

Notes on Planning SCD Programs by Kent W. Smith, Chicago Branch

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Editor's Note: This article is an abridgement of a longer discussion of the topic prepared for use by members of the Chicago Branch. For further discussion of the issue, see Bob Campbell's article in TACTalk September 1989 (Vol 14, #2).

A. Choice of Dances

1. Level of Difficulty

The most successful programs are those in which most of the dances are relatively easy but enjoyable. There is a tendency to select dances that, on average, are too difficult. At most, only one or two dances should have challenging or unique figures, and almost no standard figures. At the other extreme, there should not be a large number of dances that are various permutations of standard figures. Most of the dances should have something pleasantly distinctive about them.

As a rough guide, for every 9 dances, there should be no more than 1 or 2 difficult dances and 2 to 4 intermediate ones. The rest should be relatively easy ones with basic figures. You will have to adjust the average difficulty level to fit the general experience level of those participating, the purpose of the dance, the events that will occur before and after the dance, etc.

2. Familiarity

Most of the dances should be familiar ones. The instructions for unfamiliar dances should be readily available (for instance, through RSCDS publications) or distributed beforehand. Unfamiliar dances should also be relatively easy ones. You should be able to give yourself a definite reason for each of the unfamiliar dances on the program. But don't go to extremes and devise a program comprised exclusively of old standards. Consider including one or two dances from the most recent RSCDS publications.

The dances can come from various sources. However, the majority of the dances should be from RSCDS publications, both because the instructions for them are the most widely available and because we are members of the Society.

3. Variety

Another quality that makes for a successful program is variety. There are at least five dimensions of variety to consider.

Figures. A variety of figures should be danced throughout the program so that dancers don't begin feeling that they've already danced this dance a couple of times in slightly different guises. Watch out, especially for the number of dances with some of the most common figures such as turning and casting, setting and casting, crossing and casting, or casting off and up at the beginning of a dance; rights and lefts; hands round; turning corner-partner-corner-partner; and reels of three with corners. One good approach is to list the dances you are considering with the order of figures in each dance written out in an abbreviated form using a notation like that in Napier's Index.

On the other hand, also check that the program contains at least one or two instances of popular figures such as poussette (quick time), allemande, reels with comers, reels of four, perhaps double triangles, and a hello-goodbye setting. The list depends upon the local

preferences of the moment.

If the dance hall is likely to be crowded, there is another aspect of the figures that you need to consider. As Bob Campbell (Sept. 1989 TACTALK) points out, you may want to limit the number of figures that go beyond the sides of the set, such as casting off and up behind the lines, or that require wide sets, such as four people balancing or reeling across the dance or lines of three or four leading down the middle and up. Two-couple dances that require extra space between couples may also be problematic in crowded rooms.

These include those that have the two men (or women) dancing between their partners and casting to place or having three reels on the sides: the sets must be elongated when all four couples are dancing.

Music. There should be roughly an equal number of jigs, reels, and strathspeys. Jigs and reels (including hornpipes) are somewhat interchangeable, but the ratio of quick-time to strathspey should be about 2 to 1. Medleys count as strathspeys. There should generally be no more than one strathspey over 32 bars long (not many exist, anyway) and no more than two quick-time dances over 32 bars long. In selecting dances, think about the music for the dances, and make sure that many have exciting music that invites dancing.

Arrangements of the Set. Include one or two square (or triangular) sets or dances for three-couple sets. If you have appropriate music, it is sometimes nice to do two-couple strathspeys six times through in three-couple sets. Round-the-room dances can be good openers for the beginning of the program or after intervals, especially lengthy ones, but note the cautions below.

Number of Couples. Including some dances for two, four, or five couples is a good idea rather than having all three-couple dances. But watch out, especially for the number of two-couple dances included. Too many can be exhausting in quick time and boring in strathspey.

"Show Stoppers." You should try to include at least one "show-stopper" in each set of dances. Show stoppers are dances that are so popular or thrilling, or because of their music, that the dancers will probably call for an encore of "once and to the bottom."

4. Flexibility

These general guidelines may need to be adjusted based on who will attend the dance. If there are many beginners, then more of the program should be devoted to quite easy dances with standard figures. Repetition of standard figures (as long as not in neighboring dances) may be a virtue if there will be primarily inexperienced dancers. If any of the dancers are going to be "more mature" or lacking in stamina, then consider having more strathspeys than usual and avoid two-couple dances and those with more than 32 bars. Some people without country dance experience may have done more widely known dances such as Gay Gordons, Strip the Willow, and Dashing White Sergeant, and you might want to include such dances if some of those attending will know them but not the regular country dance repertoire.

B. Number of Dances

1. Length versus Depth

As a general guideline, you can plan on doing about six dances per hour of dancing. That estimate allows for socializing between dances but does not include the time needed for intervals, announcements, etc. It also does not leave room for encores. If many beginners

attend, then plan on only 4 or 5 dances per hour because the briefings will be longer, and there will probably be more walkthroughs. Successful and enjoyable dance parties do not necessarily have to be long ones.

Programs that exceed the endurance levels of the majority of the dancers stop being enjoyable toward the end when the focus subtly shifts toward the challenge of "holding out to the bitter end." Many different dances also put a mental strain on the dancers. After a certain point, the dances all begin blurring together, and individuals can't absorb and distinguish yet another sequence of figures. Where that breaking point varies with the experience level and expectations of the dancers. Beginners generally have not yet developed the physical stamina and mental framework for a long program, so you'll probably want less dancing time in programs geared toward them. Don't fill the program so tightly that there is no room for encores. Musicians love to play for an encore; when there is a genuine, spontaneous clamor for them, they add far more to the spirit of the event than does one more dance squeezed into the allotted time. Some musicians may have definite views about the number of dances they want to play, so check with the musicians about the length of the program.

2. Time Estimates

On average, it takes about 4 minutes to announce a dance, arrange the sets, and give a briefing. An 8 x 32 quick-time dance takes about 4½ minutes; an 8 x 32 strathspey takes about 8¼ minutes.