

The Well-Connected Dancer

Goldilocks was enjoying her first dance until the caller said, "Allemande left your partner." Her partner gripped her hand tightly, pressing his thumb into the back of her hand, and pulled her arm towards his chest as though they were arm wrestling. Goldilocks didn't enjoy that at all and was glad when the dance ended. His connection was much too strong.

Her second partner was much gentler, but she was dismayed when, as they finished a Circle Left and prepared to Pass Through, he let go of her completely so that she went backwards instead of forwards. His connection was much too weak.

Then she found a wonderful man who helped her get round Stars and Circles, did great Allemandes and smiled as he swung her. His connection was just right!

Part of the definition of a Zesty Contra (Larry Jennings, 1983) is "Strongly connected: arms joined firmly but elastically, not only in allemande and swing, but also in circle, star, promenade, long lines, etc."

Why is connection so important? The choreography of many modern dances is much less forgiving; it is much easier to add a variation (e.g. a spin out of an Allemande) if you are well-connected; and good connection makes the dances flow more smoothly, adding significantly to the pleasure of dancing.

Let's look at the changes in choreography first. Most old dances that have a Star or a Circle include a second one in the opposite direction. It doesn't matter how far you travel in the Circle Left as long as you travel the same distance back in the Circle Right. But modern choreographers use sequences such as Circle Left, Star Right. Both moves are in the same direction so you have to travel two full circles to get back to where you started.

Good connection helps you to make those complete circles. Connection in Circles, Lines and Gates comes from making a strong "W" with your neighbours, elbows down, hands up, connected by hooked fingertips (no thumbs!). If you stand in a circle of four with that connection and lean slightly to your side everyone else in the circle should feel it. Remember to go for an elastic feeling rather than rigidity. And avoid the "Nellie the Elephant Syndrome" where someone raises their leading hand but forces their trailing hand down low, forgetting that their trailing hand is someone else's leading hand!

There are basically three ways to do a Star:

1) The bunch of bananas/limp lettuce: Everyone just sticks their hand in the middle, possibly grasping some random part of someone else's hand. Looks a mess, can feel unpleasant, and really doesn't help with connection!

2) Hands Across: You take a handshake (actually just hooked fingertips) with the person opposite. This gives good connection and is especially useful if the next move involves the men dropping out so that the ladies can chain across.

3) Box Star (also known as Pack-Saddle or Wrist-Hold): Each person hooks their hand (thumbs on top with the fingers) over the wrist of the person in front. This gives great connection and is the standard in all the American contra dance clubs that I have visited.

The Box Star is not a recent invention; Zesty Contras defines the New England style as having "well connected wrist-hold stars". Search for "Beautiful Contra Folk Dancing" on YouTube and you will see the dancers using it back in 1964.

I am told that in the Deep South the Box Star is not always used as the men's wrists get too sweaty and the ladies don't like putting their hand on a sweaty, hairy wrist! But apart from that the Box Star is so easy and gives such great connection that it is not surprising that it is used so much in contra dancing.

Try a Circle Left, Star Right with hands low in the Circle and a bunch-of-bananas Star, then try it with "W"s in the Circle and a Box in the Star. When you connect to everyone else in your set and share the energy the dance moves much more smoothly and you get to where you need to be on time and with much less effort.

Coming back to the too much/too little discussion, let's look at the Allemande. Just put your palms at right angles (with your thumb beside your fingers – thumb grips can be uncomfortable and prevent spin outs), and gently hook your fingertips around the other person's hand. Next, how much tension? The key is to remember that you are not arm-wrestling; you are dancing! Go for equal and opposite tension, just enough to feel each other, but not enough to move the hands from mid-way between you. Make that nice "W" shape between you and connect with the eyes as well. As you speed up add just enough tension to keep the hands in the middle.

If your partner wants to spin out of the Allemande don't try to push them – it is more likely to throw them off balance than to help! Instead, if you feel them increasing the tension in preparation for the spin then just tense up a little yourself to give them a platform to spin off – it should be like two springs compressing and releasing – the hands never move from that mid-way position.

Finally, let's look at that Circle Left and Pass Through that Goldilocks complained about, and look at making the dance flow smoothly. Try a Circle Left with a bit of speed then just let go. Which direction will you keep moving in? Backwards. Centrifugal force is pulling you away from the centre of the circle. Which direction do you want to go for the Pass Through? Forwards! Now try it with connection. Keep hold as you finish the Circle and line up for the Pass Through. Use the arms like springs; you extend slightly away from each other and then pull each other forward. That **gentle** elastic connection changes the direction of your momentum and makes the transition so much easier.

This principle applies to a very wide range of transitions: always stay connected to those beside you and use your connection to help each other into the next move. It is not your partner's job to drag you across the dance-floor; when you feel tension in your fingers, move your feet!

The best beginners' workshop I have ever seen focused on just three elements: counting up to eight, the Buzz-Step Swing and **connection**. Teach someone a move and it might help them get through certain dances. Teach them how to connect and you have set them on the path to becoming a great dancer.

Connection helps in all dances, but it is what makes many modern dances work. Practise your connection and enjoy that beautiful flowing choreography.