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### Let's Be Brief

By Bob Campbell

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an article on an interesting topic will cause its readers to look for more. Jack Crosbie's letter and Robert McOwen's article about briefing dances in the September 1980 issue of TACTALK were a case in point and will serve as a good reason for the discussion which follows.

Now, I am not interested in taking sides in the debate about whether dances should be briefed or not. That field can well be left to other contestants. To me, the picture is not to be painted in black and white. Rather, there are occasions when briefing is appropriate and others when the dancers can manage very well without detailed reminding.

For several years, my interest has been in how the job should be tackled when briefing happens to be the order of the evening. Perhaps before looking into the question, it would be useful to recount part of two instances which captured my attention at the time, so much so that now I remember the dances and almost exactly what was said. Come with me, then, into the ballroom.

The first example took place in the very early 1960s. The evening, a fairly formal ball, was going well when the M.C. introduced a new briefer. Here is the first figure of the dance we were about to do.

"This dance starts with four hands across in a wheel. You dance round for three steps, come to a stop, then change hands and dance back again for three steps. Oh! I forgot to mention it but this is a strathspey called *Jimmy's Fancy*. It's a strathspey with 32 bars and it takes three couples to do the dance. Now, where was I? Oh yes, well, 1st and 2nd couples have now danced six bars of music. On bars 7 and 8 1st couple you cast off into second place (be sure to dance this smoothly) while 2nd couple you dance up to the top. 1st couple you are now in second place. From there, 1st man you dance three hands round ... etc., etc., and ETC."

The rest of the dance went in much the same way. The dancer in me was just as bored as could be but, at the same time, struggling to follow the description. The teacher in me was both fascinated and very puzzled. It simply was not possible to determine what this young man was up to. It certainly wasn't briefing. No more was it a dancing lesson. One could only regret that the host group had assigned the job this way and felt sorry for the briefer as he struggled along. It would have been the course of wisdom on his part to decline such invitations until he had gained more experience on less formal occasions.

The second example is of a different sort and also has a lesson for us. Let's step back then to 1968 and join a winter dance in Toronto. As in the first example, the briefer "volunteered", which means she was appointed on arrival at the hall. We'll consider summarily a part of *Middling, Thank You* (Book 15, No. 8) as she reads it from the book.

The dance was properly introduced -- an important point the teacher forgot in the first example. The first two figures are 1st and 2nd couples set twice, then half right and left, then repeat back to places. That's the way the book reads. Actually, the couples do not finish in places but perform a neat little manoeuvre to get into position for the Poussette, which follows. A small point, perhaps, but as it turned out, many dancers had to scramble to start the Poussette. It would have been better to qualify bars 15-16 in anticipation of the progression. This is not immediately apparent from the printed description. The same type of entry is to be found in *Waverley* (Book 15, No. 12), where the description also gives no hint of the anticipation required.

The briefer continued with her reading: "1st couple lead down the middle, up again to the top and cast off one place round 2nd couple." We are all familiar with the usual phrasing of this figure, i.e., lead down for three bars, up for three, then cast off for two -, but in this dance, it is different. 1st couple are starting from second place and can only lead down for two bars, then up and cast off if they hope to reach their destination on time. On that occasion, many did not.

So much for our examples. What can we learn from them? It would probably be best to establish just what briefing should entail and then see if some guidelines can be worked out. Two points seem worth discussing: briefing as communication and, in a few words, as an essential part of good teaching.

Let's look at communication. Most would probably agree that the job of briefing is to tell the folk on the floor the sequence of a dance in the shortest, most lucid manner possible. Perhaps the language we use should have our attention first. Nearly every special endeavour or activity has its own vocabulary and descriptive terms. Our dancing is no exception. It has a special notation, which is quite mysterious to an outsider. I recall when a non-dancing friend looked at one of our dance books. After a brief perusal, he asked: "Can you understand that stuff?" That "stuff" is what we use all the time, and we never give it a second thought. Each common figure is known by either a single word or a short descriptive phrase, and these terms should generally be used when briefing. There is no trouble with such obvious examples as Poussette, Allemande, or Rondel. A person briefing a dance would never think of giving a detailed description of how those figures are danced. The name is enough, as the details were learned when the figure was taught. So, it should be done with all the main figures, but this is not always found in practice.

Consider the first example above. It would have been sufficient to say: "1st and 2nd couples hands across for three steps, back for three, then 1st couple cast off while 2nd couple lead to the top." This is certainly not as concise as Poussette or Allemande but is the commonly used description and has the merit of clarity. And that is more than can be said of the interrupted oratory used by the briefer in that example. A very clear and concise description of most of the main figures is found in "*Won't You Join the Dance?*" as we discovered when taking our teacher training.

If we may digress for a moment, a small point can be made about the choice of words. Some words and expressions come across differently depending on the acoustics of the hall and/or the speaker's voice. It is interesting to keep an ear open for language to avoid. For instance, the expression "... turn with both hands to finish on 'the wrong side'" often comes across as "... finish on 'their own side'." It is a mistake in interpretation that is quite easily made.

Although the word is longer, it is better to say 'opposite' rather than 'wrong'. Again, an expression often heard is: "1st man 'wheels' with 3rd couple while 1st woman 'wheels' with 2nd couple. (Examples would be *The Jubilee Jig* or *Miss Gibson's Strathspey*.) Depending on the hall and/or the voice, this may come across as "1st man 'reels' with 3<sup>rd</sup> couple, etc. "It is usually better to say "hands across" to avoid the possibility of misinterpretation. It can be a lot of fun and a useful experience to listen carefully to all briefings to see if the dance could be described in a better way.

The above leads to another digression. The use of the voice is as important in briefing as it is in teaching, and readers are urged to reread item 13 on page 108 of "*Won't you Join the Dance?*" After all, the voice is all we have for the purpose, and it behooves us to use it to the best advantage.

So much for our first example, let's see what the second one can tell us.

It will have been noted that the only trouble encountered in the second briefing had its origin in the printed description. Indeed, reading a dance through (as a briefing) is generally not good practice for several reasons. First, one has to be an experienced reader to get any expression into the performance. Very few of us have that kind of training; we usually sound most uninteresting. Secondly, if the dance is read, the listeners may assume (rightly?) that the teacher doesn't know it well enough to rely on memory. The reaction is: "Why should I be expected to remember the dance if the teacher can't?" Thirdly, and our second example fits in here, the language used in the books varies widely, and although it may be a fairly accurate description of the dance, it may not be suitable for briefing. Consider the following additional examples. Comments are in parentheses.

1. *The Honeymoon* (Graded Book No. 8)

9 - 16. 1st and 2nd couples dance 4 hands across giving right hand for 4 skip change of step, turn and giving left hand across dance 4 steps back to place. (Far too many words - say '1st and 2nd couples hands across and back'.)

2. *Saw Ye My Wee Thing?* (Book 25 No. 9)

*The Wild Geese* (Book 24 No. 3)

25 - 32. 2nd and 1st (1st and 2nd) couples dance right and left across and back. (The words 'across and back' are superfluous. "Right and left" is a complete and quite adequate description of the figure.)

3. *Miss Christy Stewart* (Miss Milligan's Miscellany 11)

25 - 32. They turn 1st corners with the right hand, partners in the middle with the left, 2nd corners with right hand, and, giving partner left hand in passing, cross over to own sides one place down. ("*Won't you Join the Dance?*" says it better: "Turn corners and partner". But it is always necessary to say how the last two bars are danced.)

It would be nice if we could learn a dance in one big gulp. Alas, this is not possible, as our minds are not constructed in that way -- we must learn them one part at a time. In Scottish country dancing, the figures usually fit the eight-bar musical phrases so that we can learn, teach, or brief the dances more effectively by using these natural breaks. However, in a few dances, the description in the books does not follow the natural flow of the eight-bar figure. It breaks the phrase into halves or quarters, and for this reason, is more difficult to remember. Let's look at some examples.

In *Peggy's Love* (Book 8 No. 2) the first phrase is broken into two parts. In bars 1 - 4, the action

of the 3rd couple is given along with that of the 1st couple. Each couple, then, must suspend attention briefly while the performance of the other is described. This is difficult. If the figure were to be described in its entirety for each couple, it would be much easier to follow; thus, 1 - 8, 1st couple cast off two places, set, then lead up to the top, while 3rd couple set, lead up to the top and cast off to place. Having been trained in eight-bar phrases, the dancers can quickly get a picture of the pattern to follow. The same can be said for *Seann Triubhas Willichan* (Book 27 No 9). Read over bars 9 - 16 and then describe how to brief this phrase to express the continuity.

Perhaps the most beautiful solution to this problem I have ever heard was at St Andrews. The occasion was one of the social dances in the evening (remember those crowded halls?), and the dance was *Hooper's Jig* (99 More SCD). Members will recall that bars 17 - 24 are described in two-bar bits. This can be very confusing for both 1st and 3rd couples. What our friend did was to describe the figure as an eight-bar sequence for 1<sup>st</sup> man and 3rd woman, then for 1st woman and 3rd man, i.e.,

17 - 24. 1st man changes place with 3rd woman giving a right hand; they dance around, ready to cross over again, cross back to their own place, giving a right hand, and then 1st man casts off while 3rd woman dances around into place. At the same time, 1st woman and 3rd man stand still for two bars, change places, giving the right hand, etc., etc.

The words may not be precisely as used at the time, but the idea is the same.

There are now many modern dances where different things are going on at the same time, and it is an interesting exercise to work out the best way to describe them. It was stated earlier that briefing is an essential part of good teaching. Little need be said on this point as it will have been thoroughly covered during training for the Preliminary Test or the Teacher's Certificate. Because of the nature of the dances, we teach them rather slowly in phrases or parts of phrases, and in doing so, the class may forget the sequence. It is essential, therefore, that they be given a concise, clear statement of the whole dance to tie all the phrases together before dancing it right through. That is what briefing is all about.

Briefing, like teaching, is in some respects an art, and the teacher must learn to suit the briefing to the situation. At an affair where new dancers predominate, very explicit language will be required. In really advanced classes, candidates' classes, or a teachers' workshop the barest outline should be sufficient. It will be necessary for us to strive for the same excellence in our briefing as we hope to achieve in our teaching.