

FEISEANNA 101

AN INTRODUCTION TO IRISH DANCE COMPETITIONS

WHAT IS A FEIS? (AND HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE THAT?!)

The Gaelic word *feis* (pronounced "fesh") means festival, but is more commonly used to describe a sanctioned Irish dance competition.

A feis is a gathering of dancers for competition, each representing various Irish Dance Schools. Dancers perform in front of a judge (or judges) to live music.

Dancing in competition is not easy, and requires a lot of concentration. In solo events, competitors from different schools dance simultaneously, so the two or three dancers competing next to each other will each be dancing different steps.

Competing can be a great way for dancers to build confidence. But if not prepared, *feiseanna* (the plural of *feis*, pronounced "fesh-nah") can seem overwhelming. These events are large gatherings! Typically a feis will cap entries between 400 competitors (considered a small feis) and 1000+ competitors.

Feiseanna may also offer competition opportunities in one or more other aspects of Irish culture: music performance, art, Irish language, or soda bread baking, to name a few.

The goal of this publication is to help prepare dancers and families from the Teelin School of Irish Dance as they embark upon the exciting adventure of competitive dance.

A REVIEW OF IRISH DANCE TERMINOLOGY

A **step** is a series of Irish dance moves choreographed to fit a certain musical cadence. In Irish dance, a step has two sections: a **right foot** section and **left foot** section. Each foot of a step is danced to eight bars of music; therefore each step is 16 bars long.

In order to begin competing, a dancer must be able to perform two full steps of a dance.

Steps are choreographed for each category of dance: **reel**, **light jig**, **slip jig**, **treble jig**, and **hornpipe**. There are many steps of each dance, varying in level of difficulty.

Irish dance steps are performed in **soft shoes** and/or **hard shoes**. Beginners at Teelin School of Irish Dance are first taught in soft shoes (*ghillies* for girls/ladies, or *reel shoes* for boys/men). The soft shoe dances taught at Teelin (in progression of difficulty) are: reel, light jig, and slip jig.

As dancers progress to hard shoes, treble jigs and hornpipes are taught. These dances are first taught to traditional speed music. More advanced dancers will then learn treble jig and hornpipe steps at slower tempo music, which allows for more complicated footwork.

Traditional set dances have specific traditional choreography performed to a specific tune. Advanced dancers will also learn **treble reels** and **non-traditional set** dances (which have teacher-created choreography performed to a specific tune).

Typically, students are first taught **solo** steps, which can be performed individually. Steps are choreographed by the instructors of an Irish Dance School, so steps are unique to that particular school. (Exceptions: traditional set dances, and the treble reel finishing step.)

IRISH DANCE COMPETITION CATEGORIES

There are two broad categories of dance competitions at a feis: **solo dancing** and **figure dancing**. The **solo dances** (described above) are performed by individual competitors.

Figure dances are performed in teams comprised of several dancers from the same school and are named by the number of dancers in the team. 2-Hand and 3-Hand dances are choreographed by a dance instructor, and are therefore unique to the particular school (like solo steps). The traditional **ceili** (pronounced "kaylee") dances are set choreography regardless of who dances them, and are therefore judged on technique and team execution, not choreography. Typical ceili competitions at a feis are 4-Hands and 8-Hands.

Solo dance competitions at a feis are divided by both age and experience levels. Figure dance competitions are typically divided by age only. For detailed information about solo dance competition levels, please see the Teelin publication **Irish Dance Competition Levels: Information for Moving through the Ranks** available at www.teelin.com.

Irish dancing in competition is both an individual sport and a team sport. The vast majority of competitors at a feis will be dancing in solo events. However, each dancer represents his/her Irish Dance School; therefore dancers from the same school share a team objective. There is a great sense of camaraderie at these large events! Teelin dancers are encouraged to look for other Teelin costumes at a feis in order to support all of the dancers from our school. A feis is also an opportunity to meet new friends from other dance schools throughout the tight-knit community of Irish Dancing.

HOW ARE IRISH DANCE COMPETITIONS JUDGED?

Judges are responsible for awarding placement proportionate to the number of entries and to the degree of proficiency shown. Judging is somewhat subjective, and results will vary.

Basic Irish dance skills include (but are not limited to):

Good timing (meaning the dance movements match the rhythm of the music).

Pointed toes with arched feet.

Legs crossed (so that it looks like one knee is hiding behind the other) and legs turned out (so that it looks like the feet are pointed away from each other).

Upright upper body carriage with arms straight at the dancer's sides, chin level, eyes forward, head evenly balanced atop relaxed neck and shoulders.

Graceful and energetic movement, including high elevation on the toes and snappy legs which kick the dancer's bum if crossing from behind to in front or vice versa.

Well-executed jumps which incorporate all of the above principles, and an overall sense of "lift" throughout a dance.

Confident and pleasant affect. (SMILE!)

Dancers who are new to Irish dance competitions will begin in the Grade level solo dance competitions. For each Grade event, a dancer must perform two steps in sequence. Competitors will dance two or three at a time, and will typically be lined up next to dancers from other schools. Therefore, competitors will not be performing the same steps as the dancer(s) next to them on stage.

A judge marks scores for each dancer's technique, timing, poise and presentation. Results are sent to the designated tabulation room and the winning competitor numbers are posted. Competitors check the posted results and may then claim any awards given. (The dancer will need his/her competitor number to claim an award.)

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION – AN IMPORTANT NOTE TO DANCERS

Irish dance is a very athletic sport. But unlike many traditional sports, dance is a performance art. Teelin offers many opportunities to nurture and encourage our students' artistic development. Competing at a feis is one such opportunity. It is important to remember that Irish dance competitions are not simply attempts to win medals or trophies – they are a celebration of Irish culture through the expression of music and dance.

Dancers, the competitor in you will work hard to dance your best steps at a feis. Remember to allow the performer in you to shine and to ENJOY the time on stage!

THE PARENT'S ROLE AT A FEIS

Parents need to know that dancers from the same school do not move as a group under the direction of a teacher or coach at a feis. Therefore, especially for young dancers, the role of the parent becomes that of "sport manager" (aka "Feis Mom" or "Feis Dad").

Parents often learn this role by networking with experienced Feis Moms and Dads. If you don't know someone personally, ask your child's teacher and they will be happy to connect you with another family. Between the dance teacher, a mentor family, and the resources offered on the Teelin website (www.teelin.com) parents will be able to learn what their dancer needs to wear the day of the feis (i.e. costume and hairstyle or wig); what to bring (i.e. safety pins, bobby pins, hairspray, duct tape, water bottle, snacks); and hopefully a few extremely useful tips relevant to the particular feis the dancer plans to attend.

Logistically, it is helpful to know that a dancer may be competing on several different stages. For example, one musician may be playing reels for two stages next to each other, and all age groups of reel competitions will be run there. Another musician may be playing light jigs at another stage, so all light jig competitions will be run there. If parenting more than one dancer, those dancers might have to compete at the same time in different (and sometimes distant) locations. It is helpful to have one-on-one coverage, if at all possible, and perhaps an extra set of eyes for non-dancing siblings, if necessary.

Throughout the year, Teelin offers several feis practice classes. Dancers are advised to attend as many of these as possible if they would like to compete! The dance teacher will offer very helpful tips individually tailored to each dancer's needs. Parents may also be able to help their children remember some of these tips when practicing at home.

On the day of a feis, it is important to remember that the more relaxed and encouraging a parent is, the more likely the dancer is to have fun. Dancing in a feis is very different than dancing in a class or in a performance. Supportive parenting can make a huge difference in a dancer's comfort and confidence.

A NOTE ABOUT CAMERAS...

One of the obscure rules of Irish dance competitions is that no photography of any kind is permitted of dancers during competition. Cameras are allowed to be brought to a feis, and parents (or friends or relatives) are welcome to photograph dancers while they are not competing (for example, a posed photo with a medal or trophy, or a photo of their dancer

with friends or teachers, or even a video recording of their dancer running his/her steps on an empty stage NOT during competition). However, during competition, no pictures of any kind – still or video. It's against the rules, and according to those rules, the feis would have the right to disqualify the dancer of an offender from the competition.

Why the "no photography" rule? Because the Irish Dancing Commission says so! The most common reason cited for this rule is that video recordings would be an infringement on artistic copyright, as Irish dancing steps are the original choreography of each dance school. Modern technology is such that most cameras are also capable of video recording; therefore no camera of any sort is permitted of dancers during the competition.

Many feiseanna will hire a professional photographer for the event, and those photos are often available for sale. Press photographers may also be allowed to photograph a competition, if granted permission by the Feis Committee.

Feiseanna in the USA and Canada are governed by the North American Feis Commission (NAFC). The complete competition dancing rules may be found either at the NAFC website or at the Irish Dance Teachers Association of North America (IDTANA) Southern Region website (www.northamericanfeiscommission.org or www.idtana-southernregion.com). Dancers and parents are also encouraged to read the rules printed in each feis syllabus.

GETTING STARTED

Dancers should first discuss their competition interests with their teacher. To be eligible to compete at a sanctioned feis, dancers must be students in good standing of a registered school. Teelin students compete under the Director's name (Maureen Berry, TCRG) and their performance in competition represents the Teelin School.

In addition to reading this document, dancers (and their parents) are advised to view the **Attending Your First Feis** photo story and to read the **Tips for Competitors** on the Teelin website (www.teelin.com). Once a dancer begins competing, it will also be necessary to read the Teelin document entitled **Irish Dance Competition Levels: Information for Moving through the Ranks**. It is also helpful to chat with other Teelin families who have Irish dance competition experience. As always, if questions arise, ASK!

Registration information for each feis may be found by following the links from the Feis Schedule page of the Teelin website. Registration for a feis typically opens several months in advance, and should be completed early. Many feis cap the number of competitors, and most feiseanna will reach that limit before the registration close date.

Because of this, sometimes it is necessary to "predict" which events a dancer will be ready to enter. Competitors need to perform two different steps to the music in order to compete in each dance, and those steps must be approved by the dancer's teacher before performing in competition. There are no refunds; don't automatically sign up for every eligible dance. But fortunately each Grade level event is fairly inexpensive (typically \$6-\$8 per dance), so it's not a crisis if a dancer needs to scratch a dance because he/she is not ready to perform a particular dance yet.

GIVE IT A TRY!

Dancing at a feis is exciting, and many dancers truly enjoy the discipline that is required to develop their dancing to a competitive level. However, all dancers (and their parents!) are advised to keep their competitive drive in check. A good rule of thumb is for each dancer to frequently ask, "Am I having fun?!" Even the most skilled dancer is not going to compete

well if he or she is not having fun. To ensure a successful feis experience, arrive at a feis well-prepared and maintain a positive attitude. It can make all the difference in the world.

Each feis is sponsored by either a local Irish organization or local Irish dance school(s) and is run by volunteers. A "small" feis may cap their entries at 400 dancers, and some larger feiseanna accept over 1000 entries. Competitions will run simultaneously on several stages, with live musicians. Feis day can seem rather chaotic, especially to those new to the scene!

If possible, dancers are advised to attend a feis as an observer before entering one. That will permit the opportunity to see how the stages are arranged and to learn how to read a stage schedule. Everyone there likely remembers their own first feis, so talk to people, ask questions, observe – you'll be amazed at how much you learn from that first experience!

With the right attitude, feiseanna can be great fun, and are very worth the effort! In addition to the competitions, there are often several vendors at a feis selling dance shoes, dance accessories, Irish trinkets and other interesting wares to explore.

For participants and spectators alike, the variety of costumes and steps in the dance competitions of ALL levels are fascinating to watch. Dancers from all over the world are eligible to compete, which allows for wonderful opportunities to meet new friends.

We hope to see you at the next feis!

