

# *Tips on Being a Better Contra Dancer*

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## ***Introduction***

This is a set of tips on how to be a better contra dancer, mostly stolen from my Notes on Calling Contra Dances. These assume a basic knowledge of contra dancing and are aimed at anyone who has done an evening of contra dancing, from one dance to years of dancing. It explores details that may be obvious to you, details that callers seldom teach, details that some dancers or callers get wrong, details that I contrived that many people will disagree with, details that are worth discussing and debating long after the dance is over, and more.

Being a better dancer will make the dance more fun for you, for your partner, for your set of four, for every dancer in the room, and for the caller, band, organizers, and maybe the sound person.

## ***Connection***

**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.

## ***Fun***

**Fun** - If the dances aren't fun, there's not much point to them, except maybe exercise. Have fun. You will find that as your dancing improves, you will have more fun.

**Help other people have fun -**

- Learn the figures so that you can dance them without assistance and help others.
- Dance in your own space (where you should be in the called figure).
- Be on time (if you are late, skip a figure and get ready for the next figure).
- Be gentle with leads and hand links.
- Support your own weight.

## ***The Mechanics of Dancing***

**Rhythm of the beat** - 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. Feel the music.

**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 (sixteen count) phrase.

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 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. I can't describe it very well here and it varies with each pair of dancers. Seek out help at the dance and try varying positions and holds, especially if swings don't feel comfortable.

**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 gent and sometimes by the lady, 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.

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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 use of the term link when talking about handholds. You need a secure 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. You must take care to use the minimum squeeze needed at any moment.

Squeeze problems in general? - if you find that your hand is being squeezed by other dancers, 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 swinging** - Swings may be done with a buzz step, walking step, or pivot step. The buzz step and walking step are compatible, i.e. they may be done together. The pivot step requires that both dancers pivot. Regardless of the step, you should always feel the same connection of frame and weight. And the swing should always be smooth and level, not bouncy. Different partners and different floors require different steps to be smooth. Use whatever step it takes to be smooth in the current situation. And you can 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.

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**Set Awareness** - (from a suggestion at my workshop at Dance Trance 2017) In contra dancing it helps to keep the contra line in good shape, straight, not too tight, not too spread out, not too close to another contra line. When out at the top or bottom, stay close. In any figure that you can, adjust your final position to make the best contra line - long lines forward and back, down the hall and back, swings, most figures involving just two dancers.

## *Handling Complex Dances*

**For complex dances** - These tips 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 zigzag 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.
- 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 set of four, the person that you enter with will be dancing your shadow's role, not your partner's role.

## ***Odds and Ends of Contra Choreography***

**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.

**Diagonal progressions** - A diagonal right and left through or 1/2 hey is a double progression figure - you interact with a couple in the diagonal figure and then go on to a new couple. For these figures if there is no-one to do the diagonal figure with, you stay in place.

The figure often called a slice, forward to the left and straight back, is single progression. Everyone dances this 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, mad robins** - Half poussettes and mad robins may be called as six or eight counts. If eight counts are used by the dance, either extend the path or slow down so that all of the allotted time is used.

**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.

**Heys** - Heys are taught as the ladies (for example) pass by the right in the middle, then neighbors (for example) pass by the left on the side, etc. What is often missing is that, at the same time, the gents should be looping from their current position to the ladies' starting position, which puts them in position to pass by the right in the middle.

**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 Issues***

### **Social issues -**

- You may ask anyone to dance.
- You may decline any offer to dance, but do this quickly so that the person asking can find a different partner. And be polite.
- Consider asking dancers that have been sitting out to dance.
- Consider joining a line that has many new dancers so that you can help make the dance work.

### **Smile -**

- Smile - people like smiling people.
- Some people smile with their eyes, not their mouth.
- Don't avoid people who are not smiling - they may be dancing through pain or they may be concentrating on making the dance work.
- Do not tell people to smile - some people find this offensive.

**Eye contact** - Eye contact is part of the contra dance culture, but it is not required.



## ***Dancer Injury, Illness, Dizziness***

### **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.

### **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.

## ***Flourishes, Twirls, Swing Dance Moves***

**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. For example ladies chain into a circle left works better with a twirl than with a courtesy turn. Flourishes should stay within the dance timing and within your own space.

**Twirls to improve flow** - Twirls are often useful to improve flow, having the property that the twirl can be ended with the twirling dancer facing any direction. They must be started at an appropriate time so that they end ready for the next figure.

**Twirling from a balance into a swing** - The nice thing here is that you typically have 12 counts from the end of the balance to the end of the swing. You can do some fancy moves and still have time for a swing. Any swing dance move that takes you from open to closed position can likely be adapted.

**Substitutes for a swing** - I'm not aware of anything I would rather do in this time period than swing, but you can do just about anything that you and your swing partner agree to here. Be aware of how the swing integrates into the dance so that you can make your substitute flow.

**Dancing while out at the end of the line** - In a contra with one progression, you have 64 counts out at the end of the line. It often begins at the start of the dance cycle but may not. It often ends facing the dance with ladies on the right, but it may not. So pay attention to what is going on in the line and be ready to reenter the dance correctly.

The swing dance step may be replaced by a balance step, four counts per complete step (forward and back). Any swing dance move can be adapted to this step. And of course you can do any two person contra figure - balance and swing, gypsy, any twirl to swap.