

CALLERS WORKSHOP February 15, 2011 6:30 to 7:30 Ken Gall dcp/workshops

You, as caller for an evening, are the MC. You set the tone. Be welcoming and affirming, build confidence, use humor. Assure the dancers that this is not a contest, not dancing with the stars. There is no judging, just here to have a good time with friends. You are in charge, but the musicians, sound person, and dancers all have to work together to have a good time. You need to focus on the dancers, not on your cards, so be prepared.

TEACHING: As caller, it helps to *teach beginners class*. Speak clearly, with efficient use of words. I always mention 8 beats to beginners, 30 second repetition. Point out progression to next couple. Save the swing for near the end (generally with the buzz step) to catch late comers. Maybe teach the hey, if that will be in some of the dances you call that evening. Teach first dance to them first if there is time.

When the program starts, *don't take more than 2 or 3 minutes* to teach after they line up. Generally plan on two walk thrus, and don't waste time going back to place. I have been at contra dances where the caller spent (wasted) 20 minutes teaching a dance, which is a clear indication the caller didn't know how to select a dance appropriate for that particular crowd, and was not very good at teaching. (Northwest Folk Life Festival has 800-1,000 dancers, and only does 1 walk thru, even on difficult dances with dozens of beginners in the crowd!)

MUSIC and the MUSICIANS: The music is 32 bar (64 beat) repetitions, with *four 16 beat phases*. A1, A2, B1, B2. The dancers move to the musical phrases. The caller cues the dancers about 2 beats ahead of the phrase. It takes 30-35 seconds for one repetition, or 110 to 128 beats per minute. Mostly contra music is a reel (4/4) and or a jig (6/8). The 16 beat phrase is generally either 8 and 8 (for instance: "ladies chain, over and back", or "star right, star left") or 4 and 12 (partner, balance and swing), or 4 and 4 and 4 and 4 (balance, petronella; balance, California twirl). **Ask, don't tell:** Will it be a 2 tune medley per dance, with 4 potatoes to start? How and what do you communicate with the band? Signal 2 more times thru (near the end of B2), or? Tune suggestions? Show cards? Tempo? Maybe second tune faster beat, if the dancers have it. Do they have special music for last dance, or for your most exciting dance? Many callers started as musicians, or became musicians so they could call better.

CALLS: Calls should tell dancer the next move before they do it. As caller, *always watch the dancers*, prompt as needed. Ideally call three or four times with music, and stop calling if they get it, or only call a move or two *when the dancers need it*, or to keep them in time with each other. Generally, calls tell dancers **Who**, and then *what (Neighbor balance and swing; Ladies chain; Long lines forward and back)*. Vary the calls—"Long lines" can later become "lines". "Ladies chain" can become "ladies" or "chain", etc. When lining up, encourage experienced people to help beginners, or to ask folks who sat out the last dance, etc. Keep track of time. Look at "anchor" couple. It is best to start your calling career with *simple dances* written by others, rather than trying to call complicated choreography like contra corners, or to write your own dances. Keep track of time: maybe 2 minutes to line up, 2 to 3 minutes to teach, 8-10 minutes of dancing = 15 minutes or less.

BROKEN SIX PENCE by Don Armstrong. George Marshall ([Wild Asparagus](http://www.wildasparagus.com)) uses it teach when to cue.

A1: Neighbor do si do;	Men do si do
A2: Ladies do si do;	Actives swing
B1: Four walk down;	(Turn alone and) walk back up
B2: Bend to a circle and circle left;	Star left (to progress)

Call each move 2 beats before the dancers will do it—on beats 7 and 8 of the preceding musical phrase. Broken Six Pence is too boring to do with many experienced dancers in the crowd, but is great for a group of beginners.

CARDS: I use 3 x 5, on computer: it is legible, can be modified easily, fits in your pocket. Some use 4 x 6, or I phone. I make notes on the card of when I call it, teaching points, etc. It is best not to rely on your cards too much.

YOU THE CALLER: Your first objective should be to learn and call one or two dances. **Never call a dance without thorough preparation. Practice calling** when you are dancing. **Practice with a CD**, at home or in the car. If you don't have a contra type CD, many of the groups that play on Tuesdays have CD's. Look at Youtube: [Simplicity Swing](#) or [Sweet Perfection](#). Figure out the dance, and practice calling to the music. **Practice, and then practice some more!!!! Go to callers workshops and open stages whenever you can.**

GREETINGS IMPROPER*Tony Baroni*

A1 NEIGHBOR BALANCE and SWING

A2 LONG LINES forward and back

LADIES CHAIN across to partner

B1 PARTNER BALANCE and SWING on man's side

B2 LONG LINES forward and back

CIRCLE LEFT three places, PASS THRU

This is a sample card in the format I generally use.

Many callers abbreviate things LLFB, NBS, L for left,

WC for ladies chain, ¾ for three places. I prefer to write things out-- for me, it makes it easier to teach and easier to glance at a card and remember what's next. Most callers don't have "across", or "on man's side" on their cards, but again, it helps me teach. CAPS emphasize what the call will be, small letters help teach.

I always try to give credit to the author of the dance, and may mention other details if I know them. **GREETINGS** is a very simple dance, often called by [Nils Fredland](#) as first dance, and I've started to do that too. If there are many beginners, Nils recommends a circle mixer as the second dance

GREETINGS is the dance which I called at IUPUI which is on the Indycontra website. Trying calling it as the [video plays](#).

FOX GLOVE IMPROPER

Tom Thoreau Foxglove is another good beginner dance which flows well.

A1 NEIGHBOR BALANCE and SWING

A2 LONG LINES forward and back

LADIES CHAIN

B1 LADIES almd RIGHT one time

PARTNER SWING on man's side

B2 CIRCLE LEFT three places

BALANCE CIRCLE, PASS THRU**SIMPLICITY SWING IMPROPER**

Becky Hill

This is one of the most widely called contra dances.

A1 NEIGHBOR BALANCE and SWING

I often call it just before the break or at the end of the evening, sometimes as a no-walk thru. It also works as an emergency

A2 CIRCLE LEFT three places

recovery to follow up a tough dance that the dancers didn't get well, or that made them think too much.

PARTNER SWING

B1 LONG LINES forward and back

LADIES CHAIN

B2 STAR LEFT one time

NEXT NEIGHBOR, DO SI DO

Other easy dances: As you check websites you may find these dances to help you start developing cards.

[Scout House Reel](#)

Ted Senella

[Nice Combination](#)

Gene Hubert

[Jed's Reel](#)

Penn Fix

[Roll in the Hey](#)

Roger Diggle

[Shadrack's Delight](#), [Flirtation Reel](#)

Tony Parkes

[Thanks to the Gene](#)

Tom Hinds

The Big Easy, [Streetboro Reel](#)

Becky Hill

[Small Potatoes](#)

Jim Kitch

Simple Steps, [Reel Easy](#)

Cary Ravitz

[Hume Fogg Reel](#)

Susan Kevra

PROGRAMS and selection of dances: It wasn't always so, but in modern choreography the number two couple is generally as active as the active couple. Virtually all contra dances written in the last two or three decades have a partner swing, and most have a neighbor swing as well. I never intentionally call a dance without a partner swing!

In a two hour program with 10 minutes for announcements, aim for eight dances. If there are more than a couple of beginners, the first 2 or 3 dances should be relatively easy. The more challenging dances can be #4 to #6 or #7. End with a relatively easy, satisfying dance. (A three hour dance with a break will take 11 to 13 dances.)

Plan the program, and vary the dances, mixing distinctive moves, speeds, and moods. I usually do a circle mixer as #2, to help newer ones get comfortable with the dance (as a group activity, rather than solo or couple focus), begin to build body memory of 8 and 16 beat phrasing, and experience different leads (and smiles!). Easy moves to call (because they have 16 beat distinctive anchor moves, and the dancers remember them easily) include "4 walk down, 4 walk back up" or a full ladies chain over and back. A full hey, flowing out of a ladies chain is also a good anchor. I usually call one or two of the 4 down/4 back sequences in an evening, maybe one in each half.

Thank the band at least once during the dance, and another time at the end. Thank the sound person at least once.

COLLECTING DANCES: Dance as much as you can, and when you hear a dance you like, write it down or at least write down the title, and ask the caller about it when the final dance is over. Most (not all) callers are glad to let you copy a card or two, or you can probably find the dance on the internet. There are lots of sites, and far too many dances to learn or to make cards for.

Internet sites include:

www.richgoss.com/dancecards.doc: This is a site with a lot of dances from many different callers, formatted to print on dance cards. Good beginner dances include **BABY ROSE** and **FREDERICK'S CONTRA**. Slightly more challenging are **BECKET REEL**, **CDS REEL**, and **BATJA'S BREAKDOWN**. Relatively easy dances with the hey include **DELPHINIUMS AND DAISIES**, and **FLIRTATION REEL**.

<http://ravitz.us/dance/call.php>. Cary Ravitz is a great dance caller and choreographer from Lexington, Ky. His site includes a lot of advice or perspectives on calling dances. Also look up [Dances by Cary Ravitz](#) on the web for a lot of good dances he has written (although many of them are rather complex). Seth Tepfer (Atlanta, Ga.), who called Gypsy Moon in 2008, has a similar [site](#).

<http://rickmohr.net/> Rick is also a great caller and choreographer. His site has several dozen dances he has written.

www.kentthecaller.com This is a brand new site and includes several dances I have written (some of which are pretty good).

One of the best single sites is the [Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend](#) syllabus—which has great detail about every dance called at a big weekend dance for the last 22 years.

Many callers and the dances they have written can be found on the web. Try Barry Dupen, Susan Moffit, Ron Buchanon, Kathy Anderson, Becky Hill, Sue Rosen, Bob Isaacs, David Smukler, Susan Kevra, Erik Weberg, Eric Hoffman.

The [Country Dance and Song Society](#) has many books you can [order](#), including *Give and Take* by Larry Jennings.

You should have 12 or more cards complete and rehearsed before calling your first full evening. I had organized cards alphabetically til I had about 75 dance cards, but then shifted to filing by distinctive moves and level of difficulty. After three years and about 60 evenings calling, I have about 150 contra cards, and perhaps 30 or 40 squares, circles, and so on. Most of my cards are white, but I keep easy dances on a different color, to be able to pull them quickly when needed. Selecting good dances, and practicing teaching and calling those dances until it comes naturally, is far better than simply writing down every dance you find.

MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS: What is your motivation? A satisfying hobby? To spread the joy of dance? To help perpetuate a centuries old form of dance and music? To help the Indy dance? To become widely known and sought after?

With a little experience, you can earn **tens of dollars** every year! Indianapolis pays \$20 for the caller each week, Bloomington about twice that. Saturday dances in places like Ft. Wayne, Goshen, Lexington often pay \$50. Throw in prep time and travel time, and you probably won't be getting minimum wage. Even nationally known callers generally have real jobs (or spouses with jobs and benefits) and are not dependent on calling income. ***Like most of life, it is better to do things for love, not money!***

I started calling in January, 2008. I did half an hour at two or three Bloomington open stages and once in Indy when someone else was calling. My first full evening was about four months later. Most new callers don't get that much experience that quickly. Callers like Bob Duffy, John Teskey, and David Ernst having been calling 10 years or more. Many "headliners" for weekends have been calling even longer. I've been to about 12 callers workshops in the last four years, generally at dance weekends.

WHAT'S NEXT? Practice! Dance as much as you can, to as many callers as you can, and remember to have fun!

Carole and I will host a **NEW CALLERS SESSION in our living room Sunday March 20, 3:30 to 5:30**, to give anyone who wants to a chance to practice calling to real dancers in a small setting. **Please RSVP**—more than 10 dancers would make it very crowded! (If no musicians come we will do it to CD's.) Light supper afterwards.

OPEN CALLING Tuesday, March 22, 8-10. If there are four callers, you could each call two; if there are more, you may only get to call one dance. I'll help you as much as you want that evening, standing by you on the stage, or whatever. **Bloomington has open calling each month on first Wednesdays.**

If there is enough interest we may schedule open stages every month or two, or do callers nights in our living room from time to time.