

The Contra Connection: How and When a Caller Stops Calling

by *Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella*

CDSS member Charles Roth of Texas writes: "I don't believe the subject of how long a caller should keep calling has been covered in *The Contra Connection*. Or you may want to (talk about) how to phase out the calls so smoothly that nobody notices when you have stopped calling. There are too many callers around that abruptly stop calling too soon and leave the set floundering around. They may think that everything is OK when in reality the only reason the set doesn't fall apart is because everyone is telling everyone else what to do."

Dan Pearl: I got my first calling experience when the hired caller for the evening just stopped calling the sequence. The line quickly began to unravel around me. It occurred to me that I was having less than a supreme dance experience, so I croaked out enough of the calls to increase the enjoyment of the people around me. That was an early, valuable lesson.

Ralph Page called virtually every dance all the way through. He figured that he was being paid for the entire evening, so he should call the entire evening! Ralph was important and influential, but I don't embrace this attitude.

The caller's job is to act as a facilitator. The pure dance experience is a blend of music, dancers and the dance. In contra dancing, the caller is a necessary evil who gets people to the point where they can experience the pure dance form.

If your goal is to stop calling a dance quickly, then call material that the group knows cold. This might include the "chestnuts" or other favorites of the group, but this is a special case. You can't call a whole evening of familiar favorites — in the contra dance world, there just aren't that many.

Despite that, material choice does affect how long you need to call the dance. Does the flow of the dance naturally and unambiguously suggest the next movement, or does it have an unmemorable story line? Does the dance have precise timing demands, or is it forgiving? Does the dance feature demands within the capabilities of the group, or is it a special challenge?

If you do a lousy walk-through, you'll pay the price by having to do extra calling. The importance of a smooth, efficient walk-through cannot be understated.

After the music starts, you need to rely on calling skills and tricks to get the dancers on their own. Consider the following:

* Be consistent. If your timing is different each round, dancers cannot learn what you want them to do.

* Stick to the essentials. After the first few rounds, you can easily risk omitting obvious calls. Later, just cueing with key words will have the desired effect. For instance, early in the calling you might say "down the center four in line; turn as couples, and come on back"; later you could easily just say "go four in line". If the call was "balance and swing", you can omit the "and swing" part after only a couple of rounds. If the early call is "on the left diagonal, new men allemande left", the later call can be "new men turn by the left", and later still, the call can be "new men".

* Train the dancers to think for themselves. You'll note that in the previous call, you are asking the dancers to "fill in the blank". This is your goal. It works both ways, and is usually self-fulfilling. If you call all the time, the dancers will be trained not to think, and if you omit some calls, if the dance falls apart, you'll say "See! I NEED to keep calling!"

* Sensory deprivation. Don't just call less, call softer! Dancers that need to hear your call will still be attuned to the calls.

* Call late. This is ONLY to be done after the dancers have the timing of the sequence down, and best done in combination with the quieter calls mentioned above. By delaying the call to slightly after when the dancers really need it, you are asking them to first attempt to remember the call by themselves. If they still don't have a clue, you are right there, albeit a few moments late, but early enough to allow recovery. How late should the call be? Calls usually occupy the beats before the movement is to begin. I'd attempt to sneak in the "intentionally late" call in the half-beat before the movement is to begin. The Contra Police require this statement: "If you are just starting out, do NOT call late under ANY circumstances. Ignore Mr. Pearl's lunatic ravings in this paragraph."

* Avoid cold turkey. This is just not an effective teaching technique. Just because you've called the dance thoroughly for three rounds, you think you've trained the dancers? Think again.

If you've stopped calling, and things seem to be going smoothly, resist the urge to go out for pizza. You need to be right there if things go wrong. Be ready to chime in for whatever seems needed, and then no more. If people are out of sync because they've left out a hunk of the dance, get 'em back with some calls and then shut up! If timing is shoddy for a part, give rhythmic calls that make it very clear how to perform the action, and then shut up!

It's easy to overreact. It just isn't necessary to react

to every error on the floor with a barrage of calling. Every round, about 1% of the dancers will make errors. Those folks are either dancers-without-a-clue (and no amount of calling will help them) or other folks who just happened to make an error that round. Just watch them. They were probably just distracted when they made the error and won't repeat it next time, even without your intervention.

Something interesting happens about ten to twelve rounds into the dance. People are so familiar with the figure, that they let their minds pay more attention to the people and music around them. They have delegated the physical operation of their bodies to muscle memory. When this happens, the percentage of errors will creep up. You may find it necessary to chime in with a minimal round of calling, as people realize that they need to still pay attention to the dance. Then shut up.

As people become bored or fatigued, the error rate also will creep up. You should take this as a signal to stop the dance, instead of increasing the calling.

Some callers like to do a full calling job the last round of the dance. I'd say this seems more like tradition than a necessary part of calling. Perhaps those callers think that they must call the last round to have the applause be for them as well as the musicians (sort of a "Remember me?"). My personal style is to do one call (just to reestablish my voice) and then call an extemporaneous ending sequence.

Learning how to stop delivering the calls takes experience and judgement. Only by taking some small risks will you discover how well you have taught and the dancers have learned.

Ted Sannella: When I start calling a contra dance, I look out over the entire floor and watch for aberrations. Those dancers who are having difficulty will be readily apparent because they will stand out as interruptions in the smooth-flowing pattern before me. These are the dancers upon whom I will focus most of my attention as I deliver the calls. They may be beginners, physically or hearing impaired, or slow learners. Perhaps they joined the set after the walk-through or just weren't paying enough attention to the instructions. Whatever the reason for their difficulty, these are the dancers who will be most dependent on my calls to get them through the dance.

If I've done a good job of teaching in the walk-through, the more knowledgeable dancers probably can continue without my calls after the first two or three repeats of the dance. The ones having trouble will need my help beyond that stage. I continue to call while checking their progress. In most cases the combination of my calls and help from the more skilled dancers will be enough to keep them going. When I spot improvement, I divert my attention to others who still need help. I'll try using different words and adding an occasional orientation tip. (For example: "ladies chain across, now you're with your partner" or "turn your neighbor by the left, go 1-1/2 until the ladies face in".)

When I feel that nearly everyone is able to do the dance, I gradually begin to abbreviate my calls. Instead of "all join hands, go forward and back" I may say "in long lines" and rather than calling "gents allemande left 1-1/2" I may shorten the call to "now the gents". If, after a few more repeats, I feel that some of the dancers are still using my calls as a crutch, I may say, "you better learn the dance because I'm about to stop calling" then call it one more time in shortened form before stopping.

Even after I stop calling, I watch for areas of disorder and try to figure out what is causing the problem. If necessary, I give a few key calls. Sometimes all that is needed is a reminder like, "be sure the circle gets all the way around" or a word of advice such as, "if you're late, skip that figure and be ready for the next".

A critical point in most dances occurs when the beginners who invariably start at the bottom of the set work their way to the top. By then the calling has stopped and these dancers may panic when they don't meet another couple. Sometimes, I come onto the floor, tell them to cross over (or whatever action is necessary) and call the first few figures to them privately. It may be necessary to resume calling at the mike for a while until the new dancers get back into the flow.

As the dance winds down, I like to resume calling for the last time through or at least for the final three or four calls to alert the dancers that the dance is finishing. This is especially helpful if I need to get their attention when I plan to change the ending to involve everyone with something like "all swing your partner".

The bottom line, as I see it, is that a caller must continue calling as long as his or her calls are needed in order to prevent a breakdown of the dance. My preference is to err on the side of calling more than necessary rather than stopping too soon. I have heard dancers complain about confusion caused because certain callers stop calling too early. I have never heard dissatisfaction regarding callers who continue calling too long.

Larry Jennings: My answer is, "It all depends on context." Let us examine a few contexts.

At one extreme, we have the case of Ralph Page, who is often held up as the epitome of contra callers. Ralph enjoyed his reputation as a charismatic entertainer and freely engaged in patter wrapped around the calls that described the action. So in his case, the question might well be rephrased: "How much calling did the dancers expect from Ralph Page?" And the answer would be: "Lots!"

At the other extreme, we might consider a response such as, "The caller should stop calling as soon as possible." I would like to discuss the implementation of this seemingly definite answer in several contexts.

Consider first a series where "the caller is the boss". In this case there might typically be a beginners session before the dance and the caller might give an extensive, informative walk-thru before each dance. The inexperienced dancers will have thus come to put their

faith in the caller. In such a context, the caller should fulfill his commitment to those dancers who have put their faith in him — he or she should call until everyone is comfortable, perhaps the whole dance.

By contrast consider a series where there is no beginners session, where the caller never bothers the dancers with details such as "the active couples are those who progress down the set", and where, in the extreme, the caller might do the first dance with no walk-thru. At such a series, the caller might well stop calling as soon as the experienced dancers have the sequence in mind.

Since I, personally, happen to prefer this latter strategy, I would like to discuss some of the caveats and consequences. In the hands of a casual caller using primarily well-known material, the dancers may not feel any need to pay attention and the calling may be sketchy indeed. Such a series might take on an undisciplined (some might say rowdy) personality. On the other hand, a series lacking blatant caller control may well foster a tradition of reasonable discipline if the caller uses carefully chosen words for the walk-thru and in his calling of interestingly varied material. In either case, since there is no explicit class for beginners, if the series organizers wish to appeal to beginners, the caller must make it crystal clear that beginners are invited and expected to join right in and be swept along by the experienced dancers. And the organizers have to ensure not only that a suitable example is set by the dancers but also that the bulk of the experienced dancers are willing to be part of the "let's sweep the beginners in" game. To be complete, I must alert you: setting a suitable example (for instance, being wrapped up with your partner) may be slightly at odds with sweeping the beginners in (for instance, momentarily ignoring your partner to point a beginner in the correct direction).

Speaking of alerts, I might address calling a dance medley. (A medley may be an attractive way to work a swingless dance into the program while still giving a swing, particularly a partner swing, into each slot.) Experience shows that the dancers have a lot more trouble memorizing a sequence which is part of a medley than they do for a dance which stands alone. So be prepared to call most of a second or third dance in a medley.

It is also fruitful to look at the topic question the other way around, "What can the caller learn from an examination of how much calling he or she "has" to do?" Suppose, for example, that the series strives toward "disciplined" dancing in the sense that the dancers are expected to comply with the musical phrasing. The caller might then tend to keep calling so as to help the dancers observe the phrasing. But suppose that the series also has the tradition that the caller is not an entertainer — the dancers expect to hear the music, not the caller. In this case the caller might well want, perhaps with the aid of a tape recording and critics of his choice, to examine his choice of words for succinctness and accuracy. He would also check the timing of his calls. The presumption is that well-chosen words together with

timely calls would best reconcile the requirement of helping dancers with phrasing with the requirement of minimum calling.

This reconciliation can also be aided through use of suitable material: dance sequences that have enough distinction to hold the dancers' interest (both during the walk-thru and the dancing) coupled with a good story line. To emphasize the importance of such dances, someone has dreamed up a name for them: "cruisers". (I consider it vital that every important concept have a name.) Let me formalize a definition of a cruiser: "a dance which, when used by a given caller with a given group of dancers inspired by a given set of musicians, is walked-thru in less than four minutes and is substantially memorized by the dancers after no more than three changes." Thus, whether or not a dance is a cruiser depends on circumstances.

Lastly, I address the oft-realized situation that the caller finds that he or she has done a good job: he discontinues the formal calls after one or two changes and stops all prompting after another couple of changes; things go swimmingly for another six or eight changes and then the dancers suddenly need help; sometimes lots of help. There are at least two possible reasons for this breakdown: 1) The inexperienced dancers, inevitably starting at the bottom of the set, are no longer mixed in with the experienced dancers but have recongregated at the top. In this case the caller might well decide to resume calling. Or 2) The dancers are getting punchy. In this case the caller might well decide to end the dance. It is, of course, part of the caller's job to distinguish these two situations.

Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help organizers and beginning callers; "How and When a Caller Stops Calling" is the 20th article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available for \$1.00 each plus shipping and handling from CDSS News, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060.

