

Abe Feldman at GCA Caller School

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Photos courtesy of Ett McAtee

Editor's Note: *This isn't a typical caller school article. The first time I met Abe at an IAGSDC Convention was many years ago, just after he'd rescued me in a tough C1 tip. At that time, he told me that he was legally blind. As my mother would say, please close your mouth, you'll let the flies in. And keep reading. Definitely, keep reading. Thanks, Ett!*

Abe Feldman started dancing with DC Lambda Squares many years ago. I've known Abe personally since 1995, when I first met him at the Chesapeake Squares "Pass the Ocean, HON!" fly-in. He appeared to be a very good dancer and I've had the pleasure of dancing with and calling for his squares ever since.

This past year, Abe decided to go to GCA Caller School in Denver. This is an account of the experience, with input from the coaches and Abe himself.



The school was coached by Anne Uebelacker, John Marshall, and Deborah Carroll-Jones. The Teaching Assistants were Bill Eyler, Barry Clasper, and myself. When I heard Abe was taking the Callers School, I was delighted (and a little anxious) to have the opportunity to follow his progress.

Abe: I've been dancing for more than a decade, and have gotten through C2, so calling seemed like the next step. I took a long time to decide to attend Caller School, making sure I was doing it for the right reasons (e.g., not just wanting to be on stage).

I'm partially sighted, so I was concerned about how I would handle the visual aspect of calling.

My main preparation prior to attending the school was being a "human checker" at previous Caller Schools and local caller workshops. This gave me a clue about "square dance theory" and what I might be expected to do. I also talked to callers about the school and their calling philosophies. A friend suggested I should prepare a singing call, but I didn't do that. *This would have been a good idea.*

Caller School was difficult, but it was also a great experience.

There were 10 students in the Beginner class. Most of us had never picked up a mic. Some of us had called for a while.

We were told that ideally, we would have prepared sequences and had done some sight calling exercises.

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My preparation paid off, since I was able to get through the exercises better than I thought I would.

The hardest part was making myself watch the dancers. At one point I had to ask the dancers to move closer to the front of the room so that I could see everyone, and even then it was a challenge. Thank God for the colored smocks. I got through it with a combination of visualizing and good guesses.

We only had a half day with Deborah Carroll-Jones, but it was useful. We got the whole package: discussion of the entertainment side of calling (showmanship) and...more exercises.

Deborah: Abe was intensely focused and involved, a terrific sport, and aware of (yet *not* limited by) his visual challenge. He is a sweetheart. I wish there were more like him.

Abe: The third day with John Marshall was also a mixture of talk and exercises. During the school we were given assignments to come up with sequences during meal breaks. Anyone going to the hotel bar or a nearby restaurant would find groups of us moving checkers around and comparing notes.

John Marshall: I don't know what it was like for Abe, because when the average person attends a caller's school for the first time they usually bring with them a certain expectation that they are, or are going to be, a caller. That wasn't the case with Abe Feldman; he attended the school purely to find out what this calling thing was all about and if it was for him.



In spite of his limited vision, Abe acquitted himself quite, quite well! As you might imagine, it's truly a harrowing experience to get up in front of other students and coaches and try to call for the first time. He handled the challenge with great aplomb. I was pleased to hear from Abe that he intends to pursue learning to call.

Please allow me to encourage all who read this to congratulate Abe and all of the other students who attended the GCA Caller School held prior to the IAGSDC convention in Denver. They all worked hard and deserve your support. I'm sure...but when it comes to the choreography, I think Abe must be using "The Force." Wow!

Abe: I used my one-on-one session with John to just process the whole experience and bounce ideas off him as to what I got out of the school and what my next steps might be.

The vocal workshop at the school was a nice surprise. The voice teacher had a great way of coaxing people to sing who hadn't done much singing. I hadn't sung in public in years, so it

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was nerve wracking. I borrowed a singing call from a friend, but I would have been more comfortable with something I know better.

Also, we got a lot of good information about square dance music. All the teachers talked about it, and Barry Clasper did a session on the subject.

The only thing I might want to add to future schools would be some time with a turntable to sample records in the "swap boxes".

Barry Clasper: I didn't get a lot of time with the beginner class, but I was, of course, mightily impressed just by the fact that he tried it at all, given his vision challenges. From the conversations I had with him, he seemed to have a pretty good handle on what options were available to him as far as choreo strategies and was prepared to do the work to master the ones that might work best for him.



We all know the pressures and anxieties that accompany anyone's first forays into calling, and I can only imagine how much those are magnified for someone in Abe's situation. I thought he handled that all with great aplomb. I have to admit, I admire the guy a lot.

Anne Uebelacker: Abe has a presence about him that calms people down and he's very comfortable to be around. If he continues hard work, he has the makings of a very good caller. Limitations are only in your own head and he had no idea that he had any. I wish him well and look forward to watching him grow as a caller, and a person.

Bill Eyster: Having known Abe for a number of years as an enthusiastic dancer, I was both surprised and pleased to see him at the Denver caller school this year.

Conquering some of my own inner demons about working with a vision-impaired person, I saw that Abe was enthusiastic about participating in his three days of school. Abe has a super ability to just fit in, and neither asked for nor received any special compensation for limited sight.

Although I did ask him at one point, I was never clear on what he actually could and could not see. He didn't stumble much when having to read written choreography; certainly no more than any other participant in the class.

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I'm glad we got to work together at this school. Although Abe may not pursue calling as an avocation or hobby, it was great to have him put himself out there. All of the students in the beginner's class did great for first timers!

Ett McAtee: Of course, the crown jewel of the Caller's School is the GCA Graduation Dance.

Abe: I was nervous about calling at the Graduation Dance on Thursday morning. I didn't have a singing call prepared, and I wasn't going to try doing one without practice, so I used the sequences I had written throughout the school.

I was paired with Lee Griffiths, one of my classmates, for a patter tip. This was perfect, since it gave me a moment to look at my next sequence while Lee was calling.

Again, watching the dancers was the biggest challenge. I knew my sequences worked, but every time I called Allemande Left and I heard that hand clap, I felt a great sense of relief.

Everything I learned that week came together in those ten minutes.

Overall, I got a lot out of Caller School. I was taught a new skill by some of those who are best at it. I haven't called since the school, but I'm taking a local workshop soon. Getting myself on stage is just one more part of the process.

(Ett notes: "Abe tells me that he will be attending the 2008 Caller's School in Cleveland with Anne Uebelacker and Sandra Bryant coaching. Kudos, Abe!")

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