



HIP TO BE SQUARE

BY ANNE FORD

Old-fashioned dancing offers
up-to-date rewards

I NEVER HAD A SPORT. When my high school gym class played volleyball, I was known as the Girl Who Would Not Rotate. I took the left end spot in the back, and I stayed there. My theory: It was better to be uncool for not trying than uncool for fumbling the ball.

Needless to say, none of the other girls ever, ever asked me to be on their team. But hey, as long as I wore my gym shorts every day, Coach had to pass me.

Secretly, I wanted to move. I wanted to catch a softball solidly in my glove with a satisfying sting—and then whip it back to someone else, the ball making that small whoosh! against the air. I liked the synchronicity of it, that invisible connection that springs up between two people when they move like the halves of a whole. Even from the sidelines I could tell that there's a joy in moving with other people, a joy in running around on a field together. Running for no reason, really. Just to move. Just to be together in a pointless, happy pursuit.

I waited so long for my game to show up that I almost didn't recognize it when it finally did, via a phone call from my musician friend Anthony.

"Hey, I'm putting together a square dance band, and we want to practice with dancers. Are you in?" I hadn't square danced since sixth grade, and I doubted I could summon up so much as an allemande left. Still, I'd get to hear Anthony play, and I was a sucker for old-time music. How bad could it be?

When I got there, the caller was arranging everyone into squares. Anthony was setting up with the band, but when he saw me hanging back—shy with strangers, not sure I wanted to do this after all—he took me aside and said sternly, "Dance, Anne Ford."

The first thing we learned was how to swing: putting one hand on your partner's shoulder while he puts one on your waist, clasping his free hand with yours, and twirling around in a circle to the music. I figured I'd better start the apologies as soon as possible:

"Uh, I don't really know what I'm doing . . ."

But the caller was already hollering, "When you reach that pretty little girl, give her a twirl!"

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" my partner asked. I looked up at him.

"I said, 'You're good at this,' " I told him. He smiled down at me—his eyes were very blue—and said, "So are you."

And, as it happens, I am. Linking arms with my partner, weaving in and out of the other couples together, whirling and ducking and returning to home on just the right beat—all of it gives me what tenth-grade volleyball never did: a sense of connection to the people I move with.

All those years I stood on the sidelines, what kept me back was the burden of being cool, the belief that other people's opinion of how I moved my body mattered more than how I felt moving it. But in square dancing, everyone has agreed not to be cool. Trust me on this: If we were cool, we wouldn't be do-si-do-ing while a woman in a cowboy hat yells, "Dip the oyster in the stew, dip that cracker right on through!" When everyone else is acting as stupid as you are, what's there to worry about?

I still don't play volleyball. Instead, I swirl around the floor to twangy music with a bunch of friendly, goofy people who are having just as good a time as I am.

And I get asked to dance. A lot.

Anne Ford is a Chicago writer who specializes in offbeat pieces about everyday people.

Mike or Tamara--Can you place this copy as a label or caption for the dancers? Thanks!

Anne Ford (left) and friends dancing at Bethany United Church of Christ in Chicago.



"Linking arms with my partner, weaving in and out of the other couples together, whirling and ducking and returning to home on just the right beat..."





Do-si-do

Sashay into Square Dancing

Many major cities, and plenty of smaller ones, have square dance clubs that offer weekly lessons for a small fee. Since each lesson builds on the one before, and be prepared to show up every week.

Getting a little sweaty-palmed during a dance and fearing that you'll suddenly forget your own name, never mind



Allemande left

Circle left

Sashay right

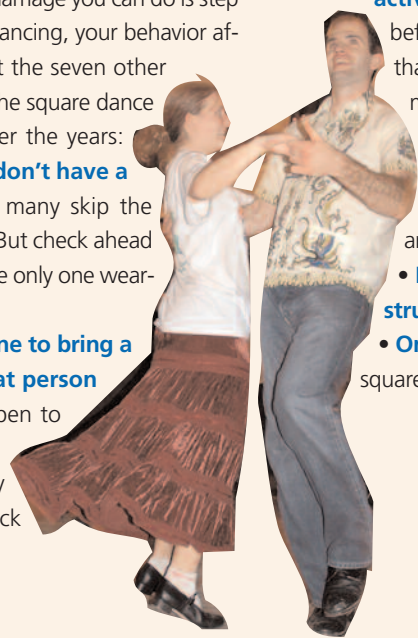
the definition of a "allemande left," is normal. But breathe easy. This isn't boot camp. Callers kick off each dance, or "tip," by walking dancers through the steps without music, and experienced dancers, or "angels," stand by to lend a hand if your square gets off track. Just follow the etiquette tips below, try not to miss any lessons, and you'll be fine.

Swing your partner

Do-Si-Do's and Don'ts

In ballroom dancing, the most damage you can do is step on someone's foot. In square dancing, your behavior affects not just your partner but the seven other people in your square. Hence the square dance etiquette that's sprung up over the years:

- **Most square dance clubs don't have a dress code** for lessons, and many skip the Western wear even at dances. But check ahead of time, so you don't end up the only one wearing jeans in a sea of gingham.
- **Some clubs expect everyone to bring a partner and dance with that person all night**, while others are open to single dancers and assume that everyone will dance with many different people. Again, check ahead of time.



- **Square dancing is almost always an alcohol-free activity.** Many clubs even frown on drinking before you arrive at a dance, on the grounds that you can't do-si-do as well after a double martini.
- **When a new tip, or dance, begins, you and your partner should move onto the floor as quickly as possible** and join the first square that needs a couple.
- **Don't talk while the caller is giving instructions.**
- **Once the dancing begins**, don't leave your square unless you feel ill.

WWW

To find a club, try www.dosado.com.