

The Contra Connection

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

"How much individualism is appropriate for contra dancing?"

Ted Sannella: Although some individual expression has always been evident on the contra dance floor, in recent years the display of individualism has increased until it appears to be the norm in many areas. Twirling, hip swaying, dishrag turns, and assorted other flourishes are becoming so prevalent at some dances that the traditional way to perform many of the basic figures is becoming obscure.

I believe that with improvisation, dancers can increase their enjoyment of dancing through a higher level of interaction with other dancers, but I also believe that a few limitations are necessary in order to prevent rough dancing or annoyance among fellow dancers. In my book, *Balance and Swing* (page 18), I speak to this issue with the following statement. "Those who choose to improvise are expected to conform to the unwritten rules that apply to the performance of any dance figure done with or without variations: (1) They must not inconvenience the other dancers. (2) They must finish the figure in its allotted time. (3) They must be ready to make a smooth transition into the next figure at the correct time. (4) They must not alter the character of the dance.

Nobody likes to have restrictions put on their dancing enjoyment, but these limitations are intended to ensure the pleasure and safety of nearby dancers and by projection, the integrity of the activity as a whole. Even when complying with these "rules," those who exhibit extreme forms of individualism risk possible emulation by less-skilled dancers who are often uncontrolled and apt to spoil the fun of others.

Much of the self-expression seen today at an average contra dance is quite appropriate when done skillfully and with consideration for others. For example, a dancer who "shows off" with several personalized balance steps is more acceptable than one who uses a balance as an excuse to demonstrate what has been learned at a clogging workshop. Likewise, dancers who flirt with their partner while moving in to make room for actives to "go down the outside" are more acceptable than those who gallop up the center during the same figure. Some of the individualism shown by better dancers is quite cleverly done and by diminishing choreographic awkwardnesses or uncomfortable situations may be an improvement on the traditional way to do a figure or a transition. This shows up in some of the ingenious compact holds used when swinging in a crowded hall or with another of the same sex, the pirouettes between hand turns when

turning contra corners, and the use of arm tension and flexion when going from "up the hall four in line" to "those two ladies chain."

Callers and dance producers share responsibility for safety and decorum on the dance floor. In attempting to show *everybody* a good time, they must overcome the tendency to foster an "anything goes" atmosphere. It is important, for the future of the activity, that contra dancing retain its reputation as a safe, wholesome form of recreation. Callers and producers can work toward this end by monitoring dance behavior and showing ways to increase enjoyment through better dancing proficiency, increased interaction with others, and suggested acceptable flourishes.

How much individualism is appropriate for contra dancing? Whatever amount is done in good taste, under control, without changing the character of a dance, and without danger or annoyance to others.

Dan Pearl: Every time I go Scottish country dancing, I am reminded how much freedom contra dancers have. RSCDS-certified instruction specifies myriad details, from the length of steps to the various angles that one holds one's feet. On the other hand, it would take a lot to raise the eyebrows of onlookers at contra dances. But contra dancing, unlike Scottish, has no formally specified style. Does the absence of a formal specification mean that with contras, anything goes? Well, no. But there are lots of factors that make the issue pretty murky.

Individualism is realized on the dance floor when dancers make choices from the "menu" presented to them by the dance sequence. Some choices are from a set of generally accepted alternatives. Some examples are: partner handhold during a swing or promenade, balance footwork, and the optional twirl at the end of a promenade. Each local style features primary choices. Here in New England, we use "New England promenade position" (identical to the ubiquitous courtesy turn position) for the promenade, but certain figure transitions lend themselves to a front skaters' handhold, varsouvienne handhold, or even just near hands joined.

Other choices are not strictly in the figure as choreographed. These include unusual "bend the line, two ladies chain" movements, women turning each other under in the middle during a ladies chain, twirling madly during a do-si-do or ladies chain, inactives swinging during the beginning of Chorus Jig, or turning leisurely 8-count allemandes into twice-round allemandes.

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(Even other "choices" are possible: high kicks, flailing one's limbs around without control, skipping instead of a "dance-walk", off-phrase movements, etc. I'd prefer to not discuss these items here, because they are the mark of beginning, selfish, or ill-informed dancers.)

When making choices, you should consider the following:

Are there newcomers around? It may be best in this case to stick to the "usual" choices and introduce unusual ones sparingly. These folks are just learning how to dance; it is beneficial if they see experienced dancers who, for example, don't twirl during a do-si-do.

Do your choices help the dance? Your choices can enhance the flow and enjoyment, or just as easily destroy a perfectly good dance. I advise dancing the dance "as written" a few times. Once you get the idea of the dance and can focus on the flow, only then try a few things out.

Do your choices make it better for everyone? You might be having a ball, but you might be forcing others to make accommodations that they preferred not to make at that time. You must use sensitivity to determine whether your frills are welcome.

Are you overdoing it? Don't forget that frills should be frills. If your dance cake is all frosting and sprinkles, then you have left something out.

Do your choices complement the feeling of the dance? The mark of a better dancer is to go with the feeling of the dance and the music, and make dance choices that enhance that feeling.

The process of becoming an experienced dancer involves not only smooth execution of figures, but awareness and good judgement in the selection of individualisms that do not conflict with the flow, connection, and community feeling that is the essence of contra dancing.

Larry Jennings: Let us skip over the desirability of charismatic individualism on the part of the caller, the musicians, and the organizers and restrict our attention to what an "ordinary" dancer might do. First she might, as an individual, give constructive criticism and other encouragement to the caller, the musicians, and the organizers. Second, she might ask a newcomer to dance, join in the shortest set, and help set a social and logistical example in other ways. And third, of course, she might go beyond the simplest interpretation of the dance sequence in order to increase her satisfaction. (In this connection, note that most people can derive enjoyment by making the dance more satisfying for others as well as for themselves.) Let us examine this third aspect in the light of my position (scarcely distinguishable from Ted's) as stated in Zesty Contrás: "Zesty improvisation is acceptable or even desirable so long as it does not change the flavor of the dance, does not discomfort or inconvenience others, and does not result in being late or in the wrong position for the next movement."

There are many simple opportunities to assert your individuality. You can move in as other dancers are dancing a figure eight around you. If the following figure is in long lines, the action of a hand cast is fun; if a promenade follows, how about a courtesy turn if a woman is going counterclockwise around a man? If an active couple is going down the outside, as in Chorus Jig, the others can take hands with their partner while they have moved in to make room for the actives. And, as an active, you can look across the set at your partner. In fact, there are myriad opportunities to "improvise" by paying attention to your partner.

You may feel a little tired of the arms around the waist position usually used for a cast off and sometimes used in a courtesy turn. As an alternative you might more often use a well-connected hand cast off. Sometimes you may find that perching a hand on the closer shoulder of the dancer next to you may avoid bothersome entanglement. Another variation on standard holds is one I like for strong allemande action: for an allemande left, say, close up on the usual thumb grasp position so that left elbows are pressing against each other, and hold your partner's left elbow with your right hand; you can even break into a buzz step if you both are comfortable and the following figure permits.

To some critics, "individualism" and "twirls" are almost synonymous. To understand my view on this, I must assert that, to me, "connection" is the underpinning of New England style dancing. And connection has two aspects. One is continuous connection, as in a courtesy turn or in circle left. The other form involves giving another dancer a strong assist in change of momentum, as in the transition from circle to pass through or from swing to promenade using the "let-go-and-catch" technique. This latter manifestation of connection can be very rewarding if the dancers have the skill to do it with sensitivity and with elastic rather than jerky action. So, consider, for example, the transition from ladies chain to circle left. I can scarcely approve of an individual who incorporates a rough twirl and is late joining the others for the circle. On the other hand, a properly executed twirl followed by cooperative let-go-and-catch can actually assist all the dancers to move smoothly into the circle. So my advice on twirls: don't focus on whether or not to do them; focus on when and how.

There are lots of examples of using connection to enhance the feeling that you are dancing with someone. Here's one: Consider a circle left in which the woman has her partner on her right and the call is for a partner swing. She can just stop and wait for her partner to engage her for the swing. But, much better, she can keep going until she feels a strong but elastic tension in her right arm. It is then easy for the couple to feel they are dancing continuously together. Here's another example: Consider an active couple coming up the outside behind their own sex, crossing over, and forming a circle with your inactives. If the active woman is left to go it alone, she may slither awkwardly into her reversal of direction. An individualistic couple,

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Frank Hall Recouping in Ireland

In July, while working in Ireland, Bloomington, Indiana caller Frank Hall was diagnosed with a chronic condition involving inflammation of the sac around the heart. On August 1 he had surgery in Dublin. His complete recovery is expected but he needs several months of recuperation in Galway. Since he can't be with his local support group, his Bloomington friends are telling his larger circle of friends of the situation. Cards and letters would be appreciated. Here's the address: Frank Hall, PO Box 50, Galway GPO, Ireland. We understand that plans are underway in Bloomington for a benefit auction and dance. For more information, call Abby Ladin, 812-332-2505; Margie Van Aucken, 333-5062; or Cindy Levindofske, 336-7703.

Group Address Changes

Here are address and telephone changes for two CDSS groups: **Dover Country Dancers**, Jack Gardner, 213 North State Street, Dover, DE 19901 (phone, 302-734-8315); **Rutherford County Square Dancers and Cripple Creek Cloggers**, Steve Cates, 1019 East Northfield Blvd., Murfreesboro, TN 37130; 615-896-3559.

Boston-bound?

The Country Dance Society, Boston [schedule] is available on request. Send a (52¢), self-addressed envelope to: CDS, Boston 1950 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA. We'll be moving the dances back to the YWC Temple Street (Central Square) in Cambridge.

George Fogg, Boston, Massachusetts

Yorkshire-bound in '92?

We have heard of two six-day workshops in Yorkshire, England of the traditional music of Great Britain and Ireland. The first session is June 22-28, 1992 (preceded by the Beverley Folk Festival, June 19-21). The second session is August 16-22 (preceded by the Sidmouth Folk Festival, July 31-August 7, and followed by the Whitby Folk Festival, August 22-28).

The courses are for musicians who already play and instrument. The professional staff includes Geoff Bowen, Dave "Mally" Mallinson, Dave Townsend, and Gordon Tyrrell. In addition to workshops, the program will include a concert, a ceilidh, plus informal sessions with local musicians and dancers. Housing is in Buckden House, an 18th century manor house in Buckden, 12 miles north of Grassington. We don't know the cost. For that information, write Yorkshire Dales Summer Schools, 14 Oakburn Road, Ilkley LS29 9NN England.

CDSS Summer Sessions 1992

Okay, here they are. Next summer's dates. There is a slight chance the dates or order may change, but, as of press time, here are the expected dates and program chairs. Brochures will be available in March.

Pinewoods, Plymouth, Massachusetts:

Early Music, Jul 18-25, Gene Murrow
Folk Music, Jul 25-Aug 1, Dick Swain
Family, Aug 1-8, Jim Childress & Barbara Paine
American Dance, Aug 8-15, Larry Edelman
English Dance, Aug 15-22, Andra Herzbrun Barrand
English & American Dance, Aug 22-29, Bob Dalsemer
Campers Week, Aug 29-Sep 5, Robin & Joe Kynoch

Buffalo Gap, Capon Bridge, West Virginia:

Family, Jul 4-11, Jim and Marion Morrison
English & American Dance, Jul 11-18, George Marshall



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on the other hand, might arrange for the woman to offer her left hand, for the man to take that left hand in his right, and for him to assist her make a clockwise turn into a brisk circle left. In each of these examples, you are displaying the individualism of not dancing individually; how 'bout that?

I have considered a number of individualistic actions which enhance a dance and dancing. There are others which, in my opinion, detract from a dance: that stuff about change of flavor, discomfort, and being late for your next appointment. I thus favor establishing and following local conventions for handholds in "star", "hands across", "promenade", "courtesy turn", "swing", "allemande", etc. And I decry dawdling as being selfish rather than artistically individualistic.

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