

New Mexico Callers Collective Handbook

The FolkMADS New Mexico Callers Collective (NMCC) is a group of people who support each other to become skilled and confident dance leaders. The group includes callers, musicians, dancers, and the curious. Mistakes are cheered, successes of any magnitude are recognized, and all voices are valued. As we grow together, we each take on higher-level roles as we're ready.

Erik Erhardt maintains these growing notes for our workshops.

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Adopting a growth mindset

We're each a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets. While your temperament can play a role --- that is, maybe you're more or less sensitive to criticism --- the environment can play a really big role. Your mindset will create your reaction to failure.

Fixed vs growth mindsets

People predominantly in a **fixed mindset** believe that their basic qualities, talents, and ability are fixed traits and they have a certain amount --- that's it.

When you're in a **growth mindset** you understand that people differ, but even the most basic talents and abilities can be developed through your hard work, your good strategy, your input, and your mentoring from others (and by mentoring others).

Grow forward

When you're in a **fixed mindset**, you think your intelligence is fixed, you're always asking, "am I smart, am I not smart, will this make me look smart, oh I made a mistake will people think I'm not smart?" You're obsessed with the level your traits are fixed at. You're often less likely to take risks or to give up more easily when you have setbacks.

When you're in a **growth mindset**, you believe your abilities can be developed and you go for it. A risk isn't that risky, a setback is a natural part of learning, and you end up accomplishing more.

Learning from problems

How do we cope with failure and setback?

In a **fixed mindset**, you're always feeling like you're proving yourself, that you always need to be right. You're always looking to judge when something goes wrong, "whose fault is this? Mine, theirs?" When you judge yourself as failing, you can feel devastated. You abhor effort, if you're good at something it should be easy.

In a **growth mindset**, you focus on solving the problem, "let's do something and learn from it". When you're struggling with a challenge it's an opportunity to learn, "I'm going to figure this out (possibly with support of the group) and share what I've learned". To succeed you realize that you need to work hard, you'll have setbacks and will overcome your setbacks. You understand that your skills can be developed, and you will ultimately thrive in the face of challenges.

Praise process over results

When we **praise someone's intelligence or ability**, it puts them into a **fixed mindset**. It says, "you've got a fixed ability, I can tell what it is, and it seems good." But then they'll worry that the next time they won't look so good and we'll take back that praise, so they become more cautious and vulnerable. Reacting to mistakes as though they can be harmful to someone's learning can make them think "failure's so terrible, it must mean something bad about me", and helps them develop a fixed mindset.

When we **praise someone's process** --- their hard work, strategies, focus, and improvement --- that conveys "your abilities can be developed and this is how you do it." Reacting to a mistake in a positive way by saying "this setback is interesting, it's going to help you learn, let's talk about it" helps them develop a growth mindset.

The words we use

Therefore, rather than saying "you're really smart", try saying "you worked really hard on that, you thought of several ways to do it, and they worked".

Triggers for fixed mindset

We have fixed-mindset moments. Even those who predominantly have a growth mindset can sometimes have events or situations that trigger a fixed mindset. Figure out "when does my fixed mindset get triggered?"

As examples, when you're asked to step out of your comfort zone, you can worry "will I show off my fixed abilities?" Or when you have a serious setback and are struggling with something, you may take a fixed-mindset perspective on your abilities. Or, when you compare yourself to someone who's so much better than you are at something you think you're good at, "oh oh, they're talented and I'm not". Or when someone criticizes you, pointing out something that isn't perfect.

You can give your fixed-mindset persona a name, such as Fonzie. Then you can work with Fonzie to see how you can collaborate with him. Maybe next time he'll be a little less defensive, anxious, defeated, or aggressive in these trigger situations. Keep setting your growth goals for how you want to improve. Keep noticing when Fonzie crops up to prevent you from meeting your goals, allow him to say what he needs to, then take your turn and grow.

Ideas drawn from an interview with Carol Dewck, author of "Mindset".

Contra calling intro workshop

Dance repertoire handout

These dances work.

Callers should dance

Feedback model: "I" statements.

1. What did the caller like? "I liked ..."
2. What did others like? "I liked ..."
3. What could the caller have done differently? "I could have ..."
4. What would others have wanted? "I needed ..."
5. What did you tell the band?
6. What did the band hear from the caller?

More suggestions on feedback from Bruce Hamilton at <http://www.colinhume.com/defback.htm>.

Mistakes, YES!

Say "I've made a mistake." All cheer!

- You've given yourself and everyone else an opportunity to learn.
- Step out of the space where the mistake was made.
- Assume the power position (A-frame legs, chest high), think for a moment, and try again with confidence.

Music

A regular (square) tune has an "A" and "B" phrase, each phrase is 8 measures long (16 beats) and repeated: AABB.

A1 12345678 12345678

A2 12345678 12345678

B1 12345678 12345678

B2 12345678 12345678

Clap at top of phrases.

Tell dancers what to do **before** they do it.

Cue after 16-beat call: 12345678 1234 blah blah blah blah.

Cue after 8-beat call: 1234 blah blah blah blah.

1-2-3-4- "WITH the next PERson DO the next THING"

A1	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
A2	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
B1	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
B2	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call
	<i>prepare</i>	<i>next</i>	<i>call</i>	<i>then</i>	call	call	call	call

Practice calling together

Practice prompting with a dynamic voice, not everyone in same way, not same every time.

Call and dance it, all together:

Someone teach: Assume mixed crowd of beginners and experienced.

Hands 4, 1s cross, teach 1s and 2s, partner pair, lady on right, gent on left, teach dance.

Everyone calls it together 4-5 times through, shorten calls, drop calls.

Calling workshop basic dance

by Nils Fredland
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(16) Neighbor balance and swing

A2 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Ladies allemande Right 1-1/2

B1 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

B2 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Circle Left 3/4, pass through up-and-down

Voice

Dictation, articulation: Articulate consonants at the ends of words.

Be understood, calling and teaching.

Be a commanding presence, be in their bodies.

Caller's Prep and Reminder Sheet

Things to think about just before and during your time at the mic.

1. Clarify you **intention**: Friendly and competently guide dancers and facilitate a good time.
2. Create the **state**: Get centered, overcome your nerves, execute #5 (below).
3. Be **concise**: Goal is one walk-through per dance, and stay concise if second is needed.
4. Be **heard**: Speak clearly and at comfortable volume, have dancers's attention, let sound equipment amplify you.
5. Open **awareness** to: band, dancers across entire floor, your own experience (Is your body relaxed? Are you having fun? Are you paying attention to what is working and what needs improvement?).

Microphone use

Talk directly into the receiving end of the microphone with a comfortable voice.

Do not strain to be heard, let the sound person adjust the volume/equalization for you.

Someone pick a dance

Choreography

- Be certain that the dance has a good story line (it makes kinesthetic sense and isn't awkward).
- Know what the 'hook' or the 'gimmick' is. This is the move that makes the dance distinctive. Will it remain enjoyable over several repetitions? Does it require superior dance skill?
- Is there significant neighbor interaction? If not, is the dance enjoyable?
- How does it feel to dance the man's role and the woman's role? Ask!
- Is the dance overly circular? If it is, will it wear out the dancers?
- Understand the pattern of the moves and the progression. Diagram the dance.
- Know where each move ends and who is facing whom and in what direction.
- Understand which parts are the trickiest to dance, teach and cue.

Concise language for teaching

Ask for help from your calling buddies, peers and trusted dancers: What's the best way of teaching this? How can I say this with the fewest words? Your goal is to do ONE walk-through whenever possible. Words should be familiar, universal, economical (fewer syllables are better), and unambiguous. Calls are imperative (not descriptive) and in the present tense (not future) ("join hands and circle left" instead of "next you will hold hands with everyone and walk around"). Consider alternate words and add imagery or adjectives (four in a line march bravely down the hall").

Suggestions:

1. Who
2. Name of figure
3. How much
4. Where figure ends (where in set/which direction/whom facing), "until X"

Examples:

"All Circle left 3/4 UNTIL YOU CAN face your Partner up or down the set"

"Nbr Allem L 3/4 UNTIL YOU CAN make long waves, with the men facing out"

"Nbr DSD 1- 1/2 UNTIL YOU CAN face a new neighbor"

"Nbr DSD 1-1/4 AND END in a short wave across the set, R hands with neighbor and Ladies w/ L hands in center"

"All Star L ALL THE WAY around and look for new neighbors"

"Women start a WHOLE hey for 4, passing R sh" or

"Hey for 4, women pass R, GO ALL THE WAY OVER and all the way BACK"

Remove the phrase "*You're going to* [ladies chain, allemande etc] ... " from your vocabulary! Give a clear command, "Ladies chain." Reserve "going to" for describing the future: "You are going to circle, BUT FIRST, identify your next neighbor."

Walk-through: 3 times through, each time with feedback.

Improve and practice your cueing language and timing

Which figures need more prompting than others? (some are unusual, others dancers forget what comes next)

One-word cues, where possible.

Dance Repertoire

To get started, below are some dances that work -- 1000s of others in books and online.

Also consider the introductory dances at the CDSS website: <http://www.cdss.org/contra-dances.html>.

#1 -----

Nice Combination

by Gene Hubert
Contra/Improper/Easy

A1 -----

(4,12) Neighbors balance and swing

A2 -----

(6) Down the hall four line

(2,8) Turn as couples and come back up

B1 -----

(6) Circle left 3/4

(10) Partners swing

B2 -----

(8) Ladies chain

(8) Left-hand star

#2 -----

Frederick Contra

by Tom Hinds
Contra/Improper/Easy

A1 -----

(8) Gents do-si-do

(8) Ladies allemande left 1-1/2

A2 -----

(8) Partner Do-si-do

(8) Partner swing

B1 -----

(8) Down the hall, four in line (turn as couple)

(8) Return and Bend the line

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Neighbor swing

#3 -----

After the Solstice

by Lisa Greenleaf
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(8) Neighbor Do-si-do

(8) Neighbor swing

A2 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Gents allemande Left 1-1/2

B1 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

B2 -----

(8) Right and left through

(8) Circle Left 3/4, pass through

#4 -----

Midwest Folklore

by Orace Johnson
Contra/Becket-CW

A1 -----

(2) slide Left to new Neighbors

(6) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Neighbor Do-si-do

A2 -----

(16) Neighbor balance and swing

B1 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Partner Do-si-do

B2 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

#5 -----

Simplicity Swing

by Becky Hill
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(16) Neighbor balance and swing

A2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Partner swing

B1 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Ladies Chain

B2 -----

(8) Star Left to new Neighbor

(8) Neighbor Do-si-do

#6 -----

Delphiniums and Daisies

by Tanya Rotenberg
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(8) Neighbor allemande Left 1-1/2

(8) Ladies Chain

A2 -----

(16) Hey, ladies passing right shoulders

B1 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Neighbor allemande Right 1-1/2 (on to next neighbor)

#7 -----

Every Second Countsby Jim Kitch
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(16) Neighbor balance and swing

A2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Partner allemande Right 1-1/2

B1 -----

(8) Shadow Left-shoulder Gypsy

(8) Partner swing

B2 -----

(8) Ladies Chain

(8) Star Left

#8 -----

Rock Creek Reelby David Harris
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(8) Gents to center, Balance wave

(8) Ladies to center (WHILE gents back up), Balance wave

A2 -----

(8) Ladies allemande Left 1X

(8) Partner swing

B1 -----

(8) Down the hall, four in line (turn as couples)

(8) Return and Bend the line

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Neighbor swing

#9 -----

Give the Scout a Handby Bob Isaacs & Chris Weiler
Contra/Becket-CW

A1 -----

(2) Slide left to new neighbors

(6) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Neighbor swing

A2 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Gents allemande Left 1-1/2 to Partner

B1 -----

(8) Partner Balance and Box the Gnat

(8) Dixie grand (1/2 hey with hands)

Part R, Gents L, Nbr R, Ladies L

B2 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

#10 -----

Roll in the Heyby Roger Diggle
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(8) Circle Left 1X

(8) Neighbor swing

A2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Partner swing

B1 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Ladies Chain

B2 -----

(16) Hey, ladies passing right shoulders

#11 -----

Kitchen Stompby Becky Hill
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

(16) Neighbor balance and swing

A2 -----

(8) Gents allemande Left 1-1/2

(8) Partner swing

B1 -----

(8) Ladies Chain

(8) Balance the ring and spin to the right (petronella)

B2 -----

(8) Balance the ring and spin to the right (petronella)

(8) Star Left

#12 -----

Square Affairby Becky Hill
Contra/Becket-CW

A1 -----

(8) Long lines, forward and back

(8) Ladies Chain

A2 -----

(4) Partner Right-hand Balance

(4) Square through two (Part R, Nbr L)

(4) Partner Right-hand Balance

(4) Square through two (Part R, Nbr L)

B1 -----

(16) NEXT Neighbor balance and swing

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4

(8) Partner swing

#13 -----

Star Struckby Nick Boulet
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

- (8) Star Right
- (8) Neighbor swing

A2 -----

- (8) Long lines, forward and back
- (8) Ladies Gypsy 1-1/2

B1 -----

- (16) Partner balance and swing

B2 -----

- (8) Ladies Chain
- (8) Star Left

#14 -----

Bumbling in ths Showerby Paul Eric Smith
Contra/Becket-CW

A1 -----

- (8) Long lines, forward and back
- (8) Gents allemande Left 1-1/2

A2 -----

- (16) Neighbor balance and swing

B1 -----

- (8) Ladies Chain
- (8) Pass thru, turn indiv R (Ladies in lead) walk along line, face in

B2 -----

- (8) NEW Neighbors, Circle Left 1X
- (8) Partner swing

#15 -----

United We Danceby Bob Isaacs
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

- Start: R hand to Nbr in a long wave in center
- (8) Balance and slide to the right (as in Rory O'More)
- (8) Balance and slide to the left (as in Rory O'More)

A2 -----

- (16) Neighbor balance and swing

B1 -----

- (8) Circle Left 3/4
- (8) Partner swing

B2 -----

- (8) Ladies Chain
- (8) Star Left

#16 -----

Blue Haired Girlby Chuck Roth
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

- (8) Balance the ring and spin to the right (petronella)
- (8) Balance the ring and spin to the right (petronella)

A2 -----

- (16) Neighbor balance and swing

B1 -----

- (8) Ladies allemande Right 1-1/2
- (8) Partner swing

B2 -----

- (8) Ladies Chain
- (8) 1/2 Hey, ladies passing right shoulders

#17 -----

Early Evening Rollawayby Bob Isaacs
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

- (16) Neighbor balance and swing

A2 -----

- (8) Right and left through
- (8) Ladies Chain, form ring

B1 -----

- (8) Balance the ring, Roll Nbr across, Catch Partner!
- (8) Partner swing

B2 -----

- (8) Circle Left 3/4, pass thru
- (8) NEW Neighbor Do-si-do

#18 -----

Mary Js Jigby Gene Hubert
Contra/Improper

A1 -----

- (8) Down the hall, four in line (turn alone)
- (8) Return and Bend the line, face Nbr

A2 -----

- (16) Neighbor balance and swing

B1 -----

- (8) Long lines, forward and back
- (8) Ones half Figure eight up the set

B2 -----

- (16) 1s balance and swing

Calling preparation

(DRAFT)

At home

Preparation

Read the dance, see the dance from each role, choose words (and alternative words) to use for teaching and for calling, find teaching moments. Is this a good dance for the particulars of the evening?

At dance

Prompting and groove.

Caller trouble

Feel the room energy, do they want to socialize or dance? Have the transition come from the floor rather than the mic.

Try to be aware during the walk-through of where the dancers have their attention. Are they attending to the dance being taught? Did they stop attending because you're using too many words? Observe your dancers and learn from them. If they stopped paying attention to you, try to understand why that happened (rather than take it as a criticism) so you can learn and make changes. "Be less concerned about what people think of you, they rarely do."

Careful about the feedback you ask for

Avoid: "Anyone need another walk-through?" You've committed to allow any one person to dictate what you do next.

Try: "How's it going?" If there's a little unease, but generally a good vibe, then try: "This is a wild and crazy dance, it might break down. Stay alert and work together. It will be fun anyway!"

If a dance has an interesting background, go ahead and give it in 10 seconds, at most.

Intangibles

Set the feeling in the dance hall.

Help people talk with each other about what works well. Try to provide a feedback model for dancers. Show them how to talk to each other, and how to model an alternative to what they need. For example, "During an allemande, *I feel more comfortable* with a straight wrist, holding hands with fingers wrapped around thumbs."

Teaching the Beginner Lesson

The beginner lesson is intended to help new people gain enough skill to be successful with the rest of the dancers. If everyone is a beginner, then don't teach a lesson, but design a program that incorporates vocabulary and moves through a progression of dances.

Notes:

Adults hate being wrong.

Don't be too controlling.

Our intension is to create community via common language, that we "listen and do" together.

Top three calls to learn: progression, courtesy turn, swing.

30-minute lesson

Big Circle

- Find partner, join circle as couples with lady on right
- With Rhythm: Circle Left, Circle Right, Forward and Back 2X
 - Discuss briefly: "you're dancing, walking with the beat, most calls have 8 beats each."

- Partner Do-si-do
- Allemande Right and Left (1X and 1-1/2)
 - No spaghetti arms, "dynamic positive tension" (avoid saying "give weight")
- Swing
 - Frame, hands on shoulder blades (not on lower back)
 - Walking (then buzz step, if wanted: "left right (pause), like pushing a scooter with left foot behind and right foot in front")
 - "Drop pointy end and open like a book to face across, lady on right"
 - Extend with "Balance and swing"
 - Have them swing their partner, then turn and swing their neighbor.

- Promenade around circle
 - Lead one couple up the hall to end in a long line

Long line

- Hands four from the top
- Two-couple sets
 - Identify positions: 1s, 2s, top/bottom/across hall
- Progression
 - Bow to Partner (across)
 - Bow to Neighbor (up-and-down)
 - Pass Neighbor by right shoulder
 - Join hands with new Neighbors
 - Repeat

- Circle Left
- Circle Right
- ... into Left-hand Star (keep walking, putting left hands in the middle)
- Back with a Right-hand Star
 - Allow them to pause and think about their hands in the star, then tell them that their feet need to move first and they can work the hands out as they walk. Then do it.

- Courtesy turn

- teapot position, lady's left hand out, right hand on her lower back with her palm facing back
- join left-hands
- Gent's right hand on Lady's "target hand" on her lower back
- Scoop around shoulder-to-shoulder, Gent walking backwards

- Right-and-Left Through
 - Right-hand pull-by, let go, stop
 - Courtesy turn: teapot, scoop around

- Ladies Chain
 - Lady pull by Right
 - Gent slide Right into Lady's place
 - Join Left hands, teapot, scoop, scoop, scoop!

- Hash-call a few figures to have the dancers feel flowing movement

- Hey (if plenty of time and everyone doing well)
 - Start with partners together on the same side, ladies start by passing right shoulder, emphasize hooking left on outside for 4 beats.

- Walk first dance through (in lesson)

Points of etiquette

How to ask for a dance: "Would you like to dance?" They will almost always say "yes". If they say "no", thank them and ask someone else.

Eye contact (or nose, or ear -- they'll never know) means "I'm enjoying dancing with you." Close proximity contact is rare in our culture, but natural in our dance.

Squares calling workshop

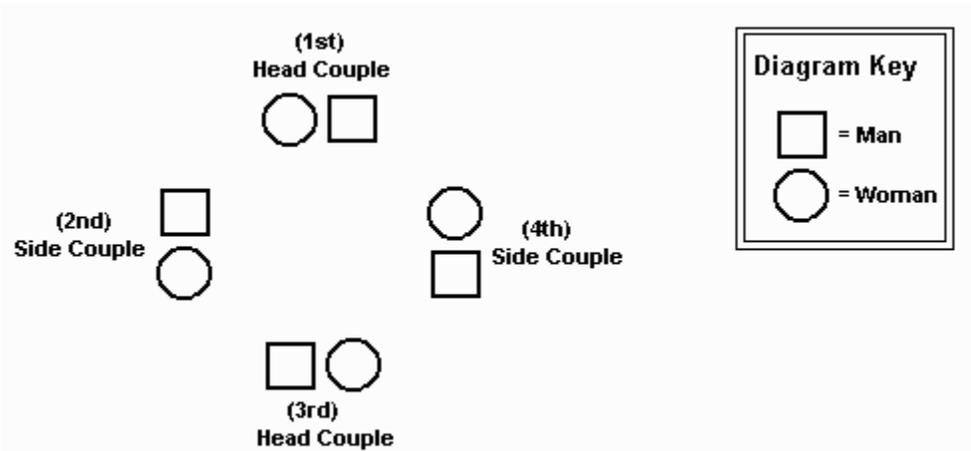
There are several types of squares. We'll first focus on Quadrille style, as that's most similar to contra, then expand to Western and Kentucky running sets.

- **Quadrille style (New England squares)** rooted in French courts and English high-society, are the most like contra dance. The calls are prompted and phrased to the music with long swings.
- **Old-Time Mountain style (Southern)**, named "**Kentucky Running Sets**" by Cecil Sharp are fast, unphrased, short swings, and delightful rhyming calls with fun names that have been passed down for generations.
- **Traditional Western style** (mix of quadrille and Kentucky running sets), extra "patter" call language to fill time between calls, with short swings.
- **Modern Western Square Dance** is no-walk-through "club" dancing with levels of increasing call complexity danced to recorded music and often with singing. Levels include basic, mainstream, plus, advanced 1 and 2, and challenge 1, 2, 3, and 4.
- **Singing squares** are usually quadrilles with singing and patter between calls to popular music.
- "**Traditional Style**" **Modern Squares** is a mix of all of the above, often as part of a mixed program with contras and squares.

Quadrille Style

Formation

- **Heads** are facing up and down the hall, **sides** face across the side.
- You're next to your **partner** with the lady on the right.
- On the other side of you is your **corner**.
- Across from you is your **opposite**.
- The last person is the gent's **right-hand lady** or the lady's **left-hand gent**.
- Couples are numbered **1, 2, 3,** and **4** going CCW starting with the couple closest to the caller facing down the hall.



Calling/music phrase structure

7 times through a standard 32-bar tune (AABB, like a contra dance)

- 64 Intro
- 64 Figure
- 64 Figure
- 64 Break
- 64 Figure
- 64 Figure
- 64 Ending

There are three basic structures for the figures:

- **Symmetric:** four figures are the same, can be a "keeper" or "mixer"
- **HHSS:** Heads active first two, Sides active second two, can be a "keeper" or "mixer"
- **Sequential:** Couple 1 active, then 2, then 3, then 4, will be a "keeper"

“Keeper” means you keep your original partner.

“Mixer” means you have a different partner each time, typically the lady progresses one couple to the right (so her current corner becomes her next partner).

Most dances describe the figure, and leave the intro, break, and ending to the caller.

Easy symmetric mixer figure

Left-Hand Star Breakdown by Tony Parkes

A1 -----

(8) Corner allemande Left 1X

(8) Partner Do-si-do

A2 -----

(8) Gents Star Left 1X

(8) Partner allemande Right 1-1/2

B1 -----

(8) Ladies Star Left 1-1/4, pass partner

(8) Swing next Gent

B2 -----

(16) Promenade to Gent's home

Notes:

Gents identify home, you will bring a new lady here each time through the dance.

Ladies, each time through the dance you will progress to your right-hand (corner) Gent.

Other Notes:

Because of the symmetry of this dance, it can be done with 5 couples, too.

Easy intro, break, and ending

Can use this for all three:

A1 Circle left, circle right.

A2 Forward and back. Do si do corner.

B1 Do si do partner. Swing partner.

B2 Promenade.

Plan for rest of workshop

1. Call the dance above.
2. Look through dance books and choose easy dances to call, and breaks that are easy enough to call without teaching.
3. Teach the figure, call the dance with the intro, break, and ending.

“Bow to your partner and corner too, there ain't no more, that's it we're through!”

Describing contra, technique tips, and etiquette

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Contra_Dance_Tips_and_Techniques

Description

Contra dancing is a traditional folk dance that is easy to learn, accessible to all ages, good exercise, and lots of fun. It usually incorporates live music, a live caller, and lively, high-spirited dancing in a safe clean environment. In keeping with the fundamental 8-count rhythm on which the dance is based, we've assembled these pieces of 8 to help you quickly master the basics and get the most out of your dancing time. For more details about the dance, visit Contra Dance on Wikipedia. You can also search for Contra Dance on Google to find local events in your area. We're glad you're here and hope you enjoy yourself as much as we do.

The Basic 8

1. Contra dancing is a group activity as well as a partner dance. Over the course of a single dance, dancers interact not just with their own partners but with everyone else in the set.
2. Single dancers and first-timers are welcome. You need not bring your own dance partner. The best way to learn is to dance with more experienced dancers.
3. Each dance couple is composed of a "Lady" and a "Gent" and the dance normally starts with the lady on the right. That said, same-sex dance partners are not uncommon, especially when the genders are unevenly represented. In such cases, one of the two partners must assume the role of the opposite gender.
4. Anyone may ask anyone else to dance. Women can ask men.
5. All dances are completely explained and "walked through" by the caller before they are danced.
6. It is customary to change partners for each dance.
7. Unlike elementary school where we skipped and hopped, contra dancing uses a simple, smooth walking step in time with the music.
8. If you make a mistake or miss a figure, don't worry about it. Relax, have fun and enjoy the dance!

8 Tips on Technique

Contra dance incorporates various figures, the Balance & Swing, Do-Si-Do, Promenade and several others, each of which will be taught as needed in a walk-through preceding each dance. The 8 techniques below tell how to manage your movements and quickly transform you into a seasoned dancer. Listen, learn, and let your body flow with the rhythm of the dance.

1. Hands four: Most dances begin with "hands four," meaning four people, i.e. two couples, join hands. Couple #1 faces down the hall, away from the music, while couple #2 faces up the hall. It begins at the head of the line and continues down until all couples are paired.
2. Eye contact: Whenever executing a figure, make eye contact with the person with whom you are dancing. This does not signal a proposition but merely acknowledges a connection with your fellow dancers. It also enhances balance and reduces dizziness during swinging. If eye contact discomforts you, you may offset your gaze.
3. Give Weight: Imagine how you help a sitting person to their feet, or how, as children, you would lock elbows and swing each other around. This is what is meant by giving weight. It is the physical connection between dancers, whether in a swing, balance, courtesy turn, etc. where each counterbalances their own weight with that of fellow dancers to propel one another through the figures. It enhances grace, fluidity, and continuity throughout the dance.
4. Swing: Square your shoulders parallel with your partner and hold your arms firm but not rigid. When swinging, give weight so that you and your partner move as one. Don't squeeze too tightly or bend your partner's wrists. Though you and your partner may choose to swing vigorously, always maintain balance, control your space, and respect the spatial needs of the other dancers.
5. Twirling: "Twirling the lady" is a popular embellishment. Though the gent typically leads the lady into a twirl, it is the lady's prerogative to follow the lead or override it.
6. Timing: Dance each figure within its musical phrase. All dances are designed and timed so that each figure flows seamlessly from one pattern to the next.
7. Recovery: If you lose your place and all else fails, wait for the inevitable partner swing, find your partner, and pick up from there.

8. Graceful Exit: If you must drop out mid-dance (this is rare), please try to hang on till you reach the end of the line. From there, you can usually step out without disrupting the other dancers in the line.

8 Points on Etiquette

1. Be sensitive to the preferences of your fellow dancers. Never apply excessive force, squeeze with an inescapable grip, or push a fellow dancer beyond their comfort level. Not only will this spoil the fun, but it may also risk serious injury.
2. Experienced dancers are encouraged to initiate contact and welcome newcomers.
3. If you and your partner are both newcomers, split up and seek out experienced dancers, especially for the first few dances. You will learn faster and have more fun when you come back together.
4. When the caller is teaching, silence should prevail. Pay attention, take "hands four" promptly, follow the instructions, and be patient while others learn.
5. Smiling, eye contact, and flirtation are part of the fun. However, take care not to read more into a gesture than is intended. Use common sense, discretion, and respect others' personal space.
6. A delicate reminder: Keeping clean and dry can be a challenge in the heat of the dance. As a courtesy to your fellow dancers, consider packing a hand towel, fresh shirts, breath mints, possibly deodorant, and, if you use fragrances, please do so sparingly.
7. Wear comfortable clothes and appropriate clean-soled shoes. If you observe men dancing in skirts, this unusual fashion merely signifies that twirling is simply more fun in a skirt, nothing more.
8. Make it a practice to thank guests for coming, instructors for teaching, program leaders for leading, bands for playing, and everyone who made your evening a pleasant one.

Contra Calling Recovery

We've all been there, and will be there again. As Chinua Achebe wrote (from Yeats' "The Second Coming"), "things fall apart". It may not have been your fault, but it's up to you to pull things together again. A deft call in time saves nine.

Train your dancers to recover

Dancers, heal thy selves.

Don't sweat it, it happens to everyone and you're in a friendly and helpful community.

Look other dancers in the eyes with your hands available and get cues from them. Usually someone will guide you to where you need to go.

When all else fails, wait for the inevitable partner swing, find your partner, and pick up from there.

Other ways ...

How a dance breaks down

The dancers haven't all learned the dance yet and we stop calling too early.

The caller skips a call (or calls the wrong move), which the dancers follow, and then you have to get them back.

The caller gets off time (either too fast or too slow) so the dance is no longer in the intended phrase of music.

The caller uses language for calls during the dance that were not introduced in the lesson or walk-through, may result in blank stares.

The caller starts the walk-through before hands four has made it to the bottom of all sets.

The band skips a phrase of music.

The A and B parts of the dance are similar and the dancers do the A part during the B (or vice-a-versa). For example, A: P B&S, Cir 3/4, N DSD, B: N B&S, L Ch, L Ch. The "X B&S" start both phrases -- do I circle or chain next?

End effects are strange and cause chaos for the couples at the ends of the line.

Beginners collide in the line.

Having a couple mysteriously abandoned by other couples in the line during a diagonal R&L (teach them how to recover from this in the walk-through -- come to the top).

Partner swapping during a shadow dance causes the shadow to not have their anchor and results in confusion.

Other ways ...

How to recover

Keep calling, and complete the call by using the word "until" to clarify where people end each move (who does what for how long, until X).

Try to identify where the confusion is and try giving calls that address the specific dancer concerns that also apply to everyone. For example, as above, keep calling using the "until" parts of the call. Try to avoid contrary words applying only to the troubled dancers, such as "no, cross the set, no, use your other hand, etc."

Know your dance, and make note of good reset moments:

Partner (or Nbr) Bal & Sw (which side: on Gent's side? Lady's side? -- maybe 1s and 2s get swapped, no big deal.).

LLFB (who's on what side? facing partner, next to partner?).

Progression to new neighbors (Saying "on to new neighbors" is probably better language than "progress").

Other ways ...

Fixing it on the Fly

So you think the dance works, you walk it through and people didn't progress or they swung their partners twice or something worse happened. Maybe you get everyone back to original starting places and it still doesn't work with a second walk-through. Dancers are patient (for the moment) and it's up to you to make a decision. Some dancers may be (un)helpfully making suggestions for how to fix it. Can you fix the dance quickly rather than starting on another dance?

Common errors in card transcriptions:

Right, Left

Gents, Ladies

Partner, Neighbor

Waves across hall, along the hall (along side lines or in one center line)

Turn alone, as couples

Improper, Becket, Proper, Indecent

Contra lines, Scatter Mixer, Circle, Mescolanza (4-facing-4), Sicilian Circle, Triplet, Triple minor

Dropped, added a move

(16) Bal&Sw became (8) Swing

Swapped the order of two calls

Fractions 3/4, 1X, 1-1/2

Below is a small collection of dances which I've broken. Don't read them through to see what might be wrong or fix them before you call them. Assume each one works, walk it through with dancers, and see if you can fix it on the fly.

FIOTF #1
Improper

Neighbors balance and swing
Down the hall four line
Turn alone and come back up
Circle left 3/4
Partners swing
Ladies chain
Left-hand star

FIOTF #2
Improper

Balance R&L and slide to the right (as in Rory O'More)
Balance L&R and slide to the Left
Neighbor balance and swing
Ladies do-si-do 1X
Partner swing
Long lines, forward and back
Circle Left 1X and pass through to new wavy line

FIOTF #3
Becket

Long lines, forward and back
Neighbor swing
Circle Left 1X
Star Left - Hands across
Ladies drop out, Gents continue allemande left 1-1/2
Partner swing
Promenade across the set
Ladies Do-si-do

FIOTF #4
Improper

Ladies walk forward to long wave in center
balance the wave
Ladies back out while Gents walk forward to long wave
balance the wave
Gents allemande right 1/2
neighbor balance and swing
Gents allemande right 1-1/2
partner swing
Right and left through 1/2
Ladies's chain

FIOTF #5
Improper

Neighbor gypsy and swing
Ladies's chain
1/2 hey, Ladies passing right shoulders in center
Partner swing
Circle Left 1X
Balance the ring
California Twirl

FIOTF #6
Becket

Circle Right
All go into the center and back
Circle Left
Neighbor allemande Left 1/2
Partner allemande Left 1/2
Neighbor Do-si-do
Neighbor swing
Promenade around the ring, usual counterclockwise direction

FIOTF #7
Contra

Top two couples make a right hand star
The other way back with a left hand star
First couple go down the center, cross over
Come up the outside to the top place
First couple face down, the others face up, dip and dive all
(center couple arches, couple 1 dips first, turn as couple at ends)
First couple cast down the outside and swing at the foot of the set

FIOTF #8
Improper

Neighbor Right pull-by, Next Neighbor Allemande Left
Pull past org Neighbor by right, Prev Neighbor
Allemande Right
Neighbor balance and swing
Gents allemande right 1-1/2 into a wavy line, balance
Promenade across the Set
Circle Left 3/4, pass through along set

FIOTF #9

Improper

Circle L 3 places and pass R up and down the set

(progression)

Mad robin with next neighbor

1/2 pousette with partner (gents pull ladies) so that ladies are back to back

Gypsy L 1/2 with partner so that ladies are on the right and couples are facing in

Long lines up and back, gents roll away partner to the left

Ladies send the gents into the middle to start full L-shoulder hey for four

Gypsy L with partner, swing

FIOTF #10

Contra

Long lines, forward and back

Corner swing

(Face the center in a square formation)

Ladies right hand star 1X

Corner Allemande Left 1X

Grand right and left

Partner balance and swing

FIOTF #11

Becket

Circle Left 1X

Neighbor allemande Left 1X

Gents pull across by Right

Hey, partners passing left shoulders to start

Neighbor balance and swing

Circle Left 1-1/4 (to original places)

"Zig left": move left with partner out of set

"Zag right": move right with partner past neighbors (to meet next couple)

FIOTF #12

Proper

Star Left

Neighbor swing

Long lines, forward and back

Ladies Gypsy

Partner balance and swing

Star Left

Corrections to return to the original dances (other solutions are possible):

FIOTF #1

Nice Combination
by Gene Hubert

A2 -----

(2,8) Turn as couples and come back up

FIOTF #2

Black Bird in the Night
by Don Flaherty

B1 -----

(8) Ladies do-si-do 1-1/2

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4 and pass through to new wavy line

FIOTF #3

Summer Fever
by Rich McGrath

Improper

B1 -----

(8) Ladies drop out, Gents continue allemande left 1-1/4

(8) Partner swing

B2 -----

(8) Ladies's chain

FIOTF #4

Trip to Lambertville
by Steve Zakon-Anderson

Contra/Improper/Easy

A2 -----

(4) Gents allemande left 1/2

B1 -----

(8) Gents allemande left 1-1/2

FIOTF #5

Hocus Pocus

by Lisa Greenleaf

A2 -----

(8) Ladies's chain

(8) 1/2 hey, Ladies passing right shoulders in center

B1 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

B2 -----

(8) Circle Left 3/4 (1s face up)

FIOTF #6

Cabot School Mixer
by Ted Sannella

Circle Mixer

A2 -----

(4) Neighbor allemande Right 1/2

FIOTF #7

Ted's Triplet #3

by Ted Sannella

Triplet

FIOTF #8

Contra-cordians
by Scott Higgs

A1 -----

(8) Pull past org Neighbor by right, Prev Neighbor Allemande Left

B1 -----

(8) Gents allemande left 1-1/2 into a wavy line, balance

(8) Partner swing

FIOTF #9

In your eyes

by Heather Carmichael

Becket-CW

B2 -----

(16) Gypsy R with partner, swing

FIOTF #10

Dance All Night

by Rick Mohr

Contra/Four Facing Four/Easy-Int

A2 -----

(8) Corner Allemande Left 1-1/4 (and face partner)

B1 -----

(8) Partner Do-si-do

FIOTF #11

Rockin' Robin
by Rick Mohr

Improper

A1 -----

(8) Circle Right 1X

A2 -----

(16) Hey, partners passing left shoulders to start, then ladies by right in center

B1 -----

(16) Partner balance and swing

FIOTF #12

Star Struck

by Nick Boulet

Improper

A1 -----

(8) Star Right

A2 -----

(8) Ladies Gypsy 1-1/2

B2 -----

(8) Ladies Chain

Communicating with the Band

Good communication with the band translates to a better experience for all. The feelings on the stage can be felt on the floor -- make them positive. Help the band have a good experience by giving them an opportunity to play their sets at their best, and help them be recognized and appreciated by the dancers.

As a caller, you'll want to have the skills to work with a variety of contra dance bands:

- as musicians, self-taught to professionally trained, amateur to experienced, new to experienced playing for contra dances;
- as dancers, inexperienced or experienced in contra dance;
- as bands, prefer to ignore the dance or to completely connect with the dance;
- with caller, prefer no input except when to begin and end a dance to preferring input on tune, tune style, and tempo; and
- as genre, preference for a single genre (Old Time, New England, Celtic, etc.) to omni-genre.

Tune notes

A regular (square) tune has an "A" and "B" phrase, each phrase is 8 measures long (16 beats) and repeated: AABB.

There are three forms of "crooked tunes":

- Three-part tunes (AA, BB, CC), such as Rag Time Annie, often work well for squares or 48-measure contra dances (rare).
- Short-phrase tunes where one of the phrases doesn't have 8 measures, such as Celtic tunes with a 4-measure phrase, typically aren't suitable for contras or squares. Some have special choreographed dances.
- Drop/add beat tunes contain a measure with an extra beat or missing a beat. For example a tune in 4/4 might have a measure of 5/4 time. Old Time tunes like this are a joy to listen to and play, but if played for a contra be sure to have the paramedics standing by.

Before the gig

Get to know the band a little by phone or email (or over a beer).

Caller wants to know

- Does the band have particular music sets they like to play at certain times, such as at the end of the night?
- What styles of music do they enjoy playing the most?
 - Old time?
 - Jigs? Smooth jigs? Smooth minor jigs? Bouncy Jigs? Slip jigs (these are special, not for typical contra)?
 - Northern or Southern style?
 - Fast "crooked tunes" (possibly for a square that doesn't need square phrasing)?
 - Jig-to-reel sets (to increase energy throughout dance)?
- Is there a particular set of music the band wants to play? Can I match a dance to that?
- What style of music does the band play exclusively, or not at all?

The answers to these questions will affect how you program the evening.

Band wants to know

- Some bands like to see a program a week or two before the dance with a recommended type/feel for each. (You may not follow your program, but you can still follow your type/feel/flow of the plan.)
- Are there any dances that aren't contras in the program?
 - If squares, would a 3-part or crooked tune work? Tempo typical or a little faster?

- How about mixers, can they go at a faster tempo? Or, will they be shorter dances?
- How many waltzes in the evening, and where in the program?
- Any special dances that have a specific tune (such as Chorus Jig or Levi Jackson Rag)?
 - If the band can accept special tune requests, make it easy for them by either providing the sheet music, a YouTube video link of the tune, or other source to get them started.
- If the caller indicates "X times more" and the band is building to a special ending, can the band communicate they want "X+2 more"? And how?

Visit the Band's rehearsal

Ask the band to sit in on their rehearsal before the dance. You'll learn their tune repertoire, give you a chance to choose dances that complement their tunes, and show you care about your working relationship with them (and you'll build trust that can carry you through tense moments). Callers in NM have found this provides a safe environment to learn about music, tempos, communication, etc.

Other comments

Maybe you have a special request. For example, maybe save their "best set" for the last dance before the break, so those who leave at the break walk away thinking "good music, good dance!"

Culture comment: Generally, an Old Time band won't play a polka, and band with no strings won't play Old Time tunes.

At the gig, setting up

Introduce yourself and write down the names of each band member and what they play. Then you can introduce/acknowledge them each by name during the evening (maybe a few times).

Ask the band how they like the character of the dance to be described, what language and adjectives connect with them? Some adjectives such as "bubbly" won't be as informative as others.

- Type: Jig, Reel, Rag, Hornpipe.
- Style: Old-Time, Quebecois, New England, Irish.
- Rhythmic/feeling adjectives: marchy, well-phrased, slinky, bouncy, smooth, driving, swingy, bluesy, energetic, rowdy, flowing, flirtatious, formal.

A no-walk-through dance requires as much advance notice as possible. The band often uses the walk-through to choose a set of tunes, communicate this through the entire band, and verify that everyone is tuned and ready to play. So the band may want to pick the tunes earlier in the evening so they're ready to go once the dancers are lined up.

Signals

Who is your main point of contact in the band? Fiddle, guitar, piano, mandolin, flute, bass, accordion, hammer dulcimer, shakers, or human metronome? You need to know whom to signal to end the dance, to change tempo, and indicate other information. It's possible your contact will be "every individual in the band".

Set your hand signals ahead of time. It's hard to talk and play music at the same time.

Keep your hand signal steady and readable to the contact person, do not wave your hand around, and make eye contact to indicate the message was received. Try to communicate to other members also, if possible. If necessary, walk in front of the band to deliver the signal, making eye contact with each member. Cacophony can ensue if the fiddle gets the signal to slow down but the guitar player doesn't.

Hand signals break down if you're sloppy by not holding the signal long enough, having bad hand orientation (three fingers look like one when turned sideways), waving your hand vigorously, bad timing. If there's confusion, avoid talking with the band and correct it with a clear signal at an appropriate time.

Common important signals:

- Number of cycles to go out: 3, 2, 1, 0 -- typically that number of fingers indicated in the beginning of the B2 of the music.
 - Contra math to end with the top couple in on the last time through: with 1 couple out at the top (an odd number), there are an odd number of times to go (3 or 1); if 0 couples out (an even number), then an even number of times to go (2).
- Tempo -- quicker is typically a palm up gesturing upward, and slower is a palm down gesturing downward. Give an OK and a big smile when they've adjusted for you.
- End at the end of this phrase -- a closed fist held up may serve in the case of calling a "hash square" when the dance ends when the caller is done, rather than at the end of the tune.
- Stop right now! -- usually a "slice across your neck" gesture when the floor is seriously broken.
- When things are good, an OK symbol is better than a thumbs-up, which may look like you want to speed up.
- Halfway through (for tune switches) -- typically a "hang loose" gesture with pinky and thumb out and rotating wrist a few times. Usually the band switches tunes in a medley themselves, but this can be helpful in some occasions, but only if discussed beforehand.

Dancing

Before each dance

It is not easy for the band to prepare for the next set while talking to the caller. Keep your conversation to a minimum and do it before you start teaching the next dance.

It's the caller's responsibility to decide how the dance should be. Many dances work well either with smooth, flowing reels or jigs, or bouncy jigs, or a march, and the mood of the dance should be something the caller selects to fit in with the evening's program. However, the bounciest jig ever played may not match with a dance with a hey into a gypsy meltdown.

Don't pick badly-phrased dances. The music is: A1 (16 beats), A2 (16 beats), B1 (16 beats), and B2 (16 beats), repeat. A swing should end at the end of a 16-beat phrase (not after the first 8 beats of a phrase), a full hey should be contained in a 16-beat phrase (not split between two), and a matched pair of 8-beat figures (two Petronella turns, or chain over and back) are better in a 16-beat phrase than split between two. All of this is especially true for the swing -- dancers want to end at the end of a phrase, and the band may be confused by seeing a swing end in the middle of a phrase -- warn the band of this to avoid confusion.

Matching tunes to a dance

Most bands want to match a tune set to a dance.

Some will accept specific requests. Some like to see your dance card. Some watch your walk-through. Some want your description of the dance or mood. Some adjust the tune as it is being danced. You must work with the band at their level, so be ready.

- Some won't care to match the tune set to the dance, in which case you may ask them what they have in mind.

- Most bands will want to know some basic features, such as where the "floor percussion" is -- balances, long lines, down the hall. For example, to match the bouncy sections of a tune to the dance's balances: "Balance at the top of A1 and A2, smooth in the B."
- When bands ask to see the dance card before the dance -- let them! It means they're very interested and can interpret the card. You may also briefly point out the main features to help orient them quickly.
- Some bands are so good that, whether or not the caller gives good information, the musicians can watch the walk-through and program from that. Furthermore, the musicians who watch the dancers can set the feeling throughout a dance appropriate for how the dancers are dancing, changing the tempo and energy to match or drive the dancers.

If you know a dance is busy (or not busy), you might want to suggest a slightly slower (or faster) pace.

If the band doesn't have a member with the insight to make use of dance information, as long as the band plays well phrased tunes, all should be fine.

It's always going to be a better experience for the dancers if the band plays music that they're good at playing.

The band programs the evening just as the caller does. For example, they may start out easy and straightforward, kick up the energy, change the tempo, up the energy again, change the tempo again, and end with a big finish.

The band usually knows what they want to play next, or have it narrowed down to two or three sets. If the walk-through goes well, they may decide to play their first choice. If not, a more laid-back set may be helpful for the dancers.

Many callers often include tune suggestions on their dance card and will inform the band that "This dance works well with the following tunes." One of the most flattering experiences a dance band can have is when the caller asks "That tune worked great for this dance, what was it?" then adds it to her/his dance card.

Ask the band how many tunes are in their set. Then you can listen for when they've switched to their last tune before signaling to go out, or you can encourage them to switch if they're lingering on a tune.

Evaluate the length of the dance sets and determine roughly how many times through you'll want the band to play, then tell them. For example, a mid-evening full line can go 11-15 times, while an end-of-night short set may go 7-9 times.

During each dance

Tempo is hugely important, and a frequent problem. Small adjustments can make all the difference. If dancers are always arriving late to the next move, slow down a little and watch the dancers. If dancers are arriving early and waiting, speed up a little and watch the dancers. Commonly, Old Time bands play too fast and many bands play waltzes too slow. It's the caller's job to fix this.

Signal timing to end the dance or switch a tune is best at the top of B2 (but ask the band when they prefer).

For tune switching (rare), B2 gives 16 beats to prepare. The top of B1 gives more time, but it is easier for the band to make a mistake (possibly by switching early).

Be consistent in your signal timing to the band so the band learns when to look for your signal. Even better, agree beforehand when signals will be given and what vocabulary of signals you'll use.

Do not signal in A1 or A2. A "2" at this point can mean "2, including this cycle" if your signal was too late or "2, after this cycle" if your signal is too early. It's a distraction for the band to sort out what you mean. Withdraw your signal (shake it off) and wait until the B2 and make an extra clear signal.

Occasionally even the best bands will get mixed up and not play two A or B parts. The caller should be aware of how the tune fits the dance and if this happens let the band know by stating "Play A-1 NOW!" as the start of the set comes up (tapping your head can indicate "top of the tune").

At the same time, all members of the band should watch the dance and remember how it starts (such as, "all join hands & circle left") so that they too can recognize when they're off and adjust accordingly.

After each dance

"Thank your partner, thank the band. Find a new partner for a contra/square/mixer/waltz/triplet/etc."

Model good behavior by clapping with your attention on the band.

Tell the dancers what the next dance is immediately at the end of the previous dance. Finding out that a dance is a mixer after they've scored their dream partner is a drag.

At the end of the evening

Thank the band. Tell them the things that really worked well, remind them of the great moments. It doesn't hurt to buy them a beer and green chili fries after the gig.

Rolling Starts

A rolling start is a seamless transition from walk-through into the dance where the band starts playing music during the walk-through. These are a wonderful treat when done well. It requires clear communication with the band, a dance that's not overly complicated to teach, and a band that can vamp and have their attention on the caller and dancers for the signal in B2 of the walk-through to punch it into A1. It is a memorable and special technique, consider using once or twice during an evening so as not to overdo it.

Basic steps and keys to success:

1. Before the dance, with the band plan the
 - a. type of start,
 - b. signals you'll use,
 - c. timing into the dance, and
 - d. what you'll do if things fall apart.
2. Line the dancers up, hands four from the top, get into formation (1s cross, becket, etc.).
3. Let the band start vamping, connect with the established groove.
4. Focus on the dancers and teach with the phrase, extending some phrases as necessary to teach a little and for the dancers to be in formation for the next call.
5. In the top of B2, make eye contact with the band.
6. In the bottom of B2, signal the band to transition into A1.
7. Contra bliss.

Many bands may not know this is an option and some will be eager to work with you to learn how to make it happen. On the other hand, some musicians dislike rolling starts.

Vamping

A **vamp** is a harmonically sparse repeating musical figure, such as jazz vamps at the beginning of *Take Five* by Dave Brubeck or *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostinato#Vamp>). For example, a two-bar vamp using chords I to IV can work well, ending with two measures of potatoes in the last four beats of B4: V---, A1: I.

This repeated 8-count chord progression gives the caller a phrase to call to, with the flexibility to slow down, make adjustments on the floor, then get back on the phrase.

The band can vamp with everyone, one or two musicians, a pair of feet, or even a lone hand drum.

From vamping to dancing

Preplan a rolling start by defining with the band the type of rolling start you'll all go for.

- A **hard start** is the firm potatoes at the bottom of B2 "5, 6, 7, 8", then coming in with the tune in A1.
- A **seamless transition** is where the tune is noodled during the vamp and goes smoothly into A1 without potatoes. The dancers may not even know where the walk-through ended and where the dance begins.

A **spontaneous** rolling start from a band may be a welcome (or unwelcome) surprise to a caller. Some bands love to do this. If you have lots of teaching to do, you're welcome to stop the band or tell them (off mic) that it will be a long teach and you may need them to be *pianissimo* (very quiet) during periods of explanation requiring great clarity. As the caller, you're in charge and can feel comfortable making these requests. If you needed to have the band stop, try to find a way for them to ramp back in at the end of the walk-through to recreate that transitional moment into the dance.

If the spontaneous rolling start is something you can work with, go for it! Make it clear with the band with your free hand to keep going. Try to modify your teaching and voice to fit the phrasing. Watch the dancers, listen to the music, evaluate the dance you're teaching, consider the advantages of continuing. You can always extend a dance phrase if you need a little more time, or cut off the band if necessary.

Signaling the band

Agree ahead of time what the signal will be for potatoes and to start A1. I prefer making eye contact with everyone at the top of B2 (walking in front of the band, if helpful), then at the bottom of B2 counting with my fingers "1, 2, 3, 4", then the band comes in with potatoes during "5, 6, 7, 8". This gives the band plenty of notice for when A1 is coming.

Other signals work well, too, such as patting the top of your head to indicate you're coming up to the top of the dance.

Some bands keenly watch the dancers. In this case, consider telling them what the calls are in B2 and A1 so they know what to look for during the transition.

Expect poor results if you haven't worked out the communication with the band.

Choosing the right dance

Some dances are not suitable for a rolling start. If a dance is easy enough to be a **no-walk-through**, then do it as a no-walk-through. If a dance is complicated enough to benefit from two careful walk-throughs, especially with a demo, then you don't want the band stealing any attention.

For your first rolling start, consider a dance that ends with a B2 (16) balance and swing, then a simple "zero" move (that begins and ends in the same place) A1, such as long lines forward and back. That gives you the long swing to signal the band in the B2 and a recovery move in the A1. An example is Barb Kirchner's *Sautee Swing*. Becky Hill's *Square Affair* is another good choice. Dances ending with an extendable move, such as a swing, can help you synchronize with the band by adding an extra few beats.

Also, consider a dance with no more than two teaching points, such as a diagonal move, gents-drop-out star, or ricochet hey. If you can teach using 4, 8, or 12 beats, then instruct the dancers to move, doing this a few times during the vamping works fine.

Ideally, in B2 you want to be in sync with the phrasing of the vamping at dance tempo to transition smoothly. Provide hand signals to speed up going into the potatoes, if necessary.

Some dances have unusual starting positions, such as *Chuck the Budgie* by Rick Mohr. These are good candidate dances since flowing into the start of the dance avoids the disorientating procedure of going back to improper formation (for example) which is different from where the dancers actually are at the end of B2.

An advantage to the rolling start is the ease of doing a second walk-through that feels more like dancing than teaching. On the first time through, you can use extra phrases to describe the next move, while the second time you can try to keep the teaching with the phrasing.

Recovering from trouble, resynchronizing with the band

As always, handle the situation with poise, grace, humor, and take responsibility regardless of the cause of the trouble. If it was your fault, people will appreciate your honesty. If it wasn't, those who notice will appreciate you even more.

The most common trouble is when the band and dancers aren't together at the top of A1. Common causes include a poorly communicated signal to the band so that they start earlier or later than you expect, or either you, the band, or the dancers weren't ready to continue flowing into A1. Everyone needs to be ready and alert for dance action.

Fixing a rolling start is the same as fixing any other timing error during a dance, except with some additional flexibility because you're still technically doing a walk-through.

Easiest: stop the band, reset the dancers, ask the band for potatoes, and start like a standard dance. While it may be a little disappointing, it's better to get it right then have the dancers struggle, get frustrated, and break down. Apologize (to the dancers and the band), smile, and shake it off.

Musicians who watch the dancers may correct timing issues before you even notice!

Callers can make on-the-fly adjustments to resync the dancers to the music:

- Hard reset: Tell the band where A1 needs to be, you can tap your head when coming up on A1 and say loudly to the band "A1 NOW".
- Need 16 more beats: Ask the band to play an additional B part.
- Need 8 more beats: Tell the dancers to swing an extra eight beats.
- Cut 8 beats: Drop a "zero" call, such as removing a long lines forward and back one time through.