

Case Study – Tam Twirlers, San Rafael, CA

Background:

The Tam Twirlers have been around since 1978. It was the largest club in Marin County among 13 clubs. It danced Mainstream only. I became their caller in 1994. By that time we were a Plus club. We ran one class per year, most years. The objective was to get dancers who had never danced before (zero calls) to Plus level in 9 months. All dancing was the same night: class and club. We held three introduction nights, then we would start the class. Advertising was typical for most clubs: word-of-mouth, flyers, post cards, etc. We had mixed results. Dropout rate was usually 80% within two years.

COVID shut down the club for a year and a half. When we resumed dancing, the board and I decided that the primary focus for the club should be to attract new people into dancing as quickly and as often as possible. This meant we would abandon higher level goals for dancers, instead adopting a “fun first” attitude. The club remodeled itself into engine for bringing new people into square dancing. Tam Twirlers’ board of five officers, all of whom dance A2 or C1, decided that Tam Twirlers should become an SSD club.

Today, many of the Plus clubs in the Bay Area are gone. The few remaining clubs mostly dance Plus and are struggling to stay afloat.

Our Philosophy:

Tam Twirlers provides a square dance and social program for people to enjoy casually without the pressure to learn more complex calls and choreography. There is no push for them to learn MS or Plus; in fact there are no lessons offered for either at the club. The emphasis is on friendship and fun, regardless of dancing level. We dance every Wednesday and have a party night once per month. The theme is different each time, and we decorate, and people bring snacks. Some members organize bocce ball events or movie nights. There is an emphasis on social interaction in the club that really fosters the bonding of the members.

When dancers from other clubs ask the usual question - How will you get them to Plus? - we reply that they may never learn Plus, and that is OK. What is important, is that they continue dancing and continue to have fun.

As the club caller, I attend every board meeting and give advice and counsel when warranted. I do not get a vote on the board, but my opinions are respected.

New dancers:

Every month on the first Wednesday we hold an intro session for anyone to try square dancing. The session is the first 30 – 40 minutes of the evening. The existing classes and club members are always supportive of new dancers coming in. If no new dancers attend, we continue with the class/club as normal. Since we implemented this program two years ago, we have always had new people each month. We “amped up” the party nights to emphasize fun and ease of dancing, with less teaching.

Holding intro sessions every month makes square dancing continuously available to the public. We collect names and emails and let them know about upcoming classes. We typically run four classes each year, about every 12 weeks.

Teaching SSD:

I generally use the existing SSD teaching order when teaching new dancers. We don't get through all the calls in 12 weeks, and often, people are gone for various reasons and then return. We split the evening into two parts: first part of the evening we teach the first column of calls (group “A”), and the second part we teach the second column of calls (group “B”) Dancers have access to the SSD list with the teaching order, so they can always see where they stand in the program.

We sell the lessons in two six-week blocks. After a dancer has completed twelve weeks of lessons, they are offered (and encouraged) to become members. There is no proficiency requirement for membership.

Results:

Our average weekly post-COVID attendance has grown from 1 ½ squares to four squares. We will continue with the frequent classes as the club continues to grow.

Challenges:

In our area there are few newer-dancer dances available. Most are SSD/MS/Plus, which really leaves out the SSD-learner. We just started holding SSD class-level dances and have had good success. Emphasis is on fun, not choreography.

Experienced club members who already dance some Mainstream and/or Plus want Plus lessons. We have not resolved yet how to address this, but most likely it will be held on a different night.