

The Contra Connection: Preparing and Rescuing Walk-throughs

by *Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella*

Will MacDonald, a dancer and caller from New Mexico, wrote in with a question about walk-throughs. The Connectors look at the question in various aspects.

Preparing and presenting tricky dances

Ted Sannella: Here's a scenario: Someone has given you a new contra entitled *Complication* to try out. It has some unusual sequences but looks like it could be great fun to dance once they are mastered. You have a calling gig coming up and you'd like to use this contra in that program. However, you foresee a problem because *Complication* is more difficult than what you would ordinarily use for the anticipated crowd at this particular dance evening.

You can choose to put it aside for another time and place or you can decide to take the bull by the horns and include it in your program. If you decide to use it, I suggest that you give a lot of thought to every aspect of your presentation.

The most important step is to be prepared. By this, I mean that you really need to understand the dance thoroughly. Pick it apart and decide which segments are routine and which may create problems on the dance floor. Of course, the unusual sequences are the likely culprits but don't overlook other potential problems. Are there any routine figures that are arranged to produce unforgiving sequences such as, "circle left, right hand star, allemande left twice with the next"? Is there a figure that appears in two different parts of the sequence so that the dancers can easily lose their place (e.g. ladies chain followed by a hey for four in the A part and ladies chain followed by "those two ladies allemande right" in the B part)? Potential trouble spots like these need to be considered along with the most obvious tricky parts of the dance. Most dancers can handle one or two unusual sequences if they are well explained. However, I believe that you're looking for trouble if you decide to use a dance that has more than two troublesome segments. Let's face it, some dances are better suited to dance camp workshop situations and should not be thrust upon dancers at a mixed-level open dance.

Let's assume that you have dissected this dance, *Complication*, and decided that the obvious unusual sequence is the only tricky spot it contains. I urge you to put yourself in the place of each dancer (in turn) in a hypothetical foursome and move through this tricky sequence. You may be able to visualize the action from

each perspective or you may have three other real people to help you walk it through. Lacking these alternatives, I suggest that you either use props such as playing cards, dancer figurines, etc. or make diagrams on paper to follow the action. Regardless of the method you choose, you need to study the sequence and be able to anticipate the areas of possible difficulty for each position in the foursome.

Once you have a handle on the potential problems, it's time to decide how you will teach the dance. Choose carefully the precise words and sentences that will effectively move the dancers through the difficult sequence. Be sure to tell them not only what to do and with whom but how to start and where they will finish after doing the movement (e.g. "inactives face your partner, do-si-do each other, go once-and-a-quarter and finish in the center with your right shoulders adjacent"). Practice until you are confident that you can teach each part of the tricky sequence.

Now you must decide where in the program to insert *Complication*. If the usual percentage of beginners are expected, you certainly want to avoid the early part of the program. I suggest that you also avoid the last half hour of the dance for this is when folks want to rest their brains and just have fun dancing. So, the obvious location is somewhere in the middle of the program.

Be sure to lead up to this dance by using some dances that include any less common "routine figures" found in *Complication*. A figure such as a half figure eight would fit into this category and even a right and left through should be used earlier in the program since beginners sometimes have trouble with this figure. The point is that you want to minimize the complexity of your feature dance by familiarizing the dancers with everything in it except the one most difficult segment.

Moving on to the night of the dance—if several dances in the early part of the program have proven to be troublesome, you would be wise to select an alternative to *Complication*. On the other hand, if all has gone well, you can continue as planned. I suggest that you present your tricky dance with some warning to the dancers such as, "Hands four from the top and get ready for a challenge" or "Now we'll do one of two dances. Do you want the easy one or the hard one?" (Of course, they'll choose the latter.) Being forewarned, the majority should be extra attentive during your carefully prepared walk-through. The key to success at this point is to proceed slowly. As you walk the dancers through each part of the dance, verify that everyone is in position

before moving on to the next part. If the dance is unequal, remind those that are not directly involved to remain alert and ready to join in when needed. If it is necessary for a neutral couple (at the top and/or bottom) to join in the action, emphasize this fact with an imperative statement such as "This is important! Remember that when you get to the end of the set you will become totally confused unless you...". A second walk-through will probably be helpful to the dancers and it may indicate to you which of them need watching while the dance is in progress.

Your calls should be clear and as informative as possible. Instead of "Right hand star, allemande left the next, swing your partner" say "Star by the right, look for your shadow, allemande left, come back and swing your own on the side." If you spot a foursome in trouble, try to analyze what went wrong and, if possible, give a call that may help. Don't say something that will help that group and confuse everyone else such as, "No, that's wrong, circle the OTHER way." Often the best action is to do nothing and hope that a progression will take place and that the next couples will pull the weaker dancers through.

If Complication falls apart completely either during the walk-through or the dancing, stop everything and say something to lighten the mood while taking the blame such as "Back to the drawing board. I'll try that one again some day—after I learn it. I'd like to switch to another dance that I'm sure you'll enjoy." Be sure that the alternative is a surefire crowd-pleaser!

To summarize, if you must use tricky dances, be sure to understand them thoroughly, be prepared to teach them very carefully, be able to call them clearly and directionally, be willing to abort if necessary (taking the blame) and be ready with a suitable alternative dance.

Recovering from a bad walk-through

Dan Pearl: You've probably seen it yourself: The third walk-through is stumbled through and people are more confused than they were at the end of the second walk-through. People are getting impatient and frustrated. Dancers and callers prone to defensive behavior are mentally preparing to blame each other for the failure. The more obnoxious ones are yelling at the people nearby. The caller is now quivering with built-up tension.

Nothing has quite as much potential for ruining the spirit of an evening like a walk-through gone wrong. In an unseen, but perceptible *poof!*, the momentum, fun and energy disappear.

Good callers, like you, know they have a responsibility to keep their cool under these trying circumstances. Preparing for the possibility of a failed walk-through will allow you to potentially *increase* the success of the evening, despite the failure.

You need to examine what caused the failure, because your strategy for recovery will depend on it. I

was at a dance where the caller walked us through a contra which didn't progress. Twice. The caller should have checked the dance card at the end of the *first* walk-through *very* carefully. Dancers will forgive this type of error, as long as it's not too frequent or time consuming. In fact, if the caller is self-deprecatory about it, the dancers will get on the caller's side. The dancers will applaud in a good-natured way when the caller discovers his or her error.

What if the dancers are confused? Half the people are in the wrong place and the other half don't know how they got to the right place. Remember the most important principle to a successful walk-through: Verify that the dancers are in the correct position before proceeding. This principle not only prevents you from getting into jams, but can also help you get out of them. You need to get your nose out of the dance card and scan the hall looking for the tell-tale signs of problems: 1) People still moving after they should have stopped (did they allemande or star too far?), 2) People not moving when they should be (do they remember how to do the movement? Is there a dancer missing?), 3) A discontinuity in the male-female placement, 4) "Buzzing" from a group of dancers on the floor. Be prepared to tell the dancers where they should be at any moment of the dance (this requires you to understand how the dance works!).

Let's say you overlooked a problem. If there have been no really tricky spots in the dance up to the point at which you spotted the problem, the best tactic might be to get people to where they should be at that moment, and finish the walk-through. Very likely, the problem was caused by inattentive overconfident dancers. If, however, you noticed the confusion after a tricky bit, then I'd recommend getting everyone home and starting from scratch. I occasionally announce "Let me know if I say something that doesn't make sense". Then proceed quickly up to the tricky bit, and proceed more slowly and carefully, always letting people know where they are going to end up.

In general, it's best not to put a lot of time into identifying the precise words that caused the havoc. Figure it out after the dance. You've got to quickly forgive yourself and get on with the walk-through.

If things have not really gelled after the second walk-through, then you might run into these problems:

‡ Some people have now practiced (twice) some things that are wrong. You need to work especially hard to dismantle their incorrect framework as you replace it with the correct framework.

‡ The people who "have it" may be distracting to those who don't; you need to keep people working together until most everyone has the sequence.

‡ If it didn't work twice, it probably won't work a third time. Consider changing your teaching strategy. For instance, do a demonstration.

I have seen effective leaders, after struggling through multiple walk-throughs of a hard dance, ask the dancers if they want to continue. Invariably, the dancers will shout "Yes!" The dancers seem to apply themselves and

they'll get a real thrill at their triumphant accomplishment.

I have also seen a caller just tear up the dance card and throw the pieces in the air. The dancers got a real kick out of this! The caller then just called an easy dance with no walk-through (like Lady of the Lake). The card-tearing was a humorous acknowledgement by the caller that he was not prepared to present the dance. This made the caller seem more human and enhanced the caller-dancer bond. With one gesture, it was as though the caller said "After all, what are we dancing for? To torture ourselves? No! Let's have fun!"

If it's in your skill set, simplifying a dance on the spot is especially effective for beginner groups. However, more experienced dancers might feel condescended to. If you use this tactic, be sure and take the "blame" as in: "I must have copied this dance down wrong. Let's do it this way for tonight, and I'll bring it back again when I get it straight."

Certainly, if you had done something differently (chose a different dance, taught it differently, paid more attention to the sides of the hall, etc.) you could have avoided the problem, so in effect, one can always blame the caller. But don't get too depressed! Errors in judgement, reading and teaching can happen to anyone. If you can have an on-mic laugh at what an awful mess that you've caused, then everyone will be relaxed, laughing along with you, and on your side.

Know your strengths and weaknesses

Larry Jennings: A lot of good advice for all callers is given in Ted's and Dan's entries as well as in ML13 of my book, *Zesty Contras*. I mention particularly "verification," given high priority by all three of us. But what about the individuality of the caller? I suggest that a caller give some thought to his or her own strengths and weaknesses, particularly with respect to the rescue tactics outlined by Dan. I suggest that you cannot vacillate at random between being authoritative and being casually innocent. Maybe rarely, but certainly not whenever it suits you. As an illustration, I offer myself, who has been characterized as a "Parkinsonian Drill Sergeant". What restrictions, flexibility and responsibility does this place on me if I want to maintain credibility?

For one, I better have a correctly worded notation of a dance that works. I could scarcely get away with tearing up a card as described by Dan. On the other hand, I expect sympathy for small lapses in speech. Other callers may be in circumstances where they could say, "I was given this dance this afternoon; let's see if we can make it work." I doubt that the dancers would want to play such a game with me. Nor would I want to. Nor can I keep my nose in a dance card; it is part of my credibility to keep track of the troops.

Which dance to program, how to present it and what to do if something goes sour depends on my objective for

that slot. If my objective for a given slot is merely to add to tonight's fun, I will choose a dance that will not give me any trouble with the walk-thru. All I have to do is follow the simple directions given in my book. If I want to add satisfaction and skill development as part of the objective, I may take a chance on a dance which will indeed challenge the abilities of the dancers. What then?

Let us assume that I have prepared the dance with great care, drawing diagrams of the positions of all the dancers at the beginning and end of each action, studying end effects, choosing succinct, information laden words, and doing all the other good things that Ted, Dan and others have suggested. Without, for the moment, going into details of what might go wrong, it is important for me to have a general philosophy about what misadventures are permissible. I feel that it is OK, maybe even desirable, to have one dance per evening that doesn't go well. It may occur to the dancers that they could have had more fun if they had worked harder to assist the caller. Or it might occur to them that they are not such experts as they thought they were. Or they might say that they are happy to know there are yet more mountains to conquer. On the other hand, more than one such dance per evening is likely to be discouraging or at least knock the caller's reputation down a notch or two.

If the dancers are having trouble with the walk-thru there are two extremes to the cause. At one extreme the dancers simply do not have the experience to cope with the dance. This is clearly a caller failure, and he/she will have to scrub the planned dance as gracefully as possible. This outcome is unbecoming of a drill sergeant who should understand the limitations of his troops, even if he is treating them with desirable high expectations. (I don't recall ever resorting to scrubbing a dance; probably there are a couple of times I should have.) At the other extreme, the dancers can handle the sequence, but the walk-thru simply goes badly. This does happen to me. Then, as Dan says, the dancers usually want to get some return on their investment, and I don't want them to go home despondent that the big one got away. So I revert to a demonstration. The totality of my unsuccessful walk-thrus plus the rescuing demonstration should only take six or eight minutes, easily tolerable for one dance. But I should re-emphasize: I really recommend against more than one unplanned demonstration per evening. And I certainly would not undertake to call a dance for which I couldn't give an adequate demonstration. Unless, of course, I were a different person, a person with a casual image who can get away with things I cannot.

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; "Preparing and Rescuing Walk-throughs" is the 22nd 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.