

What Was That Step?

A Guide for New Contra Dancers

Definitions

Contra Dance instruction starts with the men lining up on the caller's right and women lining up on the caller's left. Before the walk-through starts, the first two couples take **Hands Four** by holding hands in a circle, then the next two couples and so forth all the way down the lines. The sooner you take hands four, the sooner the dance starts.

The **Head** or **Top** of the set is the end closest to the caller and the band. **Up** is the direction of the Head. **Down** is the away from the Head. **In** or **Inside** is between the two lines of dancers. **Out** or **Outside** is beyond the two lines. **Across** is from one side of the set to the other.

The **Actives** are the odd numbered couples at the start of the dance, counting from the head of the line. Also called **Ones** or **Odds**. Actives progress down the set during the dance.

The **Inactives** are the even numbered couples at the start of the dance, counting from the head of the line. Also called **Twos** or **Evens**. Inactives progress up the set.

In an **Improper Dance**, the actives change places with their partners before the walk-through starts, so each line alternates man, woman, man, woman etc. A **Proper Dance** starts with all the women in the same line, facing all the men in the other line.

Your **Partner** stays with you for the whole dance as you progress from one group of four to another. It's customary to change partners between dances. Your **Opposite** or **Neighbor** is the person of the opposite sex in your group of four who is not your partner. Unless otherwise specified, the woman on the man's left is his Corner, and the man on the woman's right is her Corner.

Basic Steps

To **Allemande Left**, take left hands with the other dancer in a "pigeon-wing" grip, hands up, thumbs together and elbows down. Walk counterclockwise around each other, leaning back with slight tension. To **Allemande Right**, take right hands and walk clockwise. Sometimes the calls are **Turn by the Left** and **Turn by the Right**.

To **Balance** your **Partner/Neighbor**, take hands with your partner or neighbor and step towards each other, then away from each other. Often followed by a swing. Many variants on hand-holds and steps. Balance in a line or circle is done with the same step, taking hands with two other dancers.

The **Swing** can be done two different ways, with a host of variations. [1] Southern Swing (*a.k.a.* Western Swing, Walk Around Swing): take ballroom position with the other dancer, facing each other's right shoulder, staying roughly parallel. Walk around each other clockwise. This swing is common to the square dance tradition. [2] Buzz Step (New England Style Swing): take ballroom position as above, slide on the right foot. Give weight (lean back a little, but not enough to tip over); don't be a wet noodle. Both of your feet must be to

the left of your partner's feet, otherwise you will fall over. Both types of swing are easy to learn; the Southern Swing is more stately and sedate, while the Buzz Step is more vigorous and exciting. Neither swing involves jumping or leaping. Always end a swing with the man on the left and the woman on the right. Prevent dizziness by looking at your partner, not out at the hall.

A **Gypsy** is like a swing except there is no physical contact; walk around the other dancer, connected only by each other's mesmerizing gaze. A **Gypsy Meltdown** is a Gypsy followed by a swing.

In some dances, the Ones walk down the set, then return to the Twos. The Twos scoop up the Ones on each side as the dancers reach around each other's back and turn on the side of the set to face in, completing the **Cast Off**.

Circle Left by taking hands in a circle of 4 dancers and walk in a circle to the left (clockwise). **Circle Right** the other way around. Circle once around unless the caller specifies halfway, three quarters, etc.

In a **Do-Si-Do**, walk around the other dancer. Pass by the right shoulder and end in your original place. Exchange places in a Do-Si-Do **Once and a Half**. For Left Shoulder Do-Si-Do, start by passing left shoulders.

Two **Ladies Chain** by taking right hands (handshake grip) as they pass across the set. The man turns the woman on the side of the set, taking her left hand in his, and reaching around her back with his right hand to her right hand on her hip, turning to face in. (This turn is called a **Courtesy Turn**.) At this point, you have completed a **Half Ladies Chain**. A **Full Ladies Chain**, or **Chain Over and Back**, repeats the above instructions as the women return to the side they started the chain from. More seasoned dancers may choose a twirl or spin instead of a courtesy turn; however, it is the woman's choice whether she twirls!

An **Ocean Wave** is a line created by the four dancers in your set, in Allemande hold. The dancers alternate facing up and down. Usually involves a balance.

The **Promenade** varies by region. In the local tradition, the man stands to the woman's left, facing the same direction; their right hands are joined in front, and their left hands are

also joined in front. The man's right arm crosses above the woman's left arm. In a **Promenade Across the Set**, the pair will usually turn as a couple on the other side, facing in with the woman on the man's right.

Another way to cross the set as a couple is the **Right and Left**, in which you walk across the set, passing right shoulders with the one across. As each couple reaches the other side, they turn as a couple with a courtesy turn.

The **Star** is a fancy circle. **Star Left** in a group of 4 by reaching diagonally across with a handshake grip by the left hand, usually to your neighbor's partner (women taking hands and men taking hands). **Star Right** by holding right hands and walking clockwise. In some parts of the country, the tradition is for dancers to place their hands palm down on the wrist in front rather than taking a handshake grip across.

In a swing, allemande, circle or star, lean back slightly and keep tension in your arms to **Give Weight**. The figure will go more smoothly, and you'll have more fun!

A Few More Complicated Steps

In the **Becket Formation**, couples face couples across the set at the beginning of the dance. Becket dances often require more attention at the end of the set than do other contra dances.

Box the Gnat is an elegant way to change places. Partners join right hands, then exchange places as the woman walks under their raised joined hands. In contrast, the **California Twirl** starts with the partners joining near hands (man's right with woman's left). Partners exchange places as the woman walks under their raised joined hands.

Contra Corners start with the men in one line facing the women in the other line. Usually, the Ones dance the figure, with the Twos assisting. If you are a One, as you face your partner across the set, your **First Corner** is the Two to the right of your partner, and your **Second Corner** is the Two to the left of your partner. Turn your partner by the right half way, turn your First Corner by the left once around, turn your partner by the right once around, turn your Second Corner by the left once around, and meet your partner in the center, usually following with a balance and swing.

A **Figure Eight** is danced by one couple around another. The object is to change places with your partner. For

example, if the Ones start a Figure Eight from below the Twos, they walk up the set in between the Twos and cross the set, walk around the Twos and finish opposite their partner in their partner's original place. To avoid collision in the center, the woman starts the figure just before her partner.

The **Hey for Four** looks harder than it is. The caller will specify who starts the hey, and by which shoulder. For example, **Hey for Four with the Women Starting by the Right Shoulder**: the women walk past each other in the center, passing by their right shoulders (just like the beginning of the Ladies Chain, but without touching hands). They pass the men on the sides by the left shoulder. The men pass each other in the center by the right shoulder. They pass the women on the sides by the left shoulder. (You've now completed **Half a Hey** and are on the opposite side of the set from where you started.) The women pass each other by the right in the center and pass the men on the sides by the left shoulder. The men pass each other in the center by the right shoulder and return to original places. It sounds complicated, but the Hey can be very smooth and graceful. In a Becket dance, you may be asked to Hey with a couple that is not directly across from you. The 3 important points are (i) always pass by one shoulder in the center (ii) always pass by the other shoulder on the sides and (iii) if disaster strikes, end a Hey in your original position or end Half a Hey in the other couple's original position.