

The Contra Connection

What can a caller do to address the needs of beginners?

by Ted Sannella, Larry Jennings, and Dan Pearl

Ted Sannella: At a dance which is part of a series, unless the evening is advertised "for experienced dancers," the wise caller will always be prepared for at least 10% new dancers and perhaps a like number with limited experience (those who have been to one or two dances). It is the caller's responsibility to assess the ability of the dancers on hand and, through his choice of dances and the way he puts them across, to provide a fun evening for the maximum number. This number includes beginners!

A caller will be aware of beginners by the way they move. Skipping, excessively large steps, hesitant response, and jerky movement are giveaways. Other things about them will also be apparent: they cling together (for security); they try to imitate those around them (for concealment); they position themselves as far from the stage as possible (for safety); and they listen intently to the caller and anyone else nearby (for help and reassurance). There will be exceptions to these generalities, of course, but one characteristic that nearly all beginners have in common is an open mind. by taking advantage of this receptiveness, a caller can effectively communicate with the newcomers early in the evening and gently guide them along without neglecting the more skilled dancers. Speak to everyone, but choose words that will be understood by and especially helpful to beginners. Here are a few examples during a walk-through: 1) instead of "circle left with the next below" say "face that couple in your group of four, join hands in a ring, now circle to the left, go once around." 2) instead of "swing your neighbor, go down the hall four in line" say "swing that new person next to you, keep that neighbor, join hands in a line with the lady on the right and your back to me, all go forward down the hall." Sure, it takes a few seconds more to say the explanatory words, but it will take a lot longer to straighten up the confusion that results from the early use of words and concepts, such as "below, down, neighbor, etc." that mean nothing to a beginner.

The first dance on the program should be one that is forgiving. It doesn't even need to be real easy as long as it includes "buffers" to allow slower dancers to catch up if they fall behind. Be sure it has a partner swing to satisfy the more experienced dancers. The next dance or two can be slightly more complex but should include figures learned by the beginners in the first dance while introducing a few new ones. Ask the band to keep the tempos down for these early dances. Of course, dances with demanding sequences should be put off until later. It is important that, during these first few dances, the newcomers are able to build their confidence, alleviate their fears, and be made to feel

comfortable. The caller must choose his words carefully and speak efficiently so that, during both the teaching and the calling, the beginners will understand what they are expected to do. If they hear the instructions and calls clearly from the caller and enough time is allowed to respond properly (forgiving sequences), they should be able to manage nearly as well as those around them. Since some people learn by doing and others learn by seeing, it is often helpful to have a demonstration early on to illustrate a point. Demonstrations should be brief, spontaneous (though well-thought-out) and infrequent. I like to select an unexpected knowledgeable partner and show how to make strong spring-like connections in an allemande and a circle four. A little light banter helps the beginners to relax: "Ladies, be careful not to dig your fingernails into his flesh, unless you want to be sure he never dances with you again."

Often I welcome beginners with an announcement such as "We want to welcome you folks who are here for the first time. Every person here was a first timer once and we expect them to help me make you comfortable just as others did for them. Relax, have fun and do dance with lots of different partners, so they can help you." Any greeting such as this must be delivered with friendly warmth and sincerity for best results.

Most callers realize that beginners have special needs, but knowing when and how to address these needs is a skill that not all callers possess. It always amazes me to see how often callers will completely disregard beginners, leaving them to struggle by themselves, while aiming their program, their remarks, and their teaching to the more experienced dancers. With some series, I fear that this behavior is a reflection of the sponsor's attitude. Most likely, those who do the hiring come from the ranks of the most experienced dancers. These folks are sometimes shortsighted and not always sympathetic toward beginners. Here's the scenario: A caller is hired by a program chairman who says "most of our dancers are intermediate or advanced" or "the majority of our dancers are above average." The important fact left unsaid was "a goodly number of dancers that night will be beginners." This reminds me of the proverbial bottle that can be either viewed as half empty or half full.

A good committee will be sensitive to the needs of the beginners and will inform the caller of any policies or customs rewarding new dancers. Is there a *welcoming committee* to allay their fears and, perhaps, walk them through a few basic figures? Do the *regulars* usually pair off with newcomers early in the evening without being asked to do so? Is a prelim

provided for basic instruction? If the care and feeding of beginners is left completely in the hands of the caller, the committee may convey that message to him. Lacking such a declaration, dealing with beginners is the caller's responsibility anyhow. It's part of the job description!

Larry Jennings: Treat beginners with empathy and high expectations, avoiding condescension. That is to say, your attitude will have far more effect than the details of what you choose to say. I will expand on that in the case of a weekly series with, typically, about 5% brand new dancers and less than 25% who have only been to a few dances.

First we ask, should there be a special beginners' session before the start of the dance? This encourages beginners to be there at the start of the real dance, shows that (officially, at least) they are welcome, and gives the opportunity to describe a few figures. On the other hand, one speaker at a recent discussion session asserted that it may appear to be an additional obstacle to overcome ("another hoop to jump through"). Further, it may give the false impression that classes are relevant to New England style (NES) dancing. But, worst of all, it does not and cannot give the feeling of a real dance; it may, therefore, give the beginner the idea that doing the figures correctly is more important than a zesty approach to interacting with other people. This view is often exacerbated by the leader/teacher insisting on giving a detailed exposition about stuff that is completely lost on the dazed novice. So, on the whole, give the arriving dancers a few personal words of encouragement and a pat on the back. I do look kindly on an offer by the caller, at intermission, to give personal help to anyone who wants it.

And what do you, the leader, think about your abilities when you observe a beginner, at the end of the evening, still having no idea that the man backs up in a courtesy turn and that the courtesy turn usually takes up the last four counts of an eight-phrase count? Have you failed in your responsibility? Or do you conclude that Larry gave you a bum steer: you should have done more teaching? I think not. That beginner might have done comparably badly even with informal teaching. And you can feel good about the other beginner who noted for himself how rewarding is a courtesy turn executed with a firm but elastic tension in the joined left hands and right on the musical phrase.

Recalling my assumption that at least 3/4 of the crowd has some familiarity with contras, what dances do you choose? The answer is, real dances. That is, dances that the regular dancers will put their hearts into, dances that will encourage the regulars to be there for the first dance. Never mind making a big fuss about carefully grading the dances to make a perfect program. Use real dances. However, be certain that they do not break down. Avoid action out of the minor set; be liberal with the rescuing figures "down four in line" and "long lines: forward and back". And try not to choose

dances which are so well known that the experienced dancers will not pay attention; that sets a bad example for your beginners. Instead try something with a little twist that will put beginners and experienced dancers in as equal a level as possible.

Lastly, what do you respond when you are asked a specific question about how to execute a figure? Naturally you will answer the question. But I encourage you not to be satisfied with, "It's very simple, just..." This may be your best chance to influence the "style" of your group. For example, are you clever enough to go beyond the rudiments of a swing? Can you figure out how to suggest that the dancers should try to accommodate to their partner, so the axes of their bodies are parallel? The beginner will be a little taken aback by such sophistications, but will thank you in the long run. And you, the leader, are in it for the long run.

Dan Pearl: It's often difficult for callers to remember what it felt like when they went to their first dance. You might have felt intimidated, apprehensive, and ignorant. Looking back, you might wonder how you got through the first night!

The needs of beginners are varied and complex, but common needs are the "three C's": **confidence**, **comfort**, and **control**. Dancers get confidence when they know the steps, comfort when they don't feel threatened by the caller or other dancers, and they feel in control when they are in tune with the dynamics of the evening.

Every little bit helps. Even before the dance begins, certain things can happen to make a beginner feel welcome. For instance, some dances distribute a "Welcome" information sheet that lets newcomers know the routines and rituals of the dance. Some dances feature crash courses for beginners before the dance. These might not teach a lot of figures, but they get the new dancer into a learning and listening mode, and they will provide confidence for what is to come.

Even the hall and the other dancers can have a welcoming feel. For one thing, beginners are relieved when they arrive to find other dancers dressed in normal clothing. It is especially effective if an experienced dancer welcomes the beginner, clues them in on what is to come, and asks them for the first dance.

Usually the caller is talking things over with the band and getting things set up, so meeting everyone who arrives is just not practical. The caller must use other tricks to put the newcomer at ease.

Your first words over the mic could be a welcome to all, especially the newcomers. Be careful: It might make some of the newcomers feel uncomfortably conspicuous if you ask them to raise their hands. If this was your ploy to alert the regulars that there are beginners afoot, don't bother! If you need to find out the extent of new folks, consider asking the people who hired you (if you can't estimate yourself).

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OpSex Pill Needed

Here is a speech given by Gillian Dawson at a speakers competition. Her friends at the Heritage Dance Club in Williamsburg, VA suggested CDSS News readers might enjoy it. The version which follows is a condensation of the original.

Am I a man or a woman? I have a group of friends who frequently ask me this question. My answer is very often "I'm a man", and the person asking the question believes me, and sometimes the only comment is that if I'm a man, I'm on the wrong side.

So I get on the right side, facing a woman, who is supposed to be a woman -- we've already agreed that I'm a man and she's a woman -- and we do well for a while as a couple of women, one of whom is supposed to be a man, until we hear a panic-stricken voice saying "Which of you is the man?" We are surprised at his confusion because we are where we are supposed to be and doing the things appropriate to our sex, but he was caught off guard by finding a woman where he expected to find a man and not being sure whom to manoeuvre with next. He gets us sorted out and we progress nicely until another man says in an agitated way, "I'm not supposed to be doing this with a woman." "It's all right," I say. "I'm a man." He's relieved to hear that.

After a short while, though, we realize that something is fundamentally wrong -- she's doing the movements I'm supposed to be doing and vice versa. "I know I'm a man," I say, and she says, "Well, I know I started out as a woman." But it's too late, we're involved with another couple and can't get back to our proper places. We agree we might as well remain switched over. No one seems to be upset by the fact that we've changed our sex. In fact they don't know, since we both look like women, we both know how to be a man or a woman, and no one will remember how we started out. But it doesn't work. Someone says, "When we last met I'm sure you were a man!" Luckily that's the end of the dance.

People who run divorce seminars say that twice as many women as men get divorced. That can't be true, men just don't feel they need help recovering, and they don't seem to feel that they need English country dancing either because it is true that twice as many women as men turn up to do it.

Maybe by the 21st century there will be a temporary sex change pill. Let's imagine the situation. Everyone arrives for the ball and is divided according to sex - forty women and twenty men. That means ten of the women will have to become men for the evening, so they take an OPSEX pill - effects guaranteed to wear off within four to six hours, gentle on your stomach...

At the next dance someone who is a man asks me to dance. I just hope that a few minutes into the dance he won't be saying "What are you doing?" and that I won't be replying "Oh, I forgot I was a woman."

(The Contra Connection, cont. from p. 8)

Be relaxed: a tense caller calls to tense dancers.

The first dance is the most critical learning period for the new dancer. During the first walk-through, avoid the use of unexplained jargon. I like embedding the definitions of novel terms within the walk-through, on an as-needed basis, instead of bombarding people with a pile of definitions. By keeping things simple and predictable, you give newcomers confidence that they can actually do this stuff. Straightforward material would feature **predictability** (*star right, star left*), **easy, intuitive figures** (avoid *contra corners* or *heys*), and **attached movement** (use *down four in line* instead of *actives down the outside, and return*). An early dose of the feeling of accomplishment will do wonders for the confidence of the newcomers.

The music can serve as a confidence builder. If the hall is loaded with beginners, I might ask the band for a tune that might even be familiar to the beginner, like *Arkansas Traveller*, *Irish Washerwoman*, or *Gaspé Reel* (familiar to TV viewers as the theme for "The Victory Garden"). Because the tune is familiar, the phrases in the music will make it easier for the dancers to perceive how the music relates to the dance.

It is important to address the needs of the beginners without putting off the experienced dancers. If done deftly, you can address the needs of all the dancers, thus enhancing the feeling of community and togetherness that is the hallmark of contra dancing.

Callers Ted Sannella, Larry Jennings, and Dan Pearl live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help beginning callers and organizers. "Beginners' Needs" is the eleventh article in the series. Reprints of earlier articles are available from CDSS; write for details.



(Trees, cont. from p. 10)

turn to be out, Phil stopped the music, the dance was over, and we disappeared into the night.

Endnote: Twenty years after she was a tree, Meg traveled to England with Ring o'Bells Morris Women, and in the course of their tour, they went to pay homage to Douglas Kennedy. They went to his home and he met each one. When he looked at Meg, he put his hands on her shoulders and said, "I remember you. You're Meg Hodgkin. I remember the night the trees danced at Pinewoods."