

# Crowded Dance Halls

*The following is recent correspondence between Robin Stern, a dance organizer, and Brad Foster, CDSS's director; it is printed here with their permission.*

Dear CDSS,

I am on a committee to discuss/research what to do when dances are overcrowded, focusing on keeping a safe and enjoyable dance environment. We are looking into handling this issue for special dances, but are also (gladly) experiencing a trend in upward attendance for our local dances. Have you ever compiled a list of ideas/suggestions for handling overcrowded dances?

Thanks.

*Robin Stern, Triangle Country Dancers,  
Durham, North Carolina*

Dear Robin,

Congratulations on your growing attendance! To the best of my knowledge, no one has gathered together ideas on what to do in crowded situations. Sounds like a good question to present in the *CDSS News*. Here are some of my personal ideas and observations.

I remember early on in my coming to Pinewoods one of the teachers said “some of you out there don’t know how to dance in a crowded hall.” It was true! Many of us had little experience with crowds in those days.

Simple suggestions include: dancers should try to be self-contained, i.e., keep elbows down and in for an allemande, the “extended” hands/arms in swings should be pulled in. Dancers should watch behind them when backing up (a problem more for English dances than American).

Programming helps too. I remember the memorial for Genny Shimer, held in Northampton, Massachusetts. We put in many of her favorite dances only to discover that they didn’t fit in the hall! English dances with lines falling back, English or American longways dances with lines of four going up or down the hall, longways dances with everyone swinging across the set (fortunately a pretty rare pattern)—these are some of the same figures that take extra space and can be avoided. (We have gathered together programming ideas for crowded English dances; they are found in *Dances for a Crowded Hall: Self-Contained English Dances*.) \*

And asking dancers to adjust helps too, such as asking them to move in when someone goes outside them (pulling the stationary dancers into the center of a square when someone promenades outside).

I call these the simple suggestions because they work if people are willing. Life is very difficult in a crowded hall if the dancers don’t want to adjust. Twenty or so years ago I heard the story of a caller at a contra dance who found some of the dancers were using a wide arms-joined-at-the-shoulders swing. It was dangerous; the caller asked the people to stop; they refused. Perhaps they didn’t like the way the caller asked them to stop; perhaps they were just being selfish and rude. In any case, it left that dance a dangerous situation. It is far harder to adjust to a crowded situation when the dancers won’t help or when they actively hinder attempts at making things work.

I’ve heard another story of a crowded dance; actually, the dance wasn’t crowded as such; instead everyone packed into the top of the hall, leaving space at the bottom. The caller asked them to spread out; the dancers ignored the request. The caller then asked them to form lines across the hall, hoping that would get them to spread out; they did form such lines, but it didn’t reduce the crowding (everyone was still up at the top). Someone got injured, and complained later that the caller was at fault for the crowded situation. Sounded to me like the dance community was at fault.

The most important things for dealing with a crowded hall is a willing crowd and a caller/teacher willing to deal with the issue. Someone once described English dancing as an eye contact sport (in the United States at least), and contra as a body contact sport. Others have said that they measure the “success” (meaning excitement and energy level) of a dance by the number of bruises they bring home. I’d hate to be in a community like that in a crowded hall! When the CDSS

Executive Committee came to Chapel Hill in February 2004, the Friday night contra was extremely crowded. As someone from out of town, I was impressed with how well behaved people were.

About ten years ago I heard of a dance group that lost their insurance because of crowding. That group moved to a larger hall and their insurance was reinstated. I've also heard of groups that had to limit the number of people at a dance. Once the maximum number was reached, new arrivals were kept at the outside door until someone else left, at which point one person was let in for every one that left. Public buildings should have occupancy limits; if you exceed those limits, the dance could be shut down (either by the hall or the fire marshal or the insurance company). So one solution to crowding is to limit attendance, or to move to a larger hall.

Those are my quick thoughts. Good luck with your situation!

*Brad Foster, Executive and Artistic Director*

\* Six experienced English dance leaders present programming and hall management suggestions for a crowded dance. Includes an introduction and sample program by Brad Foster. Does not include dance instructions. 20 pages, CDSS, 2004; [www.cdss.org/sales](http://www.cdss.org/sales).

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