

**Square *Dance Etiquette***  
by Jack Denvir, Wilde Bunch Class Director, 2004

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*Here are a few tips on square dance behavior, customs of square dancing (particularly as they relate to our club), as well as some common-sense reminders to respect your fellow dancers and club members.*

When squaring up, if your square needs more dancers, the convention is to hold up fingers indicating the number of couples needed. In a singles' club such as ours, you are not always expected to have lined up a partner before squaring up. In this case you will notice single dancers walking out on the dance floor and holding up either a right or left hand. This indicates the kind of partner they require based on partnership hands. In other words an upheld right hand says that the dancer requires someone willing and able to dance in the lady's position. Likewise, when a left hand is held up this means that the dancer requires someone willing and able to dance from the gent's position. A change may be negotiated if the dancers involved are capable of dancing from either position. Speaking of which, you will also see dancers standing with both hands raised. This indicates that they are willing and able to dance in either position. In the event that you have prearranged to have a partner who simply has not arrived on the floor yet, the custom seems to be to simply stand with both hands behind your back. This is meant to indicate to other dancers that you have a partner who is on their way.

Square dance etiquette also dictates that dancers should be able to take part in tips (tip being the time spent dancing), that are at the top level they are capable of dancing. What this means is that a Challenge dancer in an Advanced tip should be willing to step out to accommodate a dancer whose highest level is Advanced. An Advanced dancer in a Plus tip should be willing to step out in favor of someone who does not dance higher than Plus. A Plus dancer in a Mainstream tip should step out for a Mainstream dancer and so on and so on for all levels of dance. The reason for this is that the more experienced the dancer the more chances they have to dance and the less experienced, the fewer chances.

While dancing, hand holds are very important, but please be gentle. Dancers need to establish contact with adjacent dancers in their formation. It is the way in which dancers guide each other, since no one can be alert every second; however, you should hold on loosely so the other dancers can get away if they are supposed to move and you don't realize it. When doing arm turn calls (left allemande, turn thru, etc.) grip lightly the forearm not the elbow. In waves, gently touch fingers and palms to adjacent dancers. Don't grab thumbs.

If mistakes are made or a square breaks down, it is a waste of time and energy getting angry with yourself or anyone else. We all make mistakes and the goal of square dancing is to have fun. If mistakes are made, try to gently guide your neighbor back into

place if possible but don't push, pull, or shove. If the entire square should break down, (no one knows where to go), it is best to simply go to your original home spot and then form lines. This is done by the head couple sliding over to the side couple's position while the side couple slides over to make room for them. Presto! Two facing lines. If any dancer is unclear about a particular call don't hesitate to ask the caller or more experienced dancers to help you with it. Anyone will be glad to workshop with you.

At the end of the tip, it seems now to be most correct for all dancers to turn toward the caller when applauding the square. After this, it is the custom in gay style square dancing to thank the square. This is done by crossing right arm over left and joining hands, then bowing while saying a drawn out "Thank You". There is then a backward turn to the right and back again. (Do be careful when doing this.) It is then the custom of our club to particularly thank with a hug both your partner and your corner before leaving the dance floor. From the start to the finish of the tip, it is considered very bad manners to leave the square unless: 1) You feel suddenly ill or injured, 2) an urgent and unexpected call of nature, 3) an emergency phone call. If any of these happens, inform the caller and try to get a seated dancer to replace you.

While a cocktail or two might be fun at a purely social event, it is deemed counter-productive on a club night which is meant to be a learning environment. With this in mind we ask you to please not ingest alcohol or other drugs that might impair your coordination or memory before dancing.

Alcohol will not only affect your dancing but your breath; as will cigarettes and strong smelling food. Since square dancing involves a lot of close contact, we should all try to be considerate of our fellow dancers. I find it a good idea to keep breath lozenges or fresh smelling gum with me. It is also undesirable to expose our comrades to body odors as well as an overindulgence in perfume, cologne, after shave, or hand lotion.

That takes care of the physical, now on to the verbal. The Wilde Bunch is a place where we should all be able to come and feel we are in a comfortable and non-threatening situation. This applies not only between individuals but between the genders. Men and Women are frequently not entertained by the same type of conversations. This is also true between gays and lesbians. Sex talk, dirty jokes etc. are fine at the back room of the boys or girls club but I doubt most of us would use this manner of speaking in front of our brothers or sisters. Well that's what we are in the Wilde Bunch, brothers and sisters. So let's pretend we're ladies and gentlemen and keep the filth to a minimum in mixed company. As for individuals, let's think before speaking. Part of our culture is dishing the dirt, but maybe it's a part we should downplay. We may think we're being witty or humorous but we may in fact be saying things that could really hurt a person's feelings. Hurting someone is never worth the chuckles we may get from the crowd.

Over a hundred years ago, Queen Victoria was entertaining a foreign dignitary who was unfamiliar with British table service. The guest mistakenly drank from their finger bowl.

Without a moment's hesitation the Queen drank from her own finger bowl. The entire court followed her example. Nothing exhibits better the reason for etiquette and manners. They are not designed to censure anyone or to cramp their style but simply to create an atmosphere where as many people as possible can feel safe and secure in a public environment. Let's take a page from the good old Queen. Here's wishing us all safe and happy square dancing.