

NOTES ON PLANNING A SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCE PROGRAM

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I originally wrote these notes because several of us in the Chicago Branch of the R.S.C.D.S. perceived a need for a compilation of suggestions on planning successful SCD programs that could be used by chairs of dance events, including people who are not teachers and who do not have an extensive knowledge of Scottish country dances. My objective was to offer some guidance on the range of issues that a person responsible for planning the program and music for a social event should consider, emphasizing breadth rather than depth. Several other individuals and groups have prepared useful suggestions for planning programs that discuss certain topics in more detail. There are some common themes in those that I have seen, but they also have different perspectives and emphases that are worth reading if you can find them. One good published one is by Bob Campbell in the September 1989 issue of *TACTALK* (volume 14, number 2).

Ingrid Kendall, Martin Mulligan, and Susie Petrov made several useful suggestions that were incorporated in the first version. These revised notes also include ideas developed while working with Barbara Cool and Maurice Cohen on planning programs during the last two years. I welcome comments and suggestions about what needs to be added or changed to make the notes as useful as possible.

Notes on Planning a Scottish Country Dance Program

Choice of Dances

1. Level of Difficulty. There is a tendency to select dances that on average are too difficult. The most successful programs are those in which most of the dances are relatively easy but enjoyable. At most there should be only one or two dances that have challenging unique figures and almost no standard figures. At the other extreme, there should not be a large number of dances that are simply 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. Half the dances in a given set (those between intervals) should be comfortable ones for the group as a whole. You will have to adjust the average level of difficulty to fit the general experience level of those participating, the purpose of the dance, the events that will be occurring before and after the dance, etc.

2. Familiarity. Most of the dances should be familiar ones. The instructions for unfamiliar dances should either be readily available (for instance, through R.S.C.D.S. publications) or distributed ahead of time. 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. For example, consider including one or two dances from the most recent R.S.C.D.S. publications.

The dances can come from a variety of sources. However, the majority of the dances should be from R.S.C.D.S. publications, both because the instructions for them are the most widely available and because we are a part of the Society.

Sources of Ideas. One source of ideas for familiar dances is the list of dances that have been done recently at the group's classes. Another guide to what is familiar is what is currently being danced

at parties and balls held by other Branches and groups.

3. Variety. Another quality that makes for a successful program is variety. There are at least five dimensions of variety to consider: figures, music, arrangements of the set, number of couples, and "show stoppers."

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 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 (see the listing at the end of these notes with some additional abbreviations for common figures that lie in wait to snare the unwary program planner).

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 corners, reels of four, perhaps double triangles and hello-goodby setting ... the list depends upon 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 that have reels of three 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 horn pipes) are somewhat interchangeable, but the ratio of quick-time to strathspey should be about 2 to 1. Medleys count as strathspeys. There generally should be no more than one strathspey that is over 32 bars long (not many exist, anyway), and programs usually have no more than two quick-time dances over 32 bars long.

Dull music is a severe impediment to the enjoyment of an otherwise good program. In selecting dances, think about the music for the dances, and make certain 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. It is sometimes nice to do two-couple strathspeys 6 times through in three couple sets if you have appropriate music. Round-the-room dances can be good openers for the beginning of the program or after intervals, especially lengthy ones, but note the cautions later about round-the-room dances.

Number of Couples. It's a good idea to include some dances that are for two, four, or five couples 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 those dances that are so popular or thrilling in their own right or because of their music that the dancers will probably call for an encore of "once and to the bottom." Odds are that you'll be wrong on what ones actually are the show stoppers during that particular event, but you should try to assure that there are some in the program.

4. Flexibility. All of these general guidelines may need to be adjusted because of who will be attending the dance. If there will be 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 actually be a virtue if there will be mostly inexperienced dancers. If many of the dancers are going to be "more mature" or lacking in

stamina, then consider having more strathspeys than normal 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.

Number of Dances

1. Length versus Depth. As a general guideline, you can plan on doing about 6 dances per hour of dancing. That estimate allows for some 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 will be attending, then plan on only 4 or 5 dances per hour because the briefings will be longer and there will probably be more walk-throughs.

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." A large number of different dances is also a mental strain on the dancers. After a certain point the dances all begin blurring together and individuals simply can't absorb and distinguish yet another sequence of figures. Where that breaking point is 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 to have 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; and 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 8×32 quick-time dance takes about 4½ minutes; an 8×32 strathspey takes about 8¼ minutes.

Order of the Dances

Again, variety is the key to a successful sequence of dances. Consider variety with respect to music, figures, and difficulty. Pay special attention to the first and last dance in each set. The process of deciding upon the order of dances in a program involves the juggling of many sometimes opposing constraints. While the goal is to maximize several objectives, the process often also entails trying to minimize problems. There seldom is one perfect order of dances, but expect to go through several iterations before you are satisfied. If at all possible, get a second opinion from someone who is familiar with both the dances and the group.

1. Music. About every third dance should be a strathspey or medley, and you should avoid having two jigs or two reels in a row. But vary things a little: don't use a single sequence like jig-reel-strathspey throughout the program, and check for repetitive sequences in which every other dance is a strathspey. Try not to put two dances with patterns longer than 32 bars next to each other.

2. Figures. Make certain that neighboring dances don't seem too much alike, paying particular attention to how they begin and end and to the progressions. A good way to find repetitions is to write down the tentative order of dances with the figures in each summarized in an abbreviated notation that fits on one line. Even better is to write each dance and its figures on a slip of paper or a file card. You can then arrange and rearrange the dances until you have a satisfactory sequence. An electronic equivalent is to use a spreadsheet and rearrange the rows.

Two other things to check on are the number of couples in the dance and the set arrangements. Avoid two or more 2-couple or 4-couple dances in a row, and don't put dances with unusual set arrangements next to each other. You also should try to keep two-couple dances and those requiring

complete sets of four or more couples out of the latter part of lengthy programs. Tired dancers are less likely to appreciate two-couple dances, and it becomes more difficult as the event progresses to cajole dancers into getting up and completing sets. If you want a two-couple strathspey toward the end of a program, consider doing it 6 times through in three-couple sets (unfortunately there aren't many recordings of 6×32 strathspeys).

3. Difficulty. If you include difficult dances that only some of the dancers will be able to do, make certain they are preceded and followed by dances that everyone can join with ease and enjoyment. The general guideline is to avoid having some individuals sitting out too long. Accordingly, you should also be less willing to have encores of dances that exclude the beginners than of dances for everyone.

The more challenging dances usually should not be among the first few in a program while dancers are physically and mentally warming up, nor among the last few while attention spans are short. The best place for them is probably in the second quarter of a typical program with 15 to 18 dances. This general objective, however, needs to be balanced with the equally important one that the more difficult dances should not be bunched together.

4. Number of Dances in a Set Between Intervals.

Programs with 18 or 12 dances can be conveniently divided into sets of 6 dances each. It's easy with 6 dances in a set to have two quick-time dances for every strathspey with a variety of sequences, such as JRSRSJ, RSJRSJ, and JSRSJR.

A program with 15 dances suggests sets of 5 dances; however, it's harder to preserve the ratio of quick-time to strathspey selections without beginning or ending a set with a strathspey—not a cardinal error, but something that is nice to avoid. Consider instead dividing a 15-dance program into sets of 8 and 7 dances with perhaps a slightly longer period between dances somewhere toward the middle of the sets, particularly if the room is hot.

5. *First and Last Dances.* Start the program with an easy dance for everyone, begin and end each set with a lively dance that everyone can enjoy, and make certain to end the event with a rousing and relatively easy dance that will have all but the injured up and involved. Having exciting music is particularly important for the first and last dances.

Jigs generally seem to be the best opening dance. They are light-hearted and uplifting and are often easier for musicians to play. Avoid starting a program with a dance in which there is a lot of pas de basque or one in which all the dancers are constantly moving; people need to warm up slowly. You'll have to weigh this caution, which applies to many round-the-room dances, against the sociability of such dances at the start of the program. One compromise is to do them only a few times through.

An alternative approach to getting everyone involved and limbered up after an interval is to begin with Waltz Country Dance or one of the less strenuous old-time dances. This is not the time to introduce an unfamiliar dance, however: Choose a dance that most of the people at the event know and like so that the music and dance will entice them back onto the floor. Local preferences will vary, but it is probably better to use this alternative as an occasional change of pace rather than as a routine pattern for programs.

Dances in which the final figure is a circle of 6 hands round and back are often used to finish a program because they bring everyone in the set together in a final flourish, including the couple standing out at the top. But don't overdo a good thing by ending every program with this same figure.

6. *Extras.* Selecting the right last dance is one of the more important aspects of determining the order of the dances. Therefore, you need to plan and use optional extras carefully. There are two approaches.

If you want to add the extras at the end if time permits, then at least one of the extras must be a good ending dance that can follow the one at the end of the regular program. The other extras need to form good sequences of dances that can go between these two dances.

The second approach allows more flexibility in the selection of extras but requires more monitoring during the event. This approach is to select spots throughout the program, especially in the second half, where each of the extras could go in terms of the guidelines about the order of dances.

The problem with this approach is that you also need to have estimates of how long the various segments of the program will take and criteria set ahead of time for whether or not there will be time for an extra when its possible moment in the program arrives.

Selection and Preparation of Music and Notes about Working with Musicians

1. *Round-the-Room Dances.* Round-the-room dances should only be danced 5 or 6 times through because they can be either exhausting or boring if done too many times. This can easily be arranged with live musicians, but there are not many recordings that are 5 or 6 times through for round-the-room dances. You might consider opting for 4 rather than 8 times, particularly if it is going to be a long or hot event.

2. *Fitting the Music to the Dance.* Most dances have recommended lead tunes. Use these if at all possible. If they are not available, then try to pick appropriate music that fits the phrasing and spirit of the dance. Avoid tunes that are associated with other, familiar dances. The music for "Mairi's Wedding" can't be used for other 8×40 reels, for instance.

3. *Selecting and Preparing Recorded Music.*

Variety. Try to vary the musical styles from one dance to the next. Use recordings by several groups with varying timbres and arrangements. If possible, include some by fiddle-dominated groups and ones with unusual instrumentations. Above all, choose music and recordings that are stimulating and engaging for dancing.

Plan Ahead. If you are making a tape of the whole program, prepare it well in advance, and listen to it all the way through to make certain there are no problems. It's a good idea to make a backup in case something untoward happens like the "record" button being pressed. If you are using records or

tapes of individual dances, double check that they are all in good condition and in the proper sequence and that the tapes are cued and ready to go.

Tempos. The tempos for reels and jigs usually are between 55 and 59 bars per minute; those for strathspeys, between 31 and 33 bars per minute. What tempo feels right depends upon both the tunes and the dance. In general, the tempos should be faster for younger dancers and slower for older or less experienced ones. If you cannot adjust tempos while preparing a program tape, note where the tape (or record) player will have to be speeded up or slowed down. Also be aware that the machine used at the event may well be significantly slower or faster than the one you use to check the tempos.

Encores and Extras. If extras are going to be interspersed throughout the program, record them on a separate set of tapes so that you can change tapes if you decide to include one. You'll probably guess wrong, but try to have possible encores also recorded "once and to the bottom" on separate tapes that you can quickly access during the dance. You want to try to avoid deadening the enthusiasm for an encore by the delay of rewinding the main tape.

4. Working with a Band.

Involve the Musicians in the Planning. At the early stages of the planning, ask the musicians about the length of the program and any dances they would particularly like to have included. Leave plenty of time to get their reactions to the preliminary program: Even if they don't have favorites, they may have dances they would rather not play for one reason or another. They should have the final program at least 6 to 8 weeks before the dance so they can be well prepared.

Special Order Considerations. Musicians also have to warm up, so avoid real tours de force as opening numbers. Running jigs and reels are going to be hard to play until the fingers are loosened up and the spirit of the event takes over. If a tune sounds like it has an impressive number of notes per 8-bar phrase, then it is probably not a good opening dance. Ask for and heed the musicians' opinions.

Getting Signals Straight. Discuss with the band whether they want the dance announced before they play an intro or vice versa. Also arrange how to agree quickly upon whether or not there will be an encore so that it can be announced before the sets begin disintegrating and dispersing.

Codes for Figures Adapted From Keith H. Napier, *Scottish Country Dance Index*

These abbreviations are not meant to describe an entire dance, but rather to indicate the sequence in a dance of the major SCD figures and formations, including those to check for repetitiveness. These are merely suggestive: make up your own to capture frequent patterns.

Abbrev.	Description	Abbrev.	Description
A&R	Advance and Retire (retire & advance, with setting, etc.)	POURR	Pousette Right Round (Diamond Pousette)
A&Trn	Advance & Turn	PROMx	Promenade for <i>x</i> Couples
ALLx	Allemande for <i>x</i> couples (<i>x</i> =2,3,4)	<i>Half reels included under appropriate reel description</i>	
ARCH	Arches	REEL3	Reel of 3 other than as below
BAL	Balance in Line	R3Acr	Reel of 3 across the Dance
BIRL	Bourell (Birl)	R3Cnr	Reel of 3 with Corners (on sides)
B-T-B	Back to Back	R3CRO	Cross-over Reel of 3 (incl. Inveran)
BarnDr	"Barn-door turns"	R3D+1	Reel of 3, dancing couple plus one other person
CAST	Cast off & up behind own lines	R3Pro	Reel of 3 with at least one couple in promenade hold
CHAIN	Grand Chain (both full & half)	R3Sid	Reel of 3 with leading couple on own sides
CH-PR	Chain Progression	REEL4	Reel of Four, other than as below
CHASE	Chase	R4Acr	Reel of 4 across the dance
	<i>Figures with Corners</i>	R4Dia	Reel of 4 on diagonal
C-BAL	Balance with Corners	R4Sid	Reel of 4 on side of dance
C-CHN	Corner Chain	R&L	Rights and Lefts
C-SET	Set to Corners (no turning)	RONDL	Rondel
C-SCP	Set to Corners & Partner (Hello-Goodby)	S&Cst	Set and Cast
C-S&T	Set and Turn Corners	S&Lnk	Set and Link
C-TRN	Turn Corners (no setting)	SPEC	Special figure peculiar to the dance
C-TCP	Turn corner/partner/corner/partner	SPURT	Spurtle
CROWN	Crown Triangles	S 2&2	Set in line in twos
D-Tri	Double Triangles	S 3&3	Set in line in threes
FIG8	Figure of Eight (one cpl dancing)	S*2	Set twice
FIG8D	Double Figure 8 (two cpls dancing)	S H/L	Set with Highland step
FIG8H	Half Figure of 8 (one couple)	S H/S	Set with Highland Schottische
HRx	Hands Round for <i>x</i> dancers (3,4,6,8) (incl. halfway)	TXH	Turn Left/Right/Both Hands
HXx	Hands Across for <i>x</i> dancers (wheel) (incl. halfway)	TOURB	Tourbillon
KNOT	Knot Progression	TOURN	Tournée
LAD-C	Ladies' Chain	T&Cst	Turn and Cast
LEAD	Lead (dance) down the middle & up	X&Cst	Cross and Cast
LD&Cst	Lead down or up & cast		
PET	Petronella Setting (full, half, or quarter)		
POUSx	Pousette (Quick) for <i>x</i> Couples		
POU-H	Half Pousette (Strathspey)		

Example:

Sequence of main figures in "Duke of Perth" in this notation is:

T&Cst TLH C-TCP C-S&T R3Cnr