

# FEISEANNA 101

## AN INTRODUCTION TO IRISH DANCE COMPETITIONS

### WHAT IS A FEIS?

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. 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. Here are a few things that will help prepare dancers and families from the Rince na Grá 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 at the lower levels, a dancer must be able to perform two full steps of a dance. Steps are choreographed for each category of dance: **reel, light jig, single jig, slip jig, treble jig (also called hard jig or heavy jig), hornpipe, and traditional set**. 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 Rince na Grá 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 Rince na Grá (in progression of difficulty) are: reel, light jig, single jig, and slip jig.

As dancers progress to hard shoes, treble jigs, hornpipes, and traditional sets 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 traditional 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 or “cadence”.)

## 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 composed 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 Rince na Grá publication *Irish Dance Competition Levels: Information for Moving through the Ranks*.

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! Rince na Grá dancers are encouraged to look for other Rince na Grá 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.

- 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 with two or three other dancers on stage 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.

### **ARTISTIC EXPRESSION**

Irish dance is a very athletic sport. But unlike many traditional sports, dance is a performance art. Rince na Grá offers many opportunities to nurture and encourage our students’ artistic development. Competing at a feis is one such opportunity.

### **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 Rince na Grá website parents will be able to learn what their dancer needs to wear the day of the feis, what to bring, and, hopefully, a few useful tips about the particular feis the dancer plans to attend.

### **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 organizers may disqualify the dancer of an offender.

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. Also cited are child protection and privacy. 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. Major feiseanna have professional photographers at the event, and those photos are available for sale. Press photographers may also be allowed to photograph a competition, if granted permission by the Feis Committee.

### **ARE YOU STILL INTERESTED?**

Dancers should 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. Rince na Grá students compete under the Director’s name (Katie Meyer, TCRG) and their performance in competition represents the Rince na Grá School of Irish Dance. Please take time to read all of the resources provided on the school’s website under the tab Competition Stuff.

### **GIVE IT A TRY!**

Each feis is sponsored by either a local Irish organization or local Irish dance school and is run by volunteers. A “small” feis may cap their entries at 400 dancers, and some larger feiseanna accept over 1000 entries.

Registration information for each feis may be found at large registration platforms like Feisworx.com or QuickFeis.com (different feiseanna use different platforms, but FeisWorx is the most common one). We will also post links to recommended feiseanna on the Feis Schedule page of the Rince na Grá website. There are no refunds so don’t automatically sign up for every eligible dance. But fortunately each grade level event is fairly inexpensive (typically \$10-\$15 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.

On the day of the feis, competitions will run simultaneously on several stages, with live musicians. Feis day can seem rather chaotic, especially to those new to the scene!

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.

Irish dance competitions are not simply attempts to win medals or trophies – they provide an opportunity to stretch comfort zones. It has been said that “competition drives excellence” and you

will surely find this to be true as you venture into this arena. Dancers will work hard as they prepare for a feis! Enjoy the journey and enjoy your time on stage!

We hope to see you at the next feis!