

# The Contra Connection

## The Walkthrough, and How It Can Enhance Your Program

by *Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella*

### Before the Walkthrough

by *Larry Jennings*

I believe that what the caller and the dancers do with the time from the end of the previous dance to the start of the next walk-thru is of utmost importance. In fact, the caller's best opportunity to influence the personality of the series occurs during that brief interval. What are some of the choices she can make?

She can set a less intense mood by allowing the dancers to socialize. It takes between one and two minutes for dancers to repartner and form new contra lines. If the caller adds as little as one additional minute to this time, you'd be surprised at how much difference it makes to the dancers. This relaxed ambiance can be enhanced by a casual attitude on the part of the caller, perhaps bantering with the center set dancers or the band. This latter may even be necessary: the band wants to know that you appreciate them and needs to know what you expect of them. Other things a caller might do before the walk-thru include studying the instructions for the next dance and making notes for archive.

(If the caller wants to set a more disciplined atmosphere, she can take care of the band with a carefully prepared written program given to them in advance. She can be fastidious about her homework so that she has no need to study the instructions at the dance. She can tape the dance to give her the record of what dances she called. And so on.)

The most important activity during the time the caller is silent is the virtually unfettered arranging for partners ("partnering") and laying claim to space in a set. To discuss these two issues we must carefully distinguish between "custom" (what the dancers actually do) and "policy" (which can be decreed by vote of the stakeholders). Usually the policies and the custom are close to each other, but the policy might call for slightly more altruism than the average dancer displays. If the stakeholders really believe in their policies, they can gradually encourage the policies to become the custom. For example, most people would agree (a tacit policy) that it is unfair to ask dancers to dance in a very short side set. This is the one policy with regard to which the caller can actually have some influence. She must, of course, use ploys that actually work, such as moving an unviably short set to the center of the hall. Plaintive pleading rarely works. You'd be amazed at how quickly

a custom can develop if five or six of the most admired dancers choose to dance in a side set.

I believe that most groups have substantially the following policies with regard to partnering: It is appropriate for any dancer to ask any dancer of the opposite sex to dance. A request for the next dance is normally accepted unless the requestee has a reason, usually a previous booking. Unless you have a special relationship with your partner, you will normally not ask a previous partner for a second dance the same evening (if the attendance is sufficiently large). It is preferable for beginners to dance with experienced dancers.

I think it fair to say that almost all dancers conform to those policies. Yet the customs apparent to an observer differ widely from series to series. At some series it is obvious that the same faces appear at the top center of the hall, dance after dance. Such a custom leads to there being an area where the "best" dancing prevails. (Although most leaders and administrators speak deprecatingly of this "center set syndrome", it often goes along with a financially successful series and may lead to a stronger focus on the dancing than might otherwise be the case.) At other series it might be that the custom is for each dancer to dance with all kinds of people in all parts of the hall. This custom allows the caller to program for the average skill level rather than to almost the lowest skill level, and some people are thrilled to find how beginners are swept in, apparently mastering surprisingly complex dances. If the caller wishes to encourage this potential custom, she can program lots of partnerings, say twelve or thirteen dances, so that there are enough opportunities to dance with favorite partners as well as with partners whom you don't know. If there are only nine or ten partnerings, the pressure is greater to have each partner be a favorite.

What if there are more dancers of one sex than the other? Most groups accept that, if you paid to dance, you're entitled to dance; members of the predominant sex may dance with each other. Even beginners can usually figure out what's going on and readily accept this situation. (It makes it easier, especially if the dance sequence has an unusual twist, if the person dancing the other role wears some sort of identification.) Although many dancers welcome this interesting possibility, at many groups such partnering is not "customary", but

simply confusing.

The above set of policies is not complete, of course, but I wanted to get you thinking that the seemingly innocuous time before the walk-thru can be used to further, in a positive manner, the policies and customs of the group. I suggest to each group that they consider very carefully the implications of their policy (or lack of policy) on such issues, including whether the official policy will become a custom or is only wishful thinking.

## During the Walkthrough

by Dan Pearl

Compared to some features of contra dancing, the walkthrough is a relatively recent invention. In the 1800s and early 1900s, the small repertoire of dances allowed people to recognize and perform the dances after just hearing the name. The sequences were simple, and the favorites were even repeated during a single evening dance. People learned dancing in classes from dancing masters, or simply by growing up in the tradition.

As automobile travel gave people more mobility, the dance began a transition from a social occasion uniting communities to more of a recreation. The invention of the reliable and portable public-address system suddenly allowed the dance leader to be more than an emcee. New, more complex material could be instructed and prompted on the fly. The evolution of the dancing master into the dance caller was complete, and with it, the walkthrough came into being.

The walkthrough is now such a staple of contra dancing, that it is taken for granted. But what does it accomplish?

- It teaches people the sequence. This includes the caller, too!

- It gives the band time to select tunes.

- It encourages newcomer participation. With the promise of a walkthrough, it gives hesitant newcomers the confidence that they can participate right away.

- It addresses all the dancers, not just the beginners. In this way, it subconsciously enhances the "we are all in this together" community feeling. Beware: If a caller uses nondescriptive jargon, then the beginners can be left in the cold. For example, consider how beginners react when all they hear is "Do a gypsy and meltdown into a swing". Contrast this with "Do a gypsy by locking eyes with your partner and walking around them, then turn it into a swing."

- It allows more complex and (for some) more interesting material. Consider how contra dancing would be changed if people needed to attend lessons to learn a precise, codified vocabulary (as do our friends in the Modern Western Square Dancing movement) to express all the movements that you've ever seen in every contra dance. With walkthroughs, you don't need lessons, and this enhances accessibility.

- It provides an opportunity for the caller to share styling tips.

For some, the idea of Contra Dance Heaven is to have no walkthroughs. We all know that contra dancing is just not that hard to do, and if a dance is called well, then the first round of the no-walkthrough contra is simply a walkthrough with music, and at full dance tempo. We've lost, however, most of the good things from the above list.

What have we gained? The dancers get a minor thrill from being able to do a straightforward dance without a walkthrough (ooooohhhh!) and the pace of the evening is increased. From where I stand, an occasional no-walkthrough is acceptable, and even desirable (especially later in the evening, when every movement in the sequence has already been done).

But for me, the walkthrough is an essential element of contra dancing. Eliminate it, and we lose many of the positive aspects of New England traditional style dancing.

## After the Music Starts

by Ted Sannella

Once the music starts, certain dance customs are noticeable. These may vary from one area to another and some may be considered to be more desirable than others. I point out, subjectively, a few customs that can influence the success of any particular dance.

- Are the dancers looking at each other? Eye contact is usually more prevalent in locales where English or Scottish country dancing is also found. When not overdone, eye contact adds to the congeniality of a group.

- Are the experienced dancers helping the beginners? Ideally, they can guide the newcomers through tricky spots without vocalizing. It usually doesn't take much to fix a minor problem and the result will not only make that twosome grateful but will benefit all in the set who meet them.

- Are the dancers adapting to external conditions? If the hall is crowded, by dancing as compactly as possible with elbows held in and a minimum amount of well-controlled flourishes, they can enjoy themselves without endangering others (or themselves). Conversely, in spacious conditions, good dancers will consolidate in order to keep sets from spreading.

- Are idle inactive and neutral dancers socializing or improvising while awaiting their turn? Even though not immediately involved in the action of the dance, opportunities galore await innovative inactive and neutral dancers. However, they must be ready to join in the action when needed.

- Are the dancers discriminating in their use of twirls and other ornamentation? Incessant use assumes that all are willing to participate in these actions. Beginners are easily confused by such flourishes. They, and others who "don't know how," may decide to give up contra dancing in favor of a less strenuous activity.

## She's Dancing with Penn

by Pamela Kolleas

choose your partner and take a ride  
come to the wilderness  
where we waltz and glide  
look for the lady by your side

see for yourself the glitter  
the shimmer of the lake  
each and every heart a flutter  
all the stars you can take

skimming through the water  
looking for the treasure  
perhaps from here you can spot her  
the only one who can give you this pleasure

look in your heart  
feel it in your feet  
we gather one and all  
looking for the treasure

buried in our hearts and minds  
one wonders when she will appear  
she isn't hard to find  
she holds the stars

glistening star diamonds  
strewn round her neck  
she lights the dance  
we gather one and all, hear her beckon  
the lady...The Lady of the Lake  
The one who dances with Penn

*Written for Penn Fix on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Lady of the Lake Dance Camp, 1995;  
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■ Are the dancers interacting with their neighbors whenever possible, even in those dances in which partner interaction predominates? A conscious effort to connect with neighbors (even if only by eye contact) encourages the concept of team effort.

■ Is there an energy exchange among the dancers, the musicians and the caller? Ideally, they all feed off each other to create exciting dancing, music and calling. This boost in energy can be initiated by a musical key change, an enthusiastic exclamation from a caller, a series of synchronous balances in a dance, or many other factors. Nothing does more to point out that "we're all in this together."

■ At the end of a dance, is everybody smiling and applauding enthusiastically to show their appreciation to the talent on stage (and their own accomplishment)? Here is where a sense of community is at its highest. (An announcement regarding a post-dance get-together at an ice cream shop fits nicely here.)

These customs and other equally important ones will have a bearing on the success of a contra dance. Perhaps we have stimulated your thinking to examine your own series for such indicators.

*Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help organizers and beginning callers; "The Walkthrough" is the 24th article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available for \$1.00 each plus shipping and handling from CDSS, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060.*

**(More on Helping Beginners, cont. from page 7)**  
in time with the music, to give weight and that dancing is fun, you have taught them the key stuff.

Dancers: Keep an eye out for newcomers and help to make them feel welcome. Ask them to dance. Smile. If they need help during the dance, try to give it nonverbally, if possible. Smile. Introduce them to your friends. Smile. Chat with them during the break. Smile. If the regulars go out for snacks after the dance, invite them along. Smile. Tell them about regular dances, workshops and festivals in your area. Smile.

