

REDNECK AEROBICS?

Boot-stompin,' calorie-burning fun

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Cowboy Ron brings line dancing to the Shoreline

BRANFORD — Be advised. A group of 25 Shoreline citizens are engaging in a highly addictive activity on Tuesday evenings at the Italian American Club.

Watch them lined up in rows. Watch them stomp in unison to a pulsating, boot-slapping tune. Watch them clap. Watch them boogie, cha cha, groove their hips. Watch their eyes glazed in concentration.

Call this illicit scene redneck aerobics. Call this endorphin-tripping crew Shoreline cowgirls (and cowboys.) Call it, and them, whatever you want, but be prepared to hold onto your horseshoes, feel your toes tapping, and get down with some country and western line dancing.

Country and western dancing? In Branford? Sounds suspect in itself. Particularly if you home in on the glitter sandals, running shoes, and (whoa, Nelly) docksiders two-stepping on the hardwood floor.

There are, however, two cowboy hats in the room. On the feet of those two cowboy hats are two pairs of cowboy boots. One pair belongs to Cowboy Ron, the ringleader of the, er, festivities. The boots are imitation alligator and



Milford resident Cowboy Ron Moon teaches country line dancing at the Italian-American Club at 40 Hamre Lane in Branford on Sept. 19.

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they've already been re-soled twice.

The other belongs to DJ Bill who's in the front spinning one upbeat-tempo honky tonk track after another. They're in much better shape.

Cowboy Ron grew up dancing in Chesterfield County, Va. "There was never a time I didn't dance," he said in his molasses-slow southern drawl on a recent Tuesday evening at the IAC. "God gave me a gift for rhythm

and for being able to move, I guess."

He got hooked on the dance form while on a partial football scholarship at East Tennessee State University around the time that Billy Ray Cyrus' 1992 hit "Achy Breaky Heart" catapulted line dancing into a worldwide phenomenon, then relocated to Connecticut, had a family, and worked the 9 to 5 grind as a contractor for Dress Barn, Inc.

A few summers ago, DJ

Bill was donating his tune-mixing services at a Music on the Beach function on the deck of the West Haven Beach boardwalk. "There was an older group of dancers, and they call themselves the Boardwalk Boppers," the gregarious Air Force veteran recalled. "For 25 years they've been coming to the beach faithfully every Sunday."

Then a loose-limbed Tim McGraw look-alike appeared. It was Cowboy

Ron. He asked DJ Bill to play "Hick Town" by Jason Aldean. "Let's see if I can't get them to follow along," he said. After DJ Bill played the up-tempo tune twice, he called Cowboy Ron aside. "People are looking over their shoulders, trying to follow along," he told him.

He gave Cowboy Ron his wireless headset. "Now you can just call out the steps," he said. "He had this charisma," DJ Bill

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Jean Mastroianni, of East Hampton, at right center, Lori Conte-Lavena, of Branford and Janet Sandella, of Guilford, line dance following instructor Cowboy Ron Moon at the Italian-American Club in Branford.

DANCING

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recalled. "He just made people want to go."

That's how it started.

Soon retirement homes around the state were requesting their services. "It's a low-impact way to get older people moving," said DJ Bill. They did demonstrations at benefits and fundraisers, at fairs and at last year's Branford Festival.

To cover their transportation, expenses, and overhead, they hold the weekly classes at the Italian American Club on Tuesday evenings. But, really, the time to come out and watch everyone strut their stuff, and even hit the dance floor, is on Wednesday night.

"We'd do it for free if we could," said Cowboy Ron.

Not that his line-dancing disciples are complaining about the nominal fee.

"Cowboy Ron is such a gifted teacher," said Lori Powlisher of Branford.

"He makes you want to keep coming."

Then there's the diversion. "I love the energy, I love the people, I love what it does," said Guilford's Janet Sandella. "You come in, you start to dance, and you forget about everything else."

Guilford's Mary Caplan agreed. "It's like a night out," she said. "Plus you're getting exercise and you don't even know it. The time just flies by."

It's not just a workout. According to a 2016 research study that appeared

in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, a regular whirl on the dance floor may lower the odds of heart disease. It also offers "brief bouts of higher-intensity exercise, as well as stress-relieving social connections."

That's not including the way it burns calories and improves posture, balance, and coordination, according to Cowboy Ron.

But here's the kicker. In sharpening memory and focus, dancing may save your mind. Literally. A New England Journal of Medicine study of 11 physical activities found that dancing was the only one that lowered dementia risk by a whopping 76 percent.

Above all, it seems, the reason for the energy and enthusiasm residing in the Italian American Club on

Wednesday nights is, as Sandella put it, "you become like a family, a dance family."

And anyone can do it. "If you can do the electric slide, you can line dance," said Cowboy Ron.

So sure, it may be habit-forming. But it's a healthy one. And really, as DJ Bill claimed, "it's just good innocent fun."

For more information about Cowboy Ron and DJ Bill, visit "Dancing with the Cowboy" on Facebook or email dancingwiththecowboy@gmail.com. Wednesday night line dancing at the Italian American Club, 40 Hamre Lane, Branford, 7-10 p.m. Cover fee. BYO drinks and snacks.

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