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Hot Air from the Editors

As we write this, it is New Year's Eve, 1999. And no matter when the new century and the new millennium begin, switching from 19 to 20 has an emotional impact, at least for many of us. So we would like to send you all best wishes for an extraordinary Year 2000.

Beginning with the last newsletter, Volume 22, No. 2, we began a series of issues which will be focused primarily on Border morris. It has become apparent that many teams have been adopting Border, or forming in order to perform it, so we thought this would be a timely topic.

Having started with Graham Baldwin's piece on the Pershore Morris, we'll continue in this issue with "Bordering on the Insane," by John Kirkpatrick, which was first published in *English Dance & Song* in 1979 (it is important to remember this date as you read the article!). We still find it a fascinating article. John's team, The Shropshire Bedlams, created a style that has inspired many, and is the prototype of much contemporary Border morris. In the Spring issue, we will start publishing typescripts from a series of talks given in England in 1992, at an event called "Border Morris—Boots and Revival." The talks were by John, Roy Dommett, and Gordon Ashman. We'll follow up with an interview we did with John at Sidmouth in 1999, and a short bit he wrote in a letter to us, summarizing his philosophy about women in the morris. The four pieces by John span twenty years, and provide snapshots of the perspective of the founder of one of the most influential morris teams in the latter part of this century.

There are other articles coming up as well. In this issue we're printing a paper by David Loftus, "Morris Along the Margins," which encompasses a lot of excellent ideas and advice for improving morris dancing style, as well as ideas for teachers. And while it is aimed at the Cotswold audience, much of what he has to say is translatable to Border, and other English dance styles. We received a response to Steve Galey's article (Vol. 22, #1), "Top Ten Ways to Maintain Team Longevity." We are printing it here, and hope Steve will come through with a response for the writer.

As the American Morris Newsletter, we have always tried to use mainly North American authors, but in the last year or so we've found that most of the people we've approached for articles have been unable to obliged, for a wide variety of reasons. So, in order not to become an English newsletter by default, or one which mainly does re-prints, we are requesting that...
any of you who have ideas about good articles contact us, and, ideally, volunteer to actually write the articles (if we agree that they are appropriate to the AMN). As always, our contact information is on the inside front cover.

All for now, and again, the very best for a terrific Year 2000!

- Jocelyn & Peter

Many thanks to William Brown for all the Border morris artwork in this issue. William ("Bill") Brown is an illustrator and cartoonist whose work appears nationally. He has been a member of the Foggy Bottom Morris Men (Washington, DC) for about 20 years, serving as squire since 1995, and he may be a member of the mysterious Mason-Dixon Border Morris.
“The practice of re-writing a folk-song is abominable, and I wouldn’t trust it to anyone,” said Vaughan Williams, “except myself.” Substitute “dance” for “song,” and you may begin to appreciate the magnitude of this present author’s particular abominations. For this is the tragic tale of the gross debasement of a fine arm of our national heritage; of the plundering of archives with a view to prostituting all that was found there; of the schemings of an evil, twisted mind that dared to think that these dances were not worthy to be preserved as they stood on the library shelf; of the contamination of ancient ways with the new-fangled ideas, even the deliberate invention, of an arrogant, self-opinionated upstart—me!

But first we must set the scene.

Shropshire 1973. Enter our hero with his lovely assistant, Sue Harris. The fierce local patriotism that fires all immigrants to this part of the world immediately takes hold, and the hunt begins for songs, tunes, and dances of a Shropshire origin. Morris dancing appears to exist in a regional variation—Border Morris—but previous experience and observation show that this is generally regarded at best as a novelty and at worst as a joke. We must investigate further...

Meanwhile the South Shropshire Morris Men beckon, and spasmodic visits to their practices ensue. Despite the modest confines of their title, they had at this time no other competition in the county, and performed their Cotswold Morris in the time-honoured tradition of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) and The Morris Ring. Following, as it did, a two-year absence from regular dancing, I found myself making a rig-
rious assessment of the Ring conventions of style and presentation which
this honourable team had adopted. Twelve formative and action-packed
years with The Hammersmith Morris Men in London had left a legacy of
among personal preferences in the matter of morris dancing, and many pig-
headed notions were already firmly entrenched. As these were all made
manifest later in the Shropshire Bedlam, they deserve an airing here.

Energy. Everyone agrees that what we are dealing with is the relic of an
ancient fertility rite. It is supposed to bring luck. Its performance should
thrill and excite both dancers and audience. There should be a sense of
urgency and vitality in the air, an electric atmosphere. It should be an
uplifting and entrancing experience. At the last Ring meeting I attended
(as an onlooker) the amount of energy expended was more appropriate to
the bowling green than the village green. There was no passion, no fire,
no communication of joy or lust for living. Young men are given to ex-
cess. Any team I taught would have to be far more ferocious and flamboy-
ant than this mincing middle-aged antiquated eye-wash.

Speed. I have always felt that much of the potential grandeur of the indi-
vidual movements in Cotswold Morris is denied because the speed of danc-
ing is too fast. Snatched dancing may impress the uninitiated but it often
conceals lack of ability and indicates a coarseness of approach and a failure
to grasp the essence of the medium. The more time each step and flourish

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is allowed, the greater the heights of exhilaration to which an expansive dancer may soar. And the greater the individual freedom to interpret according to the whim of the moment. Spontaneity must be an acceptable ingredient in a definition of folk music.

Eighty

which leads me to question the generally felt obligation to adhere strictly to what Sharp and the other collectors noted in their travels. Their work was monumental, and all of us now are profoundly in their debt. But what they pieced together from fragments of a dying art is now a well-established practice. Some experiments based on what our great-grandfathers were doing are surely permissible, even desirable, if the Morris Revival is to be anything more than a museum showcase. I doubt if the Morris of 1899 was exactly the same as that of 1819. The difficulty for us in 1979 is to capture the spirit of the original in whatever amendments we choose to impose on its form. A tricky task, and one not fully appreciated by some modern morrisers who have tried out new ideas.

A traditional morris dancer would have had a much less cluttered view of his art than those of us who, in a radically changed social atmosphere, learn these dances for pleasure. The general practice of the EFDSS and The Morris Ring has made it a virtue to be conversant with every different type of ritual dance and to excel in executing each one perfectly according to the letter of the law. In doing so we lose what every traditional dancer must have possessed by right, namely the ability to immerse himself totally in the overall spirit of the dance, and to allow the intuitive faculties of feeling and emotion to overwhelm the thinking, intellectual approach which we, in the Revival, cannot avoid as long as we are trying to remember which hand movements and which steps we are supposed to be doing in the particular dance of the moment. Traditionally there were no traditions. You danced the Morris as you knew it. It was an act of surrender. Any innovations were governed by the strict limitations, in our terms, of the dancer’s experience.

I believe that we should impose similar limits on ourselves. Each team should have one style and do nothing else. There is plenty to choose from after all. Only then can we hope to experience the same sort of feelings as the old dancers, and hope that in time the spirit that moved in them may move us towards an ideal state where exuberance and spontaneity are tempered by discipline and discretion.

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Meanwhile, back in Shropshire…

In May 1975 the Gloucestershire Old Spot Morris Dancers visited Clun May Fair. They are athletic, precise, sexy and spirited. Some local Sixth Formers are so impressed that they ask their Folkie teacher where they can learn this sort of thing. Folkie teacher, not aware of the South Shropshire Morris Men’s existence, approaches the only person he knows who might initiate his pupils into the mysteries of the art. No prizes for guessing whose eyes light up with glee! Here was a heaven-sent opportunity. There was an unexplored local tradition; there was a nucleus of keen young people with no preconceptions about dancing; and there was me, dissatisfied with morris generally, anxious to try a fresh approach, eager to put Shropshire on the morris map, and maybe in the process show people a thing or two. All the omens were favourable. I set about my homework with a happy heart.

Sources. First and foremost there is the article by E.C. Cawte in the EFDSS Journal of 1963, “The Morris Dance in Hereford, Shropshire and Worcestershire.” His list of references is enormous and following them up proved to be a lengthy but fascinating process. There are a few notations of dances in Roy Dommett’s leaflet Other Morris (in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library) some of which later appeared in Lionel Bacon’s Handbook of Morris Dancing published by The Morris Ring. Apart from this handful of complete dances, there is a mass of fragments and snippets of things. There are some overall similarities, but on the whole each dance stands on its own. So I decided to impose a unity of step and style, and then fit the information to that, rather than start with the collected material and work towards some kind of synthesis of all the disparate elements.

As with many features of the Bedlams’ dancing, inspiration came to me whilst walking our dog. On this occasion, Sue and I had stopped off on one of the many journeys we are obliged to undertake in the course of our business, so that she might suckle our infant son. We were on the edge of the village of White Ladies Aston, which had yielded one of the fullest and most interesting dances of all in the Border tradition. While Shep terrorised the local rabbit population, I hit upon a system of stepping taking up two bars of music, so that four steps, twice off each foot, filled eight bars. In terms of the evidence available, this has no justification whatever in the morris of the Border Counties, nor of anywhere else come to that, although I did notice recently that the step occurs fleetingly in one of the Bacup Coconut dances. As a regular feature in these dances it is totally my invention.

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This stepping had a spacious rhythm of its own which naturally af-
fected the pace of every movement and figure. The whole process slowed
right down. It was open, rolling, flowing. It made Cotswold Morris seem
cramped, frantic, and jerky. It was a deliberate move away from what al-
ready existed and it needed time to instil itself in the blood before any
specific dances were attempted.

The dog thought I was bonkers. In order not to lose sight of him al-
together, the first dance that arrived was a processional. It was based on
sword dance figures and I put it to a tune from Regency Brighton. Qualms
of conscience decreed this in future perhaps a little more attention might
be paid to local information.

Looking back now at the original material, the way our dances came
together seems totally random. Bits of this were added to bits of that to
make a new hybrid. More bits made another. Any remaining bits were
slung together as the basis of a third. Then onto another source and start
again. I offer no defence or apology for taking these outrageous liberties.
It just felt right at the time, at that stage in the development of our style
and repertory. And there was the constant inspiration flowing from out
the mist of the Shropshire Hills to keep me on the right track, filling any
gaps in the dances with a considerable sprinkling of home-spun fairy dust.
Homework over.

St. Swithuni Day, July 15th 1975. Our first meeting in Clun Memorial
Hall. There were a few Sixth Formers, a couple of teachers, one or two
waifs and strays—and, merciful heavens, one girl! Next time there were
three girls. Next time five. It soon became apparent that there would be
enough to have a separate team. So after a few joint meetings Sue took

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her women off to Clun Parish Room to form Martha Rhoden’s Tuppenny Dish. This is not their story, but the two teams have always been inseparable and the one cannot be thought of without the other. So, in passing, I’ll just say that of all the women’s teams I’ve seen, there is none more spirited and vigorous, yet more graceful and feminine than our Martha. Send them victorious.

Shropshire Bedlams. The men’s team was expanding too, in numbers and ideas. I was determined to throw out all conventions and preconceptions from my previous dancing days, so I introduced alternatives to the usual "once to yourself," and the habit of walking round in a dignified circle at the end. A well trained observer may be able to spot these departures from the norm in our performances. But we needed a name to encapsulate our identity, and luckily there was just the thing lurking in Shrewsbury Public Library.

The account books of the Shrewsbury Glovers’ Company contain some entries which puzzled an eagle-eyed antiquarian, styling himself "Shrowsbury," who brought them to light in 1911 in a publication called By-Gones relating to Wales and the Border Counties. "In 1688 one shilling was paid to the ‘Bedlam Morris,’ and the next charge is ten shillings for ‘ye bedlom morris.’ In 1689 five shillings were received by the ‘Bedlions.’

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What were these bedloms? The correspondence columns buzzed with speculation until finally "O.Y." declared that they must have been morris dancers, quoting recent parallels of the usage of the word in Northamptonshire, and ending "the phrase may, therefore, be safely added to the records of words used in Shropshire." Correspondence closed.

At the time I was convinced that the reference was to "Shropshire Bedlams" but like a lot of other things, this must have been wishful thinking. But it was a good name nevertheless. It struck exactly the right chord. It was an authentic link with the past; it indicated where we came from; it was a welcome change from "The So-and-So Morris Men"; and it implied a certain lunatic element which was developing in the team anyway. What's more, it was a name to live up to, and we immediately started making as much noise as possible—by whooping and yelling, by covering our arms with bells and waving them about wildly, and by having a fair amount of percussion with our accompanying music. It was a wonderful racket. And then there was the way we looked.

**Costume.** Picking out some of the more commonly mentioned points of fashion among Shropshire morris dancers, I arrived at black top hats decorated with feathers, tattered jackets, and, latter, one ring of bells below each knee. And, of course, blackened faces and hands. (It was a black dog. Good job we didn't have a Dalmatian!) For a while I wasn't sure what to wear on our legs, until one of the keen young lads came to practice wearing his hat and jacket, with blue denim jeans and white pumps. It looked great.
And it was just the fusion of new and old that I was searching for. It symbolised the whole approach of the team.

The effect of this costume is quite magical. The black face, under a black top hat, obliterates all recognisable features of the dancer. The jacket disguises the shape of the body beneath, especially with a lot of spinning and arm waving. Add the blue legs, and from any distance it becomes difficult to focus on anything except white feet flashing about. Best of all, it could not be confused with the costume of any other team, even at two hundred paces on a foggy morning.

Music. Not all the dances available had tunes attached. Some that did exist did not seem to suit our style. Luckily there was an untapped source of local tunes noted by Cecil Sharp from John Locke, a fiddler who played all over South Shropshire and North Herefordshire until about 1930. All his brothers played, and two sons of one of these brothers live just outside Clun where we started practising. There are now only two or three of his tunes that we don't use in either of our teams. Very often the tune has given us the name for the dance which would otherwise be known only by its place of origin. (Nothing can be more boring than giving a casual passing audience a pointed lecture about where your dances come from. We should try and preserve a little mystery. If they want to know they'll ask.) Sometimes the nature of the tune has suggested a dance idea. Either way, Fiddler Locke's magnificent, and unusual tunes could not have been tailor-made to fit our dances more exactly.

Singing during the dances seems to have been pretty common, so we do a bit of that, just for the odd verse and chorus. Some of our verses are odder than others, and it will come as no surprise by now to learn that they are often impossible to find, even in the deepest vaults of Cecil Sharp House.

St. Swithin’s Day 1979. As I write, our fourth birthday has just passed. Definitely older and possibly wiser. Within such a short time there have been many changes. We have gained a brother for the infant son, and lost the Memorial Hall under the fire regulations. A gleaming replacement has just been finished, with a floor like an ice rink. Shropshire now sports eight morris teams—four of men, three of women, and one of boys—and heaven is now full of dancing dogs since Shep took off there under the wheels of a car.
The turnover in personnel in the team has been remarkable. Only a few who attended that first practice now remain, and the original Sixth Formers are now job hunting with their freshly earned college qualifications. Nevertheless we have a good number of dancers, and the influx of new members forces continual reappraisal of what we’re doing, which is vital now that the first creative thrill has mellowed. I find it difficult to keep tabs on the general progress of the dancing, although my occasional forced absences through work do mean that I can come back to it all with a fresher mind. For some time we’ve been practicing in a room which is far too small and which has been adversely affecting our standard of performance, but now we’ve found a better hall and can look forward to a general improvement.

Apart from the processional, which is for any even number, we have a repertory of fourteen dances, for sets of three, four, six, eight, ten and, most recently, nine. They all use sticks apart from two with clapping, one of which involves other parts of the body as well as the hands. Although I still have a few ideas for dances up my sleeve, I feel in some ways that we have too many already, for the reasons I set out earlier. It’s difficult to live up to one’s ideals, principally in the matter of balancing the need to keep sensible limits with the equal need of sustaining interest and enthusiasm. Still, thinking about it keeps me on my toes and if I was completely satisfied with the way things were something would be very wrong.

On the whole I’m pleased and proud of what the Bedlams have achieved. The point has been made. A new morris has been created by clothing old bones with our own peculiar flesh. Our dancing has had the impact I hoped for. Mssrs. Cawte and Dommet have indicated their general approval, while others have been totally bewildered. Both reactions are very welcome. Suddenly, there is a great interest in Border Morris. Rumours reach me that our steps are being taught as authentic and our dances as being pinched. Some teams have gone back to the same sources and reached their own conclusions. It’s all there for the finding. There is still an enormous amount of raw material waiting to be moulded into shape by somebody with vision, not only from our own area but from all over the country. Don’t be downhearted. All this could be yours for only a few days’ research. Get yourself ready and go, man, go.

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I would like to discuss some stylistic details of morris dancing that are rarely addressed in written dance notation, and often overlooked in live teaching. These aspects go beyond (or beneath) the emblematic moves of this or that village tradition. Good dancers often develop these techniques intuitively; fair dancers would improve considerably if they consciously adopted them. I call this "morris along the margins."

1. ANTICIPATION

The most important instant in a morris dance is the instant before: before the figure begins, before the corner crossing, before the challenge, and before the foot-together-jump in the once-to-yourself. Great morris dancing requires energy—obviously—powerful, explosive, yet graceful and controlled bursts of energy—but to release that energy with precision and skill, one must first gather it up and prepare the mind and body in advance.

You will often see inexperienced or lazy dancers caught flat-footed at the beginning of a figure, looking to the others to see what to do and slipping into the action a beat or two late. To start with the rest of the set, dancers must anticipate every move and coil their energy toward that end (or rather, beginning). Hop-backs or a catch step help to unify a set’s motions, certainly, but every dancer must know where to head next and what to do in the impending figure—and that means thinking ahead.

If you’re doing a once-to-yourself that requires a down-up hanky motion during the foot-together-jump or step-and-jump (swiping the hankies down in front of you as your legs coil and spring, and lifting them back up when your feet hit the ground) you need a little extra preparation before the first step or jump in order to move the hankies to position for the down-up. The preparation is much smaller for a hanky scoop, but there can still be one: your hands may rock gently backward, past your hips, to prepare a decided emphasis to the scoop.

These small, extremely brief motions tend to precede any movement of the feet and bells, and they are difficult to teach. If they are addressed at all, morris dancers tend to develop them almost unconsciously over time.
However, these preparations can do much to accent the more obvious and canonical morris moves, just as a catch step can accelerate or shift one’s bodily momentum for an impending figure.

Since the foot-together-jump or step-and-jump takes the last two counts of the once-to-yourself music before the dance proper begins, it makes sense to place the lanky preparation movement on the third count before. This tends to occur intuitively, as dancers get used to thinking ahead, but a single dancer or a side can speed the learning process by explicitly identifying that third beat and linking action to it in practice. This same preparation and sense of timing applies to second and third corners as they prepare for their challenge and crossings.

Thinking ahead is important throughout the dance. Many morris moves are designed so that figures and choruses may flow smoothly from one to the next if the team so wishes. Unfortunately, teaching can mediate against the development of this flow. We tend to learn the dances in piecemeal segments: figures are broken down to double steps, then hook leg (or galley or forays or singles), and finally foot-together-jump or step-and-jump. In the same way, we learn figures in isolation from choruses. This does not mean we have to dance all these pieces in discrete segments, however. For the most part, we naturally develop a flow within figures and choruses but too often, dances will come to a stop—arms down, heels flat on the ground, bodily momentum slowing to near stasis or full stop—in those brief instants between figures and choruses, when stopping is unnecessary, even uncalled for, though obviously it is essential for the non-active dancers during a corner crossing, say. I think learning the various parts of a dance in separate segments may encourage some dancers to perform them that way. Dances can flow seamlessly from figure to chorus and back again if the team desires it and the individual dancers remain alert and think ahead. Why not do so?

2. DANCING WITH THE MUSIC

Dancing morris "with" the music should go without saying. Unfortunately, it all too often does. I say "unfortunately" because some morris moves flow naturally with the music but some do not. In the latter case, dancers and/or musicians have to adjust to make things go more smoothly. With a leapfrog, Fieldtown upright capers, or Bledington split capers this is perfectly obvious: even slow music that takes twice as many beats as the A theme may rush the dancers.

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In that case, a smart musician will naturally watch the dancers closely and "hang" with them. Stretching the tempo enhances the impression of sweep and grace. When the dancers try to fit their steps to an unvarying tempo, it can cramp their style and degrade the performance.

On the other hand, there are times when the dancers should work to stay with the tempo of the music, and they don't. Stick rapping sequences in the choruses of Adderbury long stick dances are a notorious and familiar example, although any stick rapping can be prey to rushing. A simple plain capers, especially a sequence of four at the end of a figure or chorus. Dancers regularly rush the best here. When their feet are hitting the ground and their hankies whipping faster than the musical tempo, they can look like frantic, flapping geese.

Simple relief and reduced attentiveness may be one factor here: typically, the dancer has just completed a more difficult and flashy maneuver—a galley, shufflebacks, or foray capers, perhaps—and is just glad that's over and all that remains are some insignificant leaps in place. He or she rushes perfunctorily through them. Unfortunately, those plain capers complete the figure or chorus—and often, an entire dance—so they should not merely be dismissed as four insignificant leaps. When six dancers end a dance, with hankies waving in unison and bells jingling as one, it picks a solid exclamation point at the end of the long and often digressive sequence that is a morris dance. A grand and unified ending redeems a few errors and some foolery along the way.

But be fair, depending on the speed of the tune, it may be all but physically impossible to stretch a plain caper to fit the allotted time, so that even if dancers spring from the ground at the "right" time, they may still come down early. There are two possible methods of dealing with this problem: leap higher and/or take toll longer. I fear some dancers will object to the latter as impractical and the former as unmusical, but bear with me: a single strategy encompasses both.

Consider sinking into your knees more between leaps. Think of your body as an off-road vehicle with oversized shock absorbers. I suspect many dancers land fairly flat-footed during plain capers (or whole capers for that matter). To put it more precisely, they land barely on the ball of the foot and roll back to the heel alone, instead of going from ball to heel and then bending the knees—which is to say, many dancers compress their frames just enough to avoid jarring the spine. But this is one place where economy

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may not pay, especially if it causes you to spring and land ever sooner with each fancy caper. Instead, imagine sinking deeply into a springy sofa or a trampoline that is also your body. This eats up more time between each landing and the next take-off, and coils more energy for the next leap (at least in theory).

I think the visual effect and the aural accent of the bells when all the dancers land with the beat is more arresting—and in the end, more musical—than a unified take-off. Which leads me directly to:

3. HANKY VISUALS

Disagreements between dancers about take-off (what happens down below) can be smoothed over visually by unified hanky work (what happens above). Although nearly everyone's footwork can use improvement, from my observation most morris dancers could stand to spend less time worrying about their feet and more about their hankies. Great footwork tends to be about oneself, or at best one's relationship to a single other dancer during a challenge or crossing. Hardly any spectator is going to think better of your entire side if your own individual footwork improves, I'm afraid.

But sensitive hankie work—adjusting the size, shape, and character of your waves and snaps to approximate more closely what five other dancers in the set are doing (or two other dancers in your line, or one other dancer in a challenge)—is about making the entire set look good as well as each of its members.

When you see that rare team whose dancers perform with hankies that move together (especially—one of my pet morris details—hankies that float down from their apex instead of being jerked down swiftly and mechanically by tight, anxious arms when the tradition does not specifically call for it), it is truly a sight to behold; one that, in my opinion, makes a much more immediate and lasting impression than do great galleys or hocklebacks on an audience that knows nothing about morris.

Hankies are bright, usually brighter than just about anything else in the set, and save for a few traditions like Brackley, they move more than anything else in the set. So, like darting butterflies among the most brightly colored (but only slightly swaying) stands of wildflowers, hankies are going to get noticed, appreciated, and remembered the most. A longsword teacher once said it is really the swords that dance while the humans are present merely to assist; the same might well be said of hankies in Cotswold morris.
There are any number of ways in which dancers and teams waste the resource of hankies. Obviously, one must be conscious of what the other dancers are doing and modulate to meet and match them. A dancer's hanky work inevitably improves in direct proportion to his or her confidence in the floorwork, because eyes and mind get freed up for awareness of what the other dancers are doing. Beginners dance in a bubble; no matter how much they look at the other dancers, they are pretty much caught in a wrestling match between the mind and body. The more the basics become a matter of subconscious, almost instinctive execution (we might call this the Zen of morris), the more one may turn one's attention to the stylistic details of dancing with other dancers, not just dancing.

One maneuver that separates the sheep from the goats is full capers. Dancers often diminish the magnificence of this move by concentrating all their attention on their feet and legs—getting the highest possible leap, making sure to do the split and get those legs back together for the landing—and neglecting the hankie work. The tension and anxiety are evident in tight arms: I see a lot of dancers execute full capers with elbows bent to as much as a 90-degree angle or more, so that their hands and hankies barely reach above their heads, instead of being fully extended. Even worse, too many dancers have their heads down, studying those worrisome feet, as they reach the peak of their leap.

My first teacher, Howard Lasnik of the Black Jokers in Boston, once demonstrated that a two-inch leap off the ground with arms fully extended, head high and proud, looks a lot more impressive than a leap that takes a dancer a foot-and-a-half in the air while the arms are bent and head down to study the feet. Don't worry about the leap: unless you're dancing on uneven ground, it will take care of itself. And even in the case of a pitted or gravelled surface, you don't really have to drop your chin far or pull in your arms at all to keep an eye out for the landing. If you are not dancing on uneven ground, concentrate your attention on full extension of the arms and look up into the sky, admire the trees, smile munificently at the other dancer and the audience... and the jump will not only look more impressive no matter how minuscule the distance between your feet and the ground, but you will appear to the spectators as if you are feeling more powerful and grand, as well.

Another "relief" signal may be seen, I think, in hanky work (or rather, relative lack of it) at the conclusion of figures and choruses. Many traditions end most if not all figures and choruses with a foot-together-jump or step-and-jump accompanied by a hanky scoop or down-up. Often, you will see the first part of that hanky motion (the "down-" or the scoop) but...
not the last—the flourish of hankies at the conclusion of a scoop’s lift or “up” in a down-up. When this is done right, the proof will be that some hankies will be flittering lazily down to rest after the next figure—say it’s a challenge—has already begun. More often, though, you will see hankies rise only to waist or chest level, and either sink unobtrusively to a resting position as the next corner couple takes up the action, or have to be raised again—late—to commence the hanky work for the next figure.

Like four plain capers, the scoop or down-up punctuates the challenge, figure, or chorus that precedes it. It says: “That was another job well done.” It does not end the “sentence” of the figure with an ellipsis but with a period or an exclamation point. There are few morris figures that trail off, the walk to the bottom of the set in the figure of Ducklington “Jockey to the Fair” might seem to qualify, but even that is more of an unobtrusive bleed into the next pair of dancers’ performance than the end of a phrase. The walkers can still stride and swing their hankies in time to the music, and they should have punctuated their phrase of the figure with a full pair of forays before strolling away from the spotlight.

4. THE SPIRIT OF MORRIS

I have touched upon several stylistic details “along the margins” of classic morris figures and choruses. In conclusion I would like to offer a general, philosophical (and let me hasten to add), highly personal conception of how morris ought to be done.

For six years before I came to morris, I performed in a Scandinavian folk dance troupe. The basic rhythm of the schottische—step, step, step, hop—is the same as that of the morris double step, so when I encountered the latter it seemed familiar. I was wrong to think so, however; the rhythm is the same, but the step—the entire body movement, the spirit of the dance—is entirely different.

The schottische is little more than three shumes and a hop. That’s all it should be. In most Scandinavian and German folk dances, footwork is not usually the premium—how you twirl and interact with your partner and move among the other dancers and couples is. The first three shumes will likely be identical, and the hop is a distinct and final flourish.

The morris double step, however, is the central, irreducible building block for all but a handful of morris traditions. It sets the tone for the fancier legwork and it should be, ideally, an unbroken series of explosions—uneven explosions, perhaps, especially in 6/8 time, but explosions all the same.
It is too easy to let those first three steps dwindle to a shuffle, so they diminish to a place-holding move, rather than a flexing of power. But I don’t think of the final hop of a double step as being any bigger than the three steps that preceded it—partly because it looked roughly the same when I saw it done by dancers I admired, such as John Dexter or Curt Hayashi. In a 6/8-time morris tune, the first and third steps will likely become larger than the second because the rhythm demands it, but I don’t believe the final hop should necessarily be larger than those first and third steps.

One way to gauge how well you may be achieving this goal is to check your heels. Does your weight settle on them at all, even just for an instant, during your double steps? Are you resting on your laurels between hops and capers? Or do your heels barely touch the ground, if they touch it at all, while the balls of your feet catch you as the muscles and Arches are coiling to spring again?

If dancers approach double stepping this way, they are more likely to dance fully erect, as if their chests were hung from wires, rather than developing a hunch with a lower center of gravity—say in the pelvis rather than the torso. It’s the difference between having a Charlie Chaplin upper body—jester, balanced, and only leaning slightly when dance momentum requires a shift in direction—while the legs do all sorts of strange things, versus a semi-jackknifed body where both the legs and the torso often bend forward. Realistically speaking, most of us probably end up doing little more than a shuffle toward the end of a dance or performance out of fatigue, and it is probably just as well that we do. We are not superhuman. Best to save it for or to best emphasize it during jigs, corner crossings, and challenges. . . . and the first one or two rounds of Bledington “Saturday Night.”

Here’s the mental image or metaphor for what I try to achieve as a morris dancer. The dancer is in a constant battle with gravity. Each step in the double-step is not so much a landing from the last leap or hop as it is yet another effort to push the entire planet away. The morris dancer constantly tries to push the whole Earth away, not just during whole capers and forays, but with every single step. This image of every step of every double step as a push-off rather than a landing is one of the things that makes a morris dancer’s body appear powerful, maintains momentum (the appearance of elegant motion as well as the reality of it), and makes a superior morris dancer.
My thanks to Dick Lewis, Curt Hayashi, and Kenneth Smith—morrismen colleagues who read and commented on this essay while I was writing it.

About the author: a native Oregonian, David Loftus began to learn morris in the summer of 1980 with the Black Jokers in Boston. He danced with the Jokers until his return to Oregon in 1987. A founding member of Bridgetown Morris Men in early 1992, Loftus has never taught morris, but inevitably kibitzes whenever anyone else does.
Dear Editors,

I feel compelled to reply to Steve Galey's recent article "Top Ten Ways to Maintain Team Longevity" (May-June issue). Is this guy pulling our legs? Is he from outer space?

The first nine points I have no problems with... mainly because I can't find the article now, but I dimly recollect it being sound sensible stuff. Then there is number ten. I still have a copy of this: it states:

On a mixed side, recognise the men are from Mars, the women are from Venus. If there is some dispute and someone is upset by something happening on the team, the women should go off to one side and process it. The men won't understand anything you're talking about anyway and just get confused and depressed.

Strike me purple! For all these years I'd been thinking we were all from planet earth! I was eager to get to my next dance practice, so I could see my fellow dancers in this new light. But after taking a good look, I can only conclude that Steve's cosmic conception doesn't go far enough. If our side is going to communicate effectively, we'll need analogies from a galaxy of planetary systems.

We've got: a) the 14-yr-old bursting with beans, when not crippled with injuries; b) the 60+-yr-old with two plastic hips and more gumption than ability; c) the university students who disappear into black holes when assignments are due; d) the know-it-all foreperson who sulks because everybody isn't fit, eager and committed; e) the assistant foreperson who cheerfully muddles up left and right; f) the enthusiastic giant who broke the floor of our last hall; g) the laid-back minimalist dancer; h) the squire who is practically brand-new to morris; i) the lead musician who is tempo- and rhythm-challenged; j) those whose regular mantra is "I must get fitter." (puff) get fitter (puff).

We try to build a coherent team capable of good dance display and having fun meanwhile. This means accepting that everyone there has a
different potential ability, ultimate goal, reason for being there (these are usually three different things), current ability, attitude to Morris, dance experience, life experience, speed of learning, method of learning, desire to perform in public, ability to commit, social need, innate talent, personality ... the finer shades of gender difference are only one small part of this larger picture.

Steve describes women as "the caring contingent of the side." In my experience, not true. Women often have better talent than men for cooperation and verbal expression; but I have seen women cooperate to exclude or belittle others, and heard them express their hypocrisies and prejudices. Caring is an attitude, not an attribute; it comes from the heart, not the hormones.

One last quote from Steve: "Any actual effect of this process is transitory at best, but everyone will have conformed to expectations and felt the exercise to be a valuable lesson in relationship building." Personally, I think conforming to expectations is a lousy way to build relationships or settle disputes. I believe it's better to behave naturally, remember your own strengths and weaknesses, and accept others as complete individuals—different from yourself, but essentially human.

I just can't see our side as Martians and Venusians. My only ambition for leaving Planet Earth is to get the side six inches off the ground. And anyhow, I'm the foreperson, so I'm always right.

Wendy Collings
Foreperson, Pride of Holland Street Morris Dancers
Quantum factor, Compass Morris
Editor, New Zealand Morris Sphere

(Well, Steve, any comments? - eds.)
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Doug Olsen (singing)
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