

The Contra Connection: Zesty Circles

A reader has suggested the following question: "What can be done to encourage dancers to circle zestily?"

LARRY JENNINGS: My own vision of dancing zestily is given in Zesty Contras. Fortunately, neither my book nor any committee dictates universal standards for New England style dancing. So the interpretation of "zesty", or even whether "zesty" is a desirable objective, should be decided by the "local committee": the group of people who are determined to make a success of their particular dance series. (Note that this "committee" need not be formally established; in fact, it probably is not.)

For the moment, though, suppose the local committee shares my vision: that dancing means moving; that social dancing involves connection; that contra dancing offers maximum rewards when that connection is through strong physical contact as well as through eye contact; and that contra dancing is a group effort rather than primarily a medium for individual expression. I feel that a direct route to realizing this vision is to encourage relatively strict compliance with the musical phrasing: everyone is ready to start each figure (for instance, a circle or the figure following a circle) with strength at the beginning of a phrase or subphrase.

How is this goal achieved? First, the caller must be absolutely certain she wants the dance phrased, with a phrasing that jibes with local custom. Then she must convey this information to the dancers and be prepared to help them achieve compliance. In the case of some beginners, "help" is indeed the requirement. They need to learn how to move effectively, with connection. More difficult to address, and a bigger problem, is indifference: dawdling. I advise slowly building, perhaps by the example of the local committee, the feeling of enthusiasm and satisfaction that derives from meeting the challenge of all being together: replacing indifference with determination. Finally, we have the biggest hurdle: the individualists, typically still twirling while the others are, for example, trying to get a circle going. The committee must attempt to develop a consensus against this, possible if the caller consistently offers exciting, well-phrased, well-presented dances.

I feel strongly that the caller and the local committee need not feel helpless when faced with dancing that does not correspond to their

vision. But they must make their case in carefully chosen circumstances (and, of course, influence the dancers non-confrontationally). In the circling example suggested by the reader, little is gained by taking a stand on the sequence "circle left (8); star right (8)". Everything is gained by insisting on either "circle left 3/4 in a compact group (6); pass through (2); start the next figure on the strong beat" or "circle left 3/4 relatively spaciouly (8); give a satisfying tug to commence a pass through on the strong beat and continue the next figure." However, all is lost if the caller fails to be very clear about which interpretation prevails.

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DAN PEARL: Dancers may be complex creatures, but they share with simpler animals the basic principles on which they operate: the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. My response is about pleasure.

Certainly, pleasure is subjective. What gives me a "dancers high" might not elevate your pulse, but there is something about what we do and how we do it which manufactures fun where there was no fun before. We all sense it, and that's why we keep coming back.

An evening of fun is made up of a series of rewards, such as the special interaction you had with your partner, the great way a tune blended with the dance, an interesting dance figure, the physical release, and so on. In search for rewards, the dancers alter the way they dance depending on the circumstances. (An example: The music abruptly stops during a balance, leaving the dancers on their own. It is safe bet that the dancers will balance more strongly and accurately than when the music was playing. The dancers rose to the "challenge" and the energy and fun are increased.)

Circling can be done with firm connection, or so limp as to be virtually unconnected. Left to themselves, dancers seem to do what is comfortable for them. I can understand it if dancers reserve their energy when doing "circle left, circle right." That marvelously forgiving sequence accepts all degrees of energy. But if the sequence is "circle left 3/4, pass through along, balance and swing," the lure of the balance at the correct moment should propel the circle zestily. An on-phrase balance is the most obvious reward; it simply

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feels great when you nail it right on the button. Done off-phrase, this step actually saps energy.

If the dancers are less experienced, or the rewards become less obvious, then dancers need more guidance. Good leaders deftly reveal the subtle rewards: It *feels really great* if...", or "To get the *longest swing*, keep that do-si-do 1-1/2 nice and tight", and so on. Dancers behave the way they do more for themselves and each other, then for you, the caller, so be accepting if the dancers seem to ignore your hints. Once you have provided guidance, allow the dancers to choose their own rewards. And watch them as they do it: they will show you things you didn't know before.

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TED SANNELLA: First, we must agree on the meaning of "circling zestily". Does it mean an action whereupon four dancers manage to circle once around in eight counts or 3/4 round in six counts? Not really, since that could be done easily with running or skipping steps and hands dangling loosely. My definition of circling zestily is; "Any number of dancers in a circle moving with smooth gliding steps, their hands joined with elbows bent upward with enough tension in their arms to form a strong connection all around."

This type of disciplined movement is hardly expected at a one-night stand. However, in the context of a regular dance series, it is most desirable for the caller to encourage the dancers to move around a circle zestily. A strong connection while circling is an excellent boost to the concept of togetherness, and after all, that's what contra dancing is all about!

The best way to promote zesty circling is to show the dancers what great fun it is to "give weight" and all move together rather than strolling around independently. The caller can do this rather effortlessly by coming down onto the floor and demonstrating both ways to circle. Even before trying it themselves, it will be obvious to all that the zesty circle looks like more fun. My suggestion is for the caller to put this forth in a positive way. Instead of indicating "the wrong way" and "the right way," I recommend that the caller say, "Here's what I see some of you doing" (while demonstrating a lackadaisical circle) and, "For more enjoyment, you might want to try it this way" (while showing a zesty circle).

Further encouragement can be given by the

continuing example of the core group of knowledgeable dancers, once they agree that such strong connection is desirable. It can be pointed out that a lone dancer can add zest to a circle, because of the unbroken connection, much easier than to any other figure requiring three or more dancers (i.e. a ladies' chain, hey, right and left through, etc.).

Although good strong connection in contra dancing has always been a desirable goal, with increased usage of demanding sequences in contemporary contras, the need is now greater than ever. Many of the circles encountered nowadays require that the dancers get around in a minimum number of steps (counts of music) in order to be in position for the following figure. This can be done only if the circle moves zestily - and it feels sooo good!!!

Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help practicing callers and others interested in calling. "Zesty Circles" is the fifth article in the series.



In recognition of our 75th anniversary next year, CDSS member Sol Weber has created a "magic square" to commemorate the date of March 23. Add up the numbers in any row, any column, or either of two diagonals, and you'll get 323 (or 3/23) each time. In the square on the right, you'll get 32,390 (or March 23, '90).

81	54	27	161
36	152	90	45
143	9	72	99
63	108	134	18



1951	5988	12,475	3992	7984
11,477	2994	9481	953	7485
8483	2450	6487	10,479	4491
5489	11,976	3493	9980	1452
4990	8982	454	6986	10,978



For a \$200 donation to CDSS, Sol says he will risk writer's cramp and brain burnout by creating a magic square with rows, columns, and diagonals adding up to 3,231,990. If you're game, send the check to CDSS and tell Sol to start adding.