

68th National Square Dance Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, June 2019

Education Panel: Putting Contra in Square Dance

Compiled by Dottie Welch, from Nova Scotia, email: dwelch@eastlink.ca
Secretary of CONTRALAB, Editor of Community Dance Journal for CALLERLAB
Resource Websites: <http://www.dances.callerlab.org>, <http://www.teaching.callerlab.org>
Our Home Page including my contras: www.dwelch.chebucto.biz

Monthly Contra or Community Dances open to the general public

It is generally recognized that the entry path into a Modern Square Dance club requires a significant time commitment.

One way to entice new dancers into our world is to offer monthly (or bi-weekly) community dances that include contras, and perhaps other dance forms closely related to square dancing. This mix of dance forms allows the caller to provide significant variety without using a large number of different calls and thus welcome new dancers at every event.

This may not produce an immediate increase in a nearby modern square dance class, but it does raise awareness about our world and is a gentle way to involve new dancers.

It also offers a place for new class dancers to immediately be part of regular dance events.

Enhancing timing, styling and music awareness

Properly chosen and prompted contras encourage the dancers to move with the music rather than hesitating too long or rushing through the calls.

Contras emphasize dancing for the primal urge and joy of synchronized activity within a community. They have a long history going back to English longways dances from 1650.

Here is wind-in-the-face action that is easily achieved because of the smooth and repetitive sequences, yet there is variety because each repetition involves new dancers and progression along the contra line.

Dealing with awkward numbers of participants

What happens at your square dance club when there are only 3, 7 or 10 couples of eager dancers present? Does your caller have some alternatives to groups of 8 such as circle dances or mixers, line dances, hexagons, or contras?

If there is a need to teach square dance calls, but the numbers are awkward for making squares, then contras are the perfect alternative. Many contras have been written to use basic or mainstream square dance calls. See the attached sample dances.

What happens when there is one dancer without a partner? Does your caller use a wireless head set and dance with the spare dancer?

Reinforcing certain square dance moves in a fun way

There are two simple options for setting up contra lines that allow the use of many two-couple square dance calls. In each case, turn the drill patten into a contra dance by using a sequence designed to be danced in 64 beats or steps. See the attached sample dances.

- 1) Use couples facing couples contra lines (Beckets). After some two-couple dancing within each pair of facing couples call "Slant Left do a Right and Left Thru, Straight Across with a new two do a Right and Left Thru" or an equivalent. This moves each couple in a clockwise direction along the lines and around the end.
- 2) Use a long Eight Chain Thru formation. After some two-couple dancing, call "Pass Thru and Trade By" or an equivalent to move each couple up or down the line to dance with a new pair.

Using Sicilian Circles as a teaching tool or as “something different”

If you have enough dancers and space (ideally at least 10 couples, although it will work with as few as 6 couples), make Sicilian Circles (pairs of couples facing couples like spokes of a wheel) and use properly timed two-couple choreography ending with a Pass Thru or equivalent. See the attached sample dances.

This can be used in a class environment to reinforce calls danced by two facing couples, particularly those timed as eight beats. It can also be used during a dance party as something different that provides a mixer feel without separating partners. It is an excellent option for situations where some dancers need the security of a known and trusted partner.

How callers (or dancers) can learn to prompt contras

The two primary keys in learning to prompt contras are first to listen for the musical phrase and learn when to pre-cue, and second to understand how one pair of dancing partners progresses to a new pair after each 64-beat sequence. (In the case of a double progression the pairs change every 32 beats.) Some information for beginner prompters is attached.

How CONTRALAB can help

CONTRALAB is the organization in the modern square dance world designed to promote contra dancing and assist aspiring contra prompters. These goals are addressed on the website <<http://www.contralab.net>> and in publications.

Contra Dances for Awkward Numbers

The following dance can be used for proper lines of three to seven couples. Proper lines have all ladies in the line on the caller's left and all gents in the line on the caller's right, and partners facing each other. To set up proper lines have dancers Promenade toward the front of the hall to line up, then partners turn to face each other. If you often need a dance for three couples, search for “Triplets” on the internet. There are several on my website at <http://users.eastlink.ca/~dwelch/index.html>

CHETICAMP LONG POTATO VARIATION:

From a traditional Nova Scotian dance
Formation: Proper contra lines
Music: Lively, well-phrased, 64-beat music
(A Long Potato is a long skinny circle made by joining hands along each line and around the end.)

- - - -; Long Potato Circle Left;
- - - -; - - (keep going);
- - - -; Long Potato Circle Right;
- - - -; - - (back to face partner);

- - - -; - - Turn partner left arm;
- - - -; - - Turn partner right arm;
- - - -; - - Forward and Back;
- - - -; Top couple sashay or strut to foot;

BARLEY AND OATS

By Ken Kern
Formation: Proper contra lines
Music: Lively, well-phrased, 64-beat music
(with 6 or 7 couples cut the sashay down and back to four steps each way)

- - - -; Everybody Forward and Back;
- - - -; Gents Arch, Ladies Duck Thru;
(right side to partner and all move forward);
- - - -; U-Turn Back, Forward and Back;
- - - -; Ladies Arch, Gents Duck Thru;

- - U-Turn Back; Top Couple Sashay down;
- - - -; - - Sashay back and Separate;
- - - -; All Promenade Single File to Foot;
Leaders make 2-hand Arch, Others Duck Thru and Promenade up with new leaders;;

Couples Facing Couples Contras (Beckets)

<p>SLIDE RIGHT CONTRA #1 By Dottie Welch, December 2004 Formation: Contra Lines of Couples Facing Couples, spare couple at bottom ok Music: "Mandolin Contra" on Lloyd Shaw 332 Clap Sequence: knees 2, hands 2, opposite 3</p> <p>---; -- Ladies Dosado; (or Opposites Clap) ---; -- Gents Dosado; (or Partners Clap) ---; Each 4 Star Right; ---; Each 4 Star Left;</p> <p>---; -- Circle Left; ---; -- Circle Right; ---; Let Go, Slide Right to New Spot; (move all the way to next couple's spot) - Face new two; Long Lines Forward & Back;</p>	<p>BECKET REEL VARIATION By Dottie Welch, 2003 (variation on original "Becket Reel" by Herbie Gaudreau) Formation: Contra lines of Couples Facing Couples, spare couple at end of right line. Music: "Slaunch to Donegal", Windsor 4183</p> <p>---; -- Allemande Left your Corner; ---; -- Swing your own; ---; Long Lines Forward and Back; ---; -- Ladies Dosado; (alternate w. Gents)</p> <p>---; Slant Left go Right and Left Thru; ---; Straight Across, Right and Left Thru; ---; Same four Make a Left-Hand Star; ---; - Star Right to same corner;</p>
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Contras setup in a Long Eight Chain Thru are Alternate Duples

What square dancers might think of as a Long Eight Chain Thru formation is equivalent to an Alternate Duple contra line that begins facing up and down. One way to create this formation is to start from squares and call "Sides Lead Right". Then line the squares up to make the long Eight Chain Thru formation.

When contra dancers use this formation they end the sequence with something equivalent to a "Pass Thru". That may leave a couple facing out at the head and/or at the foot. Those couples should Partner Trade and wait "in neutral" until the next sequence when another couple will be facing them again. This gives the dancers a chance to catch their breath.

<p>JEFFERSON'S REEL By Dud Briggs Formation: Long Eight Chain Thru Music: Reels or Jigs with a marching feel</p> <p>---; (New four) Circle Left; ---; -- Circle Right; ---; -- Star Right; ---; -- Star Left;</p> <p>Those facing down go down outside own line; -- (6 steps); U-turn Back, come back up; Into the middle; Line of four go down 6 steps; ---; Back up 4 steps; Centers arch, ends duck; (new 4 Circle Left); (Those coming back up return to their starting spot then step into the middle between those they were facing who also turn to face down.)</p>	<p>OZARK SATURDAY NIGHT By Don Armstrong Formation: Alternate Duple (face up or down) Music: "Callison Hall Jig", Lloyd Shaw 320</p> <p>---; Neighbor Balance and Box the Gnat; ---; -- Neighbors Swing; ---; -- Circle Left; ---; -- Star Left;</p> <p>- Neighbors Promenade up or down in Twos; ---; Wheel Around and come back; ---; Bend the Line, Right and Left Thru; ---; -- Half Square Thru; To new neighbor; (Balance & Box the Gnat); (Neighbor is the contra term for Corner. Swing ends with the lady on the right. As the Star Left ends, gent moves up inside to make a normal couple for the Promenade.)</p>
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Writing and Using Sicilian Circles for Square Dance Classes

(From CALLERLAB 2012 and CONTRALAB 2013 presentations by Dottie Welch)

Set up Sicilian Circles by directing the dancers to make a big circle of normal couples facing in Promenade direction. Then designate one couple to turn as a couple to face the couple behind. Ask every other couple to do the same. Demonstrate how Pass Thru will move couples forward in their current facing direction to a new couple.

Teaching Right and Left Thru

Teaching Flutterwheels

<p>After Setting up the Sicilian Circles and explaining the progression, teach the action of Right and Left Thru. Then use one or more of the following kind of sequences. These increase in difficulty.</p>	<p>After Setting up the Sicilian Circles and explaining the progression, teach the action of Flutterwheel and Reverse Flutterwheel. Then use one or more of the following kind of sequences. These increase in difficulty.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, -- Forward and Back ----, -- Right & Left Thru ----, -- Forward and Back ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Gents Dosado ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, -- Two Ladies Chain ----, Ladies Lead Flutterwheel ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, -- Right and Left Back ----, (Left hands in) Star Left ----, -- Star Right ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Gents Dosado ----, -- Ladies Dosado -- Gents Lead with left Reverse Flutterwheel ----, -- Two Ladies Chain ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Two Ladies Chain ----, -- Chain Back ----, (all go) Right and Left Thru ----, -- Right and Left Back ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Ladies Dosado ----, -- Gents Dosado ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, Ladies Lead Flutterwheel ----, Gents Lead Reverse Flutterwheel ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, -- Two Ladies Chain ----, -- Right and Left Back ----, -- Ladies Chain Back ----, -- Opposite Dosado ----, -- Pass Thru, Move On and Bow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----, -- Circle Left ----, -- Circle Right ----, -- Star Right ----, -- Star Left ----, -- Right and Left Thru ----, Ladies Lead Flutterwheel ----, Gents Lead Reverse the Flutter ----, -- Veer Right and Veer Left, Move on

Learning to Prompt Contras

Contra Music:

Standard contra music has the same structure as a modern singing call. Usually it consists of a tune that is 64 counts. Tunes usually have two distinct parts called A and B. Each part is 16 counts. Part A is played twice and then Part B is played twice so the sequence is AABB to make the full tune. One count is the time a dancer uses to take one step. For the musician this “count” may actually be several notes (often two or four for a Reel and three for a Jig). Contra dances repeat after 64 counts of music.

Contra Dance Action Listings:

Contras are written in several ways. Here are the two most commonly used systems. The version on the left describes the action of the dancers during the indicated section of the music, and the number of counts. The version on the right shows the prompter when to give the calls so that the dancers have time to hear the call and react before they must begin the action. As the dancers learn the sequence, the prompter may shorten the cues.

<p>GEORGE & AMBER'S WEDDING By Dottie Welch, September 2010 Formation: Long Eight Chain Thru or Sicilian Circle</p> <p>A1: (8) Join both hands; begin with outside feet, Heel, Toe, Side, Close, Side, out and in. (8) Repeat the Heel and Toe out and in.</p> <p>A2: (8) Same dancers Dosado. (8) Each four Circle Left.</p> <p>B1: (8) Same four Circle Right. (8) Partners together Veer Right and then Veer Left moving on to a new pair.</p> <p>B2: (8) Dancers join both hands with new opposite and move up right hip to right hip and walk around each other. (8) Dancers maintain handholds and individually reverse direction to be left hip to left hip to go back the other way.</p>	<p>GEORGE & AMBER'S WEDDING By Dottie Welch, September 2010 Formation: Long Eight Chain Thru or Sicilian Circle (Alternate Duple facing up and down) Music: “Year End Two-Step and Rollstone” on Southerners Plus Two</p> <p>- - - -; - - Heel, Toe, Out, 2, 3; Heel, Toe, In, 2, 3; - - Do it again; - - - -; - Opposite Dosado; - - - -; - - Circle Left;</p> <p>- - - -; - - Circle Right; - - - -; Partners together Veer Right; - - Veer Left; Two-Hand Right-Hip Turn; (New opposites turn with right-hips close) - - - -; Two-Hand Left-Hip Turn;</p>
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Practice Prompting:

In order for contras to be effective in enhancing timing and music awareness, and providing a simple and satisfying wind-in-the-face experience, they must be prompted properly. Therefore the new contra prompter must practice this skill.

- Find a few willing volunteers and a bit of dance space.
- Find some music that has clear 8-count phrasing and distinct part A and part B melodies.
- If possible set the tempo to 116 to 120 beats per minute (slower than for square dancing).
- Listen to the musical introduction until you know when to give the first prompt.
- Initially you may find it helpful to have an assistant who announces the counts in eights.
- Watch the prompter’s version of the cue sheet until the timing becomes instinctive.