

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT AN OIREACHTAS

(...WELL OK, *ALMOST* EVERYTHING...)

WHAT IS AN OIREACHTAS?

Within the context of Irish dance, Oireachtas (pronounced "O-ROCK-TUS") is an annual regional championship competition. Prestigious in its own right, the Oireachtas also serves as a qualifying event for the National and World Competitions.

The Teelin School of Irish Dance is part of the Southern Region, one of the seven regions in North America. The Southern Region Oireachtas is also referred to as "the SRO".

The Irish word "oireachtas" literally means "gathering". A convenient mnemonic for the spelling of Oireachtas is "Oh, I reach to a star".

(Note: Outside of Irish dancing context, the term "Oireachtas" is the national parliament or legislature of the Republic of Ireland.)

WHAT ARE THE COMPETITIONS AT OIREACHTAS?

There are two broad categories of competitions at Oireachtas: solos and teams.

Solo dance competitions are divided by age and gender only, not by levels. Each competitor performs a hard shoe dance (treble jig or hornpipe) and a soft shoe dance (reel or slip jig) specified by the Oireachtas syllabus. The cumulative scores from those two rounds determine which dancers will be recalled to perform a hard shoe set dance in the third round.

Figure team dance competitions are a huge part of the Oireachtas, and an important part of the cultural traditions of Irish dance. There are competitions for 4-Hand Ceili Teams, 8-Hand Ceili Teams, Figure Choreography Teams, and Dance Drama Teams. The ceili dances must be performed according to the Irish Dancing Commission's publication *Ar Rinncidhe Fairne*. Figure Choreography and Dance Drama dances are choreographed by the teacher, and each have time, music and theme limitations. Figure Choreography competitions are further limited to class costumes and ceili steps only.

Dancers within a team do not need to be Oireachtas soloists, yet must execute the simple steps and complex choreography of figure dancing at a champion level. Figure team competitions demonstrate team skill, precision and creativity; present knowledge of the traditional dances; and honor Irish heritage.

HOW IS THE OIREACHTAS DIFFERENT FROM A FEIS?

Echoing a Southern Region satirist, the Oireachtas is for the most part "just a big honkin' feis". However, there are significant differences, as specified in the following chart...

	FEIS	OIREACHTAS
REGISTRATION	Students register independently.	Registration by TCRG (teacher).

LOCATION	Determined by local feis committee.	Determined by Regional IDTANA (Irish Dance Teachers Association of North America), and generally rotated throughout the region. The Southern Region spans from Maryland to Florida to Texas.
DATE	Determined by local feis committee and held throughout the year.	The SRO is a full 2-day event, usually held the first weekend of December.
VENUE	Hotel ballrooms, convention centers, a school gyms or other sports complex, outdoor festivals, etc.	Typically held in the ballrooms of a large hotel, or in a convention center.
PARTICIPANTS	With their instructor's permission, any student of an IDTANA registered teacher can participate in any feis world-wide. Most feiseanna cap the maximum number of entries.	Restricted to dancers of an IDTANA registered teacher within the region. There are no entry caps. Teachers are expected to maintain the caliber of dancing with their entries.
SOLO DANCE COMPETITIONS	<p>Beg-PW: divided by level, age, and dance. Competitors perform two steps of each dance, and prizes are awarded for each dance.</p> <p>Prelim and Open Champ: divided by age group and include a minimum of two rounds: a hard shoe dance (3 steps of treble jig, or 2.5 steps of hornpipe, or a set dance for Open level) and a soft shoe dance (3 steps of reel or 2.5 steps of slip jig). Scores are combined for a single presentation of awards. Some feiseanna offer a third round, or a separate competition for set dances.</p>	<p>Competition groups are divided by age and gender only – no levels. All competitors dance the first two rounds, and the top cumulative scores determine those dancers recalled to the third round (approximately 50%). Placement is awarded to recalled competitors.</p> <p>First Round: hard shoe (3 steps of treble jig or 2.5 steps of hornpipe)</p> <p>Second Round: soft shoe (3 steps of reel or 2.5 steps of slip jig)</p> <p>Third Round: set dance (traditional set for U8 and U9 age groups, original set for all other age groups)</p>
FIGURE TEAMS COMPETITIONS	<p>Teams are comprised of dancers of any level from the same school and must dance in the age bracket of the OLDEST team member. Each dancer can only dance one dance of that particular type. Team dancing varies from feis to feis, but most often includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-Hand Dance (48 bars) 3-Hand Dance (48 bars) 4-Hand Ceili Dance 6-Hand Ceili Dance 8-Hand Ceili Dance 	<p>Participants must dance in the age bracket of the OLDEST team member, and must meet a specified percentage of team members within the correct age bracket. Limited type of dance repetition is allowed for team members. There are four Figure Team competition categories at Oireachtas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4-Hand Ceili Dance 8-Hand Ceili Dance Figure Choreography Dance Drama

COSTUMES	<p>Solos: School costume for beginner and advanced beginners. Advanced levels have the option of wearing a solo costume (subject to each school's policy for costumes). Teachers often allow shirt/blouse or a simpler costume for newer competitors.</p> <p>Teams: typically school costumes</p>	<p>Solos: solo costumes</p> <p>Teams: school costumes only for ceili and choreography competitions; original costumes and props are permitted for Dance Drama</p>
STAGES	<p>Vary in size, material, and arrangement.</p> <p>Sometimes seating for spectators is offered, sometimes not.</p>	<p>Stages at Oireachtas are LARGE and raised. Movement into and out of the ballroom is generally only allowed between dances to avoid distracting the competitors.</p> <p>The front row of chairs in each dance hall is reserved for TCRG / ADCRG seating only.</p>
PRACTICE AREAS	<p>Usually there is a designated practice area for dancers to warm up their hard shoe dances before competing. Oftentimes dancers warm up their soft shoe dances in any available open space.</p>	<p>Typically the Oireachtas venue AND each hotel with a block of rooms for the event will offer a designated practice room. Dancers at this level of competition are expected to be practicing every day, therefore these events accommodate those dancers who travel and stay multiple days.</p>
MUSICIANS	<p>Musicians vary greatly and are sometimes shared by two (or more) competition stages.</p>	<p>Oireachtasai (and other majors) hire outstanding musicians, usually two musicians for each stage.</p>
COMPETITION GROUP SIZES	<p>Varies depending on the feis. Groups with too few competitors (generally less than 5) will be combined with the next age group. Conversely large groups (generally more than 30) may be divided.</p>	<p>Age groups are not combined or divided, regardless of numbers.</p>
SCHEDULE	<p>A feis schedule usually lists the feis start time and each stage's order of competitions. Occasionally intermediate times will be listed. Competitors normally check in 1-2 competitions ahead of their own.</p> <p>Stage conflicts are common, and competitions will often be held open to accommodate this if the stage manager has been advised of the conflict. Parents may approach stage managers to request this. Competitors are expected, however, to check in for a held competition as soon as possible.</p>	<p>The Oireachtas schedule lists the approximate start time and location for each round of each competition. If any conflict exists, only the registered TCRG can request a competition remain open.</p> <p>Important: competitors (solos and teams) must check in with the stage manager at least 30 minutes prior to the start of their competition, regardless of dance order. Once a competition begins, any competitor or team that has not checked in with the stage manager forfeits their competition.</p>

COMPETITOR NUMBER ASSIGNMENT	Numbers are assigned by the local feis committee, and are usually independent of the order in which the competitors dance. Prelim and Open Champ competitors will dance each round in as close to the same order as possible. The local feis committee determines the process of determining the order of dancers.	Solos: The Oireachtas program booklet lists each competition group. Dancers compete in numerical order according to this number. Each round will begin with a different number (randomly chosen and announced in the program booklet). Teams: are listed by school name and are ordered as above.
JUDGES	Beg-PW and Teams: one judge per competition Prelim and Open Champ: three judges per competition	Solos: three different judges per dance (9 maximum per competition) Teams: three judges per competition
RECALLS	Not applicable.	Announced between the second and third rounds. This is not usually posted, therefore dancers should remain close to their assigned stage until the list has been read. Competitor numbers of recalled dancers are read in numerical order.
AWARDS	Beg-PW: posted on a scoreboard, and awards claimed at an award table. Prelim and Open Champ: awards are announced some time after each competition is completed. Typically all competitors who have placed are invited onstage, and then placement is announced ascending to first place. Dancers should dress in competition attire.	An award ceremony is held at the end of each competition day. Solos: all dancers who recalled must attend the award ceremony dressed in full costume (including shoes). Each group is invited onstage, and then placement is announced ascending to first place. Teams: a list of winning teams is usually posted. All winning team members are expected to attend the award ceremony dressed in full costume (including shoes). Teams are invited onstage as each placement is awarded. A Parade of Champions is held at the end of the final award ceremony.
SCORES	Beg-PW and Teams: judges' scores and comments (if any) are generally available either at the end of the day or by mail / email Prelim and Open Champ: score sheets are generally handed to each competitor after awards are announced	Solos scores are available after the award ceremony. (Look for the table or booth where they are being distributed. There may be a fee.) Score sheets will list the point value of each score awarded by each judge and the conversion to Irish point scale which determines placement. No comments are offered at Oireachtas.

RESULT IMPLICATIONS	<p>Adv Beg-PW: placement awards allow advancement to the next level as determined by the North American Feis Committee (NAFC) rules.</p> <p>Prelim: dancers must win two firsts to move to Open Champion level.</p> <p>For Beginner, Open Champ, and Teams competitions, results are locally significant.</p>	<p>Qualifying event for individuals and teams for North American and World Championships.</p> <p>Solos: A pre-determined percentage of dancers awarded placement for age U10 and above will qualify to compete at World Championships, and a slightly larger percentage will qualify for North American Championships. (Also, any Open Champion level dancer is eligible to compete at North Americans.)</p> <p>Teams: Top placing 8-Hand, Figure Choreography, or Dance Drama teams may compete at the North American Championships. 4-Hand teams may be combined to compete as well, at a teacher's discretion.</p>
OTHER MAJORS	<p>There are three annual NAFC Championships that rotate each year: the North American Senior Irish Dance Championships, the North American Junior Irish Dance Championships, and the North American Minor Irish Dance Championships. Only Open Champion level dancers who have previously won a first place are permitted to compete.</p>	<p>The World Irish Dancing Championships (<i>Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne</i>) is an eight-day competition typically held Holy Week (preceding and including Roman Catholic Easter Sunday).</p> <p>The North American Championships is a five-day competition typically held end of June or early July (usually including American Independence Day). Most countries with a significant Irish dance community also hold Nationals (All-Ireland, All-England, etc.)</p>

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

At each competition, dancers and teams are judged from the moment they approach the edge of the stage until the moment they leave the stage area and are no longer in the judges' view. Everything counts, and judges can be influenced by dancers' reactions to their own dancing! Dancers should remember to arrive prepared at the stage in plenty of time (warmed up, shoes double knotted, costume zipped and ready, hair done, etc).

There are no second chances for sub-optimal dancing. If you are competing, focus your energy on doing your best the first time and presenting a relaxed but energetic image to the judges at all times. Excess nerves can be as damaging as lack of focus, so it is best to get your nerves under control before heading to the competition.

Your instructors want to give you the best opportunity to dance your potential. As a general rule of thumb, if your instructor gives you any further instruction at the Oireachtas, just do it! Ask questions later.

For solo competitions, only those performing are on the stage, and music only plays for the requisite number of bars. As the competitors finish, the next two (or three) will enter the

stage in numerical order, wait for the previous dancers to be dismissed, and then step forward to “starting position”. Competition groups U14 and younger will dance three competitors onstage at a time; U15 and older will dance two competitors onstage at a time.

Once you have started dancing, do not stop unless you hear the judges’ bell ring even if another dancer falls. If you fall, get up and continue dancing (if possible) unless the judge rings the bell. The dance is still being judged unless a judge stops the competition. The judges will decide whether the fall will count against the dancer who fell, and whether/when dancers will return and repeat the dance. The stage manager will help clarify if there is any confusion.

While in a competition hall, clap politely for other dancers and teams as they finish. Do NOT clap along with the music during competition, yell cheers, or chat with others while dancers are on the stage. Respect every dancer’s and every team’s time in front of the judges.

HOW CAN I HELP TO KEEP THE OIREACHTAS A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE?

There is a certain thrill, a tangible energy at this large gathering of people for a high-level competition. The atmosphere is charged with excitement! Many families fly or drive great distances to attend the regional championships, but even those distances do not compare to the “miles” of effort that the dancers have traveled in preparation for this opportunity.

Dancers often feel an added sense of pressure to perform well. However, dancers generally can only perform well if they are enjoying themselves. Practice and warm up, eat and sleep well, and most importantly balance the nerves and the fun to get the most out of your Oireachtas experience.

When attending the Oireachtas, remember that you are a proud representative of your dance school and are expected to conduct yourself appropriately at all times. This includes respecting other competitors, abiding by stage manager and hotel management requests (regarding saving seats, storing bags, etc.), respecting hotel property, supporting all dancers from your dance school, and showing good sportsmanship toward all competitors. Outward displays of disappointment should be done privately.

Take the time to make new friends from all over the region – you won’t regret the connections within this tight-knit community of Irish dancers!

