

# The Contra Connection: What Can Dancers Contribute?

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

**Ted Sannella:** First of all, I think we'll all agree that without dancers there would be no contra dancing. So, primarily, dancers contribute their presence and support. Let's look beyond this participation and consider other ways that dancers can contribute.

A viable dance series needs dancers that are enthusiastic, open-minded, motivated, and considerate. Of course, not every dancer will bring all of these attributes to a dance, but I believe that the larger the percentage of those who do, the better the chance that the series will be a success.

Sometimes we find dancers who had some or all of these traits when they first came as beginners. Somewhere along the way they lost their enthusiasm and motivation, became set in their ways, and a bit selfish in their attitude. Perhaps, as dancers, we all need a little introspection now and then to discover if we are contributing as much to the activity as we once did or are capable of giving now!

How else can dancers contribute? As a caller, I really appreciate feedback from dancers. Applause is great, but it can mean that the group enjoyed a particular dance or tune or that they managed to get through an awkward or inappropriate dance without incident. Specific feedback from dancers is very helpful to a caller. Talk to him or her briefly between dances or during intermission. Did you feel that a certain dance was a perfect choice for the group? Can you suggest a better way to teach a sequence? Did a piece of original choreography have an awkward spot that you noticed? Perhaps you feel that the whole program is exceptional. Tell the caller. If it's praise, be lavish with it! If it's disapproval, be diplomatic – but do speak up! Every caller, regardless of experience, can gain from feedback. I know that I'm still learning after 46 years behind the mike.

I recall a dance in a hall without a stage or platform. Calling from a position at the same level as the dancers, I was unable to see that many extra ladies were seated at the far end of the hall. Between dances, one of the perceptive veteran dancers asked me if I was aware of the gender imbalance and also if I knew that those not participating were mostly beginners. I made a few program changes to include a threesome dance and a nine-pin quadrille, and made an announcement to remind the ladies that the local custom encourages them to ask the gents to dance. I also suggested that it's fun for ladies or gents to pair up together occasionally. Many were made happier that night, thanks to a helpful remark to a caller from one

thoughtful dancer.

Good dancers, and especially callers who dance, can help other dancers by gently (and silently) guiding them through the figures. Teaching others by setting an example is the best way to show good style. Newer dancers watch the veterans and emulate them. By dancing their best while with beginners, all dancers can contribute to the improvement of the activity. There is great satisfaction to be gained on the spot, and in the long run everybody benefits!

Over the years, I have had dancers contribute in many other, less noticeable but just as important, ways to me as a caller. They have helped with transportation, with carrying and setting up P.A. equipment, with door-sitting at dances, with refreshment preparation, with dance demonstrations, with newly-written dances to try out, with encouragement, and with long-lasting friendships.

I am grateful!

**Dan Pearl:** There are lots of people who give of themselves to help dance evenings run smoothly. By making the lemonade, minding the admissions table, bringing flyers of other dances, or running the sound, many people sacrifice some of their dancing pleasure to contribute to the success of the evening. On the other hand, you can contribute something even if you dance every single dance.

At the very basic level, just by stepping in the door you reinforce the feeling of community and camaraderie present on the dance floor and add energy and fun to the proceedings.

When you ask newcomers to dance they feel welcomed, and they will learn faster than if they danced with their neophyte friends. This contributes enormously to the future of the dance, and can be very satisfying for you, as well.

Consider the plight of newcomers who see lots of different styles for a ladies' chain or a do-si-do. They would find it easier to learn the basics and recognize embellishments if you'd dance conservatively when you are near newcomers early in the evening. That is, leave out the frills if you sense they would confuse the new folks.

Callers are just ordinary people who sometimes make mistakes. Callers will be thankful if you bring problems to their attention in a cooperative spirit.

Without even thinking about it, feedback is

provided by the dancers. The discontented buzzing that dancers do after a confusing walk-through sends a message to a caller, loud and clear.

The best kind of feedback is your appreciative applause. The information content is low because it can't be directed at anyone in particular, but everyone gets a good feeling! (Of course, you can "target" your suggestions or compliments to specific performers at the end of the dance.)

I like to think of dancing as a symbiosis: The dancers get a lot of enjoyment from the dance, and the dance benefits from having the dancers there. Any of the above dancer contributions are investments that tend to pay back in dividends later that evening and on subsequent evenings.

You don't have to be a behind-the-scenes person. By just being a dancer, you have the potential for contributing a lot to the success of the evening and the health of dancing.

**Larry Jennings:** Ted and Dan have made a number of suggestions for what dancers might do. I would like to rephrase the question to "What can the administrators (including, of course, the caller) do to encourage and utilize contributions by the dancers?"

In my view, the fundamental task of an administrator is to synthesize a vision for the series based on two sorts of input:

- 1) The perception of the ordinary dancers as to what constitutes an ideal dance; and
- 2) An analysis, based on experience, of what actions and inactions lead to a healthy future of a series.

If the administrator has her finger on the pulse of the dancers, and tempers the reaction to that pulse by the experience of the leadership, there is likely to be consensus in support of the series. Said another way, a successful politician keeps his finger on the pulse of the populace (in our case, the dancers), adds his experience, and leads in such a way that everyone is pulling together. And, if he fails, disaffection reigns, and everyone pulls in a different direction.

How do you, the responsible administrator, address item 1), above? Of course you encourage people to talk with each other and to talk with you. Such talk, in my opinion, represents the most valuable contribution of the "ordinary" dancers.

When and where do they talk together and with you? During a dance, between dances, at intermission (perhaps around a refreshment table), in the lobby before and after the dance, at the pub yet later (don't forget to invite everyone, not just the in-group), at a potluck (everyone still invited), etc.

What do you talk about? Mostly you ask questions. What do the dancers think of the calling? Of the programming? Of the variety (or lack thereof) in the music? Of the balance between uncontrolled abandon

and discipline? Between aerobics and elegance? Between making a fuss over newcomers and giving the "experts" a chance to display zesty independence? And so on.

And do you say anything yourself? Of course. You can urge your dancers to take all the actions suggested by Dan and Ted. You can even offer to anonymously convey their criticism to others if they feel awkward about doing it themselves. In appropriate circumstances, you might even offer constructive criticism to well-meaning "experienced" dancers. For example, do they try to help beginners at the same time that the caller is continuing the walk-through? Do they try to "teach" ill-advisedly, for example by saying that both the man and the woman plant their right foot as a pivot during a swing? (It's bad enough for one person to plant a pivot foot; disaster if two try it.)

In summary, I assert that an ordinary dancer, perhaps inspired by an ordinary administrator, like an ordinary citizen, can have influence and make a difference.

*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. "What Can Dancers Do?" is the fifteenth article in the series. Reprints of earlier articles are available at \$1 each (plus shipping and handling).*

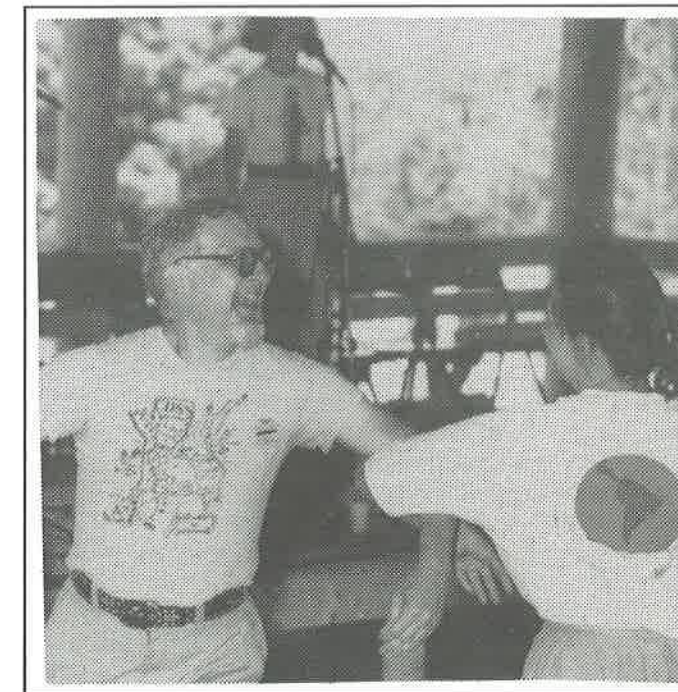


Photo by Stephen Spinder