

A Caller's Check List

[Contributed by Hugh Stewart, frequent caller at ceilidhs in the Cambridge area. See the pages for [Cambridge Contra](#) and [The Round](#). - Thos G]

This is intended to be a list of questions to ask when someone asks you to call a ceilidh for them. I presume you have a collection of easy dances you are capable of calling.

Logistics

- When, where?
 - Is the starting time real? Will two couples arrive at the advertised time and demand to dance; will the hall be packed quarter of an hour early; will it actually start three-quarters of an hour later after a meal has over-run?
 - Is the ending time real? Will everyone rush off home early to relieve baby-sitters? Will everyone be raring for another half-hour of dancing at the end. If the latter what are you going to do? (NB you may think another half-hour would be great but the caretaker may have other ideas, as may the organisers who have to clear up afterwards or the band who have to agree to play on. Don't extend the dance without willing agreement from these people.)
- Access
 - Can you get in to set up early enough?
 - If you bring heavy equipment by car can you park near the hall?
- Amplification
 - Who will supply PA? Most bands will be happy to give you a microphone or let you plug yours into their system. Some don't have a spare socket and demand that the caller supply his own system. You might not trust their system anyway.
- Dress
 - How formal is the dance? A formal dance might want a caller in evening dress, a casual one might worry if the caller were wearing a tie.
 - Does the band wear a uniform? Do you want to appear as part of the band?
- Pay
 - You should be clear up-front how much (if anything) you are being paid, and by whom. (i.e. is the organiser paying the band who then pay you, or is he paying you separately.) If payment is by some complicated formula then it needs to be at least written down somewhere. (I presume you are not in this business to get rich.)
- Food and drink - are you going to get any?
 - It is reasonable to assume that if food is served to the dancers in the interval then the band and caller get fed too.
 - Depending on the dance there may or may not be a bar. Some organisers tell the band and caller to help themselves from the bar for free, but this can be very expensive hospitality with some bands. If you don't know that there will be a bar you should take any drink you think you will need with you to play safe.
- Advertising
 - If the organisers put out a flyer with your name on it then they should give you a copy to check they have your name right. (They probably won't bother though.)
 - It is a good idea to ask for a copy of any flyer so you can see what expectations the dancers might have. (If there is a cowboy picture on the poster for example.) (You probably won't get that either.)
 - Do the organisers want you to advertise their dance? Obviously not for a private party, but a PTA group might be delighted to have a few extras turn up, and if you call one dance you might get people rushing up and asking where they can find more dances.
- Contacts
 - The organiser. If the booking was months before the event it is a good idea to contact the organiser a week or two before the event to reassure him that you haven't forgotten, and to reassure yourself that the event is still on, and in the same

place. (If you really count as being part of the band then the band leader is responsible for this contact.)

- The band leader. If you think of some specially appropriate dance you may need to check whether the band can play the right music for it.
- How to contact you. Those people need to know how to contact you, both in general, and in case of panic on the day.
- The hall. It can be useful to be able to check direct with the caretaker if you want to check something (can you park a car there all day while you go and do the tourist bit round the town?)

The dance

- One off v series? One off - dance v social event?
 - If it is a dance then people are there to dance; you can expect them to be reasonably punctual and actually want to join in the dancing
 - If it is a wedding, 21st birthday party, retirement party or whatever then you have to appreciate that people are not there to dance. Even if they do not join in the dancing they can still enjoy the atmosphere and approve of the general principle of having a dance. So long as you as caller accept the event on those terms it can be a success -- you will have a struggle to persuade people to get up and dance, and should not try too hard because many of them don't really want to dance -- but you may be suprised when you announce the last dance and everyone realises that this has to be the token dance they should join in and the dance floor is suddenly swamped.
- The series
 - One of a series gives you a known quantity. You can ask about the previous event to get a feel for what will happen. On the other hand there will be expectations from the previous event which you will have to meet. Unless the previous caller has been the incumbent for a zillion years you can safely ask the previous caller for advice -- organisers commonly have different bands and callers just to avoid getting in a rut so the fact that you have usurped the previous caller is not necessarily any reflection on him. An easy thing to ask for is a list of dances they did last time. (You usually won't get any answer, but some callers and clubs log their dances and if the information is to hand you may as well have it.)
- Structure
 - Is there an interval? (Probably.) Roughly when and how long?
 - Spots? Are there displays, song spots, presentations, speeches? When are they to fit in, how long will they take?
 - Announcements, adverts for the next dance in the series. If it is just "make sure you remind people not to slam the car doors as they leave" then it is probably better for you to do it yourself sometime rather than struggling to persuade some idiot organiser to speak into the microphone. If it is a blow by blow account of next term's events then you may as well hand over to someone who knows what he wants to say.
 - Public thanks at the end. The convention is to do this just before the last dance so we can end dancing, not with a series of boring announcements. An organised group will line up someone to do this but if they don't you (as caller) should make a point of thanking the band publicly (which may then lead to them struggling to give public thanks to the caller through a fiddle pick-up). Assuming they deserve it, private thanks to the band after the dance is finished is a good idea too.
- Who is in charge?
 - To the people dancing you are in charge. If the caretaker appears half way through and says you have to be out in ten minutes you need to know who is responsible for the hall booking and let them to sort it out.
 - Bear in mind that if smoke billows in from next door it is your job to decide whether to tell everyone to bale out through the fire exits.
 - If there are a lot of spots then there may be an MC running the evening, handing over to you as caller for the "dance spots". Obviously you need to liase with him as

to how long your dance spots should be; ideally he can warn you about what the spots will be so you can think about clashes -- will a singer sing to a tune you have just used for a dance, will a dance display side do one of "your" dances?

- Expectations
 - Is there some dance everyone knows that you really ought to do sometime during the dance?
 - Does this group always end the evening (or first half) with some standard dance? You don't have to pander to such expectations, but you should ignore them by choice, not out of ignorance.
- What sort of dancers will you get?
 - Quantity
 - Sex ratio -- do you need to rush off and look up triples or international dances which don't need partners?
 - Age range -- children and OAPs want different material, though of course one of the great plus points of country dances is that it is one of the few social activities that you can do with mixed age ranges, where Granny and Grandson can join in on an equal footing.
 - Singles v Couples -- are most dancers going to arrive as couples and object to dances that separate them, or will people be delighted by the opportunity that mixers give them to dance with everyone else?
 - Experience. If this is a dance club, or even a long-running ceilidh series you may have dancers that want more challenging material. If most dancers have next to no experience then you need dances that probably look boringly simple to you; if in doubt use even easier dances; people get more frustrated struggling with a dance that is too complicated for them then doing something they regard as dead easy.
- The band -- what can they, do they want to, play?
 - Do they have some standard list of dances with associated music sets?
 - Are there some tune types they don't have? (eg 9/8 slip jigs, rags)
 - Are there some tunes they can play, but would really rather not?
 - Singing calls? Key?
 - What if you throw music at them (well beforehand, not at 2 minutes notice)?

On the Day

- Report to the organiser when you have arrived. It is one worry off his mind.
- Check with him
 - Start / finish times
 - Whether an over-run is acceptable.
 - When any intervals / spots / speeches are.
 - Who the MC is if there is someone else in overall charge of the event.
- Identify the band leader
- Bands distinguish the business manager from the band leader; up to now you should have been talking to the business manager; at the dance you should talk music to the band leader, who might be a different person.
- Check for panics from the band
- (we've lost our book of Jigs so you can only have reels tonight); more probably "we hate that tune you threw at us, can't we scrap that dance?".
- Check that the dance area is safe.
- Make sure that things are set up reasonably so you won't get a bar queue snaking across the dance floor, that nobody has scattered hay on the dance floor "to add atmosphere", etc. etc. You know more about how to organise a hall for dancing than they do so make sure things are set up right.
- Check where the fire exits are. (Toilets too for that matter.)
- You are the person seen to be in charge, so when fire breaks out you may have to organise the panic.
- Agree signals with the band

- You need to be able to say
 - Panic stop (chaos on the dance floor)
 - Once more
 - Generally signalling one finger towards the end of a tune will be taken to mean play the tune once more and then stop. Two fingers means twice more. If the band are changing tunes they may want enough notice to change back to the original tune the last time through.
 - A cry of OUT about 7 bars before the end of a tune will usually stop a band in the right place, but make sure you are not usurping the band-leader's prerogative: you should be addressing your commands to him, not his minions.
 - Be aware that some dances (eg Nottingham Swing) can be done twice through for once through a tune, and others (Cumberland Square Eight) have a tune through twice for once through the dance. This makes signalling "once more" ambiguous. (No, I don't know what the answer is either.)
 - faster / slower
 - There aren't really any standard signals here. Shouting "Faster" or "Slow Down" is probably the simplest. (Don't bother being polite, the band leader is busy and not interested in listening to long paragraphs from you; don't risk negatives:- "You're too slow" will probably be received as "slow".)
 - Be aware that tunes with lots of notes can't be speeded up easily, so if you know you will want to speed a dance up you should warn the band ahead of time.
- Find out how the band likes to start dances.
- A chord, 4 bar introduction, whatever. (I like 2 or 4 bars on a melody instrument and then the band joining in at the start because then I can tell where I am, but the band may have other ideas.)
- Once things are under control it is a good idea to walk round and chat to any arriving dancers to size up their level of dance knowledge.
- Relax, Don't Panic.
- You have a responsible job, and people's enjoyment of the dance will depend to a large extent on you, but nobody is likely to have asked you to do it unless they thought you were up to it. If it is your natural style to tease people and tell funny jokes then fine, but don't start doing that because you are in a panic. If you do get in a panic then just play it straight and get on with the job without trying to be clever.

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