

The Contra Connection

Appropriate Movements and Calls for Contras

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

"What movements are appropriate at a New England style dance and what sort of words best describe those movements?"

Ted Sannella: In my opinion, there are only twenty or twenty-five movements, commonly referred to as "basic," that currently are appropriate for contras at a New England style dance. Of these, a scant fifteen or so are used most often. These workhorse basics include: do-si-do, swing, promenade, allemande, ladies' chain, right and left through, forward and back, circle, star, balance, pass through, cast off, down the center (or outside) and back, hey for four, and turn contra corners. Some other acceptable basics such as 1/2 figure eight, gypsy, elbow reel, two hand turn, and sashay are less frequently used. By combining this limited number of basics in interesting ways, traditional New England style dance composers are able to produce a vast repertoire of exciting dances. They feel no need to create new basics for they already have all the tools necessary to please the dancers.

Admittedly, some of these basics have variants. For example, circles, starts, and allemandes can be done in either direction while these and a few other basics are often danced in fractional distances, such as 3/4 or 1-1/2. Down the center and back (with variants) and forward and back will be seen as movements for various numbers of participants.

There are a few specialized movements that are appropriate but less common. Usually taught when used, these include: hey for three, dip and dive, basket swing, right hand over and left hand under, and lady around two and gent cut through. Some movements that can be called directionally are not considered, by me, to be basics (for example, "ends close in," "inside arch and outside under," "cross through").

Some movements, such as the twirl, break-away swing (throwing partner to arms length as in a jitterbug swing), and clogging steps are NOT, in my opinion, appropriate to New England style contra dances. In fact, the twirl and break-away swing can be "hazardous to your health" if

unexpected by one party or extended beyond the normal space allowed. Usually, these movements are idiosyncratic but they tend to be contagious and they could, if encouraged, dominate the scene and change the flavor of the dance entirely. Clogging, not to be confused with "footing" steps in a balance, can be quite disruptive. Although I can imagine that a contra demo with all clogging in unison might be very entertaining, it shouldn't be portrayed as a New England style dance. There is a place for twirling in contras when done in good taste and with mutual consent to smooth out a transition. (Ex. For the lady as she leaves an asymmetrical allemande left below and prepares to swing her partner in the center. For both partners when moving rapidly from a contra corner turn to a right hand turn or balance with each other.)

I realize that even in New England, we have an evolving dance tradition. When I started dancing forty-four years ago, there were only two dances that used the movement turn contra corners (Chorus Jig and Rory O'More), and the 1/2 figure eight, hey for four, gypsy, and hey for three, all movements from the English dances of the colonists, were not used at all in American dances. In those days, ladies' chain and right and left through was usually done both ways (over and back) and circles and stars went once around, never 3/4 or 1-1/4!

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Sometimes, new ideas come from the old dances and, occasionally, one of them takes hold if a dance becomes popular or well-known. When I used a hey for four in my contra dance, *Bonny Jean*, in 1975, it may have been the first use of that movement during the current contra dance revival. Now there are many dances with that basic. Likewise, my *Scout House Reel*, written in 1979, may have been the first to include a do-si-do 1-1/2. That, too, is now in common usage. The do-si-do to a wave was popularized through *Tony Parkes' Shadrack's Delight*, written in 1972 and undoubtedly, box the gnat is breaking into

the New England dance scene through the frequent use of the square dance. Smoke on the Water by Pancho Baird.

It's fair to state that this dance evolution has spread beyond New England. Therefore, we find that certain basics are more common in some parts of the country and less used in other areas. Likewise, I theorize that such figures as California twirl, square thru, and flutterwheel may well find their way into the New England style contras in those areas where the "western style" dance predominates. This is more likely if the callers and choreographers have been trained in this style or, because of their background or inclination, they feel no commitment to the conservative New England restrictions.

The words used to teach and call contra dance movements should be those which will convey the intended meaning and elicit the desired response from the dancers. On a walk-through, be sure that you have the attention of the dancers, then direct them carefully and efficiently with words that are brief and precise. Aim your instructions toward the least experienced dancer in the hall. Tell him with whom he will dance a movement and what he will do with this person (Ex. "with your corner, alfemando left" or "with the next, do-si-do"). Sometimes it helps to mention which way to face and how far to go (Ex. "face down, right and left thru along the set, make a full turn and face the next below"). When possible, reassure him by saying where he should be at the end of a movement or sequence (Ex. "swing below, circle left 3/4 -- you are now next to your partner at the side of the set").

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While calling a dance, the choice of words will depend on what you need to say and how much time there is to say it. Here, brevity and preciseness are essential! Some advance thought should be given to the choice of words to be used, especially those to be given during the early stages of the dance. These calls should reinforce those words used during the walk-through.

A poor teaching job during the walk-through can seldom be corrected while calling the dance. Assuming a reasonable understanding of the sequence by the dancers, the caller can be helpful by stressing *when* the movements should be done. Words such as "now," "go, and "stop"

are useful. Ex. "with the next, circle left, *now*, circle 3/4 round, *stop*, pass thru" and "actives down the center, ready, *go*."

The choice of words used in teaching and calling will enhance or hinder the success of a caller. Personality, voice quality, attitude, and reputation may be difficult or impossible to change, but the ability to choose the best words in every situation is a skill that can be learned; every caller should work toward the goal of perfection in this technique.

Dan Pearl: The word "appropriate" suggests subjectivity. Different dance communities and different dances within them will differ in what they call "New England style" (NES). Boundaries are drawn dependent in part on the interests and background of the caller, the traditions of the area and series, and the influence of the musicians, dancers, and intangible fads.

Most folks will agree on the standard set of movements that comprise 95+% of New England style sequences. These movements are derived from dance ancestors, like English country dancing and colonial American dancing, that have given much of what they have to NES. Although heys and gypsies are relatively recent introductions to New England style, the assimilation of those movements from English country dance into NES was very smooth because of their common heritage.

The remaining 5% features dance movements that might have been adapted from other dance traditions. For instance, "box the gnat," "cross trail," "California twirl," "four leaf clover," and "Half sashay" are featured more prominently in other styles such as traditional western, or Appalachian dancing, even though they are found in some NES sequences.

There are movements that only featured within a very few dances (for example, the hand claps on Carol Kopp's dance Aw Shucks, heel-and-toe polka steps, or waltz contras). Are these movements part of NES? This is where personal opinion enters. Modern Western (club) square dancers occasionally do dances in contra formation, but the selection of movements tends to be from the club square dance repertoire. It takes more than formation on the floor to make a dance New England style.

What words should one use? The Short Answer: Whatever works for you. Those words will likely be those that other leaders use; an unsuccessful leader will force unorthodox

terminology on dancers who have been trained differently.

Use English instead of cryptic glossary terms. For instance, dancers just don't respond to the term "along," as in "ladies chain along." I'd suggest "ladies chain *along the line*" or "up and down the set, ladies chain." If you have the dancers oriented correctly, then even just "ladies chain" will do the job, since the direction has been made clear from the context.

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It's okay to define a term during the walk-through if you plan on using the term during calling (as a simplifying syllable-saver) or later in the evening. For instance, define the term "chase" for a "lady 'round two, gent cut through; gent 'round two, lady cut through." There is no substitute, however, for a smoothly flowing dance, where the next movement seems natural.

Avoid alienating the crowd. Not everyone can pull off the good-natured, but sexist, comments that peppered Ralph Page's performances. Similarly, avoid singling out individuals that are having problems.

Consider your performance. Do you come across as irreverent or somber, unprepared or confidently knowledgeable, relaxed or uptight, imaginative or rigid? The impression you make and your leadership effectiveness depends not only on the words you use, but on the tone of voice and your body language.

Larry Jennings: As Tony Parkes recently observed, New England style (NES) is governed by consensus. Thus, tests of innovative ideas are inevitable and appropriate, and so any dance figures and words to describe them, in my view, *potentially* fall within the tradition. However, because consensus is slow to develop, because the tradition provides that beginners be incorporated without lessons, because dancers justifiably get antsy if the walk-through is lengthy, and for other reasons, a caller should treat unusual figures and words very cautiously and should also carefully examine whether he or she is using the words effectively.

I say little about examining non-consensus figures or actions beyond urging the

exercise of good taste. On the other hand, I will discuss one of my favorite topics: the choice of words.

Some of the words a caller uses will have special meanings to dancers. Categorizing such words may help the caller to use them effectively. We have "basic" words (those that dancers are expected to learn) and "ad hoc" words (all other specialized words). Alternatively, we may consider those words whose effect the caller can immediately observe during the walk-through, for the most part "calls," and the more descriptive words ("descriptors") whose effect can be observed only indirectly. One tenet of New England style is that the basic vocabulary is, and should remain, small: it is relatively inflexible. The caller has more flexibility in the choice of ad hoc words, particularly ad hoc descriptors, and this choice greatly influences a caller's effectiveness as does the way she strings her words together.

Ad hoc words must be defined by explanation or by clever use of context and choice of words which naturally work (I call such words "apt"); i.e., for dancers standing in a set, "join hands in *long lines*" would work, even for beginners, but, after a swing, a little reinforcement might be needed: "long lines facing across." Words don't have to be suggestive as are "long lines" and "across" to have impact. After suitable explanation, calls such as "do it" or "put it in high" may be particularly apt because they are obviously ad hoc.

In contrast, consider "improper" or "Becket formation," neither of which is particularly apt nor (in my view) in the basic vocabulary. That doesn't mean that they are not useful words -- after the caller has defined them. For example, if the caller converts the usual duple, improper

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set to Becket formation by having the minor sets circle 1/4, she may state what she had done and then, after the walk-through, ask the dancers to "return to Becket formation." If many dancers know the words, so much the better, but the beginners should not feel they are required to know the strange words in advance.

In summary, you must exercise good taste in your choice of dance and use all your skills to (continued on page 14)