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Grab your partner and do-si-do

Square dancing season is almost here

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By Debbie Juniewicz

Contributing Writer

John Lewis' wife left it up to him – ballroom dancing or square dancing. The Germantown man chose the latter.

“We were empty nesters and my wife and I wanted something to do together,” Lewis said. “I had never done anything like square dancing, but I gave it a try and I have to say I really like it.”

Four years later, Lewis is an officer with the Gem City Square Dance Club in Kettering. He and his wife, both in their mid-50s, regularly attend dances locally and across the country.

“We went on vacation to Myrtle Beach and found three clubs there,” he said. “We went to a dance and they treated us just like we were family.”

But if allemande, do-si-do and promenade sound foreign to you, not to worry. Square dancing clubs throughout the Miami Valley, from Springfield to Wilmington and Kettering to Greenville, offer lessons and regularly host dances. And fall means the start of square dancing season as most lessons kick off in September.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

While square dancing has been around for centuries, it is not a thing of the past. “The barn dance is an old part of Americana that you rarely see today,” said Rick Musselman, education supervisor of the Historic Farm at Carriage Hill MetroPark. “Dances held in barns were once a big part of social life in rural areas. However, they gradually went away and are rarely seen any more.

“Square dancing is more of an active lifestyle type program now.”

The United Square Dancers of America has a membership in excess of 250,000 people and the recent National Square Dance Convention in Detroit drew approximately 8,000 participants. There are more than a dozen active clubs with approximately 1,200 members in this area alone.

"Square dancing's image is sort of Midwestern hayride and that doesn't really appeal to everyone," said Steve Stoehr, president of the Miami Valley Dance Council. "But the truth is we dance to everything from country to the Black Eyed Peas."

Lewis has also heard some square dancing misconceptions.

"People think square dancing is just for old people or that we only listen to hillbilly music and neither of those things are true," Lewis said.

The Gem City Square Dance Club has more than 70 active members and graduated 15 from their lesson program last year. According to Lewis, participants range in age from 8 to 80.

"And we dance to all kinds of music, including rock-n-roll," he said.

BROAD APPEAL

"Kids from 8 to 12 years old can get involved in square dancing," Stoehr said. "We have a pretty good mix of ages but our biggest sweet spot, as far as members, is parents when their kids leave home."

The appeal of square dancing, according to Stoehr is wide-ranging. There is the challenge of learning the dances, physical exercise and the community aspect.

Henry Jones, of Troy, and his wife Janet have been involved in square dancing with the Double H Squares in Huber Heights for the past five years. They are both in their 70s and dance as many as five nights a week.

"We meet a lot of people and go to other clubs and dance," Jones said. "It's a good idea to get out and do something at our age. It's close to home, it's good exercise and it's fun."

If you aren't ready to commit to a club just yet, the MetroParks host demonstrations at the 2nd Street Market as well as square dancing events at Carriage Hill MetroPark. Both events will take place this weekend.

And the Gem City Square Dance Club hosts two open house events in September to help people get a taste of square dancing free of charge and commitment.

"By the first two weeks, you'll know if you like it and whether or not you want to commit to lessons," Lewis said. "But if you're anything like me, you'll keep coming back. There's something about square dancing that just gets a hold of you."

WHERE TO GET YOUR DO-SI-DO ON

Saturday, August 18

Swing Your Partner, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Where: PNC 2nd Street Market Pavilion, 600 E. 2nd St.

What: Members of the Gem City Squares will be at the market dancing and inviting you to learn to square dance. Everyone is invited to give it a whirl.

More: Free; no registration required; open to all ages

Information: Call (937) 228-2088 for details.

Hoe Down Square Dance, 8-10:30 p.m.

Where: Carriage Hill MetroPark, Historical Farm, 7850 E. Shull Rd.

What: Square dance in the park's historic barn. Listen to the sounds of The Corndrinkers. All skill levels welcome.

More: Free; no registration required; open to all ages

Information: Call (937) 278-2609 for details.

Monday, Sept. 10

Gem City Square Dance Club Open House

Where: Michael Solomon Pavilion, 2917 Berkley Ave., Kettering (Community Golf Course)

What: Introduction to square dancing, demonstrations, refreshments.

More: Free, no registration required, all ages

Information: Visit www.gemcitysquares.org

For a complete listing of clubs, lessons and events, visit the Miami Valley Dance Council's website at www.miamivalleydancecouncil.org.

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Visitors to the 2nd Street Market can get a taste of square dancing this weekend as members of the Gem City Square Dancing Club return to “Swing Your Partner.”



Members of the Gem City Square Dancing Club host an event at the Michael Solomon Pavilion in Kettering.