



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

# Is square dancing too SQUARE?

George Betts, vice-president of the Olde Tyme Square Dance Callers Association instructs newcomers at the McConaghy Seniors Centre in Richmond Hill. "One of our difficulties is we are not attracting as many young people as we would like," he said.

BY SIMONE JOSEPH  
Staff Writer

Forget any notions you may have of square dancing being about husky-voiced hicks in cowboy boots belting out: "Swing your partner round and round. Turn your corner upside down." A group of about 28 dancers bust this stereotype every Friday when they gather in the multi-purpose room of Richmond Hill's McConaghy Seniors Centre to listen intently and react to the calls of instructor George Betts, who has been square dancing for 40 years and has called square dances for 35 years.

Rather than being some country drivel, this dance requires an astute mind and quick reflexes. The calls given by Mr. Betts, on a Friday in March, have names like the clover leaf, double pass through and grand sweep. Some of the dancers wear vests or bolo ties, a necktie made of cord or thick string, fastened at

the collar with a decorative clasp. The dancers are part of a nine-week program drawing people from across York Region and the Greater Toronto Area. Mr. Betts is not only an instructor but also vice-president and acting secretary of a non-profit organization that runs a monthly Saturday dance at the Grace Anglican Church in Markham.

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The dance, which features live music, attracts people from across the GTA. The organization, called the Canadian Olde Tyme Square Dance Callers Association, preserves the traditional Canadian style of square dancing. According to Mr. Betts, preservation is needed because, through

his own observations, the Etobicoke resident has noticed interest in square dancing has been dropping for 15 years. "One of our difficulties is we are not attracting as many young people as we would like," he said. Mr. Betts, who started square dancing in his mid-30s, said people don't start at that age anymore. "Square dancing has become a senior citizen activity. Younger people do not seem interested." Too many other activities compete for the attention of young people, such as watching their children at hockey games or spending time on their computers, he said.

"It's a shame because it (square dancing) is a great activity." This type of dancing is also a very social activity where every body works in teams of eight. "It is physically and mentally stimulating. You have to recognize the calls which come at random," he said. Back at the McConaghy Centre, between dances two women

move their knees back and forth and their hips side to side to the bop, bop of the country music in the background.

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On the dance floor, smiles outnumber the number of bolo ties and vests. Women greatly outnumber men and they work in rotation, benched like hockey players when not in the thick of the action. When several dancers retire to chairs after a song, one man on the dance floor jokes: "Send in the reserves."

For more information on the square dancing lessons in Richmond Hill or the monthly dance in Markham, call George Betts at 416-247-1277.

## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

- **What is modern square dancing?** Eight people form a square with two on each side, then dance a series of movements as "called" by the caller. Dancing is done to modern music, even from the 1950s and '60s — from Pink Cadillac, Bill Bailey, When the Saints Come Marching In, Elvis Presley tunes, Oklahoma, etc.

- **What is the difference between old time and modern square dancing?** In old time, there is a set pattern followed for each dance.

This never varies, no matter how often that dance is repeated.

Usually the first couple executes a number of moves with each of the other couples in turn.

Then the second, third, and fourth couples do the same moves with each of the other couples.

In modern square dancing there are no set patterns for a dance.

Dancers learn a number of moves which the caller then puts together to form the dance.

Dancers execute moves as they are called. Dancers do not know what will be called next.

Usually all dancers move together, although some calls are executed by only four people.

- **Around the world:** Modern square dancing is a worldwide activity. Square dance calls are standardized and are called in English around the world.

Once dancers have learned the calls, they can dance at any club or square dance event anywhere.

- **No competition, thank you:** Square dancing is recreational and done strictly for the fun of it.

- **Clubbing it:** The basic unit is the local club. Clubs may have anywhere from eight to several hundred members.

However, the average club has 50 to 100.

- **Learnin' the moves:** Anyone can become a square dancer by joining a club where the basic movements are mastered.

- **How big are we talking about?** There are 655 clubs, 10 federations, 51 associations and almost 23,000 dancers registered with the Canadian Square and Round Dance Society.

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