

*'All eight circulate, that's all eight ...
Center six hinge ... Do a single wheel ...
Do a left swing through ... Now, here, circulate ...'*

Square Dancers Call Him King Of The Callers

By RODGER MULLEN
Of The Times Staff

When Lee Kopman says to cross chuck-a-luck, you'd better believe people listen.

Same goes for when he tells folks to shove off, or to single shake down or to tag back a wave. And when he says to deflate the O, well, you deflate the O.

If all that sounds like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo, you're obviously not a square dancer. Or if you are a square dancer and it still sounds like mumbo-jumbo, you're not familiar with the man some call the king of square dance calling.

The author of all the square dance calls mentioned above and about 300 more, Kopman calls dances nearly every day in the New York City area and spends about 42 weekends on the road a year making square dance house calls. Calling is his calling, you might say.

His recordings of square dance calls are sold worldwide and he has called dances on the Phil Donahue Show and at the Alamo in Texas. Over the years, Kopman has visited Japan, Sweden, England and other countries, leaving square dancers spinning in his wake.



Renown Dance Caller Lee Kopman



Kopman, who lives on Long Island, N.Y., was in Fayetteville last weekend at the request of the Pine State Squares, a local square dance club. Kopman called dances for club members and guests, some of whom traveled hundreds of miles to dance to his calls.

Kopman has been calling square dances for 30 years now. His first exposure to the dance form came when he was pursuing a degree in physical education at Adelphi University in New York.

"One of our course requirements was a course in square and folk dancing," Kopman said in a recent interview at his hotel room while he prepared to call a dance at Massey Hill Recreation Center.

Kopman received his physical education degree, along with a master's in education administration from Hofstra University in New York. He began a career as a physical education teacher in the Bethpage School District, but the square dancing bug never died.

Looking for a way to supplement his teacher's salary, Kopman began calling square dances in New York. He took private instructions and eventually came under the tutelage of respected New York caller Paul Hunt, a man Kopman refers to as his mentor. When Hunt died, Kopman's career as a caller accelerated.

"All the groups he called for asked me to call for them," Kopman said. "I took to it."

About three years ago, Kopman quit the teaching career he had pursued for more than 25 years and made square dance calling his full-time profession. And he's kept busy since.

For most people, square dancing is dose-y-doe-y and swinging your partner round and round. But square dancing is serious stuff for the millions of enthusiasts across the country who spend years studying the dance form.

Square dancing consists of several levels of difficulty, from beginner to challenge-level IV. At each level, the knowledge of more and more steps is required.

"It takes a tremendous amount of study to be able to achieve any one of those levels," Kopman said.

And calling a square dance is no piece of cake either. Kopman calls it "instant choreography."

The caller reads off the steps in a sing-song voice, improvising their order based on the degree of proficiency of the dancers. It's his job to keep the dancers moving without getting them tangled up in each other on the floor.

"I have to be able to put these things together, instantly, right away," Kopman said. "That's a hard skill for the callers to learn."

At the Massey Hill Recreation Center recently, Kopman manned a microphone and called out steps accompanied by a twangy record. Some of the



Staff Photos By CRAMER GALLIMORE

Dancers Follow Kopman's Call At Massey Hill Recreation Center

dancers had trouble following the steps but most got along fine.

To a non-square dancer, Kopman's non-stop litany might as well have been in a foreign language. But every phrase meant a specific move to the dancers.

"All eight circulate, that's all eight...Center six hinge...Do a single wheel...Do a left swing through...Now, here, circulate..." The dancers spun around, reacting in an instant to Kopman's commands.

Bill Rodgers and his wife Peggy of New York were on a camper trip in Florida when they heard recently that Kopman was to appear in Fayetteville. They turned their camper around and headed for North Carolina.

"Throughout the northeast, he's called 'the king,'" Rodgers said. "We make it our business to be where he is."

David Harris, founder of the Pine State Squares, said it's a little difficult to explain what sets Kopman apart from other callers.

"Why would Bear Bryant be a better coach than some other coach?" Harris said. "Most of it is ability.

He's a winner. He never meets a stranger and he never puts anyone down.

"We've been dancing to him about 12 years and he's just head and shoulders above anyone else," Harris said.

For Kopman, the quality that separates a good caller from a great caller is control.

"A good caller has to have a very strong knowledge of the fundamentals of choreography. He has to understand the degree of difficulty of a step. He has to know how to read a floor, to know how much they can handle," Kopman said. "Most of all, though, he really has to be in control."

There are more than 10 million square dancers in the world, and the dance form's popularity is no mystery to Kopman.

"It's wholesome, it's fun and it's relatively inexpensive," Kopman said. "And no matter where you go, you're not a stranger if you can square dance. You can go anywhere and square dance. What can I tell you?"