

# Introduction to Contra Dancing

## Susan Morris, Redmond, Washington

Contra dance is one of the predecessors of square dancing and it shares many of the same calls in our Basic list. Also, in Contra Dancing, like Square Dancing, dancers have Partners and Corners. Contra Dances can provide additional variety at Special Dance Parties, regular dance nights as well as during lessons.

There are a few differences between a Contra Dance and a Square Dance. Notably, dancers work in two lines, not squares. The word Contra means “against.” In Contra Dancing, one line works against another line as dancers progress either in one direction (toward the Head or the Foot) during the dance. Also, there is a substantial difference in how we, as dance leaders, prompt or call a Contra Dance.

A Contra Dance caller must give commands prior to the beginning of a musical phrase. This is done to give dancers the first beat of the next phrase to execute the call. In Modern Square Dancing, it is best related to Grand Square. Failure to give the command, Sides Face Grand Square, so that dancers can step on the first beat of the musical phrase results in a poorly executed maneuver.

Contra Dance Notation sometimes looks like this:

**Music Introduction:** — — — —; — — **DoSaDo Corner**

**1** — — — —; — — **All DoSaDo Partner**

**2** — — — —; — — **Active Couples Balance and Swing**

Another difference from Modern Square Dance is that, in Contra Dance, the timing of the calls is almost always 4, 8, 12 or 16 beats. (16 beats being the rarest of cases.) This change of the timing can take some adjustment on both the part of the caller and the dancers but it is not a difficult one.

An example of this change is Dosado. The latest Callerlab definition and timing sheets list the number of beats for Dosado as 6. In Contra Dancing, a Dosado takes 8 beats to complete.

Because of this, you will have to remind your dancers that there is no need to rush.

Swing is another call that is affected by a timing difference. Many Contra Dance include at least one 8 count Swing. Square dancers (in general) hardly ever take a full 8 counts to Swing their partners.

### Prepping the Dance

All Contra Dances get a walkthrough before the music comes on and they are danced. (Sometimes, in the case of more difficult choreography, it may get more than one walkthrough.) This is important for dancers so that they know how they are going to progress

up and down the hall during the dance. It also helps them learn how to make the dance flow smoothly.

Mentioned earlier, Contra Dancing is done in lines. In Square Dancing, we start with partners being next to each other. In Contra Dancing, your partner is most often across from you. (There are Contras, that start in Beckett formation, where your partner is beside you.) With new dancers or Square Dancers, it can be a challenge to get Contra Lines formed. Here are a couple of ways to help. Every group has their own dynamic and you will have to find which way works best for you.

### **Contra Formations and How To Get There:**

**1. *Proper Duple*:** all the boys in one line, on the Callers right, facing all the girls in another line, on the Caller's left.

Have couples line up one behind the other facing you at the head of the hall. When all are in line have them turn and face their partner. You now have Proper Contra Lines.

**2. *Improper* or *Alternate Duple*:** Two lines, partners across from each other. The line on the Caller's left hand side is Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl, etc. Line on Callers Right hand side is Girl, Boy, Girl, Boy, etc.

From a squared set – Sides Lead Right, all Face In. You now have Alternate Duple Contra Lines.

From Proper Lines, starting at the top have every group of four join hands in a circle. The command is 'Hands Four from the Top.' The first couple are the 1's or the Active couples. The others are 2's or Inactive. Have the 1's trade places. You now have Alternate Duple Contra Lines.

From Beckett Contra Lines (*see next*), have the couples across from each other join hands and circle left  $\frac{1}{4}$ . You now have Alternate Duple Lines.

**3. *Beckett*:** Two lines with couple facing couple.

From a squared set – Heads Lead Right, Circle to a Line. You now have Beckett Contra Lines.

As the dancing starts, people on the sidelines may want to join in. Anyone can join the dance in progress at the bottom of the set.

### **Music**

Square Dance music is not always appropriate for Contra Dancing. There is specific contra music used for each individual dance. (Music resources are at the end of this handout.) Contra music can be a jig, a reel, a hornpipe, or other strongly phrased music. The best music has very strong phrasing. Some singing call records/mp3s can be used. Be aware that, just like in Square Dancing where all singing call figures do not work with all singing call records/mp3s, all contra dances do not work with all music. You have to do your homework and try it out with your home group or dance at home.

Now you have a brief overview of the basics of Contra Dancing. The next question is, "Where do you use it?" The description of this session is about using Contras at your Special Party Dances. This is certainly a place to start. Contras are great because you don't have to wait for the last one or two couples to arrive to make another square. If you have seven couples present and ready to dance, do a Contra Dance. Why have one square dancing and three couples sitting out?

Here's another question. Why not make other dances into "Special Party Dances?"

Start with the first night of square dance class. Many new dancers enjoy Contras because they are easy and everyone is dancing right away. As a Modern Square Dance caller, you very likely teach 10-12 (or more) calls on the first night. Teach a few and then dance a contra dance.

Move away from Contra lines to include the Community Dance formations (Sicilian circles or trios) and it gives your new dancers the feeling that they can actually dance from the very beginning.

Then, use it again, on other nights, in class. Consider those evenings when new dancers have worked really hard to master that night's new calls. End an evening with a relaxing contra or Sicilian circle dance that they don't have to think about as much. Instead, let the Contra Dance teach muscle memory. If you have a night where you're trying to express a new concept and they look at you like you are talking a language they have never heard. Pull out a Contra Dance to ease everyone's frustration.

New dancers also like Contras or Community Dances because they are floor levelers. There is no more "them," the new dancers, and "us," the experienced angels. The dance is new for everyone.

In my dance area, the greater Puget Sound area, square dance clubs take turns hosting New Dancer Dances or Student Level Dances. Contras are great for those nights. Use them in place of a Round Dance. It gives the new dancers a chance to relax from concentrating so hard to remember the calls they know. Since they don't round dance yet, it keeps them dancing the whole evening. (Dancers paid to dance, not sit around and watch others dance.)

Finally, use it in your regular dance program from time to time. It adds some variety and shows your dancers what else is available for them. At all National Square Dance Conventions there is a Contra Hall. If they have been exposed to Contra Dancing they may just like to stop in and give it a try and make/meet new friends.

### **Resources for Contra Dances:**

*Dancing for Busy People* by Calvin Campbell, Ken Kernan, and Bob Howell. This is the book for the Community Dance Program. It contains information and dances for squares, contras, trios, circles, mixers, lines and mescolanzas. If you don't have this in your reference library, you are missing out. It is available from Palomino Records.

**Community Dance Journals** published by the Committee for Community and Traditional Dance. All the past CD Journals are now on the Callerlab website; from the home page, select Documents; then select Community Dance Journals from the list at the right.

Beginning Dance Party Leader Seminar: It is held on the Saturday and Sunday before Callerlab Convention starts. This year was the 12<sup>th</sup> annual seminar. There were 11 sessions on all aspects of party dances (formations, what calls to use, music, gender imbalance to name just a few). It is only \$50, partners are free, and well worth your time.

Lloyd Shaw Foundation: <http://www.lloydshaw.org/> Check out their website for dances and music suggestions.

Kentucky Dance Foundation: [www.folkdancer.org](http://www.folkdancer.org) Another good source for music.

Palomino Records or Dosado.com: <http://www.dosado.com/> Lots of square dance and contra music.

## A Nice Combination

Don Ward

*Dancing for Busy People* (p. 177)

**Formation:** Alternate Duple ,1, 3, 5, etc. crossed over

**Suggested Music:** Row, Row, Row – TNT 188 or strongly phrased music.

**Introduction (adjust to your music):** — — — —; — — **CORNER DOSADO**

**1 – 8** — — — —; — — **CORNER SWING**

**9 – 16** — — — —; **PROMENADE DOWN IN FOURS**

**17 – 24** — — — —; **WHEEL AROUND & PROMENADE UP**

**25 – 32** — — — —; **BEND THE LINE & CIRCLE LEFT 3/4**

**33 – 40** — — — —; **WITH THE ONE YOU FACE SWING**

**41 – 48** — — — —; **FACE ACROSS & 2 LADIES CHAIN**

**49 – 56** — — — —; — — **STAR LEFT**

**57 – 64** — — — —; — — **CORNER DOSADO**

### Description:

1 – 8 All face corners and DoSaDo

9 – 16 Swing the same corner and finish facing down the set in lines of four.

17 – 24 Promenade away from the caller 6 steps and Wheel Around as a couple.

25 – 32 Finish the Wheel Around and Promenade toward the caller, Bend the Line and finish facing across the set as a couple.

33 – 40 Circle Four with the couple across 3/4 around.

41 – 48 Swing the one you are facing. This is your original partner. Finish facing across the set with your partner.

49 – 56 2 Ladies Chain across the set.

57 – 64 Star Left once around to the next corner position.

## Broken Sixpence

Don Armstrong

*The Caller/Teacher Manual for Contras by Don Armstrong (p 16)*

**Formation:** Alternate Duple ,1, 3, 5, etc. crossed over

**Suggested Music:** Strongly phrased music or singing call

**Introduction (adjust to your music):** — — — —; — — CORNER DOSADO

1 – 8 — — — —; JUST THE MEN - DOSADO

9 – 16 — — — —; JUST THE LADIES - DOSADO

17 – 24 — — — —; ACTIVE COUPLES SWING IN THE MIDDLE

25 – 32 — — — —; DOWN THE CENTER – FOUR IN A LINE

33 – 40 — — — —; TURN ALONE BACK TO PLACE

41 – 48 — — — —; BEND THE LINE – CIRCLE LEFT

49 – 56 — — — —; — — STAR LEFT

57 – 64 — — — —; — — CORNER DOSADO

## Barley & Oats

Ken Kernen

*Dancing for Busy People (p. 149)*

**Formation:** Proper contra lines of 4 couples. All the men in a line on the caller's right and all the ladies in a line on the caller's left.

**Music:** Any spirited well-phrased music.

**Introduction (adjust to your music):** — — — —; EVERYBODY FORWARD AND BACK

1 – 8 — — MEN ARCH; LADIES DUCK THRU & U-TURN BACK

9 – 16 — — — —; EVERYBODY FORWARD AND BACK

17 – 24 — — LADIES ARCH; MEN DUCK THRU & U-TURN BACK

25 – 32 — — — —; TOP COUPLE SASHAY TO FOOT

33 – 40 — — — —; SLIDE BACK TO THE HEAD OF THE SET

41 – 48 — — — —; PROMENADE SINGLE FILE TO THE FOOT

49 – 56 — — — —; ACTIVES ARCH & OTHERS DUCK THRU

58 – 64 — — — —; EVERYBODY FORWARD AND BACK

**Susan's notes:** This is a good dance with uneven gender numbers. Just pick a different designation for the lines.

## Tropical Island

Glen Nickerson

*This is a variation of the dance Aland Island*

**Formation:** Alternate Duple ,1, 3, 5, etc. crossed over

**Suggested Music:** Strongly phrased music or singing call

**Introduction (adjust to your music):** — — — —; — — LADIES DOSADO

1 – 8 — — — —; — — MEN DOSADO

9 – 16 — — — —; — — CORNER SWING

17 – 24 — — — —; — — CIRCLE LEFT

25 – 32 — — — —; — — LADIES CHAIN

33 – 40 — — — —; — — LADIES CHAIN BACK

41 – 48 — — — —; — — HALF PROMENADE

49 – 56 — — — —; — — RIGHT AND LEFT THRU

57 – 64 — — — —; — — LADIES DOSADO

## First Night Sicilian Circle Variation 1

Calvin Campbell

*Dancing for Busy People (p. 226)*

*Variation by Susan Morris*

**Formation:** Sicilian circle; couple facing couple in circle around the hall

**Suggested Music:** Strongly phrased music or singing call

**Introduction (adjust to your music):**

— — — —; TURN YOUR OPPOSITE, RIGHT HAND AROUND

1 – 8 — — — —; TURN YOUR OPPOSITE, LEFT HAND AROUND

9 – 16 — — — —; JOIN HANDS, CIRCLE LEFT

17 – 24 — — — —; — — CIRCLE RIGHT

25 – 32 — — — —; — — TWO MEN, DOSADO

33 – 40 — — — —; — — TWO LADIES, DOSADO

41 – 48 — — — —; EVERYBODY FORWARD AND BACK

49 – 56 — — — —; 1'S ARCH & 2'S DUCK THRU TO THE NEXT\*\*

57 – 64 — — — —; TURN YOUR OPPOSITE, RIGHT HAND AROUND

\*\*Note: 1's are facing LOD or counterclockwise, 2's are facing RLOD or clockwise.