

# What was that step?

## A guide for new Contra dancers

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### 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 band and caller. **Up** is in the direction of the Head; **Down** is 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 **Ones** are the odd numbered couples at the start of the dance, counting from the head of the line. Ones progress down the set during the dance.

The **Twos** are the even numbered couples at the start of the dance. Twos progress up the set.

In an **Improper Dance**, the Ones change places with their partners before the walk-through starts, so each line alternates man, woman, man, woman, etc. Most contra dances are Improper. 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. When you get to the end, change places with your partner and come back as the other number (Ones become Twos, Twos become Ones).

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.

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### Basic Steps

To **Allemande Left**, take left hands with the other dancer, palms together, thumbs crossed (but not gripped), 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**, **Turn by the Right**.

To **Balance your Partner/Neighbor**, join hands with this person and step towards each other, then away from each other...often followed by a swing. There are many variants on hand holds and steps. Join hands with two other dancers to balance in a line or circle.

The footwork for the **Swing** can be done two different ways. [1] Southern / Western / Walking 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): slide on the right foot, propelling yourself with the left foot (like riding a scooter). Your right foot makes a little circle. Give weight; don't be a wet noodle. Don't cross right feet with your partner, 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. End the swing with the man on the left and the woman on the right. Avoid dizziness by looking at your partner, not out at the hall.

A **Gypsy** is a walking swing with 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 backs 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 says halfway, three quarters, etc.

In a **Do-Si-Do**, walk around the other dancer. Start by passing right shoulders and end in your original place. Exchange places in a **Do-Si-Do Once and a Half**. For a **Left Shoulder Do-Si-Do** or **See-Saw**, start the do-si-do 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 with a **Courtesy Turn**, taking her left hand in his, and reaching around her waist with his right hand to her right hand on her hip, turning to face in. At this point, you have completed a **Chain Across** or **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. This step usually involves a balance.

Partners walk together in a **Promenade**. Two variations are common: [1] 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. Often called "Skater's Position". [2] The man's right arm is behind the woman's back as in the Courtesy Turn. 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. In many dance communities, dancers pull by with the right hand as you cross the set. As each couple reaches the other side they turn as a couple with a courtesy turn.

The **Star** is a fancy circle. In a Hands-Across **Star Left**, reach diagonally across your group of 4 to the same-sex neighbor with a handshake grip by the left hand, and walk counterclockwise. **Star Right** by holding right hands and walk clockwise. In a New England Star, place your hand palm down on the wrist of the dancer ahead of you. Star once around unless the caller says some other fraction.

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

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## Slightly More Advanced Steps

In **Becket Formation**, couples face couples across the set at the start 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 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** typically 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 followed by 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 across the set, passing by their right shoulders (just like the beginning of a Ladies Chain, but without touching hands). They pass the men on the sides by the left shoulder. The men walk across the set, passing by the right shoulder, then 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.) Repeat the same steps to return to your original place. 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. Remember: [1] always pass by one shoulder in the center; [2] always pass by the other shoulder on the sides; [3] if tragedy strikes, end a Hey in your original position, or end a Half a Hey in the other couple's original position, and smile.

