

Clifden Academy School of Irish Dance

www.ClifdenAcademy.com

Irish Step Dancing 101

ROOTS: The dancing traditions of Ireland probably grew in tandem with traditions of Irish traditional music. The very first roots might have been in Pre-Christian Ireland, but Irish dance was also partially influenced by dance forms on the Continent, especially the quadrille dances. Traveling dancing masters taught all over Ireland as late as the early 1900s.

Stepdancing as a modern form is descended directly from sean-nós ("old style") stepdancing. There are in fact many other forms of stepdancing in Ireland (such as the Connemara style stepdancing), but the style most familiar is the Munster, or southern, form, which has been formalized by An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, which first met in 1930. An Coimisiún was formed from a directorate of the Gaelic League during the so-called Modern Revival.

Irish stepdance has very precise rules about what one may and may not do and when, but within these rules leeway is provided for innovation and variety. Thus, stepdance can evolve while still remaining confined within the original rules. Wikipedia 4/09

Ghillies ("silent h, sounds like Billy's") "pumps" or "lights" are soft shoes similar to ballet slippers. Worn for the following dances: Reel, Slip Jig, Light Jig. See Eileen for where to get these types of shoes. She also may have so used ones for sale in her used shoe collection. This works out well. As your child grows, you can then resell the shoes.

Softshoes, often called "ghillies" (or "gillies"), fit more like ballet slippers, but they are of black leather, with leather sole and a very flexible body. They lace from toe to ankle and do not make sounds against the dance surface. They are worn by female dancers for the light jig, the reel, the single jig, the slip jig, and group dances with two or more people. They also can be worn for ceili dancing, though social céilí dance doesn't have rules about the sorts of shoes worn. Wikipedia 4/09

Hard Shoes: similar to tap shoes worn for the following dances: Heavy Jig, Hornpipe. Eileen will tell you when your child is ready for "hard shoes". Your best bet for the first pair is to try and find used ones in the school.

A legend about hardshoe dances is that the Irish used to dance at crossroads or on the earthen floors of their houses, and they removed and soaped their doors to create a resonant surface for hardshoe dancing. (The more common actuality was that dancers "battered" on a stone laid in the floor with a space underneath; in the case of set dancing, the head couple of the set would claim the stone.) Wikipedia 4/09

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Dance Levels:

- **Pre-Beginner** – Anyone usually under age 5 that have been dancing less than 12 months.
- **Beginner** – A competitor who is taking dancing lessons for less than 12 months. A Beginner must move to Advanced Beginner the next year.
- **Advanced Beginner** A competitor who has completed one year in Beginner and has not won 1st, 2nd or 3rd in this category.
- **Novice Grade** – A competitor who wins 1st, 2nd or 3rd in Adv. Beg. Category and never placed 1st in Novice.
- **Prizewinner** – A competitor who has placed 1st in a particular dance in Novice will advance to Prizewinner in that particular dance.
- **Preliminary Championship** –Reel/HP or SJ/Jig (plus a set piece)
- **Open Championships** - **Usually 2 rounds...light and set.**
- **Dances Names:** Reel, Slip Jig, Light Jig, Heavy Jig, Hornpipe, Traditional Set, Treble Reel, Ceili, Contemporary Set.

Ceili Dances or Teams: Figure Dances (typically 4 hand & 8 hand). These are group dances that your child may or may not be interested in doing. I personally feel these are far more fun for dancers then solo competitions. The family that agrees to be on a team is making a commitment to that team. The practices are separate from the school classes and may include an additional fee per practice (usually small, \$5.00 or so). The kids have a blast and they are absolutely beautiful to watch these dances. The child will also be required to purchase a school dress or borrow one if available. They can be costly and that's why this is optional. The dresses are usually sold to other school dancers so you can make some of your investment back.

Dress: Beginner dancers wear any type of loose skirt (length approx. 6 inches above the knee) & a white peter-pan collared blouse. Boys wear dark slacks and shirt and tie. School Dress: Black jumper with pink cape. Eileen will issue a dress when the time comes. Solo Costumes: are purchased after pre-approval by Eileen and only after reaching the Novice level or at Eileen's discretion.

Hair: Younger girls usually wear curled hair or ringlets (created with foam curlers the night before the feis). Some girls wear a partial wig or bun covering with ringlets, while the more advanced groups generally wear full wigs of curls (color of the wig to match the natural hair color)

Classes: Level and times of classes are assigned by Eileen. A student cannot attend a class in which they are not enrolled unless approved by Eileen

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Privates: Private lessons are optional and supplemental sessions, usually one student to one instructor unless a semi-private lesson has been approved (two students, one instructor). Students are not required to sign up for privates and are usually requested by students who are Novice level and above who wish to improve their skills for competition.

T.C.R.G., Teasgicoir Choimisiuin Le Rinci Gaelacha, or Irish Commission Dancing Teacher. Eileen has attained the status of TCRG. In order to compete at a Feis, the teacher must be a TCRG in good standing.

Feis: (pronounced Fesh)(feiseanna – plural) is an Irish Step dance competition. Competitors are broken down into several groups & compete against children in their age category and level. The groups are: Pre-Beginner, Beginner, Advanced Beginner, Novice, Prizewinner, Preliminary Championship & Open Championship

The Feis is usually held in a school gymnasium, church hall or even at outdoor venues. These dance competitions can seem quite chaotic to even the most seasoned dancer (and mom!), but there is a rhythm (pun intended) to the event.

Each dance competition is assigned a number and approximate start time. For instance your child may be a Beginner dancer under 9 and scheduled for competition 201 & 202 at 9:00 a.m. This group of competitors will usually have to wait until all the dancers in the previous competition are finished (i.e. Beginner dancers under 8)

Dance Competition Number: Each dance competition is assigned a particular number. See the Feis Form section below for further details.

Dancer (competitor) number card: The dancer's number is a number assigned to a dancer and is unique to that dancer. The dancer cards are either sent directly to the home of the dancer or delivered as a group to Eileen depending on the system of the host of the feis. The dancer is expected to have the card visible to the judges, usually by pinning it onto the waistline, or punching holes on the sides of the card and then running a piece of ribbon through to then tie around the waist. Some dancers place their cards in clear plastic holders that are attached around their waist by ribbon. Some people feel that these are not a good idea as it may reflect the light and can obstruct the view of the number.

Stage Officials: These are people who work for the host and help dancers line up for the correct competition. They are usually always dancers or former dancers who know what music is playing, what competition is going on etc.

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Judges: (ADCRG) Certified by *An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha* ("The Irish Dancing Commission") in Ireland and this certification provides permission to judge at *feiseanna*. Please remember that Irish dance is subjective. Judges have various criteria when viewing a competition. One week your child might get all first places, the next nothing. But don't always blame the judge; children have on/off days when competing. Just tell them to keep practicing and there is always another day! Judges may or may not provide comments about your dancer....if you do happen to get comments, often times you'll find that "I heard that before!"

Dance Line: OK so you found the right competition and the right stage! Great. Now what? Well watch the process for a little while and you will notice a pattern. The dancers on judge's left usually start the dance first. Some dancers want to be first and are confident that the judge will remember them. My daughters prefer to go towards the end of the line, if not the end of the line and dance last. It's a personal preference really. I like the girls to see the other dancers, and get to know the music before it's their turn. Younger age groups will usually dance two or three at a time.

****NOTE:** Eileen will tell your dancer not to look at the other dancer while dancing. Of course you would not want to bump into another dancer, but don't follow their lead. For instance, if the other competitor starts at the wrong time, does the wrong dance or ends too early, you don't want your dancer doing the same thing. This happens all the time and it's a hard habit to break.

Feis Forms: Ok this could be a full college credit course of 14 week duration! Here's the short version. Eileen will sometimes have these forms printed off and at the studio to be picked up. Most moms get the hang of it and will go online to get the forms they need. They can be found from our website at www.clifdenacademy.com. I've attached an overview of how you navigate the web to find these forms. Once you get to the feis form site (from popular links/feis information) you will see a table with the Feis Name, Date, and link for the syllabus. Ok so that was easy right. Are you ready to fill out the form now? Click on the link to the feis you are interested in and look for the syllabus. It may be a link that says "click here" for syllabus or something like that.

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So get a glass of your favorite beverage and get down to filling this out. You may need a magnifying glass or your glasses because there's a whole lot of information in a very small space. *The Zoom icon" is your friend, embrace it.

You will be asked and should have on hand the following information: *Note: some feis hosts request that you place this information on an index card and others are sticklers that you use their entry section of the feis syllabus only. They can send it back to you or even worse: not consider your application entry! Let's just say I have experience with this one and leave it at that!

- **Dancer's name** (hey that one's easy, I'm not a moron)
- **Dancer's D.O.B.** (hey no problem)
- **Dancer's Address** (are you kidding me, my kid even knows this one)
- **Dance School** (Clifden Academy of Irish Dance)
- **Dance Teacher** (this is the TCRG which is Eileen Dinn)
- **E-mail Address:** They want your address not the dance schools. This helpful if you make a mistake on your feis form entry (hey not you because you took the Irish Step 101 class! They won't be calling you up for clarifications.)
- **Parent Signature:** This is to show that you have read the rules and won't hold the host liable for any injuries etc. (a "*friend*" of mine was called to resubmit a form for forgetting to sign her name), what a dope right?
- **Dancer's age as of January 1st** of the present year (hang in there we can do this one too). My daughter's D.O.B. is 12/25/95 & (she's 13 now). As of 1/1/09 she was 13. (Brilliant right? Easy you say). Does she dance in Category "under 13" or Category "under 14".....Hmm getting tricky? She would be in the Category "under 14", not under 13 (even though she's now 13 yrs old).
- **Pour yourself another drink and continue**

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- **Competition numbers:** Eileen will tell you what competition your child can compete in. For instance he/she may be doing a hornpipe in class but that doesn't mean he/she's cleared by the teacher to dance it yet. Trust Eileen, she knows when to put them out there.

Example: Advanced Beginners Girls under 9 Reel might be #201 and Advanced Beginners Girls under 9 Light Jig might be #202 and so on. BE VERY CAREFUL that you sign up for the correct category, age, & competition. If you make a mistake and sign up for the wrong competition the host has the right to say you can't compete (or switch the entry). I have been known to sign up for the wrong competition (say 201 instead of 301 or something) & change the card with a pen. I'm pretty sure it's illegal but the stage monitor is usually too crazy to notice. You didn't hear that from me, and I would deny it in a court of law.

- **Categories:** The groups are: Pre-Beginner, Beginner, Advanced Beginner, Novice, Prizewinner (Open), Preliminary Championship & Championship (ha we already knew that, see above)!
- **Competition:** Now match up the dancer level, age group, dance category & competition number that you need! (Come on, we can do this people) example: Advanced Beginner, Under 8, Reel, # 301. Repeat this for all the dances that your child competes in.
- **Competition Fee:** Each dance you enter your dancer will have a fee. If the feis form says \$7.00 per solo dance & you enter for example: Reel, Slip Jig, Heavy Jig, and then you pay \$21.00. Prelim and Open dancers generally will have one flat fee of approximately \$25-\$28.00. Be careful because if your dancer enters a Traditional Set dance or a Treble Reel competition this may cost more (\$8.00 for example).

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- **Door Fee:** Yes this is a fee that you pay to actually get in to see your child compete. Yes, I know you already paid for her to have the honor of competing. The host places this fee on each adult entering the feis. But think about it, the cost of these competitions are huge due to the fees paid to musicians, venues, judges, ribbons, trophies, flooring, sound systems, food etc. Some host's actually ask that this "entry fee" be paid along with the feis application entry form and not at the "door". Be careful with this one too. Good news people, your dancer does not have to pay a door fee!
- **Submission Deadline:** This date is a date chosen by the host as a cut off for acceptance of applications. The host can only legally hold a certain number of people in a venue at a time for safety reasons and can get shut down by the authorities for going over this. If your entry is **POSTMARKED** by that designated date, you will be accepted unless they have already reached their maximum allowed so get your entries in early.

So you have now successfully completed the lesson Feis Forms 101. So you get to the Feis and now it's a piece of cake right? Sorry, but it's still a maze. And no, you can't bring that beverage in with you (you know the one that got us through the feis form application)!

Dressing Rooms: If they exist it's a beautiful thing. Some hosts will have separate rooms set aside to place your things and get your dancer ready. Most likely there will not be a separate room. You will literally see people "camped" out in various spots on the floor, hallways, classrooms, parking lots etc. People may place a blanket down on their designated area to save it. This valued piece of property is hotter than the Hamptons, is sacred and not to be messed with. I would not recommend moving another persons bags or even worse moving another person's costume. You haven't met an angry Feis Mom, so let's just keep it that way!

Getting Dressed: I know you are not an idiot and can get your child dressed, but trust me this is Irish Step dancing and it's different. I would recommend your child wear a light cotton tank top underneath a zipped up jacket or sweater. Yup, no kidding there is a method to our madness. Once you put the child's wig on and won't be able to take a t-shirt or shirt off once the wig is on!

Stage Schedule: You have to find the right stage (& by stage I mean a piece of floor that is mapped out for your competition), it could be a classroom, part of the gymnasium etc. There will most likely be 3-4 other competitions going on at the same time to the same music. Sort of like the Olympic Gymnastic competition with the balance beam, floor exercises and vault going on. Perfect for the Attention Deficit sufferers amongst us. Prelim & Champion dancers are usually situated in the Auditorium (with air conditioning and actual seats). Something to strive for right.

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The “stage” will have a large poster or sign that has all the dance competition numbers on it (not your dancer’s number card number). So you would look at the back of your dance number card and note that you are signed up for Competition 201 Reel & 201 Slip Jig. The sign will have the competitions listed in the order they will dance for the whole day. The competitions that have already ended will be crossed out. So competition 200 is complete and crossed out on the board. Yippee, your child is dancing next, Competition 201.

Music: is encouraged for practice at home. Bradley Brothers, Feisin’ Statement, Mike & Merv, Tempo, Mike Schaeffer, Pat King are all good to start with. Eileen recommends using music from Mike Shaffer and Theresa Shaffer Wilkinson. You can buy the CD’s at the feis, but it might be easier to download the pieces they need from www.udance.com. There is a link to download music from the website also under popular links.

Music Speed: Novice and Prizewinner dancers get a choice of speeds for their heavy dances. Eileen will let them know whether they are doing “slow” or “fast” speed. Open dancers will be asked to request the preferred dance speed on their feis entry. If they don’t know their speed by now, well.....

Results: Results/Awards that are given for the competition are given in several ways. Some feis hosts choose to give the medals to the dancers on the same stage that the competition was held. This practice is generally reserved for the younger dancers; pre-beginner & beginner. The subsequent categories; advanced beginner through prizewinner usually will have their results posted on a wall. The feis staff will let you know when you enter the venue where the location of the results wall would be. You would look up your dancer’s competition number (not her dancer number). For instance one section of the wall will be a poster with competition 201 Reel, 201 Slip Jig, 203 Heavy Jig, 204 Hornpipe. You will then need to look for your dancer’s number in the columns to see if she/he placed. For instance you see #1031 under the column for 1st place competition 201 and that means she/he got a first in the reel! Yippee. NOTE: You child does not have to be in costume to receive these award.

Medals : The first few categories of competition usually get ribbons with a small medallion attached. Some clever people actually make a fabric flag and pin all their medals on that (present company excluded of course)

Trophies: Some hosts will give out trophies for 1st, 2nd & 3rd place winners. Some organized families actually have trophy cases or trophy shelving in their home (present company excluded of course)

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Disclaimer: Some hosts seem to try to give out many firsts, seconds and thirds which make more children happy. It can be disappointing for the kids if they don't place. Enjoy this practice while you can. When the dancers achieve levels Novice and above it gets more difficult to place. I remember my daughter dancing three dances and getting two medals. She asked my "Why did I only get two medals when I danced three times", HA!

Prelim/Open Dancer results: Prelim and Open results can be a torturous process. The girls usually take their dresses off and wait a large sum of time before the results are announced. There is sometimes a podium with 1st, 2nd & 3rd levels to stand on (like the Olympics). The trophies are huge! **Eileen's Rule:** All Prelim/Open dancers MUST be in full costume to receive their awards (whether they think they will place or not!)

Fees Results form: If you are in Prelim/Open, you will typically get a sheet with your results. Review them and then hand them over to Eileen...Eileen spends hours pouring over these sheets analyzing results (yes she needs a life!). For dancers in Beginner to Prizewinner, there is a feis form Eileen would like completed and passed in after each feis. You should also keep a copy for yourself. The children must attain 1st place in dances before they can progress to the next level...You can find this form on the website and I've included it below.

NAFC RULES: The North American Feis Commission (N.A.F.C.) is an organization of Feis Managers responsible for the organizing Feiseanna in Canada and the United States. The primary role of the N.A.F.C. is the development and promotion of Irish Culture, through the medium of Irish Dance and music, as a principal component of the Irish identity. The NAFC Rules are listed on every feis entry form. You should get that magnifying glass out or zoom in again because they are very small. The rules are important and will be enforced.

Use of Video Equipment: The use of video equipment during a Feis is against the NAFC rules and usually enforced. I never understood why taking a video of your daughter dancing will get you in trouble before, but now I do. The dance steps are unique to your school and video taping dancers is against the rule for that reason. Think of it in terms of copy writing information and the rules against that. Personally I would give grandma the video and hope that they won't kick out an elderly person.

Use of Flash Photography: The use of flash photography is also not allowed at the feis while dancers are competing. I believe it's a safety issue if the dancers get distracted or something like this. Good thing no dancers fell while I was taking pictures of my daughter dancing. The urge to do so does pass after about the 1,000th feis and now I hardly ever take pictures!

Vendors: The vendor booths or tables are usually set up at the feis. They will sell anything from socks, shoes, wigs, and just about anything you need in case you have forgotten something. Yes, I did buy shoes once because we forgot ours, but I wouldn't recommend it. The vendors will sell ribbon if you chose to tie your number on. They also sell things like jewelry, clothes etc.

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Used Costumes: When Eileen says it's time to buy a solo costume, you may want to first check for used dresses. Most parents sell dresses amongst themselves and then to other schools or people if they need to. There are many websites for used dresses. Dance Again is a good site and I bought my daughter's first solo costume from Australia. Here's the web site: www.dance-again.com (also available as a link from the website)
Disclaimer: I would recommend that you take careful measurements of your dancer before purchasing anything on line. Eileen would need to approve the purchase of a solo costume and if it doesn't fit properly you will have a problem. Read the description of the dress closely. Some may have defects in the dress, but usually are priced to reflect this. Some sellers are good about letting you return a dress but the shipping can be expensive and they aren't required to let your return it once purchased.

There is usually a section designated for resale of dresses at every feis. This is a better choice because you can try the dresses on and the seller is usually local (no shipping fees, etc.).

So that's it..you are now a Feis Expert. Don't worry, there are plenty of folks around to ask...And of course, if you have any questions....ask Eileen.

WELCOME ABOARD!!!!

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FEIS Results Form for Beginner to Prizewinner:

Name of Child	
Level	
Date of Feis	
Name of Feis	

	Reel	Light Jig	Slip Jig	Heavy Jig	Hornpipe	Trad Set
Place						
Judges Comments (not always Available)						

Other Comments:

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