

**News From  
Washington DC Area  
“ALPS (Accelerated Learning Program For Squares)”  
By Virgil Forbes  
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The ALPS program that I have been using for the last several years is not original to me. It is an adaptation of a number of different concepts such as “Blast”, “Blitz” and “Crash Course” that have been talked about at CALLERLAB and other caller gatherings in recent years.

The concept: Quick equip new dancers with enough square dance vocabulary and dance skill so that they can quickly join regular club dances.

The process: A concentrated weekend (Friday/Saturday) that teaches the major elements of the Basic program, followed by club dances that include a workshop tip to add to their choreographic vocabulary. It doesn't really get them to mainstream (or plus) all that much faster. It just gets them there in the format of regular Friday night dancing, where they learn a little bit each night. In order to have time enough for this, we've added an extra 45 minutes to our normal 2 hour dance evening, giving us 8 tips rather than 6.

Supporting ideas: This process allows our new dancers to think of themselves as club members sooner, improving overall retention. Our new members bring new excitement to our dances. Our special dances like the Halloween costume dance the last two years have been special fun, with innovative costumes, especially due to the new members.

Most importantly, ALPS allows us to bring into square dancing new dancers who have been unable or unwilling to commit to the traditional weeknight classes. We dance in a community where commutes to work are routinely over an hour each way, and where most families have two careers to cater to. These families simply can't get home from work after 6:00 p.m., have dinner, get to a class at 7:30, dance for 2 hours, go home, sleep, and get up at 5:00 a.m. the next morning to commute to work. I think this may be the most important impact of ALPS, and its strongest selling point. We are giving our newer dancers recreation on the nights that they have available for recreation—Friday or Saturday.

The choreographic program that I am using this year is attached. In teaching three different ALPS classes I have varied this program quite a bit. If dancers aren't getting a given move, I drop it and move on to something else, then come back to the problem move the following week. The exact choreographic sequence is far less important than the process of keeping the learning on-going and fun.

Requirements: The club as a group and the vast majority of its members must agree to actively support the program, at least for two successive years. It means that they are not going to get much plus dancing in—at most two or three tips out of eight called. It also means that they must all work to support the weekend program.

Advertising is a key. The first night of the class is the only night to start; if you don't have them there for the first session, you can't add them in later. Unlike traditionally formatted classes, you simply cannot keep the class open an extra week or two to pick up a few more students.

At my club we have been blessed by a hard working publicity chairman. She has arranged, in two consecutive years, to get journalists from the local weekly papers (four different papers, two publishers) to attend a dance, take pictures, and talk to the dancers, with the articles to run in the two weeks immediately prior to our ALPS weekend. In every article we try to emphasize the 'modern' nature of the dance, acknowledging our traditional roots, but talking about how modern square dance contains enough variety to engage the interest of dancers for years to come. All the dancers in the pictures have to be smiling. We use a mixture of dress, from neat but casual attire to understated traditional attire. Since many of our dancing ladies favor prairie skirts as their most common attires, this is not a major change. We try to ensure that at least a few pictures taken include some of the younger members of the club.

We have used lawn and road side signs, similar to those used by politicians and real estate agents. They measure approximately 20" x 30", bright yellow (black lettering), and say "Learn Modern Square Dance" and two phone numbers to call for information. Depending on quantities ordered the cost is in the \$8-10 range per sign. There may be local ordinances that place restrictions on how they can be placed. We primarily placed them at intersections where roads from subdivisions and communities come to major commuting routes. This year we're going to try to get approval to place them at subway and commuter rail stations, and in the commuter "Park & Ride" lots.

As far as flyers go, one design does not fit all. We have tailored our flyers to each audience. At fitness centers and recreation centers we advertise the healthy and gentle exercise of square dancing. For church groups we emphasize the wholesome aspects of no smoking, no drinking, no blue jokes. For general public distribution (like grocery stores and community bulletin boards, and for the homeschooling community) we emphasize the multi-generational family dancing.

To be successful, each club member must help. We ask each club member to place flyers in at least two public locations. We also ask them to place one either at their work location, church, or other place where they are known. On these flyers we leave the 'For information' block blank and ask that they write in their own name and phone as the source for further information.

The weekend:

Friday evening: Try to get all of the club members there. Ask them to wear a variety of square dance apparel, but leaning toward the less spectacular. Use two registration tables to collect names, phone numbers, and money, and prepare name badges. Hope you'll have enough new dancers to keep both busy. Don't start dancing immediately. Have the coffee pot and punch bowl set up. Encourage the club members to introduce themselves to the new dancers and mix for a bit before we start dancing. I start the first tip just like I would a on a normal first night, but I have to keep in mind the fact that we are aiming for learning as well as entertainment. I use just enough repetition of each move to smooth out the majority of the new dancers, and then I move on. I do singing calls every tip, based on the choreography taught during that tip. The first two tips I don't change partners in the singing calls; thereafter I do. The list of choreography listed below for the first session is about double what I would try for on a traditional first night. I have been pleasantly surprised at the ability of most of the new dancers handle this much material.

Saturday morning: Have the coffee pot on, as well as the water jug and a cooler of juice and soft drinks. I've found it useful to do advance scheduling for the "angels", trying to get about one-third of the club at each of the three daytime sessions. In line with our 'we need every member to support the program' concept, try to get each club member to attend one session, although some members will end up attending more than one.

The largest logistical problem is feeding everyone on Saturday, first at lunch and then supper, especially since you won't be sure how many you're going to feed until Friday evening. Lunch tends to be cold cut platters from Safeway and sandwiches from Subway. Supper is pot luck, with all the club members contributing. Advance coordination on who brings what is necessary. The dancers who "angel" the morning session tend to do the majority of the heavy cooking for the pot luck.

During the Friday night sessions I've found it important to be honest with our new dancers. The physical endurance necessary for this program should not be downplayed. Nine hours of dancing on Saturday is a lot of physical activity. For our primary target population (single adults, young families, and empty nesters) this is not usually a problem, but it can be for older dancers. My phraseology for this is an announcement to the effect of, "We're not suggesting anyone not participate with us in this learning experience, but please be honest with yourselves: square dancing is a physical activity, and we're going to be trying to cover a great deal of material in a relatively short time. You can't learn to square dance by watching, you have to be on the floor doing it. If you find yourself not able to keep up physically it will not only frustrate you, but also the other seven people dancing is your square. If this happens to you, but you still want to learn to dance, I'll return your tuition from this class and try to help you find a traditionally formatted square dance class where you can more fully enjoy learning to dance."

Students who are younger than adults present their own challenges and must be considered on a case by case basis. Our policy has been that children under 16 may only participate as part of a family group (at least one parent or grandparent must participate in the class, either as student or “angel”). When asked ahead of time, I generally ask that children be at least 10, or entering fourth grade. In traditional classes I use 8/second grade as the criterion. Teenagers 16 and older may register independent of a family group, although even there it is helpful to have a recognized family authority figure around. I’ve found that children younger than 10 usually do not maintain their concentration and learning urge throughout the day, although there are exceptions. We know from experience that teenagers learn square dance skills far more quickly than adults; keeping them interested throughout the day is a considerable challenge.

I consider that the programs I have conducted at Aqua Square to have been a significant success. To put the numbers into context, we are doing this in the Washington DC metro area. From our area’s high point, sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, more than half of our clubs have folded, and the remaining clubs are much smaller. Less than a third of our remaining clubs have had a beginner’s class in the last three years, and a class of eight new dancers is considered to be a large one. Against this context, here are some of the numbers from the first two years of ALPS classes at Aqua Squares:

2006-2007 Season:

31 attended the Friday evening session

24 attended all of the Saturday sessions

17 graduated as Mainstream dancers in January

15 are club members a year later

2007-2008 Season:

43 attended the Friday evening session

29 attended all of the Saturday sessions

23 completed Mainstream in December

I don’t want anyone to think that ALPS is a cure for all of our problems; it is not. But in certain circumstances, and with the right combination of caller and club leadership, I believe that ALPS, or other programs like it, can help in beginning the rebuilding of our great activity.

**See tables below:**

# Aqua Squares

## ALPS Curriculum 2007-2008 (Tentative)

Friday Session 1 (7:30-10: p.m.)	Saturday Session 3 (1-3:00 p.m.)	Saturday Session 5 (Evening)
Square Identification	Flutter Wheel	Stars (Box)
Hand Holds	Reverse Flutter	Single Circle
Circle	Sweep $\frac{1}{4}$	Friday Sep 21
Up & Back	Veer Right	Dance & Review
Do Sa Do	Ocean Wave	Friday Sep 28
Prom Single File	Swing Thru	Walk Around
Swing	Boys run	See Saw
Promenade	B/G Trade (Wv)	Box Gant
Prom Inside	E/C Trade (Wv)	Wrong Way Grand
Allemande	Circle to a Line	Friday Oct 5
Right & Left Grand	Touch $\frac{1}{4}$	Shoot the Thar
Pass Thru	Column Circ	Wheel Around
Courtesy Turn	B/G Run	Partner Trade
Lead Right	E/C Run	Trade By
Veer Left	Circulate (Wv)	Hinge
Bend the Line	Chain Down the Line	Centers In
Right & Left Thru	Pass the Ocean	Cast Off (OFL)
Promenade $\frac{1}{2}$	Saturday Session 4 (3-5PM)	Pass to the Center
Circle $\frac{1}{2}$ , $\frac{3}{4}$	Alamo Style	Friday Oct 12
Ladies Chain (2 & 4)	Alamo Swing Thru	Separate Around 1
Arm Turns	Alamo Left Sw Th	Separate Around 2
Star – Static Square	Wheel & Deal (TFL)	Into/Down Middle
Star Promenade	Wheel & Deal (OFL)	Squeeze into Line
Couples Circulate	Double Pass Thru	Friday Oct 19
B/G Circ (TFL)	1st Left/Next Right	Gents In Ladies Sashay
E/C Circ (TFL)	Extend	Half Sashay
Grand Square	Zoom	Friday Oct 26
Ladies Chain $\frac{3}{4}$	Ferris Wheel	Halloween Dance
Weave		Facing Couple Rule
Backtrack		Ocean Wave Rule
Saturday Session2 (10AM-Noon)		Friday Nov 2
Star Thru		Spin the Top
California Twirl		Grand Swing Thru
Rollaway		Slide Thru
Ladies in Gents Sashay		Turn Thru
Square Thru (2-5)		Walk & Dodge
Do Paso		Fold
Allemande Thar		
Slip the Clutch		
Dive Thru		
U Turn Back		
Eight Chain Thru		

Friday Nov 9  
Turn Thru  
Cast Off (Wv)  
Cloverleaf  
Friday Nov 16  
Bill Harrison Dance  
Friday Nov 23  
No Dance – Thanksgiving  
Friday Nov 30  
Dixie Style  
Cross Run  
Cross Fold  
Left Hand Wave  
Left Swing Thru  
Split/Box Circulate  
Friday Dec 7  
Tag the Line  
Half Tag  
Scootback  
Recycle  
Wrong Way Thar  
Shoot the Thar Full  
Friday Dec 14  
Dance Mainstream  
Friday Dec 21  
Christmas Dance  
Friday Dec 28  
No Dance  
Friday Jan 4  
Review/Dance MS  
Friday Jan 11  
Guest Caller  
Dance Mainstream

Friday Jan 18  
Guest Caller  
Dance Mainstream  
Friday Jan 25  
Anniversary Dance  
February 1 & 8  
Dances cancelled due to  
Hall availability  
Friday Feb 15  
Graduation  
Begin Plus  
Friday Feb 22  
Single Circle  
Grand Swing Thru  
Acey Deucey  
Teacup Chain  
Load the Boat  
Extend  
Friday Feb 29  
Spin Chain Thru  
Peel Off  
Ping Pong Circulate  
Friday Mar 7  
Linear Cycle  
Coordinate  
Anything & Spread  
Anything & Roll  
Friday Mar 14  
Spin Chain Gears  
Track Two  
Friday Mar 14  
WASCA Weekend  
Friday Mar 21  
No Dance – Good Friday

Friday Mar 28  
Review Plus to date  
Follow Your Neighbor  
FYNAS  
Fan the Top  
Friday Apr 4  
Explode the Wave  
Explode & Anything  
Relay the Deucey  
Friday Apr 11  
Peel the Top  
Trade the Wave  
Diamond Circulate  
Flip the Diamond  
Friday Apr 18  
Crossfire  
All 8 Spin the Top  
Cut the Diamond  
Friday Apr 25  
Chase Right  
Dixie Grand  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  Tag  
Friday May 2  
Sp Ch Ex G  
Friday May 9  
Friday May 16  
Friday May 23  
No Dance – Memorial Day  
Friday May 30  
Friday Jun 6  
Last Regular Dance