

# IT'S COOL TO BE SQUARE

By LISE GREENE  
For The Herald

Quick, what's the official folk dance of New Jersey?

If you said "square dance," you're right. The roots of square dancing extend centuries back into Europe and this dance form continues to evolve. Today, well over a thousand people in New Jersey enjoy a variation called modern western square dancing.

In Sussex County, enthusiastic dancers get together twice a month in Andover to swing, twirl, weave, promenade and dosado (from the French "dos à dos" meaning back-to-back). Some wear cowboy shirts, others dress in long skirts, some dance in jeans, others in traditional crinolines. The common element is not clothes, but conviviality.

## What's the attraction?

For many people, the initial attraction to square dancing is a fun evening out. At a recent dance hosted by the Kittatinny Rangers of Sussex County, Jay Ten Eick of Andover said he and his wife, Barbara, were "looking for an outlet away from the children for a couple of nights a week. We were constantly running in different directions with our son and daughter, and wanted to do something together instead of separately." They happily accepted a friend's invitation to try square dancing.

As with any new activity, there are those who catch on quickly and others who have to focus a bit more intently. Jerry Prosapio of Newton took lessons because his friend, Alice Vealey, was a dancer. "I had no choice," he joked. "People tell me to smile. It's not that I'm not enjoying myself, but I can't smile and concentrate at the same time."

Executing the steps announced by the caller eventually becomes automatic, and laughter comes easily even when the inevitable mistakes happen. Then, after getting hooked on the fun, it dawns on many dancers that they're also getting good exercise.

"It's a total mind and body workout, which I



Photos by Lise Greene

Francine and Bob Leshnowar, presidents of the Kittatinny Rangers square dance club, enjoy a light moment with Sue and John Bridenbaugh.

love," said Gail Shawger of Sparta, who joined the Kittatinny Rangers with her husband, Ed. Sue and John Bridenbaugh of Sparta cited the "wonderful, friendly people and good exercise, both physically and mentally." Marilyn Chapman of Sparta added, "It's the feel-goodest fun way to exercise I can imagine."

Friendship is an important element for many dancers. "Square dancing provides great exercise with super nice people," said Sara Allison of Newton, who dances with her husband, Bob. Many dancers have developed close friendships at several clubs in the region, and some use square dancing as a reason to travel both nationally and internationally.

Paula and Roy Lawrence of Sparta, who have been square dancing for 20 years, described it as "a wonderful, inexpensive hobby." (A Kittatinny Rangers dance costs \$4,

including refreshments.) They added, "There are clubs close by anywhere in New Jersey and the rest of the country."

The presidents of the Kittatinny Rangers, Bob and Francine Leshnowar, live in Stockholm. They've been dancing for four years, and it's become their springboard to travel. "I tell people that we joined square dancing to see the United States," said Bob. "We're going to attend as many (national square dance) conventions as we can, thereby seeing many of these states." The national conventions annually draw about 8,000 dancers from all corners of the earth.

So there's fun, friendship, exercise and travel. Anything else? "Yummy food," said Sue Bridenbaugh. Indeed, the refreshment tables at most dances are groaning with goodies — homemade cakes and cookies, fruit, vegeta-

bles, cheese and crackers. Alcoholic beverages are not permitted.

## What's it like?

The modern style of square dancing might not resemble what you were forced to do in elementary school. Four couples of any age face each other in the form of a square. The music starts — maybe country, Elvis, rock, Latin, or a movie theme — and it could be emanating from a computer, a CD, or even a 45 rpm record. ("I didn't know you could square dance to 'Mission Impossible music,'" said a teenage boy watching for the first time.)

A caller announces various steps and the dancers walk in the announced pattern, keeping time with the music. They might interact with the person standing beside them, or as a couple execute a particular call in partnership with another couple in the square. The patterns can become quite complex, depending on the level or "program" being danced.

The first program is called Mainstream. Those who have learned additional calls can dance Plus, Advanced or Challenge. Once a dancer has mastered the steps (calls) in a particular program, he or she can join in a square anywhere in the world. All the calls are in English, whether you're dancing in North America, Japan, Germany, or elsewhere.

There are dozens of modern square dance clubs in New Jersey, including the Kittatinny Rangers in Andover, which alternates between Mainstream and Plus throughout the evening.

## Must you have a partner?

While square dancing requires four couples in a square, it does not require that each dancer come with a partner. Singles can pair up with other singles, but established couples often split up to dance with singles, too.

Sally Mason, who delivers the mail in Sparta, used to square dance with her husband. Later, as a single, she didn't mind attending alone. "I've always had someone to dance with," she said. Herb Stanske, a widower from Sparta, appreciates having "a very nice group of people to dance and socialize with."

In some places, there are specialized square dance clubs for singles, teens and campers. The Times Squares club in New York was founded by gay dancers, but welcomes everyone. Dance vacation resorts are available worldwide.

## How can you join in the fun?

Many square dance clubs offer lessons. In Sussex County, the Kittatinny Rangers club holds classes on Tuesday evenings during the school year. Upon completion, a dancer is ready to participate at the Mainstream level anywhere in the world, and there's the option to continue on to higher levels.

If you enjoyed square dancing in the past but don't remember the calls, take heart. "I danced with several clubs as a teen," said Ron Kornmiller of Newton. He tried it again two years ago during a demo at the New Jersey State Fair with his wife, Donna, but "unlike bike riding, only half of it came back." So they took lessons with the Kittatinny Rangers, and the other half returned.

"Here's my best suggestion," said Jay Ten Eick. "Take the lessons and get another social outlook besides baseball, football and carting the kids around." So that's the word: Be there, be square.



Dan Koft calls a lively square dance using 45 rpm records during a Kittatinny Rangers dance in Andover.

## Square dancing calendar and information

The following is information about square dancing clubs and some upcoming square dancing events:

- The New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark will host a modern western square dance demo in conjunction with the opening of "Movin' Out" on Tuesday. The demo starts at 6 p.m. outdoors on the Theater Square (or indoors if the weather is inclement), and the show follows at 7:30 p.m. About 200 dancers from throughout the state are expected to participate in the demo. For tickets to the show, visit [www.njpac.org](http://www.njpac.org).

this summer at the New Jersey State Fair/Sussex County Farm and Horse Show, which runs from Aug. 1 to 10 at the Sussex County Fairgrounds in Augusta. Experienced dancers will give a short demo and then invite onlookers to join them. A caller, Wayne Applegate, will teach some basic steps for anyone willing to try it out.

The demos are expected to be held on Sunday evening, Aug. 3 and Wednesday evening, Aug. 6. Check the Fair's Web site at [www.newjerseystatefair.org](http://www.newjerseystatefair.org) to confirm the date, time, and location.

scheduled a square dance demo during its Family Fun Day on Sept. 21. For details on the event, visit [www.monmouthpark.com](http://www.monmouthpark.com).

- On Sept. 23 at 7:30 p.m., the Kittatinny Rangers are hosting a free party where you can give square dancing a whirl. The event will be held at Halsted Middle School, 59 Halsted St., Newton, and lessons will begin there the following Tuesday for those interested in continuing.

Regular dances are held on the second and fourth Fridays of the month from September through May at Florence M. Burd School, 219 Newton-Sparta Road, Andover

Township. Two summer dances will be held outdoors in Budd Lake on July 17 and August 14 at 7:30 p.m. To learn more, call Ron and Donna Kornmiller at (973) 383-7101 or Bob and Francine Leshnowar at (973) 697-9112.

- For information on other clubs and classes in and around the area, visit the Web site of the Northern New Jersey Square Dancers Association ([www.njnsda.org](http://www.njnsda.org)), an umbrella organization for more than 20 clubs in the region including the Kittatinny Rangers. Click on "square dance classes" for local clubs or on other links for information about dancing elsewhere in the U.S. and worldwide.

- Square dancing will be featured again

- Monmouth Park Racetrack has also



Sharing the fun at a Kittatinny Rangers dance are, from left, Jay and Barbara Ten Eick, Sharon Kittner, Herb Stanske, Jerry Prosapio, Alice Vealey, Donna and Ron Kornmiller.