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Ahwatukee line dancers find a welcoming home at Cactus Jack's Bar

By Paul Maryniak
AHWATUKEE FOOTHILLS NEWS EDITOR

If you think that line dancing is just for people who wear cowboy hats and boots, Gina Lombardi and Carrie McNeish urge you to drop by for happy hour Wednesdays at Cactus Jack's in Ahwatukee.

From 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the nightclub-restaurant at 4747 E. Elliot Road, you'll see some moves as sophisticated as those on "Dancing with the Stars," said McNeish, of Ahwatukee.

A certified fitness instructor as well as a line-dancing teacher at Pecos Community Center for years, McNeish had started the impromptu gathering of friends and neighbors in 2013 at a Tempe bar. It closed two years later, sending her distraught group in search of a new venue.

Enter Lombardi, manager of Cactus Jack's, who gave the group a chance after reading about their plight.

She hasn't regretted the move. "It's been great for us," Lombardi said. "The energy is wonderful. Our oldest dancer is 91 years old and she's a hoot."

Though an average of 40 to 50 dancers normally show up, some line-dancing happy hours draw as many as 70 participants.

Don't worry if you don't care for country-western music, because the group just doesn't shuffle and turn to songs with a twang.

"About half is country and the other half includes oldies, Latin music, some pop," said McNeish, who took to line dancing in 2001. "I make a point of

mixing it up because some people don't like country music. Besides, you can line dance to anything."

"Line dancing is very involved," she added. "It's a lot more technical than many people think. There's different kinds of turns involved, syncopation, speed, the length of the dance. The more you come, the more dances you know and the more dances you do."

If you've never line danced, you don't have to worry either, both women advise.

For one thing, McNeish incorporates lessons into the happy-hour festivities, sprinkling beginner and intermediate lessons among more sophisticated dances for more accomplished participants.

"Typically, the music is mostly beginner stuff, but I have music for the more

experienced dancers in between," she said. "The last half hour I call 'Wild Card' and I play requests."

The uninitiated need not fear, both women said.

"If you're easily intimidated by nature then there's a chance you'll be intimidated at first, but the regulars are very welcoming," McNeish said. "That doesn't mean if you're a beginner that it will be super easy. It's a little scary because you're out of your comfort zone."

"This is the friendliest group of line dancers I've ever been with," she added. "Sometimes people can be mean but that is not this crowd. They're very welcoming."

Lombardi concurs.

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"It's a really good community of people," she said. "If you don't know them at first, after a few Wednesdays you will. It's a good meeting place for businesswomen."

But women in search of a man, beware.

"It's mostly women," Lombardi said.

However, if you're a people watcher, the line dancing happy hour is hard to beat.

"It's great for people watching," Lombardi said. "They're fun to watch and the music is good. Even people who don't care about line dancing come and have a drink or something to eat and watch them dance. It's free and it's fun, and people just love Carrie."

McNeish said Cactus Jack's personnel are also "very appreciative of us."

Sometimes Lombardi will bring out a cake to celebrate someone's birthday. Other times she lets them know she'll include line dancing in their weekend repertoire.

When the dancing ends at about 7:30 p.m., Lombardi opens some tables to poker games and lessons.

"So if you come early and stay late, you'll learn line dancing and poker," she said.

McNeish said the menu makes lingering worthwhile.

"They have fantastic burgers and fries," she said, quickly adding, "The



Carrie McNeish leads a line-dancing lesson at Cactus Jack's Bar in Ahwatukee..

salads are great, too."

As a special gesture of appreciation, Lombardi plans to schedule a September appearance of the Ryan

Sims Country Band.

"The group loves, loves, loves that band," she said. "I like to do some special things for them because they have

been so great."

Check out the bar's offerings at cactusjacksbar.co. That's not a typo: the " belongs to a bar with the