

The Square Dance Revival in Fairfield

It's Hip to Be Square

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Fairfield Ledger
September 3, 2013



Square dancing is mentally challenging, physically invigorating, and just plain fun.

Want to know a secret that's fast becoming public knowledge? There's an old-time revival going on in Fairfield, and it's not under a tent. It's in the dance halls, and yes, it's all about dancing . . . square dancing!

The Genie Emerges

About four years ago, Revelations Cafe owner Betsy Howland, an experienced and avid square dancer, wanted to offer lessons in the basement of Revelations. So she invited Robin Ragen, the caller and teacher for the Ottumwa Square Dance Club, to give it a shot. A few people completed the 15-week course, but there were no local dances. A year later Sandy Skinner, another local instructor, gave it a try, with the same results.

It was only in the fall of 2012, when half a dozen folks from Fairfield made the weekly trip to Ottumwa for Robin's classes there, that the square dancing genie came out of the bottle.

In January 2013 these new dancers again invited Robin to teach in Fairfield. "I was blindsided by the turnout in 2013," Robin says. "I was shocked and amazed." Since then, response has just grown and grown, and by now, Robin has taught over 180 people.

While it takes 10 weeks to teach the basic and mainstream calls at the heart of square dancing, Robin is quick to add, "It only takes 20 minutes to learn how to have fun."

Rockin' Robin

Robin was born in Batavia, and in 1972 went to work for John Deere in Ottumwa, starting as a production worker. But as a born teacher, he subsequently became a factory coordinator, putting new manufacturing

practices in place. He started square dancing in 2002. Intrigued by the “sound of the caller,” he soon took calling lessons himself.



Square dance caller Robin Ragen

Square dance calling is both an art and a science, as the caller directs the constantly changing choreography of the dancers in their squares. A miscue on his part and it's game over for the entire dance hall. After retiring from John Deere in 2006, Robin took further training at the Caller College of St. Louis, and also the Heart of America Caller College in Kansas. He has since led dances throughout the Midwest and is still Club Caller in Ottumwa in addition to his pivotal role in the Fairfield dance community.

Robin says, “What sold me on square dancing was when I called my first dance in Des Moines—there was a 103-year-old woman, dancing in the same square as her son, who was 80.”

Thank You, Dr. Oz

That little story tells as much about the benefits of square dancing as any scientific study ever could, but it is worth noting the research. Square dancing involves every muscle in your body, from your core to the extremities, in much the same way that swimming does. And it does so in a non-strenuous way, improving cardio strength. In an evening of dancing, dancers can cover four or five miles but feel more energetic than when they started.



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The steps, or “calls,” require you to use both sides of your brain, and employ “cross-lateral” movements—ones that require the arms and legs to cross over the mid-line of the body and cause the left side of the brain to work together with the right side. And because the caller is directing you in a series of calls that you have previously learned, it is an integrated exercise for your brain, memory, and coordination.

But it’s not just exercise. It’s dancing, within a very real social context that includes the other seven dancers in your square. Square dancing has been called “friendship set to music.” And for many dancers, those friendships are the real draw, to both the classes and the dances.

Do dancers make “mistakes” or sometimes forget the calls? Of course they do, but as Robin says, “Square dancing is more about having fun than being right.” Dancing in a square that occasionally “breaks down” can be just as much fun, with the added challenge of putting the square back together as the dance unfolds.

And don’t think that square dancing is all done to country-western or fiddle music. A good caller can have you dancing to Bruce Springsteen, Eric Clapton, the Beach Boys, blues—you name it.

Perhaps Dr. Oz sums up the benefits as well as anyone: “Square dancing is one of the few activities shown to involve physical activity, social interaction, and mental stimulation significant enough to reduce the risk of dementia.”

Sign Up in September

Robin Ragen’s next 10-lesson beginners’ class will start on Monday, September 29, 2014, at 7 p.m. at the Eagles Lodge, 1707 S. Main St., Fairfield. For more information, call Sarvani Viger-Edson at (641) 472-6434, or Mary Gagnon at 472-6096. Or visit [Fairfield Square Dance](#).

To see a demonstration of square dancing at the September 5th art walk, come to the gazebo on the square at 7:30 p.m. Robin will be calling!

p>Learn more about the [History of Square Dance](#)

David Fleming lives in Fairfield, and has been square dancing since March 2013.