# Calling at FSGW English Dances

The FSGW English Dance is a social evening which is open to dancers at all levels of skill. This document provides basic information on what is expected from our both experienced and inexperienced callers.

## I. Expectations

To create a smooth and enjoyable experience for everyone, and to best support and encourage all dancers, we expect callers to strive for the following standards.

**Repertoire and programming:** Glen Echo callers cultivate a varied repertoire that meets programming requirements outlined in the **Programming** section of this document.

**Preparation:** Callers know the dance: they have internalized a clear concept of how the dance looks and works from all positions, with the music. Their cards or notes are used as a reference, rather than words to read to the dancers.

**Teaching:** Teaching is geared towards people of different learning styles and levels of experience, and employs demonstrations on the floor for visual learners and for economy of words. Teaching points on style and history are welcomed; however, this is not the emphasis of the Wednesday night dance. Callers attend to what's happening on the dance floor and adjust their teaching, prompting, or program accordingly.

**Music:**

- Callers communicate tempos to the band—for instance by singing, or conducting, or by stepping in the desired tempo with the music. Callers may, and should, adjust tempos as needed during a dance.
- Callers send a list of tunes and copies of the tunes that are not in the Barnes books to the band at least two days ahead of time.
- Callers ask musicians about preferences and suitability of the tunes when the list is first sent, and adjustments are made cheerfully, as possible. (In return, musicians are cheerful about adjusting to program changes on the fly as needed.)
- Callers bring copies of the tunes that are not in the Barnes books.
- When musicians are "noodling" (playing under and with the teaching), callers signal them effectively.
- Callers give clear signals and plenty of notice to end each dance.

**Stage presence:** Callers know how to use their voice and speak into a sound system so that they can be heard by all in the hall. They also are mindful of setting an encouraging and joyful tone for the room. It is useful to have tools ready for challenging situations, such as bringing back the attention of a talkative crowd, or managing comments from difficult individuals, while allowing for the talking that happens at this social occasion. Most of all, callers aim to manage their own personal emotional state and keep in mind that the room wants them to succeed.

**On the dance floor:** Callers are seen as leaders in our community, so even when they are not calling, they are aware of the way that they dance, and of their behavior on the dance floor. If someone appears to not know the next figure in a dance, callers on the floor appeal to the intelligence of that person by putting themselves in the correct place, preferably without words or motions towards the other person.

- This gives dancers the fullest chance to figure out the dance on their own without overloading them with verbal suggestions from many people at once.
- It trains our community to listen to the current caller rather than to the people around them.
- It affords the current caller the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes and enjoy their own successes.
- It demonstrates that mistakes are accepted with good humor as natural parts of the learning process.
- It sets a good example for other dancers.
- It allows all dancers to hear, dance to, and enjoy the music.

**Community leadership:** Regular presence at dances allows callers to be familiar with the level of dancing, culture, and needs of individuals. It also signals that callers value the community itself.

## II. Programming

The program should include a balanced selection of dances with consideration given to the following factors:

- **Time periods** of the dances
- **Familiarity** to the local group
- **Difficulty level**
- **Different formations**
- **Musical variety**
- **Teaching time versus dancing time**
- **Overall structure** of the evening, including the placement of the break

**Mix dances from different time periods.** Dances from a particular time period often have a similar flavor.

**Vary the familiarity of the dances.** Include some old favorites along with other dances that may be less familiar, along with occasional dances that are entirely new to us. Limit the number of dances that you have written or reconstructed to one or two in an evening. Do not program dances that are still under development.

**Manage the level of difficulty.** Keep in mind the level of difficulty of each dance, and the difficulty level of the combined program. This encompasses physical and mental challenges for dancers, level of teaching difficulty, and level of musical difficulty for the ensemble in question. For dancers, the evening should start at an easy level and build to the most challenging dances near the end of the first half of the evening.

For musicians: It is not always easy to tell which dances will feel challenging for a given set of musicians. Sending a proposed set list to the musicians a few days or more before the dance is one way to minimize any unpleasant musical surprises on the stage during the evening.

**Mix up dance formations.** Program a variety of dance formations over the evening, with the duple minor dances being included more frequently than the other categories.

Do not leave too many dancers sitting idle during a set dance. Use tap-ins whenever possible to minimize this.

**Strive for musical variety.** Vary the key signature and time signature. Key signature refers to both whether a dance is in a major key, a minor key, or a modal key, as well as the main key (tonic) of a dance, such as D, G, B flat, etc. Time signature refers to the rhythmic structure: for example, 4/4 (march), 6/8 (jig), or waltz.

Generally, avoid programming sequential dances with similar musical structures. A major-key tune in 4/4 time might be followed with a jig in a minor key, for example. Sometimes that is unavoidable, but certainly avoid programs that are predominantly major key (or minor), or predominantly duple time (or jigs, or waltzes).

Also vary the feel across the dance: is this dance sprightly and happy, or dignified and stately, or energetic and driving, or something else? Choosing tunes from varied time periods and genres will help in this effort.

**Control the time you spend teaching.** The Wednesday night dance is intended to be a social evening. Choose dances based on the amount of time that it takes to teach the dance. Balance dances that merit more in-depth teaching with quick-teach dances.

**Structure the evening.** Be attentive to the overall mood of the dancers and musicians to gauge when to end a given dance. Be ready to substitute a more or less challenging dance if needed. Generally, the break should start between 9:15 and 9:30. Announcements happen just before the last dance of the first half. Please thank the musicians, and the person(s) who provided the snack, by name. The break should be long enough for everyone to have an opportunity to get snacks, get a drink, and have some time to socialize. A larger crowd may need a slightly longer break, but not so long that people cool down and think of leaving. Give musicians a 2-minute warning to return to the stage.

## III: Feedback

For the health of the community as a whole, and for callers' development over time, we collect and communicate feedback on callers' performance. Feedback is communicated by the caller schedulers. Feedback must be given and received in a spirit of collaboration.

**Collecting feedback.** Paper and pencil are available at the dance, with a box labeled "Feedback," on the table at the entrance. Dancers should be reminded to use it, with or without their name attached, for any feedback they desire (caller, band, hall, organization structure, weather…). Dancers are also encouraged to talk to any committee members present, or use

email. In addition, ECDC members and the caller coordinator, when present at the dance, attend to the caller's performance in relation to expectations.

**Sharing feedback.** The ECDC reviews all feedback, whether paper or electronic, before deciding what to do with it. Trends and occasional specifics are routinely passed along to the caller shortly after the dance so as to be most useful to the caller. Feedback given to callers is specific, constructive, positive as much as possible, and focused on caller development. The caller expectations documented above are the benchmark for caller performance.

**Caller responsiveness.** We expect callers to be open to feedback and responsive to suggestions. Callers may always ask questions about feedback and suggestions. Mentoring by experienced callers will be available for any caller who desires it or whom the ECDC feels requires it. If a caller consistently fails to meet the above expectations despite receiving specific feedback, mentoring, and/or guides to improvement, the ECDC and schedulers will reduce or end bookings for that caller.

## IV. Caller Rotation and Scheduling

The goal in scheduling callers is to make each Wednesday evening a good experience for our dancers, and secondarily, to give people who want to call a chance to do so. Regularity of scheduling may vary due to scheduling factors out of our control, but the goal is a fair distribution among callers. We check availability, distribute over available nights, and plan for the irregularities to come out in the wash.

**Regular scheduling:** Currently we have a system of regular callers, occasional callers, and new callers. Subject to dance dates and callers' availability, and with the current number of callers in each of those groups, the regular group calls approximately every 2 months, while the occasional callers call approximately every 3 months. This is before factoring in new/mentee callers, visiting callers, and callers who move to the area. Callers wishing to move from the occasional group to the regulars group must participate in caller mentoring, as detailed in the Mentoring section of this document. Any caller wishing to move from a less frequent booking basis to a more frequent one must have the approval of the mentor callers and the ECDC. Callers who find they cannot call on a night when they have been booked should notify the schedulers as soon as possible for a swap or replacement. When we need a last-minute substitute, the replacement caller's appearance is not treated as a full night of calling for purposes of scheduling.

**Visiting callers:** We occasionally get the opportunity to book a caller from out of the area. These are generally a nice way to broaden our community's experience and bring in new repertoire or expertise. This has not been so frequent as to create the sense that visitors are taking calling slots away from local callers, so a generally favorable attitude seems prudent at the moment. We will not book callers who have a bad reputation among our own callers or trusted callers from other areas, or with whom we have had difficulty in the past, or who reject our expectations.

**Callers moving to the area:** When an already established caller moves to the area, in order to know how frequently to book them, we need to know:

- How often are they used to calling (i.e., how much experience do they have)?

- How broad is their repertoire and how well does it mesh with ours?
- Have they called for local, regional, and/or national events?
- Do we know their calling already, or do we have references from their home community, or from people we know who have heard them call at regional or national events?

Sometimes we'll already know these things; for others, we'll need to make inquiries and talk to the caller directly. Taking those factors into account, we should book them for a half night or two, and/or a whole night or two, to see how they work with our group and how well they match our caller expectations, before placing them in a particular frequency category.

**New callers:** For callers new to the Glen Echo Town Hall scene, we are experimenting with a mentoring program. Mentoring is discussed in greater detail in the Mentoring section of this document. Mentors who split a night's calling will have a full night to themselves in the month following their mentoring night.

**Schedulers:** Currently we have a scheduling committee consisting of a caller coordinator and two schedulers, who set the caller schedule based on the above parameters, with the approval of the caller coordinator. For unusual occurrences (outside caller requests, anything requiring payment negotiations, weather cancellation re-bookings, etc.), the scheduling committee should run them by the ECDC for advice and approval, and as a courtesy to keep them in the loop. The ECDC (and/or its nominating committee) appoints scheduler replacements in consultation with any remaining schedulers.

## V. Mentoring

Mentoring is used for two purposes here: to start new callers off on a good footing, and to improve the skills of existing callers.

**New callers:** Community members who wish to begin calling for us must go through a period of mentoring. Potential callers should contact the schedulers, who coordinate with the caller-mentors and the ECDC to schedule incoming callers. When scheduling at about once per month for new callers, it is not practical to have more than three or four at a time. Bookings must be balanced to provide for the needs of all concerned: good nights for dancers, experience for mentees, and not overwhelming the mentors.

At the beginning of the process, potential callers should state why they want to call, any prior experiences they have had, and anything they are working on in particular. The ECDC, mentors, and schedulers will decide together whether to accept a new caller in this program. Mentors and mentees should work out together what form of feedback is best between them. They must plan time for both preparation and feedback, on either side of the scheduled dance, so that there is time for preparation and so that feedback does not arrive so late as to be not useful. We hope that the caller expectations and programming sections of this document can be a useful framework and starting point for mentoring.

Potential callers with no prior experience are encouraged to find or organize a workshop dance or three to begin learning the ropes, if possible. At Glen Echo, they should begin with calling a handful of dances on a mentor caller's night. They progress to calling half nights, and then to

calling full nights, still mentored. At each stage of progression, the mentors, ECDC, and schedulers should agree to move the mentee on. Schedulers will rotate mentees through the mentors, as possible, for breadth of perspective. We recommend new callers also look for opportunities presented by others: workshops, camp sessions, etc., as a way to get outside perspective and more experience than we can provide.

**Mentors:** Mentors are chosen from among the regular callers, with advice from the ECDC and consent of the mentors in question. Generally, mentors are booked for a whole night of calling in the month after their mentoring night. Mentors must plan for the time that will require: planning with the mentee ahead of their calling night, in time for the mentee to prepare their dances; giving feedback after the mentoring night; and preparing for their own calling night in the subsequent month. Schedulers will endeavor to be sensitive to these needs as well (e.g. not scheduling a mentoring night for the 4th week of one month and that mentor's full night in the 1st week of the following month).

**Existing callers:** Mentors may also work with current callers, when requested by the caller or by the ECDC, or when an existing caller wishes to move to a more frequent booking status. As this is expected to be a less intensive occurrence, mentors will work out remuneration status with the ECDC.

**Mentoring fees:** Mentors are paid based on calling only. When a mentee calls one to three dances of a mentor's evening, the mentor is paid the full fee. For split evenings, the fee is split evenly. For mentees calling a full evening, or for existing callers being mentored through a full evening, the mentee gets the full fee.

## VI. Caller Resources

This document provides a very broad overview of what the FSGW community expects of English Country Dance callers. This is a living document and will be revised whenever the ECDC believes that new or additional information needs to be included. It is not intended to provide calling instruction. There are some excellent written resources for callers available on the FSGW website under English dancing, and CDSS provides more intensive development for new or existing callers through camp classes and workshops.