

# *Notes on Calling Contra Dances*

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www.ravitz.us    caryravitz@gmail.com

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## ***Introduction***

This is a set of notes about calling contra dances. It is not an introduction to calling. It was written as a set of topics for callers workshops and discussions. Under each topic is my view of the topic, which is at least a starting point for a discussion. I expect a lot of disagreement.

These views are based primarily on my experiences as a dancer. I have spent a lot of time writing dances, calling dances, fiddling for dances, and setting up sound for dances. But what filters down to the dance floor is what drives me.

## ***For Beginning Callers***

### **Caller Jobs**

- Choose the dances.
- Get people lined up.
- Teach the dances.
- Call the dances.
- Cue the band - start, two cycles to go out at the start of B2, one cycle to go out at the start of B2.
- Facilitate connection - people, music, dance.
- Be the master of ceremonies - get things started (first and second half), be the center of attention, thank the band, sound person, organizers, etc.

### **Elements of the Dances**

- Four count introduction to start.
- For each cycle, four 16 count phrases - A1, A2, B1, B2.
- This is 64 counts or 32 bars of music per cycle at 112 to 120 counts per minute.
- Mostly 8 (chain, do-si-do, ...) and 16 (hey, balance and swing, ...) count figures.
- Call each figure just before the figure should start.
- Drop the calls to allow the dancers to connect with the music.
- Signal to the band two cycles to go out at the start of B2.
- Signal to the band one cycle to go out at the start of B2.

### **Elements of Calling and MCing**

- You are the leader - the center of attention.
- Communicate effectively - speak at a moderate pace, pronounce words deliberately, use the microphone effectively.
- Stage personality - be positive, happy, distinctive.

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**Dance Cards** - includes instructions and timing.

**example 1 - front, for teaching**

The Nice Combination / Gene Hubert  
Improper contra

A1 - Neighbors balance and swing (16).

A2 - Down the hall (6).  
- Turn as a couple and come back up (10).  
- Bend the line to a circle.

B1 - Circle left 3/4 (8).  
- Partners swing (8).

B2 - Ladies chain across (8).  
- Star left (8).

**example 1 - back, for calling**

1

neighbors balance and swing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6

down the hall 1 2 3 4 turn as a couple 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6

circle left 3/4 1 2 3 4 5 6 partners swing 1 2 3 4 5 6

ladies chain 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 star left 1 2 3 4 5 new

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**example 2 - front, for teaching**

Simplicity Swing / Becky Hill  
Improper contra

A1 - Neighbors balance and swing (16).

A2 - Circle left 3/4 (8).  
- Partners swing (8).

B1 - Long lines go forward and back (8).  
- Ladies chain across (8).

B2 - Star left (8).  
- Look away from the star for a new neighbor to do-si-do (8).

**example 2 - back, for calling**

1

neighbors balance and swing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2 3 4 5 6

circle left 3/4 1 2 3 4 5 6 partners swing 1 2 3 4 5

long lines forward and back 1 2 3 4 5 6 ladies chain 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

star left 1 2 3 4 5 with a new neighbor do-si-do 1 2 3 4 5

## ***Speaking***

**Position** - You are the leader. Stay on stage so people can see you and know where to look if they need to see you.

**Understanding the Caller** - You are trying to convey information to a large group of people in a noisy room. This takes some effort.

**Microphone** - Most microphones are directional and will work best when you talk straight into them. The closer you are to the microphone, the less amplification is needed, so the less noise is amplified. The microphone is a supplement to, not a substitute for, clean, clear speech. If you cannot be easily heard and understood in a noisy setting without the microphone, then the microphone will not fix the problem.

**Sound System** - Make sure that the high frequency range (treble) is sufficient. This is where transient sounds (edges of waveforms) are enhanced or suppressed. If the treble is too low, your speech becomes mushy and difficult to understand. If it is too high, your speech becomes harsh and unnatural.

**Diction** - Speak clearly. Pronounce each word. Talk at a moderate pace. Do not be in a hurry.

**Choice of Words** - See Words for Teaching and Calling, below.

**Speech Speed and Echoes** - If you talk too fast in an acoustically lively hall, the echo from one word will interfere with the next word, making your speech difficult to understand.

**Projection** - Head voice is high frequency, easy to understand, but it can be harsh and annoying. There is a tendency to switch to head voice when you want to be loud. But this sounds like you are shouting and it is annoying.

Chest voice is low frequency and projects. It is pleasant, but not always clear. Learn to be loud with your chest voice and this stays pleasant. Be aware of how you are speaking and choose your voice.

**Words for Teaching and Calling** - Using clear, correct words is important. Clear words are easier to hear and distinguish than mushy words. Correct words cause a lot less confusion than incorrect words which need to be filtered by the dancers.

**Men, Ladies, Gents, Women** - "Men" and "ladies" are distinctive. "Men" and "women" are similar. "Gents" is mushy, with no hard consonants. But gents, ladies has become the standard.

**Star Left** - The direction of a star is designated by the inside hand. "Star left", "star by the left", "star by the left hand", and "left hand star" are correct. "Star to the left" is ambiguous at best - don't use it.

**Trail Buddy, Shadow** - Your "trail buddy" or "shadow" is an opposite sex person that you meet each cycle of the dance. I have recently started using shadow in preference to trail buddy, only because it is shorter.

**Corner, Neighbor** - Your neighbor is the opposite sex (in general) person in your set of four that is not your partner or shadow. Your corner is the person beside you, usually on the side opposite your partner. If you are dancing in a set of four, your corner is your neighbor. In long lines or a four couple square, with your partner beside you (ladies on the right), your corner is beside you opposite your partner, not across from you. The point is, corner is not always the same as neighbor - use the right word.

**Twirl** - A twirl is a spin pivoting around a hand held above the head, such as in a California Twirl, or any of the twirl to swap figures - box the gnat, etc.

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Spin, Roll - I have recently switched from "roll" to "spin" when describing a Petronella or Rory O'More balance and roll. Although I think that "roll" is a better description of the figure since it implies linear motion as well as axial motion, spin is a more distinctive word, especially when used in dances that also have a roll away figure.

Extra Words - Redundant words are just noise. "Ladies you allemande left" means "ladies allemande left", the "you" is pointless.

**Why Do Dancers Ignore the Caller?** - I often see two things that result in dancers ignoring the caller. The first is excessive explanation. Dancers will work out details for themselves. Keep anything beyond the basics to a quick one sentence tip.

The second is telling stories that are typically uninteresting and longer than needed. If you want to tell a story, first ask yourself is it interesting or humorous to the dancers. If not, forget it. If you feel obliged to tell a story, for example about a dance or yourself or the band, keep it short.

**Performing** - If you are going to be a caller, you must be a performer. You must want to be the center of attention, be heard, be followed, be watched. Otherwise you will come across as weak and ineffective. If you don't want to be a performer, find something else to do.

## ***Teaching Dancing***

**Connection** - Dance connects music and people.

Dancing solo is the connection of dancer to music. Rhythm, melody, and harmony connect to body motion, shared rhythm (foot tapping, rhythmic clapping), and mental musical enjoyment.

Dancing with a partner adds a connection between dancer and partner, physical, visual, and emotional via frame, eye contact, and shared experience.

Contra dancing and other set dancing adds a connection between the dancer, the set, and the caller.

These connections are synergistic, improving one connection will improve other connections. Being a better dancer will make a better experience for you, your partner, the rest of the set, the band, and the caller. The goal here is to maximize this total experience.

**Rhythm of the Beat** - Nothing is more important to dancing than rhythm. If all you can do is move to the beat, you are dancing. If you can do every figure at a dance, but step off the beat, that's not dancing. Teach rhythm first.

**Timing of the Phrases** - Contra dancing is (should be) rigidly connected to the phrases of the music. There are two dance beats or counts to one bar of music. Sixteen count figures and figure sequences are matched to eight bar musical phrases (A1, A2, B1, B2). Eight count figures and figure sequences are usually matched to four bar musical phrases (the first and second half of each eight bar musical phrase). And swings almost always end at the end of an eight bar phrase. After rhythm, which is timing at the beat level, timing at the phrase level is the next most important aspect of contra dancing to teach.

Matching a dance figure with the phrasing of the music may take adjustments to walking speed or path length, or the addition of a flourish. This skill is critical to being a great dancer.

**Weight** - "Weight" is just enough tension between two dancers to establish a connection that allows cooperative movement and lead and follow signals. For face to face situations, it is established, in general, by leaning back at the feet, without bending your frame, just enough to connect. In rotation, the leaning is replaced with centrifugal force. Here the tension is raised with rotation speed and can be reduced by reducing separation distance. Weight is the primary connection between the dancers, although eye contact is also important.

Tension in a circle is another aspect of weight, just a different orientation. A slight tension is needed for connection in a stationary circle, and the tension increases to hold centrifugal force for a rotating circle.

"Weight" is horizontal, not vertical. It is holds dancers at the right distance, countering leaning back or centrifugal force. It is not used to hold a dancer up.

Many contra dance figures use a weighted connection to assist motion - swing, allemande, pull by, any twirl to swap, circle, star, butterfly whirl, gate, Rory O'More and Petronella spins.

**Frame** - Frame is the position used by two face to face dancers to give the right weight, left and right. It makes the right connection for lead and follow signals and an enjoyable experience.

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**Lead and Follow** - In contra dancing, lead and follow can be the leader assisting the follower in a contra dance figure or transition or leading a swing dance inspired sequence that replaces a figure or assists in a transition. Contra dance leads are sometimes lead by the gents and sometimes by the ladies, for example in a zigzag, if the gent leads out the lady leads in. A good lead and follow is part of the dancer to dancer and dancer to music connection that makes dancing fun. There is a very good Lead and Follow FAQ at [http://www.eijkhout.net/lead\\_follow/](http://www.eijkhout.net/lead_follow/) (as of June, 2006).

The purpose of a lead is to impart information - a suggestion to a specific movement. A lead should not force movement.

Leading should be a smooth push or pull applied with just enough force to inform the follower of the leader's intent. The push or pull may be smoothly increased until the follower begins the intended motion. Some leads in contra dancing may assist the follower into the right motion, but still the push or pull should be smooth and not jerk the follower, throw the follower off balance, or force the follower into the motion.

After the initial indication of the lead, the lead guides the timing of the move. This should take almost no force.

The follower must be sensitive to the leader's leads and respond quickly. That means your weight is on your forefoot and you have a good line of communication (elbow tight enough to respond instead of unbend).

The follower should not anticipate the lead. It is up to the leader to handle the timing of a flourish and this should take into account the inevitable delay of the follower figuring out what the leader is trying to make happen.

When a follower is not experienced with a lead, the lead may require additional force, ramped gently with additional time allotted.

### **Hand Links for Contra Dancing**

**Hold versus link** - I suggest the use of the term link when talking about handholds. The dancers need a handhold that does not squeeze either hand and allows quick release from either side. Imagine a chain link that is tight when pulled. But the link is in only one direction and if you release the tension the link vanishes.

**Swing Dance Link** - for balances, circles, lines, and hands across stars, this is just a finger hold that holds only in tension and is released easily by either dancer. Each dancer bends their fingers (all fingers together) at the middle knuckle and then the hands are linked. There is no finger wrap or squeezing. The lady's hand is on top by convention.

**Allemande Link** - thumbs up or held to hand, wrists straight, elbows down, base of hand to middle of palm, fingers lightly wrapped, no squeezing. The link force is from the base of one hand to middle of the other palm, and holds only while both dancers hold the tension.

**Wrist Hold Link** - used in some stars, wrap the top of the wrist of the person in front of you in the star, with just enough wrap to hold the centrifugal force in the star.

**Handshake** - for a pull by. Handshakes imply a squeeze. They are not links that can be released by just one participant. **But** the only shared weight in a pull by is the initial pull from a standing start. The dancers must take care to use the minimum squeeze needed at any moment.

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Squeeze problems in general? - if you find that your hand is being squeezed by others, ask yourself, are you giving the other dancers a hand that they can link to. If you hold your hand limply, there is no way to link and dancers will squeeze your hand to try to hold against the pull.

In a hands across star, sometimes called a handshake star, use a swing dance link, not a handshake.

### **Steps for Contra Dancing**

**Walking Step** - The basic contra dance step is a simple walk to the beat. Stay level, do not bounce.

**Buzz Step** - The buzz step is used in a swing, the right forefoot stays on the floor, the left foot steps to push forward. The buzz step is not a requirement for a swing - a walking step works well. I use whatever it takes to be smooth in the situation. Different partners and different floors require different steps to be smooth. And I will also vary the step to go with the music.

**Allemandes** - Tension is created by centrifugal force (in the frame of reference of the dancers) associated with rotation. Elbow angle should be held against the centrifugal force to keep the right distance between dancers.

Elbows should point toward the floor. Anywhere else is dangerous to other dancers.

The grip should be the base of each hand pressed against the middle of the palm of the other hand. Wrists should be straight. There should be no squeezing of fingers, just a gentle wrap for connection.

**Dancing Defensively** - Be careful when you back up because someone is likely to be backing up toward you. This can happen in a lines forward and back or a balance. In a swing, gents keep your left arm close, either down or with bent elbow. Dance in your own space and watch for dancers dancing out of their space.

**Dancing Inoffensively** - Uncontrolled elbows, clamped grips, forcing a bent wrist in an allemande grip, hanging on shoulders, uncontrolled stomping especially when backing up blindly can cause pain and injury to other dancers. Don't do this. Teach people not to do this. Dance in your own space, that is, at any given moment, the position where you should be if you are correctly doing the dance.

**How to Minimize Dizziness** - moved to Choosing Dances and Addressing Dancer Injury, Illness.

**Flourishes** - Flourishes, usually added twirls or spins, are widely misunderstood. They are added to the dance for two basic reasons, for fun and to help timing and flow. Fun flourishes must be controlled to avoid hurting the timing and flow of the dance, and often give flourishes a bad name. But many flourishes can help the timing or flow of the dance by taking up time, orienting a dancer in the right direction, or giving a dancer the right momentum to flow into a figure. Teach the difference.

**Helping Dancers With Complex Dances** - These tips for dancers apply to traditional contra dances and some of them may not be valid for a specific dance.

- Suspend disbelief and do what is called. Leave it to the caller to get the figures right.
- Assume individual responsibility for each figure - there will not always be someone to help you.
- Be alert on the ends and be prepared to reenter the dance at any time on either side of the set. Reenter the dance as the dancers need you - do not try to correct the set.
- For diagonal chains, right and left throughs, and 1/2 heys at the ends of a line, if there is no-one to do the figure with, the dancers should stay in position. For the zig-zag figure of Beneficial Traditions each individual should stay in position if there is no-one to pull by by the right (the diagonal pull by). For the forward on the diagonal and straight back figure in Hey Man, this figure should be done even if there is no couple to walk forward to.
- For any swing on the side, while swinging line up with a couple across the set.

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- When you get a new neighbor take note of that person. You should never lose your partner/shadow and neighbor in the same figure.
- Be aware that shadows may change due to a breakdown/fixup of the dance or the addition of new dancers.
- To jump into a dance after it has started, wait until the partner swing. And be aware that you will cause a change of shadows for other dancers. If you jump in when partners are not in the same minor set, the person that you enter with will be dancing your shadow's role, not your partner's role.

## ***Teaching a Dance***

**Know the Dance** - If you know the dance, it will be a lot easier to teach. If you know problem spots, you can address them with additional instructions on position and orientation or perhaps a demonstration. But I don't recommend ignoring your dance card - it is too easy to make a mistake and hold to it - memory is fragile. I see this often as dropping or adding figures. Balances, do-si-dos for example don't ruin the walkthrough since they don't affect positions, but they cause a dance to not fit the music. Dropping other figures, such as a ladies chain, ruin the walkthrough, leaving people out of position, and you will be forced to fix them before the dance starts. Knowing the dance will mean more time to watch the dancers rather than your dance card. This will help you verify that your teaching is working.

**Who, What, Where** - It is traditional and effective to give a figure as who, what, where, and final orientation. For example, ladies allemande left  $1+1/2$  to face your partner. Face your partner includes where since the gents are in a specific position unaffected by the figure. (All) circle left  $3/4$  until you are on the (gents') side of the set, (facing across). The parenthetical phrases may be unnecessary due to convention.

**Finish Stating the Figure Before People Forget Their Starting Point** - State the complete figure in one phrase. For example, "circle left 3 places". If you say "circle left", pause to look at your card, then "3 places", the dancers will have forgotten where they started and not know where to end.

**Give the Distance and End Point** - Some dancers like rotational distances in fractions ( $1/2$ ,  $3/4$ ,  $1+1/2$ ). Some ignore this information and like to know where to end the figure. Many callers ignore the likes of the dancers and teach their preference. For best results, give both. And make sure that the distance is correct. If you give the wrong distance and the right ending point, this will be confusing. And don't guess - it will just get you into trouble.

**Are People in Position Before You Give the Next Figure?** - If you start teaching a figure before the dancers are in the correct position to start the figure, you are wasting time, not saving time. Look around the room and verify positions.

**What Happens at the Ends of the Lines** - For dances with simple but unusual end effects, teach them, for example "reenter the dance with ladies on the left" or "you must do this part of the dance around the ends". If the end effects are more complex, it may do little good to try to teach what happens since only the dancers at the ends will get to walk it through. In this case, you can warn everyone to watch out for end effects, and pay attention to the dance at the ends. I like the phrase "go where the dance needs you". This warns people out at the ends not to try to fix a dancer that looks out of place, because they may be right where they should be.

### **One, Two, or No Walkthroughs**

One - this is very common. For straight forward dances it is all that you need. This is especially handy for dances that progress early in the dance. Teach one round, then start the dance with a couple out at the top.

Two - when teaching two walkthroughs, the second walkthrough should be near dance tempo, and there is no need to send dancers back to their home position before starting the dance. So this is not a major time waster. If you run the second walkthrough at near dance tempo and coordinate with the band you can start the dance immediately after the end of the walkthrough because there is no waiting for dancers to line up. It also has the advantage that people who jump in late can catch up during the second walkthrough.

None - this is great to get bored dancers moving. But even if a dance is simple enough to go without a walkthrough, consider the readiness and exhaustion level of the band and dancers. If they need a short break, do a walkthrough - a by-product is that you can drop out your calls one round earlier and the dancers can enjoy the music.

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**Go Home Before Starting the Dance?** - Sending the dancers home before starting the dance is usually required if you do just one walkthrough. If you do two walkthroughs or a double progression dance, it is not needed, but it may be desirable to have the dancers dance with familiar neighbors on a complex dance.

**What Does Progressed Mean?** - "Progressed" means different things to different people. To some people it means that the dancers have moved to a position that is the start of the next cycle. To some, it means that the dancers are now dancing with the next couple. These are different. I call the first "progressed position" and the second "progressed". This seems to eliminate the confusion.

**How to Handle Questions** - What do you do when a dancer asks a question? You don't want to hold up the entire crowd for one dancer. But does the dancer have a legitimate question that needs to be answered or will it be obvious once the dance starts? I suggest, first look at your dance card and see if you have made a mistake. I have seen this often - the caller has forgotten to include a figure. Ignore the questioner at your own peril. Sometimes it is a simple misunderstanding because the the dancer missed a detail. Or perhaps you made an ambiguous statement. If you can clarify this for the crowd, it will be very helpful. If the questions happen too often, consider that your teaching is not effective. Regroup and be concise and correct.

**Get and Keep the Attention of the Crowd** - Make sure that everyone knows the formation of the upcoming dance and that dancers are taking hands in minor sets. Do not start teaching a dance until the dancers are in position.

Allow the dancers time to converse and get ready for a dance before you start teaching.

Make it known early in the evening that what you say is important. Follow up by not spending time on unimportant topics.

Announce when you are about to start teaching an unusual sequence that will require special attention.

Make it clear when you are talking to a subset of the crowd.

**Monitor the Crowd Sound Level** - (based on a note from Marty Brenneis) If the crowd is silent, you have succeeded in impressing upon them the importance of listening to the next call. Don't waste that rare opportunity.

If after teaching a figure, the crowd noise picks up, they are confused or unhappy about something that you said. Make sure that the crowd heard you, that you taught the right figure, that you said what you intended to say, that what you said was interpreted correctly.

Another possibility to watch for is that you have caused some spontaneous teaching among the dancers. I let this go for a short time, and then decide whether to let the dancers handle the situation or back up and teach from the stage.

If the normal background buzz becomes too loud, ask yourself if you have given the dancers enough socializing time or are you boring the dancers by overteaching or just being slow.

## **Tips**

While teaching a dance, when repeating a figure to a small group that needs help, make sure that the crowd knows you are talking only to that small group.

If time is short, remember - speaking and/or teaching too quickly does not save time, it causes problems that take up time.

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Notify the band when the walkthrough is near completion, for example the start of B2, assuming a straight forward B2. This will help the band to be ready to start as soon as you are ready for them.

When a 1/2 hey is called in a walkthrough, dancers often presume the next figure will be a swing or balance, and stop a little short of finishing the 1/2 hey. If the next figure is, for example, a star then they are out of position and often aren't clear on where they should start the star. One way to address this is to say something like "You will trade places with the couple across the set - ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey."

**Setup for Becket, Improper "Reverse Progression"** - By definition, ones progress down the hall and twos progress up the hall. If you line up the dancers in improper formation the ones are facing down and the twos are facing up.

For a clockwise Becket dance, to keep the ones and twos, have the dancers circle one place to the left. For a counter-clockwise Becket dance, to keep the ones and twos, have the dancers circle one place to the right.

For an improper "reverse progression" dance, the dancers that are facing down progress up, have the dancers circle two places. This puts the ones facing up and the twos facing down. The ones progress down and the twos progress up, as the dancers expect.

While the details that keep the ones and twos the same are not required to make the dance work, they can make it less confusing to some dancers.

**Do Not Leave Out Figures** - Callers sometimes tell dancers about a null figure (a figure leaves the dancers' positions unchanged such as circle 1, do-si-do) and asks them not to walk it. This works, but can make it harder for some dancers to learn the dance.

**Do Not Modify Figures for the First Walkthrough** - Callers sometimes start a Becket dance from improper formation and modify the first figure to compensate. This works but can make it harder for some dancers to learn the dance. For example for a Becket dance that starts with circle left 3/4, neighbors swing, you might teach the first cycle from improper as circle left 1, neighbors swing. But this puts the wrong dance in some dancers' memory and can be confusing.

## ***Calling a Dance***

**Timing** - In general, your call of a figure should be complete as the figure is about to start. If it ends earlier than this, inexperienced dancers may start the figure early. If it is late, then dancers may know that a new figure is starting, but not know what it is.

The distance part of the call may come after the figure is started. For example "ladies allemande right" - figure starts - "go once and a half". And the destination may come even later, merging with the next call. For example "ladies allemande right" - figure starts - "go once and a half" - figure is over halfway done - "look for your partner, balance and swing" - balance starts.

**Shorten Calls, Drop Calls, and Stop Calling** - Dancing is the merging of music and motion. For the dancers, listening to calls does not add to this experience, except as it is needed to make the dance work. In general, you can add to the dance experience by minimizing your calling, providing the dance is working well. Initially, complete calls may be needed. You can quickly shorten calls, dropping easily remembered aspects, for example "ladies chain across" becomes "chain" and "partners balance and swing" becomes "balance and swing" or "balance" or "partners". This can be further reduced by dropping all but the first call of a 16 count phrase, or all but the unusual or difficult parts of the dance.

If a dance has similar segments, you might need a call where the similar segments diverge. For example a right and left through is followed by a ladies chain at one point in the dance, and a second right and left through is followed by a 1/2 hey. In this case the chain and hey calls are more important than the right and left through call.

Calls (short calls) may be needed to compensate for music that does not have distinct phrases.

To shorten a call, drop the part that is obvious. For example, "long lines forward and back" becomes "long lines". Often, for allemandes, the choice of hand is driven by the flow of the dance, and the distance is driven by the destination, so "gents allemande left 1+1/2" can become "gents allemande". And since it is likely that the only gent to gent interaction in the dance sequence is the allemande, the call can become "gents". Or for a neighbor allemande, the person, hand, and distance might be driven by the flow of the dance, so the call becomes "allemande". For "new neighbors balance and swing", the entire call is generally obvious, but you might want to help the crowd with the timing or give a reminder, so "new neighbors", "balance", or "balance and swing" will all work.

**Dance Card** - You should be watching the dancers while you are calling the dance. If you need to reference your dance card for a call - do not read the call from the card - look at your card in the free time before the call, then make the call while watching the dancers.

**How Long To Run A Dance** - There are many ways of choosing how long to run a dance. My preference is by a clock. Based on set length, temperature, humidity, dance dizziness, dance inequality, etc. decide on how long to run the dance. Then time it. This makes it easy choose a halfway point if the band asks. You can estimate 30 seconds per dance cycle (really 32 seconds at 120 beats per minute).

If the music is especially good, I will hold off ending the dance for a couple of cycles.

**Be a Part of the Dance, Connecting with the Dancers and the Band** - You must be a part of the dance to succeed on a psychological level. That means interacting with dancers and the band, showing an interest in both, throughout the dance.

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**Monitoring the Dance** - You should monitor the dance for the entire length of the dance. This lets you fix problems quickly. Many callers will use dance time to choose the next dance, take a break, or jump into the dance. I believe that you have duty to stay with the dance. By joining the dance, you are displaying a connection with the crowd, showing that you want to be part of the dance, but this has drawbacks too, such as missing problems and making it difficult to do a special ending to the dance.

**Wrong Calls** - It is best not to make mistakes. If you do make a mistake, the sooner you recognize it, the easier it will be to fix.

Dropping a phrase and calling the next phrase early will often break a dance. Dancers will often fix the dance for the start of the next round, but be off the music. You can add in a couple of figures that do not change positions to fix this (right and left through over and back, long lines forward and back twice).

Often you can get the band to skip a phrase or add a phrase. Tell them you are off, wait until the dancers are about to start A1, and signal the band.

**Excessive Poeticism** - Some callers will try to blend in with the music by poetic phrasing of the calls or singing the calls. If this truly fits in, it is not objectionable. But in my experience, it often results in odd pauses - waiting for a beat to say the next word - or wordy, redundant calls that fill in the time. This just takes away from the music.

## ***Choosing Dances***

**It is the Caller's Responsibility to Choose Dances** - It is the caller's responsibility to choose appropriate dances. Don't yield this to dancer requests. And don't randomly select dances - the fact that a dance is published doesn't make it a good dance.

If you call good dances for an evening, I can forgive a lot of sins. But if you call bad dances, nothing else really matters.

**Figures that are Needed** - Modern contra dances need a partner swing. We often encourage dancers to take new partners for each dance. Give them the complete contra dance experience with each partner.

Neighbor swings are needed for most of the dances in an evening. The search for interesting (long) figure sequences along with the essential partner swing tends to yield dances that have no neighbor swing. This is okay to a point. But look for dances where a neighbor swing is part of the interesting figure sequence.

And don't waste your partner swing only dances by calling dances that have long boring sequences. Make sure that there is something interesting that makes up for the lack of a neighbor swing.

**Dances to Avoid** - The most common problem that I have with dances is dizziness. Any dance with more than 32 counts of consecutive clockwise rotation (star right / swing / circle / swing for example) should be examined closely. Are there any counter-clockwise figures? Are there optional counter-clockwise turns such as those that might be done in a do-si-do. It is easy to make a flowing dance when you aren't concerned about dizziness. Don't fall into the trap of calling a dance just because it flows. Do not take the dancers' dizziness lightly. This is a significant issue for some people. It prevents some people from contra dancing. Others can handle it but are at the edge. The dances that you call have a significant impact on the dancers' dizziness level.

Some dances are wearing - that is, they tire arms, legs, or feet. Excessive allemandes and excessive clockwise rotation are the primary contributors.

And some dances are boring, largely due to repetition of figures - two circle lefts, three Petronella turns, three allemandes, four balances. A dance can be simple without being boring.

Swings that end in the middle (or anywhere except the end) of a sixteen count phrase are confusing to dancers and callers. There is no good reason to call a dance with this problem.

Gents allemande right to a neighbor or partner swing does not work well. The first connection of a swing is the gent's right hand to the lady's back, but this hand is not available immediately after the allemande.

Look at the dances that you are calling critically. Don't call a dance because it flows, or because it's different, or because it's got a certain name. Make sure that it is a good dance.

**Dances Appropriate to the Available Space** - Some dances are wide, for example, a dance with gents in the middle facing out, box the gnat. Some are long, for example, a dance with down the hall, and possibly up the hall also. If the hall/crowd combination is not appropriate for such a dance, don't do it.

**Special Situations** - Late night dances - if you want to keep the crowd - high energy. And beg the band for more energy.

Severe heat - do not back off on the energy due to the heat. That will just make the heat more obvious. Do fun high energy dances, but keep them short and perhaps lengthen the breaks between dances. And remind the dancers to drink water.

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Sunday at a dance weekend - people are tired and sore. But just like excessive heat, don't back off to a boring dance. Give people a reason to forget their sleepiness and aches. That means high energy.

Small crowd - if the crowd is small, there is just one short line, drop any multiple progression dance from your list. And drop dances that pull by up and down the lines. These will emphasize the small number of dancers. Squares? Triplets? Any other suggestions?

**Great Dances** - Some dances are great, noticeably better than good dances. They are unusual, flow beautifully, fit the music perfectly. Find these dances and use them.

**Memorable Dances** - Some dances are memorable because of some unusual figure or sequence. These may or may not be great. If they are not good, then the memorable aspect is irrelevant. Find good, memorable dances and use them.

**Complex Dances** - First, complex dances with no payback are pointless. A complex dance needs something to make it fun or memorable beyond mere complexity.

Given a good complex dance, the issue is the dancer/music connection. If you call dances that are too difficult for the crowd, you will break this connection as the dancers' attention is on making the dance work rather than enjoying the dance.

The dancers will be a lot happier with dances that are too simple than with dances that are too complex. But as long as you don't break the dancer/music connection, complexity allows you to add fun to the evening.

**After a Break or Delay** - After any long period spent not dancing, use a simple dance to get the crowd dancing again quickly, without a walkthrough if that is reasonable. At this point, the dancers are bored and inattentive, and will not be receptive to complexity, and the band is losing their energy. This applies to breaks, long announcements, or if you attempt to teach a dance that does not work, due to excessive complexity, poor teaching, or bad dancers.

**Choosing Dances by Title** - Do not use a dance solely because its title fits a theme. Make sure that the dance fits the theme.

**Over an Evening** - For an entire evening, you need good dances with variety and you need memorable dances. A progression of energy, complexity, and fun is useful.

Partner swings - I prefer that all of the dances have partner swings.

Neighbor Swings - I prefer that about three-fourths of the dances have neighbor swings. It is helpful to new dancers to include neighbor swings in the first few dances. This lets them practice the swing with a variety of dancers.

I like the first dance after a break to be no walkthrough. People have been sitting. Get the dance started.

I like the last dance of the evening to be straight forward, partner oriented, and also include a neighbor swing. This is to ensure a problem free finish and to let all of the dancers enjoy the dance and music experience without stress. It is best to avoid oddly placed balances and four count figures to give the band flexibility in tune choice.

Your list of dances for an evening should not abuse figures or figure combinations. It is very easy to have more than one circle per dance, excessive allemandes, repeated common sequences. But it is your job to ensure that this does not happen.

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Variety - an evening of dances needs variety, but what is variety? The central figures of two dances may be completely different while the peripheral figures might be the same. You can have an improper contra and a Becket dance that are virtually identical except for the starting point. You can have two dances that use the same figures with considerably different transitions. Many dances start with neighbors balance and swing, but I don't think that makes the dances too similar to call together. On the other hand, four straight dances that begin with neighbors balance and swing, regardless of anything else in the dances, sounds like a lack of variety. Squares, triplets, proper contras, circle mixers add variety, but I don't think that they are required for variety - there is a wide range of improper and Becket dances.

**Open Calling Night** - Even open calling night is for the dancers. That means it is your responsibility to keep track of what is being called and choose an appropriate dance that fits in with the evening and the crowd. If the evening is being dragged down by complex dances, choose an easy dance. If the other callers are not doing neighbor swings, do one. Be prepared to choose a dance at the last moment, based on the dance before yours. And note the time. If the dance is late, keep your dance short.

From the dancer and band perspective, if the calling is getting bogged down in complex dances or poor teaching, one of the most appreciated things that you can do is call a simple no walkthrough dance.

**Beginner Crowds** - When calling for a beginner crowd, don't give people the wrong impression of what a contra dance is by oversimplification or leaving out swings. Contra dances are not difficult to understand or dance. You don't need to simplify any further than Simplicity Swing or The Nice Combination.

Proper contras are more difficult than improper or Becket dances as it is not always obvious from the set formation who is a one or a two. And there are likely different calls for the ones and twos.

Scatter mixers can be stressful for some people because they have a moment of panic trying to find a new couple, too much like musical chairs.

Neighbor swings are critical to giving new dancers experience with a variety of dancers.

Partner swings are required to give new dancers the contra experience.

## *Dance Cards*

**Reference** - Dance cards are reference material. You should know the dance before you teach it. You should not read your cards to the dancers. When needed, the reference information should be available at a glance.

**Teaching and Calling Sections** - I like to divide cards into teaching and calling sections. The teaching section might be wordier, with explanations, positions noted, points of difficulty noted, maybe diagrams, and maybe information about the dance such as difficulty, unusual figures, etc. The calling section would include just short calls and timing information. Many callers have no teaching section and when there is a teaching problem, they try to work the problem out in front of the crowd. Are you good enough to handle this? Many callers have just a calling section with additional notes. But if you need to see the dance at a glance, the extra notes get in the way.

**Easy to Read** - Your cards should be easy to read. As a dancer, it is very annoying to have a caller need to read a card and have trouble with it. To me, this means black on white, printed text in a large simple font.

**Correctness** - Your cards should be correct. Check them before use.

**Becket** - On your dance card, if the dance is in Becket formation, bold, underline, and/or highlight the word Becket. And even if you know the dance well, look at your card before you start teaching.

**Preparation** - Your cards are part of your preparation for a dance. If they are incorrect or misleading, that is poor preparation. Time spent preparing a good card will be returned in fewer problems and quicker problem resolution at a dance and easier preparation for future dances.

## ***No Walkthrough Dances***

**Notify the Band in Advance** - Notify the band in advance of the no walkthrough dance. Otherwise they may spend as much time selecting a tune as you saved by dropping the walkthrough.

**Straight Forward Dances** - Choose a straight forward dance that the dancers can learn quickly. If you call two or three extra cycles because you dropped the walkthrough, you're interfering with the music and dancing.

**Late Calls** - Late calls are forbidden in no walkthrough dances.

**Is a Dance Suitable for Use Without a Walkthrough** - The primary issue with a no walkthrough dance is - can you completely describe the dance with no ambiguity in the allotted time before each figure? A complete description of each figure includes who does the figure, the figure, and where the dancers end. Some figures need specification on how to start, for example, "gents pass left to start a hey". Many figures need specification on how to end, for example, "gents allemande left 1+1/2 to your partner". This may be called before the start of the next figure, for example, "gents allemande left 1+1/2, ... to your partner, swing".

Fractions are generally not sufficient to specify an endpoint without a walkthrough. I will call a walkthrough with only a fraction, I might say "note your position, circle left, count out three places". But without a walkthrough the next figure needs to make the endpoint obvious, for example, "circle left 3/4, partners swing".

Even if your calls completely describe the dance, avoid unusual figures and transitions. The dancers need additional time to recognize and act on these calls. If you need to go outside the dancers' expectations without a walkthrough, make sure there is time to emphasize the unusual.

Issues to consider

- unfamiliar figures
- dancer expectations
- does each figure lead to the next by momentum and hand link
- entry into flexible figures (hey, mad robin)
- endpoint or end orientation of flexible figures (hey, star)
- 2, 4, 6 count figures
- progression(s).

## ***Dance Medleys***

**Why** - Why do you want to medley dances? It can be fun to keep the dancers listening to you and responding to new calls. As a dancer, I don't care for this. You might have an unequal dance, a dance without a partner swing, a dizzy dance, some other dance that you don't want to call for the normal length. This could be switched to a compensating dance halfway through. Or you might want to make a dance more fulfilling by switching to a compensating or symmetric dance halfway through.

**Related Dances** - Are the dances in your medley related? Is there some connection between them that makes you want to place them together? If not then your combination will seem incoherent to the dancers.

**The Second Dance is a No Walkthrough Dance** - see No Walkthrough Dances.

**Direction Of Progression** - In a dance medley dances should flow from one dance to the next without changing the direction of progression. If this is a problem, it can usually be addressed at the end of the first dance or the start of the second by changing a figure, such as long lines forward and back to right and left through across.

**Energy** - When the band switches tunes, you generally get an energy lift. But changing dances does the opposite. In the first cycle of the new dance the dancers must come out of their dance flow and learn a new dance. If you've deliberately chosen a low energy dance for the first dance, you might get some relief in the second. But that just means you chose a poor dance to start with.

**Syncing with the Music** - Tell the band in advance that you want them to change tunes on your signal. You can synchronize with the music in different ways. You might change the dance and the tune simultaneously. The problem with this is that while the musical energy is lifted with the new tune, you are teaching a new dance. My preference is to switch the dance first. Switch the tune when the dancers are back in their flow and let the music carry them forward.

## *Ending a Dance*

**Ending with No One Out at the Top** - It is accepted practice to end the dance with no one out at the top. With a conventional single progression dance, wait until the dance is near the end of a cycle with no one out at the top. Then signal two more times to the band. Double progression dances will always end with no one out at the top, regardless of when it is ended (assuming no problems).

**Let the Dancers Know that the Dance is Ending** - As a dancer, I like to know when the dance is going to end. This lets me hold on to my partner to thank them, rather than getting ready for a new cycle. Call "one more time" or "last time" to lead into the last cycle.

**Ending with Partners Together** - I like dances to end with partners together. This lets them acknowledge each other easily before looking for a new partner. When calling, I will always modify the last cycle of the dance, if needed, to end with a partner swing.

**The Band** - Signal the band at least two cycles to go out. Then signal how many cycles to end near the end of each cycle.

Do not assume that the band can count - they can, but they can also make mistakes or misunderstand the signal. Keep the countdown going from wherever you start it to one cycle to go.

Especially with inexperienced bands, always signaling the band the number of cycles to go out early in B2 will reduce mistakes. This is because it tells the band that the next 16 count phrase is important. If you signal in B1, it's the phrase after the next phrase, making it easier to miss. Do not signal in A1 or A2 - this causes confusion of whether you mean to include the current cycle in your count.

**Bringing the Crowd to the Front** - If you want to bring the crowd to the front of the hall to thank the band, end the dance at its usual end and use a full cycle of the music to get people to the front.

## ***Choreography Details***

**Wavy lines connected at the ends?** - When the set is configured in long wavy lines, should the people at the top and bottom take hands to make one continuous loop? If the dancers need someone in that hand then the answer is yes. For example, if everyone is with their partner in the wavy lines and the next call is allemande your trail buddy, then they should have already taken hands. Otherwise no - it distorts the lines for no reason.

**Petronella claps** - Petronella claps are not part of the petronella spin, they are an optional flourish. Petronella claps are good for synchronizing the dancers, but they remove the weighted connection that occurs when the dancers take hands at the end of the spin. This connection may be a star, swing, allemande, and the connection is preferred over the clap.

**Hands on a right and left through?** - Do you take hands across on a right and left through, that is pull by across to a courtesy turn or pass through across to a courtesy turn? This has been the subject of much debate. I suggest no hands. The hands are needed for the courtesy turn (or replacement twirl) so any pull by is short and does not feel like a proper pull by, where the hands are held until you are well past the person that you pulled by.

**Types of stars** - "Star" means different thing to different people. In the north it means a wrist hold. In the south, hands across. For many dances the choice is important - specify what you want. For other dances it doesn't matter, but it is a mess if different people in a star choose different grips. If there is any question - specify what to do. This is especially important at a dance weekend with many travelers.

**Dancers' choice calls with partners and neighbors** - A few dances have dancers' choice figures, generally chosen by how far to allemande. This is easy if it is a partner decision. It is not easy if it is a neighbor decision. I suggest that you not do this to neighbors.

**Diagonal progressions** - In general, dances that progress with a diagonal right and left through or 1/2 hey are double progression - you interact with a couple in the diagonal figure and then go on to a new couple for the next cycle. For these dances if there is no-one to do the diagonal figure, you stay in place.

Dances that progress with a forward to the left and straight back (also known as slice) are single progression. Everyone dances the figure and it may take you in or out of the dance.

**Orbits** - In a clockwise orbit it flows nicely if the orbiters from adjacent minor sets pass by the right instead of left. (And in a counter-clockwise orbit it flows nicely if the orbiters from adjacent minor sets pass by the left.)

**Half poussettes** - Teach the dancers to use a large enough path so that all of the allotted time is used. This is often needed if eight counts are given to a half poussette. If six counts are allotted then it is generally not a problem.

**Zigzags** - In a zigzag, dancers should maintain their orientation. If you start facing down, you should face down for the entire figure. The steps are predominantly sideways. The distance to lead out should be enough so that the figure takes the appropriate amount of time.

**Allemande 1/2** - This figure is often called as four counts, although it can be done in as little as two counts. Increasing the path length is not really an option so adjust your speed to use the allotted time.

**Down the hall, turn alone** - With down the hall, four in line, turn alone, it is traditional and preferable that the inside dancers turn so that they make eye contact with the adjacent outside dancers. And the outside dancers should turn so that they make eye contact with the adjacent inside dancers.

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**Contra Corners** - The problem that I encounter here is that the posts (the dancers standing on the side of the set) often don't have their left hand ready. And when they do, they are often looking in the wrong direction. If you are a contra corners post, at the start of the figure have your left hand ready for an allemande and face to the right diagonal. After allemanding your first corner have your left hand ready for an allemande and face to the left diagonal. This will make it easy for the dancers that are turning contra corners to allemande with you.

**Pick up your partner** - The transition from an allemande in the middle to a star promenade needs a clean pickup. This is primarily up to the dancer who is being picked up. This person should be in position and facing the right direction. It works well if the person is stationary and ready to move. It also works well if the person is moving prior to the pickup and their timing puts them in the correct position. But they should not get ahead of the pickup point.



## ***Social Comfort***

**Fun for Everyone** - A dance should be fun for everyone. You should not put any of the dancers in uncomfortable situations.

**Singling out Dancers** - This is easy to do unintentionally - you are trying to help someone understand a figure, and you end up talking to or guiding that one person. This may be very uncomfortable for that person as it makes them the center of attention. Avoid this.

**Politics** - I believe that politics should be completely avoided at dances. The crowd might heavily lean to one side of an issue. Why would you want to antagonize the minority? People are at the dance to have fun and get away from day to day problems.

**Gents Swing, Gents Gypsy** - Gents swing and gents gypsy make a number of people uncomfortable. You may find these figures innocuous, but a lot of people don't. Or you may enjoy pushing people into uncomfortable situations to see their reactions. This is not good for the dancers' enjoyment or dance energy. Or you might think that pushing people into such situations will improve their reaction to them - that is not my experience and that is not your job as a caller. If you insist on calling a dance with gents swing or gents gypsy, tell people in advance, and give them the opportunity to sit it out. If you do not do this then some people will feel trapped into doing the dance rather than doing it voluntarily. This will detract from the dancers' enjoyment and energy level.

## ***Improving Dancer Interaction***

**Let People Know What's Coming Up** - Some people prefer to sit out various types of dances - complex dances, dizzy dances, mixers, squares, etc. Let them know what's coming up while you have their attention at the start of the preceding dance, or at the latest, immediately at the end of the preceding dance. This lets them handle partner interactions appropriately (and line up correctly). Also let people know when there are one or two dances left before a break or the end of the dance.

**Line Length** - The caller should monitor line length and recommend the formation of more or fewer lines. This may be based on the chosen dance.

**Practices that Help New Dancers** - The best thing that you can do to help new dancers is get them into the dance early, and make the early dances heavy on neighbor interaction, especially swings, so that the new dancers will interact with experienced dancers.

**Suggestions to the Dancers** - If there is a static group of people at the side, not dancing, the caller may suggest that experienced dancers ask new dancers to dance or that dancers look for people who are sitting out to ask to dance.

**The Center Line** - The center line is the subject of much debate around contra dance forums. Experienced dancers tend to prefer the center line, leaving inexperienced dancers on the edge lines, dancing with other inexperienced dancers. You can make a short announcement, suggesting that experienced dancers try the edge lines.

**Booking Ahead** - There has been a lot of discussion in contra dance forums about booking ahead, that is, signing up dance partners in advance of the dance, and how it can be addressed. I suggest it should not be addressed - the caller should not impose his/her preference in the matter on the dancers. Try to address the problems that you think are caused by booking ahead by encouraging positive acts, such as those noted above.

## ***Topics for a Lesson for New Dancers***

### **Contra Lines**

- Up and down the hall
- Contra line, hands four, set of four, ones, twos, partners, neighbors, gents, ladies
- Improper contra, Becket formation
- Progression ("new neighbors", "with the next", "look away from your set")
- Direction of progression
- Out at the top and bottom

### **Rhythm, Steps, Phrases**

- 1 count steps (walk to the beat, smoothly, weight on forefoot)
- 16 count musical phrases
- 16 count figures (balance and swing, full hey, etc.)
- 8 count musical phrases
- 8 count figures (circle, star, do-si-do, etc.)
- 4 count figures (balance, allemande 1/2, box the gnat, etc.)

### **Hand Links and Weight/Tension**

- Hand link, fingers bent to hold link, do not squeeze
- Stay vertical and straight
- Lean back and tighten elbows/shoulders just enough to establish the connection needed for cooperative movement

### **Basic Figures**

- Do-si-do
- Circle
- Star (wrist hold, hands across)
- Long lines forward and back
- Allemande (allemande link, wrists straight, elbows pointed down, do not squeeze)
- Right and left through across
- Ladies chain across
- Balance
- Swing (frame, buzz step, walking step, ends with lady on the right, ends at the end of a 16 count musical phrase)
- Hey

### **A Basic Sequence**

- Neighbors balance and swing
- Long lines go forward and back
- Circle left 3/4
- Partners do-si-do
- Partners swing
- Ladies chain across
- Star left and look for new neighbors

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## **Flourishes**

- Are optional
- Can improve the dance flow (direction, timing)
- Can be fun
- Should stay within the dance timing and within your own space

## **Fun**

- Have fun
- Help other people have fun by
  - Dancing in your own space
  - Being on time (if you are late, skip a figure and get ready for the next figure)
  - Being gentle with leads and hand links
  - Supporting your own weight

## **Social Issues**

- You may ask anyone to dance
- You may decline any offer to dance, quickly and politely so that the person asking can find different partner
- Consider asking dancers that have been sitting out to dance
- As you become experienced, consider joining a line that has many new dancers so that you can help make the dance work

## **More Figures**

- 1/2 poussette
- Box the gnat
- Butterfly whirl
- California twirl
- Contra corners
- Down the hall
- Gate
- Gypsy
- Mad robin
- Orbit
- Pass through
- Pass through to a wave across
- Petronella balance and spin (when is clapping appropriate)
- Promenade across
- Pull by (gentle hand shake)
- Roll away with a half sashay
- Rory O'More balance and spin
- Star promenade
- Wavy lines

## ***Addressing Dancer Injury, Illness***

Reckless dancers, poor dance form, repetitive stress, accidents can cause injury to contra dancers. Callers are in a position to give tips that may reduce this problem, but watch out for information overload and long speeches that lose the audience.

### **Tips for avoiding injury, illness**

- Dance in your own space, i.e. where you should be in the called figure.
- In a balance or long lines forward and back, do not back up any farther than you stepped forward.
- In a swing, the lady's right arm and the gent's left arm should be down or folded, not straight out.
- Hand links - hooked hands with tight fingers gives the linked dancer (in a circle for example) something easy to hold so that they don't have any reason to squeeze.
- In an allemande grip, hold your thumb to your hand.
- Don't stomp - tap your feet on the floor if you want to make noise (saves your feet for future use).
- Wear supportive, cushioned shoes that allow easy pivoting (saves your feet for future use).
- Ladies, forcing your hand directly above your head in a twirl reduces the ability of the gent to crank.
- Be proactive in protecting yourself.
- During or after dancing do not touch your eyes or nose until you have washed your hands and wrists.

### **Tips for avoiding CAUSING injury, illness**

- Dance in your own space, i.e. where you should be in the called figure.
- Do not do flourishes that affect others' dancing space, for example holding arched hands in a hey may force others to duck, dips may cause legs to extend into a swinging couple.
- In a balance or long lines forward and back, do not back up any farther than you stepped forward.
- Point your elbows to the floor in allemandes.
- Keep your wrist straight in allemandes.
- Gents use a flat hand on the lady's back in a swing.
- Don't squeeze hands.
- Don't stomp - tap your feet on the floor if you want to make noise (saves other dancers' feet).
- Plan ahead to give plenty of time for a twirl or other flourish so that you can finish on time without rushing.
- The purpose of a lead is to impart information to the follower, not to force them to follow. A lead may be declined - be prepared to abort it if you detect resistance.
- Do not wear rings or bracelets with sharp edges.
- Use unscented laundry detergent and deodorant or antiperspirant and do not use perfumes or colognes.
- Do not dance when you are sick.

### **Tips to minimize dizziness**

- Do not eat too much or too little before a dance.
- Maintain eye contact in a swing.
- Keep your head upright.
- Keep your head level - walk and swing smoothly, without bouncing.
- Turn alone counter-clockwise when there is time, such as in a do-si-do.
- Try taking ginger before the dance.

## ***Working With the Band***

**Be Flexible** - There is a wide variety of bands playing for contra dances - experienced to inexperienced in contra dance, professional musicians to amateur musicians, strong orientation to music type (old time, Celtic, etc.) to anything goes, bands that are fully involved with the dance to bands that ignore the dance, bands that want the caller's input on tempo, tune choice, mood to bands that want no input except when to start and end. You must be able to work with any of these bands. And anything noted here must be adapted to your specific situation.

**Communication** - It is difficult for the band to play music and talk to the caller at the same time. It is common for the caller to use simple hand signals for the most common communication. Before the dance work with the band to set the signals that you will use. Useful signals include 3, 2, 1 cycles to go out, go out now, halfway through (for tune switches), quicker tempo, and slower tempo.

And it is not easy for the band to prepare for the next set while talking to the caller. Keep your conversation to a minimum and do it before you start teaching the next dance.

Hand signals break down when the caller is sloppy with the signals (insufficient hold time, bad hand orientation, poor choice of timing). Do not let this happen. And when it does happen, do not start a conversation with the band, just correct the problem.

**Signal Timing** - A good time to signal the band for ending a dance or switching a tune is the start of B2. This tells the band to change at the next 16 count phrase, and gives them time to prepare. Alternatively, the start of B1 gives more time to prepare but it is easier for the band to make a mistake. Ask the band what they prefer.

Either way, be consistent so the band knows when to look for your signal.

Do not signal in A1 or A2. This is ambiguous as to whether you are including this cycle and it is a distraction to the band to sort out what you mean.

**No Walkthrough Dances** - Give the band as much advance notice of a no walkthrough dance as you can. A band must choose a set of tunes, communicate this through the entire band, verify that everyone is ready (equipment check, tuning, mental or sheet music), and start playing. With no advance notice, this can take as much time as a walkthrough.

**Introductions** - Be prepared to introduce the band. Often the dance organizers will do this, but if they do not, then you should do it.

**Choosing Tunes** - Bands work on many different levels when choosing tunes. Some will accept specific requests. Some like to see your dance card. Some watch your walkthrough. Some want your description of the dance or mood. Some adjust the tune as it is being danced. You must work with the band at their level, so be ready.

**Structure of the Music** - Contra dance music, regardless of the time signature on sheet music, whether a reel, jig, march, or polka is written as two dance beats (or counts) per bar (or measure). For a reel, march, or polka, the time signature may be 4/4, 2/2, or 2/4 and each dance beat is written as

1 half note or 2 quarter notes or 4 eighth notes (or a combination)

or

1 quarter note or 2 eighth notes or 4 sixteenth notes.

For a jig, the time signature is 6/8, and each beat is written as

1 dotted quarter note or 3 eighth notes or a quarter note and an eighth note.

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Referring to beats composed of eighth notes, four eighth notes for a reel or three eighth notes for a jig, each dance beat is emphasized by accenting the first (downbeat) or third eighth note. At a simple level this is done by the rhythm instruments with a boom/chuck strum pattern - base note of the chord on the downbeat then strum the other chord notes. For fiddle, it may be done with a bowing pattern, often the Nashville shuffle bow, slurring the first two eighth notes and sawing the second two (1 2 3 4), or just accenting the desired note.

Contra dance tunes, in general, are composed of four 16 count phrases, usually noted as A1, A2, B1, B2. Each 16 count phrase is made up two 8 count phrases, but this division is less distinct than the 16 count phrase. The A1 and A2 phrases may be identical or similar. And the B1 and B2 phrases may be identical or similar. A less common phrasing is A1, A2, B, C, sometimes the result of shortening an A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 tune to use for a contra dance. Phrases are distinct because of the melody, but the band may add further rhythmic emphasis, making them easier to hear.

The heavy 16 count phrases with light 8 count phrases makes it possible, but not desirable, to break figures at the 8 count transition. For example, a swing needs to end on a sixteen count phrase, a full hey should be contained in a sixteen count phrase, and a pair of eight count figures (two Petronella turns, chain over and back for example) are better contained in a sixteen count phrase than split. Especially for the case of the swing not ending at the sixteen count phrase, either don't do it (preferred) or inform the band so that they will not be confused when watching the dance.

## ***Working With the Organizers***

**Schedule** - The caller is in charge of implementing the timing of the dance event. Ask the organizers about the start time, stop time, break time, break length, announcement time, and is the stop time a hard limit or fuzzy.

**Beginner's Workshop** - Is there a beginner's workshop before the dance? Who is teaching it?

**Agreement** - Check the dance group's web page to verify any booking. Also make sure that you are in agreement on payment, housing, meals.

**What Kind of Dance to Call** - There's a tendency to expect that if a dance group hires you they want what you like to call. This is not always the case. You might be hired because they are familiar with your dances and like what you do. It might be because you have a recognizable name and they have no idea what you do. It might be that they like your style but want a specific type of dance. It is important that the organizers know what kind of dances you like to do and are willing to do, and that you know what kind of dance they want.

Some basic contra dance event types -

- Traditional - includes new contras, traditional contras (including unequal dances, dances with no partner swings, proper contras), squares, mixers, triplets.
- Barn Dance - maybe the same as a traditional contra dance, maybe more family or community oriented, so easier dances.
- Contemporary (as of 2012) - includes mostly contras with partner swings, but may include a few of the other traditional forms (squares, mixers, etc.).
- Modern (as of 2012) - exclusively contras (including four facing four) with partners swings and most have neighbor swings.
- Advanced - implies no beginners, but it is best to know how the organizers handle it because this may limit your choice of dances. The organizers may want complex dances, no walkthrough dances, or just a dance with only experienced dancers.
- Dance Weekend - this implies few beginners because pre-registration is encouraged, maybe no beginners if the weekend is sold out. Ask the organizers what kind of dances they want.

I've struggled to name contemporary versus modern, and found this distinction - modern refers to a contemporary style that is moving away from traditional forms. What I've called contemporary is a small step from traditional. What I've called modern is a big step, avoiding many of the traditional dance forms. If you've got better names, let me know.

## ***Beyond The Basics***

**Running an Evening** - The caller is responsible for starting and ending the dance and breaks on time. You are the leader. Some things are out of your control - setup, the band, sound, the people who are putting on the dance. But you can use your position to coordinate with all of these people to make things happen. Use this power for the good of the dancers.

**Be a Part of the Dance** - You must stay interested in the dance, the dancers, and the band throughout the evening. If there is more dancing after your part is done, join the crowd on the dance floor.

**Make the Band Happy and Help Them to Look Good** - Keep the band happy so that they will be energetic and play good music. Introduce them, announce them, complement them, work with them.

**Sound Guy** - Don't forget the people that set up the sound system. They are very important to a dance.

**Dance Organizers** - Don't forget to thank the dance organizers and work crew. They put a lot of work into making the dance happen.

**And Yourself** - Some dance groups are not good about introductions to the crowd - band, caller, sound people, work crew, organizers. It's the caller's job to cover this, and that sometimes includes having to introduce yourself. Introducing yourself may not be easy, but it is necessary to let the crowd know who you are and to give them the opportunity to express their appreciation.

### **Stage Personality**

Smile and act happy, regardless of how you feel.

Enthusiasm is okay, but too much is annoying. You can't make people enjoy the dance by telling them to, or increase the energy level by being enthusiastic. The dancers' enjoyment and energy level will come from the dance and music.

Regardless of how good you are technically, you will be judged by many primarily on your stage personality. Get the basics right and then work on your charisma.

**Why am I Here?** - Don't forget that the dance is about the dancers, not the caller. Keep your stories, pontification, and jokes short.