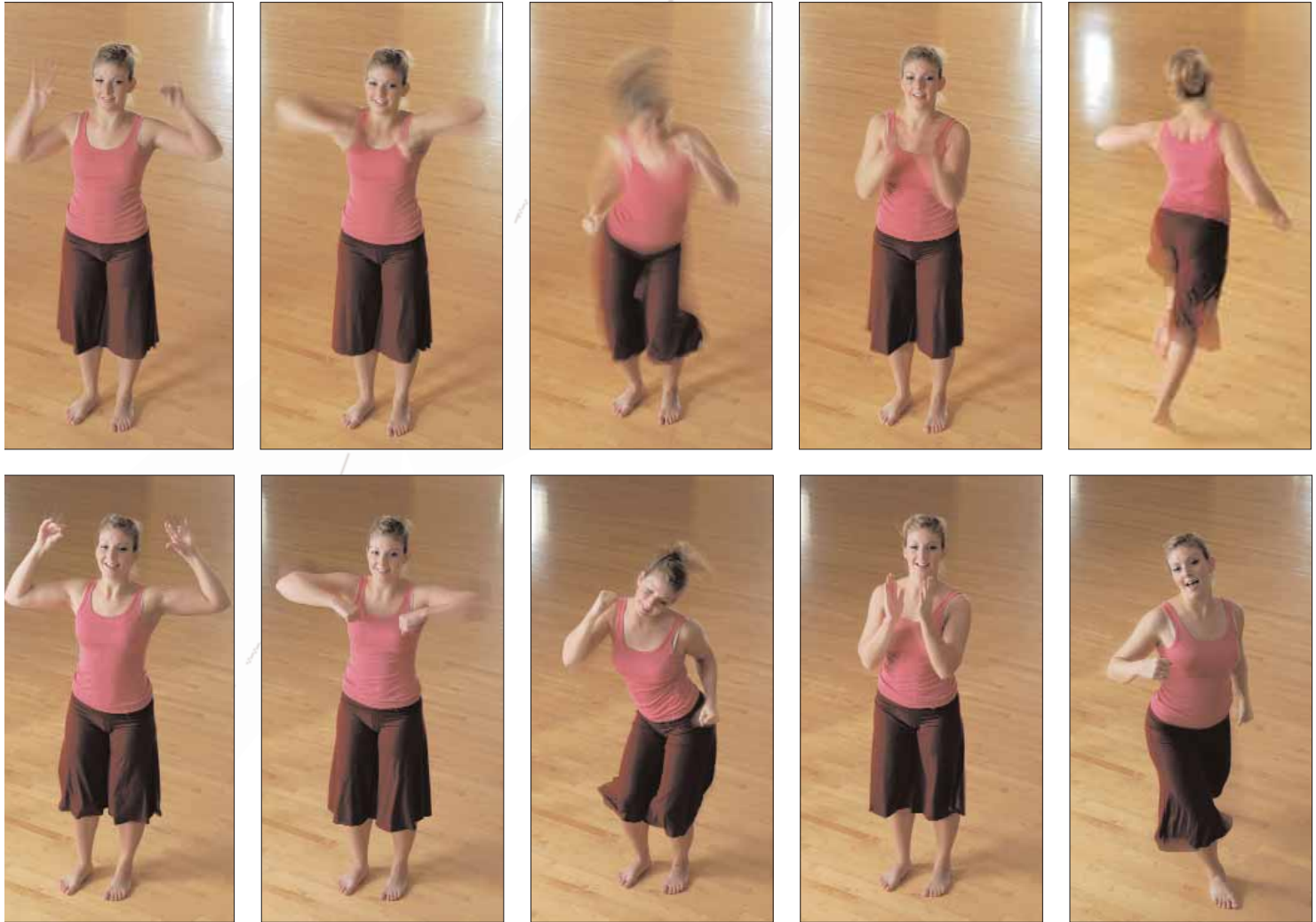


# Connect the Polka Dots



# Tracing the chicken dance through UW history



To perform the chicken dance: 1) place arms, elbows bent, at shoulder height and open and close fingers to resemble a bird's beak opening and closing. 2) With arms still bent, place fists near chest and wriggle bent elbows up and down to resemble wings flapping. 3) Lower arms, still bent, to waist level and twist torso back and forth while bending the knees and lowering the body progressively closer to the floor. 4) Stand upright and clap hands three times in rhythm with the music. 5) Take a partner's arm and swing. 6) Repeat. Thanks to Lauren Rosenstein, a senior in the UW dance program, for her technical expertise in demonstrating the correct way to chicken dance.

BY SUSAN LAMPERT SMITH '82

Anyone who's been to Camp Randall on a football Saturday has seen the Badger faithful in the grips of a strange, avian-borne affliction.

Its symptoms are finger tweeting, followed by arm flapping, then a communal wiggling that brings the fans nearly to their knees.

Badgers call it "the chicken dance." But where did it come from? And how did a charade that has been labeled "the world's stupidest dance" jump species and continents to become endemic right here in Madison?

Never fear. Your CSI (Chicken Song Investigation) team is on the case.

The earliest references to the song come from the 1950s in Davos, Switzerland. Accordion player Werner Thomas

is credited with writing an oom-pah song called "Der Ententanz" or "The Duck Dance." The dance evolved during the 1960s, and within the next decade, it was played in many countries, under names ranging from "Vogerltanz" to "Danse des Canards" to "Dance Little Bird."

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia of sometimes dubious authority, says that Wisconsin bandleader "Whoopee

Norm” Edelbeck and his Dairyland Dutchmen of Wausaukee in far north-eastern Wisconsin introduced the song to the United States during a segment of the television show *P.M. Magazine* in 1982.

You’ve heard of Elvis impersonators? Well, polka is a world unto itself, and polka expert Rick March says “Whoopee Norm” is a sort of “Whoopee John” Wilfahrt impersonator. Just picture lederhosen and a feathered jaeger’s hat instead of a white jumpsuit and gold medallions.

March, the folk arts specialist at the Wisconsin Arts Board and an adjunct professor at UW-Madison, remembers seeing the chicken dance in Wisconsin even before the television show.

“I first saw it at the 1981 Mitchell Street Fair in Milwaukee,” recalls March, an avowed polkaholic. “Louie Bashell played it, and a band member demonstrated the moves to the audience. Louie said it was a new dance from Munich’s Oktoberfest.”

But neither Norm Edelbeck nor Louie Bashell brought the song to Madison and infected the Badger faithful. That honor goes to Randy Jablonic ’60, Wisconsin’s legendary men’s crew coach.

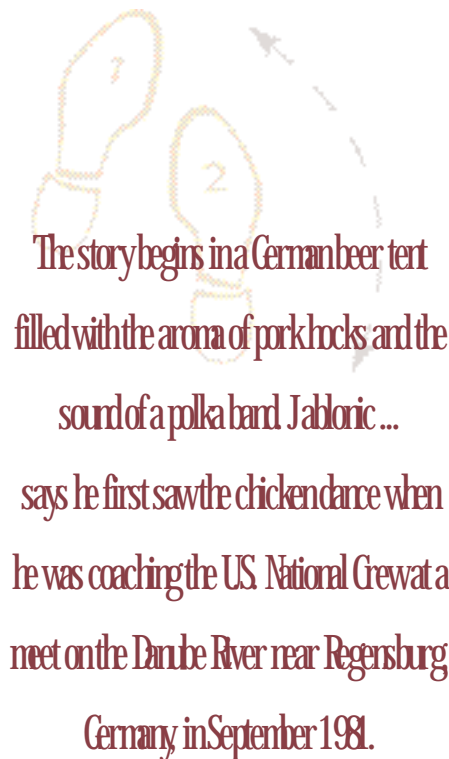
Not only did the dance catch on at Wisconsin — it also helped unite two former rivals and Wisconsin legends: Jablonic, known almost universally as “Jabo,” and UW Band Director Mike Leckrone.

A few decades ago, both Jablonic and Leckrone were building their programs, and both relied on the August registration week before classes start to fill their rosters.

Back in the days before online registration, students would line up at the Stock Pavilion, on the far western edge of campus. At the assigned time, all students with last names beginning with the same letter got their forms and set off, on foot or bicycle, to beat their classmates to the departments where they hoped to register. As quaint as it sounds today, those long lines outside the Stock Pavilion helped build national

championship rowing teams, as well as one of the best college bands in the country.

Jablonic would troll the lines for freshmen recruits. He says he’d look for “tall, gangly kids,” the athletic types who might have played football or basketball in high school, but who weren’t quite good enough to play in the Big Ten. He’d also question them about their other interests, to find his ideal student athletes.



“If a kid said he played in the band in high school, that was even better, because it meant they were smart. Kids who are good at music are usually good at math,” says Jablonic.

But the kids who are good at music were also the ones Leckrone wanted for his band. While Jabo was eyeing their arm strength, Leckrone was sizing up their embouchure.

“We were rivals,” Leckrone says. “I lost some kids who I wanted for the band to the crew.”

But how could a crazy chicken dance bring them together?

The story begins in a German beer tent filled with the aroma of pork hocks and the sound of a polka band. Jablonic, who is now retired and living along the Black River in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, says he first saw the chicken dance when he was coaching the U.S. National Crew at a meet on the Danube River near Regensburg, Germany, in September 1981.

He and assistant coach Bob Newman from UCLA had a night off, and they ventured out to an Oktoberfest celebration being held in a huge tent. The two took a seat up front, near the band.

They were partway through a pile of pork hocks and into their second liter of beer when a tiny, gray-haired waitress swept past the bandstand, carrying what Jablonic recalls as six steins of beer in each hand. Jablonic says the band leader motioned her forward, but the woman shook her head in an emphatic no. He motioned again. She looked disgusted. Then she shrugged, slapped the steins onto a table near the crew coaches, and the band began playing.

The music started painfully slowly.

“It was very, very slow,” Jablonic recalls. “Ka-bump. Ka-bump. Snap. Snap. Flap. Flap.”

“It took them about five stanzas to get up to speed. By now the crowd is going wild, because this little gray-haired lady is just flying, and the crowd is cheering!”

After the last frenzied note faded, the waitress calmly picked up the beer steins and went back to work.

And Jablonic had an epiphany. He recalled the popularity of “The Bud Song,” a polka-style sing-along based on the old Budweiser advertising jingle, with lyrics reworked by Leckrone to end, “When you say WISconsin, you’ve said it all.”

“I remember saying, ‘Wouldn’t this be great for Wisconsin?’ ” he says. “I knew it would work here.”

As soon as Jablonic got back to Madison, he headed up to Leckrone’s office in the Humanities building to show him his souvenir dance from Germany.

Now, Jabo is legendary for many things: national championships and creative training rituals among them. He used to train his crew by having them trudge across frozen Lake Mendota hanging on to a rope, in case any athletes fell through the ice. His “hour of power” had crew members running up and down the stands at Camp Randall to the accompaniment of polka tunes from his boom box.

He is also rightly known for his enthusiasm. Anyone who could convince an eighteen-year-old that it would be excellent fun to roll out of bed and into a boat on an icy lake at 5:30 a.m. is a man with awesome sales skills.

On the other hand, it can fairly be said that Jabo has never been known as a singer or a dancer. Leckrone remembers watching with a mixture of amusement and amazement as the bear-like Jablonic started tweeting and flapping and wiggling.

“He went on, non-stop, for what seemed like half an hour,” Leckrone says. “It’s still a vivid memory, one of my magical memories that will stick in my mind forever.”

Leckrone was looking for material to expand the band’s Fifth Quarter repertoire, and despite Jabo’s somewhat dubious interpretive dance, he thought the song might work for the post-game show. There was a problem, though. Jablonic didn’t know the name of the music, and neither did Leckrone, who had never heard the tune before.

This didn’t deter Jablonic. He called up WTKM, the polka radio station based in Hartford, in Wisconsin’s Kettle Moraine, and began singing and describing. The staff there were able to identify the music as “Dance Little Bird.”

Leckrone caught “chicken dance” fever, but his assistant director that year, Jerry Anderson, who went on to become a band director at Beaver Dam High School, thought both Leckrone and Jablonic had lost their minds.

“I bet him five bucks that it would work here,” Leckrone says.

And it did. At a Badger home game in the fall of 1982, the band launched into the first “Ka-bump,” and soon thousands of Badger fans were wiggling away.

“I remember Jerry was directing on a step ladder, and he looked at me, and shrugged,” Leckrone says. The band director won his five dollars, and the rest, as they say, is history.



Leckrone was looking for material to expand the band's Fifth Quarter repertoire, and despite Jablonic's somewhat dubious interpretive dance, he thought the song might work for the post-game show

But there are a few footnotes to the story. (Or should that be chicken tracks?)

While Jablonic is justly proud to have contributed a bit of musical tradition to Wisconsin, the former coach does have a quibble with Leckrone. It seems that the Wisconsin band doesn’t play the song quite the way Jabo remembers it from that beer tent near the Danube — starting slowly, then taking several verses to build the crowd to a frenzy.

Leckrone is aware of the coach’s criticism.

“I know, I know, he tells me that whenever I see him,” Leckrone says.

But while Jablonic knows crew, Leckrone knows controlled chicken crowd frenzy. “We’ve tried it different ways, but it seems to work the best

when we play it once, then stop, then go fast,” Leckrone says. “The crowd gets into it when we manipulate it.”

The other footnote is a confession. It seems that the chicken dance isn’t a true polka.

Polka bands do play the chicken dance in a variety of styles. For example, March says, while “Whoopee Norm” plays it in a Dutchman style, Steve Meisner would play it in Slovenian style, and Norm Dombrowski in Polish style. But it isn’t really a polka, which March says is a couple’s dance in 2/4 time. The chicken dance is a dance for, oh, thousands, and Leckrone has the Wisconsin band play it in 4/4 time.

“The chicken dance is in a category with novelty dance fads like the Hokey Pokey or the Macarena,” March says.

The Hokey Pokey? Ouch, that hurts.

But novelty or not, there’s something that Badger backers can aspire to. Every year, Cincinnati’s Oktoberfest tries to top its own record as the site of the world’s largest chicken dance. (The 2004 event, led by Mötley Crüe rocker Vince Neil, was panned as “the single least metal moment” in heavy metal history.)

With the Cincinnati record hovering around forty-eight thousand people chicken dancing at once, and eighty thousand fans in Camp Randall on a football Saturday, it seems that the UW has a good chance of beating the record.

Leckrone, ever the showman, says he’d be “enthusiastically in favor” of trying to swipe Cincinnati’s claim to fame.

We could bring back Jabo — maybe find a grandmotherly German waitress or two — and put them on a stage with Bucky Badger at half time. Eighty thousand people flapping and tweeting would be a sight to behold — leaving no doubt that it’s the chicken dance, and not the Hokey Pokey, that’s really what it’s all about. 🐔

---

Susan Lampert Smith '82 has been known to do the chicken dance, but she can’t remember her first time because, undoubtedly, beer was involved.