

The Contra Connection: Getting Beginners to Return

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella

"What are some of the ways callers and organizers (and experienced dancers) can get beginners to return to their dance series?"

Larry Jennings: Previously, I have expressed the opinion that a caller should treat beginners with empathy and high expectations, avoiding condescension and segregation (such as is done by having a formal beginners' session). Further, I suggested that the beginners (and everyone else) be treated to real dances in a real dance atmosphere.*

These opinions are based on the belief that the most powerful motivation for newcomers to return is to have been a part of an exhilarating experience, an experience they hadn't even imagined until they stumbled on a zesty contemporary contra dance. And, of course, that experience must have been reasonably comfortable. A little overwhelming perhaps, but not to worry so long as it is reasonably comfortable.

So my answer to the topic question is: Present the most exciting evening of dancing you can, using all the skills you can muster, but always within a restriction that the beginners are kept reasonably comfortable. I have addressed the exciting evening of dancing in my "Checklist for Callers" still available on request if you send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to CDSS. I here focus on keeping the beginners comfortable in the context of a dance in a series where at least two-thirds of the dancers are familiar with the rudiments of how contra dances work.

You want to impress on the beginners from the outset that they are welcome, that the norm is for them to learn by joining in, that (at your series anyway) the experienced dancers are expected to cooperate in this venture. This is not done with a beginners' session or by belabored explanations of actives, crossing over, progressing, etc. Rather you show that you really believe that they can best learn by participating. Urge them to join in; suggest that they get an experienced partner if possible; tell them that they are going to learn from nearby dancers; make sure that there are opportunities for the nearby dancers to do that teaching. In fact, if there are only a handful of beginners, I sometimes display my confidence in this philosophy by doing the first dance with no walk-thru. If you have succeeded in getting the beginners into a set, that surely makes it obvious that someone other than the caller is doing the teaching.

Are there any problems with this point of view when it comes to the dances which need a walk-thru? In my

opinion there is one problem which outweighs all others put together: when the caller and the experienced dancers unwittingly conspire to indicate to the beginner that he or she does not count. What could make the beginner more uncomfortable than that? Let me detail a few typical events to illustrate my point.

The hands four may not penetrate the oblivious experts clustered near the top of the set. The poor beginners, inevitably clustered near the bottom, already have a strike against them. As the walk-thru progresses, the blasé experts may not bother to participate; maybe they are arranging a partner for the next dance. Strike two: who is there to emulate? The caller usually goes ahead with the walk-thru at a pace comfortable to the confident, cooperative experienced dancers. The caller has the experience that this "works" (i.e., the dance does not break down) and he can, and probably should, ignore the overconfident experts who seem a little lost. Unfortunately, this gives a third strike to a few beginners whose actions are scarcely distinguishable from the overconfident experts. So the caller accedes to the overwhelming consensus: let's get on with the dance.

What is the usual consequence of this scenario? Sure enough, the dance does not break down. If the dance has only standard features, the oblivious, the blasé, the overconfident may all get it straight pretty quick, just like they did in the no walk-thru dance I myself suggested (maybe even quick enough that the beginners almost immediately lose the sense of frustration that they had during the walk-thru). However, as the dances have more and more distinctive action, the very action that adds interest to the program, the oblivious, the blasé, the overconfident have more and more trouble doing their part so as to set an example for the hopelessly-left-behind beginners. The usual result is that the experts happily bumble through the dance as they reconstruct it, though a few may complain about why the slot did not meet their expectations. And the beginners? Many may well be uncomfortable thinking that their inexperience was a hindrance to the experts' enjoyment. And that is added to the now unmitigated discomfort of the walk-thru they didn't understand.

Of course this gloomy picture is not the whole picture. Most dancers, including the beginners, are having a marvelous time because the caller is an inspiring leader and because the dancers who are occasionally oblivious, blasé or overconfident revert (for the most part) to their usual confident, cooperative selves. But still and all, a caller can probably do a bit more to indicate to the beginners that they belong. For example, at a small dance I once regimented the

formation of a set: "At the top, couples in which one dancer is brand new, next those who have been to less than five contra dances," and so on.

Most of all a caller can do a little more checking that (almost?) everyone is in position for the next action in a walk-thru. I cannot overemphasize my opinion that the caller should at least be aware of it if he or she continues a walk-thru while some people are out of position.

Finally, a story. I was invited to a calling gig where I was able to get little info about the committee's vision of the dance. So I featured my own not-very-hidden agenda of dances with interesting features that put beginners and experts more on an equal footing, of dances that give the initiative to the women, and of walk-thrus with everyone in position. I asked the booking coordinator for a critique with the response, "To tell the truth, I got some complaints." I also asked the beginners' session coordinator for a critique with the response, "The beginners stayed appreciably longer than usual." So it is up to the organizers and the callers to decide which way they want to go. But I have to emphasize, the beginners do not stay later if there is a lot of lecturing or if the dances are not interesting. And I assume that those who stay later are also more likely to return.

Dan Pearl: While a core group of dancers are the meat and potatoes of a dance series, astute producers realize that they cannot be taken for granted. Aging, injuries, marriage and family responsibilities take a terrible toll on dance attendance. A typical dance series attracts about 3% to 10% new folks each time. "If only a small fraction could come back," we lament, "we'd have a larger core group and a more successful series."

Let's face it: some beginners won't return even if you paid them. We find it hard to understand, but most of the population is just not interested in what we have to offer. Others, however, are interested. All we can do is to make them feel welcome and excited and maybe one in ten will come back. Can we do anything to increase the odds?

If a dance is just starting out in a new community, then it is important to make the event seem accessible to the curious newcomers. This is best done by hiring callers who are excellent, clear and fun. The material should be at a level to give newcomers the feeling that this activity can be accomplished, but holds occasional challenges.

Should you hold a pre-dance newcomer's crash course? I'd recommend against it, since some potential attendees might infer that what we do is so hard that you need to be briefed in order to participate. On the other hand, I would encourage the caller to develop a program that teaches concepts throughout the evening. Put "All Dances Taught" on the flyer.

It never hurts for the caller to occasionally remind people of our social customs (the switching of partners, where we go out for ice cream, etc). If your dance is fun,

some of the people will return, and they'll bring their friends. It won't happen overnight, but keep plugging away, and soon a core group will develop.

Let's say you already have a sizable core group at a mature dance. Is it possible to get beginners to return? Of course, but they have to enjoy themselves. This will happen if 1) experienced people ask them to dance, 2) their inevitable mistakes are not criticized, and 3) they are swept along in a gentle way by the experienced dancers. It's beneficial if the caller still calls clearly; this will make the dance seem more open and less like a private club.

Producers often feel pressure from the core group for more difficult material. Caving in to that pressure would increase short-term excitement at the expense of the long-term health of the dance, since beginners would feel excluded. It's a thin tightrope to walk. You need to periodically examine your series to see if it accessible to newcomers.

Ted Sannella: In my opinion, the best way to answer the question is to put yourself in the beginner's shoes. I urge you to recall your earliest dance experiences. What happened at your very first contra dance that made you decide to come again? You must have been satisfied with what happened or you wouldn't have returned. Perhaps you came with expectations that were fulfilled; someone told you that contra dancing was good exercise or that it was a good place to meet people — it turned out to be both of these things. Maybe you came because you heard that it was a fun activity and you really did enjoy yourself. Perhaps you came without expectations. You had no idea what to expect but just a curiosity to find out what goes on every Saturday night in that hall, and you were pleasantly surprised. Whether or not you knew what to expect, something happened there that made you return. Most likely, what happened was that you had fun!

Has contra dancing changed since you started dancing? Sure it has, but not for the beginners. Their first dance experience still has to be enjoyable or you'll never see them again. They usually come with wide eyes and an open mind, eager to learn but far too timid to take the initiative. It's natural to have a fear of the unknown which leads them to be very cautious about taking that big first step onto the dance floor. Since there is safety in numbers, once a beginner gets up the courage to join in a dance, the inclination is to find other newcomers and dance with them. A common mindset among beginners leads them to avoid experienced dancers because they "don't want to spoil their fun." A few paired beginners can usually be absorbed with ease. However, when present in large numbers, pairs of newcomers tend to congregate at the bottom of contra lines, at the sides of the hall, or in squares of their own.

Am I digressing from the question? Not really. Let's step back at a hypothetical established dance series and view these beginners from the vantage point of the caller, the musicians, the organizers and the experienced

dancers. All of these folks know that the beginners are there, most of them realize the importance of giving them a good time, but only those who actively participate in the "sweeping in" of these new dancers will help ensure that they will return.

The caller and musicians will be involved in teaching and programming considerations to deal with the beginners, especially early in the evening (using less complex dances, teaching in more detail, slowing the tempos), and the organizers may deploy a "task force" to assure them that they are welcome or they may consider the possibility of running a beginner orientation session prior to future dances.

The experienced dancers are in the best position to influence the dancing future of the newcomers. Obviously, they can take them as partners (occasionally) or join them in the "beginner sets" — two ways to help them learn faster. They can pay special attention to them and their needs when meeting in a set. Most importantly, they can go out of their way to engage them in conversation, let them know that they are most welcome, and assure them that even the best dancers in the hall were beginners once.

I believe that a great part of the enjoyment experienced by new dancers comes from a feeling of accomplishment and a resulting gain in confidence. The caller and other dancers can help by praising their efforts. I often approach beginners during intermission with a few words of encouragement and a little chat to let them know that I'm genuinely pleased that they came.

I urge all who are involved in the activity to make a special effort to share their joy of contra dancing with newcomers. When they have fun and feel that contra dancing is a friendly activity, beginners are most likely to return.

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; "Getting Beginners to Return" is the 21st 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.

Previous Contra Connection articles which have touched on the subject of beginning dancers include: Addressing the Needs of Beginners, issue #100, May/June 1991; Adapting Leadership Techniques (for Different Kinds of Crowds), issue #110, January/February 1993; and Producer/Caller Dialogue, issue #112, May/June 1993. All are available as reprints; see above.

Hail to the Next Generation, or The Graying of the Stalwarts

by Cindy Larock

You must have seen them. Fresh faced, lithe limbed and breathlessly exuberant, they're populating more and more of the contra lines around Maine of late. Is it something in the water? What happened to the presupposition that one is naturally immune to the seduction of such "alternative" sociocultural experiences until one had moved beyond the prevailing collegiate peer context? Not these kids. They're eschewing the campus keg parties and boogie bashes and piling in cars to head off into the Maine outback to plunk down five dollars each (that's a lot of laundry quarters, folks) to dance to...fiddle music? With a bunch of fading, if affable, flower children? And it's not just the college kids — they've even turned some of their younger siblings on to it, by gorry. It's almost scary — until it sinks in that, hey, this is evolution, Mother Nature's way of ensuring that those lusty Bowdoinham* dances will carry on with gusto well into the millennium, regardless of the ravages of ageing on those of us who danced our first dos-a-dos back when all those precious MCDO progeny were mere twinkles in their parent's eyes.

So let's strike while the iron is hot, I say! "What is she blathering about?" you ask. Well, what it boils down to is a matter of hospitality, tempered with empathy. How many of you remember your first time on the dance floor? You survived and are still dancing today most likely because of a few friendly, patient souls who time and again pointed you in the right direction, helped hone the hop out of your swing and proffered well-timed tidbits on the finer points of contra etiquette, all with an encouraging smile. Resist the urge to whup these new folks upside the head when they (for the eighteenth time) veer off into oblivion on a right and left through (why do callers think people are born knowing what a "courtesy turn" is anyway?), or worse, abandon them like lepers as they flounder through a contra corners. Hey, we were all there ourselves once. Let's take this opportunity to make them feel welcome, help edit the experience down to easily digested chunks of basic movement (i.e. cut the twirls out, guys, at least until they've got their sea legs) and let them leave with a feeling of true accomplishment, and maybe even euphoria. We owe them that much. They are after all the next generation.

Author's note: First Saturday dances at the old Bowdoinham Town Hall, a 45 minutes drive from Portland, featuring the colorfully organic Maine Country Dance Orchestra (MCDO), are legendary for their freewheeling exuberance and unabashed glee.

Editor's note: "Hail to the Next Generation" was published as a slightly longer article in the DEFFA News, February 1994 issue; it is reprinted here with permission.

