



The Hatchlings—Developing Callers in St. Louis

by Martha Edwards

If you live in some of the more developed dance regions, I hear you have a problem. You have so many good callers that new callers don't have a hope of getting enough practice to become future good callers. As callers age, so does your dance group, and there's no one coming along to take your place.

If you live in one of the less developed regions, I hear you also have a problem. You don't have enough good callers to keep your dancers coming back for more. Or perhaps your callers are pretty good but there's a breakdown or two every evening, and your dancers' skills are not improving. Your community may be shrinking, and your dance isn't particularly attracting new people, for whatever reason.

Don't get me wrong. There are some really good new callers now making the national rounds at dance weekends. They learned somewhere, and since there is always room at the top, they get gigs. But I'm not talking about where our new *great* callers are going to come from, but where our new *good* callers are going to come from.

Perhaps you've tried holding calling workshops,

led by your best local caller, and eight people show up, take the workshops for six weeks, and at the end, one person decides to continue, and then she moves away. It's been ten years since a new caller started calling in your town.

If this is your situation, I offer a possible solution, one that has (so far) worked in St. Louis, and one which I believe is completely replicable almost anywhere. In six months, we had seven new callers, and that number is now up to nine.

All it takes is a big enough space to hold ten to twelve dancers (we dance in my suburban home family room), some CDs, and the Internet.

There were three of us in the beginning; we met a couple of times on a beautiful backyard deck and puzzled our way through some dances. We roped in a nondancing friend to be the fourth in the set (it's important to have someone who needs clear explanations in your practice group), and began to figure out what to do. The three of us are longtime dancers, and one of us is a musician. We had attended a few one day calling workshops in the past, but our actual calling experience was thin, to say

What's a Hatchling Dance?

At a Hatchling Dance, you get the best of what has been practiced at the Calling Parties, and you get to dance to live music from Reel Women and the Jigelos. Some of the members of Reel Women and the Jigelos also play together in the English Country Dance band The Tu'Penny Uprights.

The dances will be the ones called at the Calling Parties:

- * Contra Dances
- * Square Dances
- * English Country Dances (ECD)
- * Dances in Unusual Formations

The English Country Dances will have Contra Dance subtitles, and Contra Dance moves will also be given their ECD equivalents for people more familiar with English. Short demonstrations will be interspersed throughout the dance for unfamiliar moves.

Hatchling buttons above and "What's a Hatchling Dance" from Childgrove Country Dancers' website; used with permission.

the least. So we just jumped in. I casually mentioned what we were doing to the leader of our local contra group and he said “Why don’t you each call a couple of dances at the dance the week after next?” Gulp. Into the deep end. We managed it, with a few awkward moments, and were pushed quickly a ways up the learning curve.

We roped in a couple more friends, and then started buttonholing people in the dance group who we thought might make good candidates. We were looking mostly for the better dancers. In addition to specifically singling people out, I also made this announcement at several dances: “In this group of people there are several of you who would be terrific callers if you learned how to do it. We have no idea which one of you it is, and you probably don’t either. The only way to find out is to try it long enough that you learn how. We’re looking for talent and you just might be the one that has it.”

Some of the people we identified did join us, and a few others we hadn’t thought of volunteered, and we started getting together, once a week on alternating Tuesdays and Wednesdays (that didn’t last long), then on every other Wednesday, and finally, every Wednesday, every week, every month. We spend a portion of every get-together just discussing calling topics — *What do you say, when do you say it, how long does a dance run, what do you say to the band, how do you learn to call without a card*, that sort of thing—but the main event of the evening is simply people calling dances. We call them Calling Parties, and yes, they do involve wine and cheese and brownies.

Lately, we’ve started using a signup board, like an open calling night, to make sure everyone who wants to call gets a chance. We have found that, while you can have a lot of fun with just four people, the ideal number is twelve—ten to dance (so you get a progression without leaving out more than two people at a time, as you do with eight people dancing), one to call, and one to work the CD player.

After six months or so, we had seven callers. Our local contra dance group, the Childgrove Country Dancers, gave us tremendous support. Each of our regular callers is willing to give up a dance or two to let one of us call, and we were given occasional whole evenings where we could all call and get practice planning an evening.

Then we started our own dance series, where everyone would get a chance to call one or two dances. We call ourselves “The Hatchlings,” since we are coming out of a caller incubator. We had badges made up (easier than t-shirts), each with a different hatched animal (birds, turtles, lizards, a Storm Trooper etc.). This branding has had its plusses—big plusses for buzz, fun, and being nonthreatening,

which we felt would help dancers feel comfortable attending our new dance series, which featured both contra and English country dances. If something is new, but cute and cuddly, people feel comfortable trying it. If it’s new and serious (e.g., “The Callers Collective”), people might be scared off.

But the branding has had its minuses, too. We’ve been calling for well over a year now and we’d like to be taken seriously. We probably won’t switch from the Hatchling name, but it does create a challenge for us to make the name mean “darned good, fresh calling” instead of “newbie wannabe.” It’s not impossible—words tend to assume the meaning of the thing they describe, so if we’re really successful, a caller’s having been a Hatchling will signify the value of practice, of sharing information, and supporting each other.

We found out that it was important to have noncallers (dancers) come to the Calling Parties as well (we call them “caviar” since they are as yet unhatched), and we emphasize in our announcements at our regular dances that new and inexperienced dancers are particularly welcome, to help us see immediately if our explanations work!

There have been other benefits besides an increased pool of callers. There is more understanding of the way the dance works among all our dancers, better understanding of how to help new dancers, and better calling from our regular callers (not so much from the increased competition, but from the increased interest in the caller’s art). One completely unexpected benefit is that several of the Hatchlings started writing dances! These new dance choreographers have written over twenty new dances, some of them quite good after they were worked and reworked over many weeks of using live salt and pepper shakers at the Calling Parties.

We started a blog to record the evolution of this experiment. You can see it at <http://dancecaller.blogspot.com>. There you will find our statement of who we are and what we’re trying to be, but here’s the main part of that statement—“We want to encourage good calling, good dancing, good music, traditions, evolution of traditions, and fun.”

If you do the same, I’ll wager you’ll have new good callers this time next year,

The dances are on First Saturdays from 7:30-10:30 p.m. at the Monday Club, 37 South Maple Avenue, Webster Groves, Missouri.