

The Contra Connection: Tips and Ploys

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

Good callers possess a bag of tricks, collected over the years, that they use to help the evening run more smoothly. These tricks can be teaching techniques, verbal icebreakers, encouraging words, crowd management tools, etc. Ted, Dan, and Larry share a few such tips and ploys. Some of these may seem contradictory so choose the ones that fit your situation.

Programming

- ★ Be prepared for all eventualities. Have alternate dances available. (TS)
- ★ If the crowd seems lifeless: insert a dance where forgiving "decisions" cause even stiff dancers to learn it is OK to relax. For instance: *Atlantic Mixer* or *Who's in the Middle?* (DP), or
Use unusual or driving music to perk them up: A contra to a polka. A tune in a minor key such as *Jump at the Sun* or *Dancing Bear*. (TS)
- ★ Crowd scrambling for partners? Neglecting to thank the band? Call a pair of squares! The break between the two figures will give plenty of chance for applause that will continue after other dances. (DP)

As Sets Are Being Formed

- ★ If there is an unusual formation coming up in the next dance, alert the dancers during the current walk-thru. (E.g., "After this contra, there'll be a set of squares.") (DP)
- ★ Take advantage of the opportunity to set a tone for thoughtfulness: "I think four sets will work best for this dance." (TS)
- ★ Early in the evening, be sure the shortest set is near the entrance. (LJ)
- ★ By establishing the hands four as sets are forming, the sets will tend to be less crowded. Or try Mary DesRosiers' tactic: "Free beer at the bottom of the hall!" (DP)
- ★ Beware of exerting too much control regarding set placement and length; it is not necessary to get all the sets to equal length. By being excessively controlling, you will lose goodwill. (DP)

- ★ Center set too long? Try "the center set is sold out" if you can manage it in a nonconfrontational way. (DP)
- ★ Dancers lined up in a "center set" and "the other set"? Try "Let's arrange the sets so the room doesn't tip over." (LJ)
- ★ Not enough sets or hopelessly short sets on the sides? "Let's form a new set right here in the center." Or: "I invite those few couples way over on the side to bring their set over here near me." (LJ)
- ★ Tod Whittemore's tactic: "We'll run this dance until the couple at the head of the shortest set gets back to the head." (DP)
- ★ Alternate tactic: "That short set might want to send out a recruitment team." If true, "This is an equal dance; tell the recruits they can go to the top of your set." (LJ)
- ★ Similarly, for whole set dances, such as squares or triplets, invite an incomplete set to dispatch a press gang. (LJ)
- ★ A large number of newcomers joining the end of the longest set? Rather than chopping off the bottom into a set of mostly newcomers (before the hands four): "We have room for another set right here in the center, from this long set let's have couples two, four, six, eight, and every alternate couple move over to fill this space." (TS)
- ★ Similarly, if this is noticed after the hands four and cross overs, "All face your partner, join both hands, and the ladies push the gents to form two sets." (Of course, reorganization of both sets will be required.) (TS)
- ★ Avoid forlorn pleading for "one more couple" or to "join the side set" repeated over and over. (LJ, DP)

Establishing Minor Sets

- ★ "Alternate couples cross over and then take and hold hands four." (LJ)
- ★ Hands four, then actives cross over" is easier, quicker, and less ambiguous. (DP)
- ★ "I can't tell when the hands four has propagated to the bottom; would the last couple wave their hands when it gets to you?" (LJ)
- ★ Want some variety and a chance to add a light touch? Try replacing the hands four (or hands six) now and then:

For a duple proper dance: "Couple one step forward and hug your partner, hold on, couples three, five, and every other couple do the same. You are the active couples. That's enough (hugging). Return to place." (TS), or

Alternatively, "Let's have a try at synchronous vocalization. From the top, with strong voice, count off: one, two, one, two, etc." (TS)

The Walk-thru

- ★ Can't get their attention because of socializing? "In your groups of four, circle once around to be sure you have space. Back to place and we'll go through the actual dance." (LJ)
- ★ Use a vocal cue to indicate when people should start paying close attention. I use a slightly louder: "Here we go!" after announcing the title of the dance and crediting the author. (DP)
- ★ Have a problem holding the hot shots back while those who are temporarily confused get to the right position? Try:
"Everybody face your new neighbor and FREEZE right there. When I say GO we'll do the next figure, which will be..." (TS), or
"Now you have progressed, and have changed places with your partner. If so, say YES!" (TS)
- ★ If you continue the walk-thru while some dancers are out of position, you have tacitly assumed that they are skilled enough to cope without a walk-thru. That is often true. If you are concerned that it is not, try a walk-thru with everyone correctly positioned before taking a lot of time teaching figures. (LJ)
- ★ If you keep the instructions flowing slightly ahead of the dancers, you will "program" the dancers with

not just the figures, but the flow of the dance, too. (DP)

- ★ Introduce terms, like "shadow", when it is most convenient to do so. In general, introduce concepts only when they are needed at the moment. (DP)

Calling

- ★ Remind the dancers of what the first figure will be, so that they may cleanly execute it, even if you get off to a rough start with the band. (DP)
- ★ After a few rounds, making your calls slightly late will challenge the dancers into remembering the sequence on their own. (DP)
- ★ An alternative scheme: "What's next?" or "Here's the tricky part." (LJ)

Words for Common Situations

- ★ Say *wave* or *wavy line* when dancers are facing in alternate directions. Say *line* only when a group of dancers are all facing the same direction. Note how simple the effective words are. (LJ)
- ★ If your series uses a wrist-grasp star, say *star* only for that. For hands-across, don't be afraid; always say *hands-across*. Be circumspect about *hands-across*; you're likely to revert to "star" and there's no need your promoting confusion. (LJ)
- ★ When you say "swing partner" do the dancers know whether you mean "all swing partner" or "actives swing partner"? (LJ)
- ★ The dancers can't identify with "ladies chain, then face clockwise"? Try "finish the ladies chain and all face around the big set with the ladies nearest the center." (TS)
- ★ Can you avoid: Speaking only to the men? Instructing one dancer to do something "to" rather than "with" another dancer? For example:
Instead of "twirl your partner", try "women turn under." (LJ)
Instead of "take her left hand with your right", try "join hands, men's right, women's left." (LJ)
Instead of "put your partner on the right", try "with men on the left." (LJ)
- ★ To get their attention when you want to end the dance, with a swing say, or change to a new dance in a medley, try "Now hear this" or "Listen up" or "Here comes a change." (TS, DP)

Words for Uncommon Situations

- ★ It is often effective to define picturesque words during the walk-thru and then use them as effective oral calls. For example:

For sets in Sicilian circle formation, couples are sometimes faced with having to "make an extra half revolution of courtesy turn and face in the original direction." A mouthful at best and not very forceful. Kathy Anderson coined the descriptive call *power turn*, which is much more likely to get the action well-phrased. (TS)

Most dancers say they are eager to swing, but they often dawdle over some complex action preceding a swing; for example, "allemande left neighbor; men pass right shoulders while the women turn sharply left." Referring to the action as a *tryst* consummated with a swing may be more persuasive than calling the details of the action. (LJ)

Developing Camaraderie

- ★ Have a potluck dinner or go out for snacks after the dance. make sure everyone is invited. (DP)
- ★ Upon forming triplet sets, say: "Before starting, the usual custom is to take a moment to shake hands, hug, or introduce yourself to each of the others in your set." (TS)
- ★ In squares, ask the more knowledgeable dancers to teach a whole-group figure in their set: "I'll give you two minutes to show the others how to do a grand square (ladies grand chain, grand right and left, etc.)." A similar ploy may work in contras with a whole-minor-set figure such as hey for four or lady around two, gent cut through. (TS)
- ★ In a simple repetitive square, let them dance the last time through without your help: "Keep on going; you can do it the next time without calls." (TS)
- ★ Want to help them discover newcomers? End a contra with a scatter promenade hash mixer and finish with "Find your original partners and swing." (TS)

Announcements

- ★ Are usually counterproductive. (LJ)
- ★ Are best made after the sets are formed, but before the walk-thru. Are most disruptive if made after the walk-thru. (DP)

- ★ Are useful only if beneficial to the dancers. For example: "There's info about all the dances on the flyer table" or "The location [of a competitive dance] has been changed to..." (TS)

Other Tips and Ploys

- ★ From the beginning, the Contra Connection has invited reader response. Please share your own favorite stratagem for getting the dancers' attention, an example of a technique which is counter-productive, or a problem which is crying out for a ploy. Send your ideas to Contra Connection, CDSS News, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060.

Callers Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help organizers and beginning callers. "Tips and Ploys" is the fourteenth article in the series. Reprints of earlier articles are available at \$1 each (plus shipping and handling).



Pam's Dance II*

in association with Country Dance New York, Inc.

Sue Dupre, caller
with music by

Bob McQuillen & Tom Phillips

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NEXT DANCE:

Sunday, October 4: Mary Virginia Brooks & the Lazy Aces

*Pam McKeever (1949-1991) was a gifted caller, dancer and musician. She was a dedicated teacher and a devoted friend, sorely missed by all who knew her. Funds raised at these dances honor Pam's memory by creating an endowed scholarship in her name at Country Dance & Song Society's Pinewoods dance camp. This was one of her favorite places as both staff member and camper. The endowment scholarship will send someone to camp in Pam's name each year.