

Conventions in gender-free English country dance calling, a Boston-area guide

Read Weaver, fall 2024

A lot of my awareness of gender-free English calling has come from callers who do something different from what I expect, so this is very much about **Boston** GF calling. There are some smallish differences in how it's done in other parts of the US—I'll try to point those out below. Some of these descriptions make use of landmarks in the Jamaica Plain hall: there's a big clock on the left side of the hall, and a wall of windows on the right side—translate as needed.

A bit on **philosophy**. What's probably obvious is that gender-free terminology is more inclusive, for example of same-gender couples and non-binary folks. For new dancers, it can be simpler and clearer (certainly clearer when people are dancing the “wrong” role). It also usually requires fewer words. More basically, we think that teaching and calling based on position rather than role makes it easier for dancers to see the pattern of the whole dance, rather than what they as individuals are supposed to do. To the extent men and women have different roles in English dance (though that's much less than in, for example, contra), knowing both roles makes everyone a better dancer. It's also our experience that long-standing gender-free dances feel like a group of people who come to dance together; at long-standing gendered dances, it feels more like a group of women and a separate group of men who come to dance with each other.

Calling is based on **current position**. “Original first diagonals” shouldn't be used (people don't remember and have to move themselves back to that location in their minds, which means it takes too long to figure out); same with “original window file”—we won't remember, so “window file” is used for current window file, not original; etc.

The **exception** to that is ‘ones’, ‘twos’, ‘threes’—those *are* roles, not positions; dancers keep that role till they get to the top or bottom. “Current ones position” will be confusing (or at least unexpected). We'd usually call that “top dancers,” or the role (“ones” or “twos”). If it's a mix of ones and twos (e.g., after people have moved three places around the circle), we'd definitely say “top dancers” (“bottom dancers,” “middle dancers”).

If you've got **nameable landmarks** in the room, use them (clock side, window side; lake side, field side; etc.) rather than left file, right file. It's often easier/quicker to remember, it won't be confused with other “right” or “left” calls (turn single right, left-hand turn, etc.), and it's not affected by which direction a dancer's facing. “Side facing the windows,” while it's easier for a dancer to immediately see, gets confusing if you're facing out; in any case, it's the opposite of what we're used to.

When **three people** in a set of four are doing something, it's usually (though maybe not always) better to use pair-plus-one designations, rather than three individual designations; e.g., “ones and the second window person” rather than “first clock, first window, second window.” If the previous (or next) thing that happens involves two of those three, they're who I'd name as a pair (e.g., “first diagonals and second clock” or “clock dancers and second window” or “twos and first clock”).

In Boston, we would say “end crossed over” rather than “**end improper**.” (I've noticed that this is changing—“end improper” is becoming more common at our dance, so it's less of an issue than it used

to be. Nonetheless:) Because so many of us also do contra, “proper” and “improper” are thought of as formations of a whole line, not positions of individual dancers. “End improper” will therefore lead people to think about whether they’re a one or a two and whether they’re in top position or bottom position, before they decide which side they’re supposed to be on (and if they’re a two in top position, they won’t be able to decide). Similarly, if the twos are below, “twos end improper” and “twos end proper” would lead to the same positioning. “Crossed over” is unambiguous.

“First **diagonals**” is sometimes also called “right diagonals,” but the latter isn’t language we often use in Boston, and that they’re the same thing isn’t obvious: when you’re interacting with your diagonal, you’re facing into the set of four, and so that person is right in front of you, not to your right. I do think this is a concept that could easily be learned (i.e., when you’re facing across the set, first diagonals are right diagonals and second diagonals are left diagonals), we just haven’t taught it that way in Boston. This is definitely a good way of thinking about it in a four-person dance.

Because we haven’t used right diagonals to think about first diagonals in Boston, the concept is difficult for some of us in a **square set**; the first diagonal may go the “wrong” direction (for head couples, NE to SW rather than NW to SE). And how far right do I look to find my right diagonal in a set of eight? There aren’t a ton of square-set dances in ECD, and fewer still that call for diagonal interaction, so Boston GF dancers will need pretty explicit explanation.

Our tradition for finding **partners** is to just get in line, and your partner is the person you’re across from. Hence, callers don’t say “Find a partner and join the set.” (Maybe “Join the set to find your partner” instead, though usually just “Line up for the next dance.”) If there’s someone you really want to dance with, you’re encouraged to join the line at the bottom after the set has formed. Our tradition is also to not have a waltz—the emphasis is on the group dancing together, not individual couples.

In duple or triple minor dances, we rarely worry about **proper vs improper** dances, and pointing it out makes us think we’ll have to do something to account for it, so unless that’s true it can be a distraction. (In improper set dances, where dancers end on a side different from where they started, it’s helpful to let dancers know that’s what’s supposed to happen.)

I note on The Heather and the Rose website that they decide **who goes first** (e.g., in a figure eight) by saying that it should be as though you’re passing right shoulders (assuming the choreography doesn’t more appropriately have you doing something else; e.g., if one of you has to do something next, that’s who should usually go first). We’ve never made a rule about who goes first in Boston (though adding it would help with that moment of hesitation, so maybe...).

We haven’t explicitly taught gender-free **hand holding**, but having it be consistent does help with another moment of hesitation; it’s left hand up, right hand down (though that might change with, e.g., a gate turn). That’s east coast. On the west coast, it’s left hand down, right hand up. (Yike.)

This style of calling, while it’s not 350 years old, *is* nearly 50 years old—there is a real **tradition** here. We’re understanding about mistakes, but we do value that tradition (as well as being used to it), so we’d encourage you to think carefully about deciding to do something different.