

# The Contra Connection

## 3: Confusion on the Dance Floor

by *Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella*

**"During a contra dance, you see confusion in one set. As a caller, what do you do?"**

**Larry Jennings:** The best thing to do about confusion is to avoid it. This advice is not as facetious as it may seem; the planning and actions you take to avoid the trouble will help your rescue tactics when, despite your preparations, something goes wrong. So I first discuss avoidance procedures and then turn briefly to how to handle problems.

Learn to verify that you are in communication with the dancers. During the walk-thru, for example, note whether the cross-over and formation of minor sets has propagated all the way down. Verify that they are responding to your instructions. If not, you may need to practice being more authoritative. Make sure that each dancer is in the position you want and facing the correct direction.

Most importantly, choose succinct, information-laden words. Dancers have to know where to be, which way to face, and who to dance with before they have a prayer of executing your next call. Those things are often far less obvious to them than they are to you, especially after a swing or allemande. Know exactly how you are going to impart that information.

I can't resist a story in this connection. I recently inquired of two of my favorite callers -- callers who use splendid words in a relaxed, seemingly casual, manner -- whether their knack was acquired by revelation or given by nature. Both gave the same reply: Neither. Rather they listened with great care

to tapes of their calling and determined to improve it.

Before tackling trouble on the floor, you must also have some idea of the objectives of the series. For example, if experienced dancers fail to pay attention and/or distract others, do you let them know that is unacceptable? Is it unacceptable?

With all these skills and decisions at hand, what do you do when something goes wrong? Almost always my advice is the same: Call the dance as completely as possible using all your well-chosen words. If the dance is at all forgiving, the dancers will have the most fun correcting the confusion themselves. Furthermore, experienced dancers may be put off if you intervene.

Do I ever advocate the caller go down on the floor to help? Yes. Most often in the following cases:

- o Beginners become active, not having walked-through the active role. (Beginners usually appreciate help so long as the help is basic.)
- o An extra couple appears in the middle of a set, most often where there is a partner swing at the sides and/or a diagonal figure. (Ask that couple to go to an end of the set.)
- o The dance has serious end effects, which most people do not encounter in the walk-thru. (Decide whether you will be seen as needlessly intervening or as helping.)

**Ted Sannella:** Of course "an area of confusion" indicates an abnormal situation. It could mean that someone is injured or, more likely, that several dancers in the affected area are having difficulty with the dance sequence.

In the event of an obvious injury (someone crouched over or on the floor), I would announce "It seems that someone has been hurt in one of the sets. Would those folks please step out of the set? Thank you." Most likely the dancers nearby will continue without difficulty.

A problem with the dance sequence could be caused by the juxtaposition of several inexperienced dancers in the same foursome, by a temporary memory lapse, or careless dancing on the part of one or more experienced dancers, or by a combination of all of these. In any event, the solution is the same regardless of the cause.

I must quickly assess the situation and decide whether or not to take action. If I know that the dance is quite forgiving or notice that reliable experienced dancers are approaching the "area of confusion," I may decide to do nothing with the expectation that the situation will take care of itself. However, I would watch for further problems in that set and be prepared to take action if necessary.

If something needs to be done, I must determine immediately what part of the sequence has caused the problem, figure out where the dancers should be for the next figure, and give the proper call to get them there. For example: two gents together in one line during a forward and back could mean that the preceding swing finished with the gent on the right. By announcing "You should now be opposite your partner" you may be able to get the offender to move to the correct position. Another example: two couples that are beginning to go down the center four-in-line while every one else is

still doing a swing below. Since it appears that the offenders have stopped their swing too soon, the appropriate call is "Keep on swinging, now in a line of four ready, go."

The problem and solution are not always so obvious. Sometimes by resuming normal calling of the figures or rewording the calls I can be helpful. If I know that the dance has a potential trouble spot, I can give the calls for that portion in greater detail. For example: a hey for four can be clarified with "gents pass right shoulders now, gents loop to the left, etc."

If the problem persists I may come onto the floor and try to help the dancers having the most difficulty. I would do this by standing near them with encouraging calls or by physically guiding them through the trouble spots.

Failing all this, it may be necessary to ask those in the "confused area" to go to the bottom of the set and reorganize themselves. If the set is a total loss and it represents only a small portion of those in attendance (25% or less), I may ask the entire set to break up and attach themselves to the bottom of the other sets. If I judge that the troubled set comprises more than 25% of the crowd and that the problem is irreparable, I may decide to stop the dance by bringing it to a normal conclusion and switch to another, more forgiving dance. It is important, however, that I do not blame the dancers. A suitable comment would be "I made a poor choice with that dance. Here's one that you'll find more enjoyable." If the dance had been running for a while before the confusion occurred, I may just end the dance earlier than planned, tell the dancers to thank their partners, and continue with the program.

There is no standard answer to this question. Each situation must be handled individually in whatever way seems most appropriate.

**Dan Pearl:** I hate when I see confusion! You can prepare and prepare, choosing an appropriate dance for the group, using the "perfect" words for the instruction. Things seem fine, but something goes wrong anyway. You can think about what happened some other time, but now the job is to see if you can rescue the set.

In general, an area of confusion is centered around one person or a couple. (Usually, an experienced partner can guide a newcomer partner through the dance. Two newcomers as partners cannot support each other effectively.)

First step: Pick up on the calling. Focusing on the parts that seem to be causing the confusion, I'll use more positional information to aid in recovery. If the problem is a matter of response-time, I'll expand the number of counts in the call, or even use rhymes so that the dancers can guess what the call will be. If these things don't work, it could be that the people involved are not listening to me. This is understandable, as they are likely being bombarded to sensory saturation with the shouted instructions of their neighbors. Don't dismiss the possibility of language or motor difficulties, or learning disabilities.

Next step: Consider manual intervention. Yes, I do mean leave the protective cocoon of the stage and go to where the trouble is! Now this is a tough decision. The fact is that some people object to this kind of help.

How do you help? It all depends on the problem. I'll try and use very few words, but lots of sweeping arm and hand signals. After all, if language posed the problem, then a more "graphic" approach might work. Is the couple travelling too far? I'll use my body as a blockade. Is someone getting disoriented? I'll get where they should be and have them come towards me. I recommend not touching the people involved. Be careful that you don't impede the actions of others in the

set!

I leave when they get the idea of what they have to do, even though the phrasing of the figures is not perfect. Now that they have the traffic pattern, the phrasing will generally improve.

I'll also leave if my instruction has no effect. It's a fact that you'll encounter folks who will not relate to the instruction you offer.

As a dancer, you can set a good example by being in the right place at the right time, or you can show compassion by giving confused dancers enough time to recover after swings, etc.

For callers and dancers: be prepared to be either a hero or a goat -- you can never tell which it's going to be. But be really sensitive to the folks you are assisting to see if you are stepping over their lines.

*Callers Larry Jennings, Ted Sannella, and Dan Pearl live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help beginning and practicing callers and dance organizers. "Confusion on the Dance Floor," the third article in the series, was published in the CDSS News, issue 84, September/October 1988.*

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