

Girl takes Irish dancing seriously

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GREECE — For a 13-year-old girl, Moira McMahon is incredibly dedicated to developing her talents as a competitive Irish dancer.

Yet she's quick to point out that it's not a case of overzealous parents pushing her to the point of burnout.

"I had a teacher say that my parents must really want me to do this, but I said it's because I want to do it," emphasized McMahon, a seventh-grader at Greece Athena Middle School. "I could quit tomorrow if I wanted to."

Don't expect that to happen, though. Not only does McMahon excel at what she does, but she also gets tremendous satisfaction out of Irish dancing and wants to convey its virtues to others.

"It helps me in stressing the Irish culture, which is something a lot of people don't know about. Once you see Irish dancing, you automatically want to know how to do it."

Anybody who gets the answering machine at the McMahons' Greece home is treated to an earful of Moira's favorite pastime: a recording of her voice can be heard over some lively Irish music.

"People say, 'It sounds like you're having a great party over there,'" she laughed.

Those same upbeat tunes are what McMahon sets her feet to — with the emphasis on feet. Irish dancing is primarily based on rapid, intricate foot movements.

McMahon frequently performs with her Butler Academy of Traditional Irish Dance classmates at local nursing homes, hospitals and private parties. Often the entire audience will eventually get up and dance, she said.

Social events, though, are superseded by McMahon's desire to excel in individual competition. Accompanied by her mother, Mary, McMahon spends many weekends traveling to competitions around the country.

A dancer can participate in five levels of competitive Irish dancing: beginner, novice, open, preliminary and championship. McMahon is already at the preliminary level and has collected



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
Moira McMahon, a student at the Butler Academy of Traditional Irish Dance, performs a reel during a March 7 practice.

"a roomful of trophies and medals," according to her mother.

After these dancers perform a series of jigs (fast waltzes) and reels (traditional folk dances) before a panel of judges, they are graded on a point system. Dancers advance to higher levels of competition based on the number of first-place finishes they accumulate.

Getting to the championship level is an extremely different chore. McMahon must sometimes compete against nearly 100 people in her under-15 age group, and she's often the smallest in her division. In addition to being one of the youngest, she is also a petite 4-foot-6 and 70 pounds.

"All the dancers are much more serious (at the higher levels)," she said. "When I started Irish dancing, it was just a second thing to do. Now that I've gotten this far, this is what I've set everything else aside for ... most of my friends take tap dance and ballet and they go as far as Niagara Falls once a month and that's it. In the summer, every weekend I'll be out of town."

McMahon performed well enough at a recent world qualifier in New York City to travel to this month's world championships in Limerick, Ireland. But, her mother explained, "The tradition in our school is that you don't go unless you have a chance at winning. She's going to wait a year."

The mother and daughter, who are parishioners at Our Mother of Sorrows Church, both belong to the Butler Academy. It's operated by Pat Butler, who lives in Toronto, Ontario, and also runs Irish dance schools in Syracuse and Watertown.

Not only does McMahon want to become one of the world's best Irish dancers, but she's also anxious to pass her skills on to other performers and hopes she can make a full-fledged career out of dancing someday.

"I'd like to be a teacher. I was thinking that I'd need something else to fall back on, but one teacher brought 700 students to (a competition in) Cleveland and so he didn't need another career. Usually I teach new kids (at her dance school) new steps because (Butler) knows that's what I want to do."

YOUTH BRIEFS



Psychologist to speak

BRIGHTON — Nationally known psychologist Dr. Robert J. Wicks will speak about "Living Simply in an Anxious World" during a visit to Our Lady of Mercy High School, 1437 Blossom Road, on Friday, March 13. The event will take place from 7:30-9:30 p.m. in the Mercy auditorium.

Wicks is director of Program Development for Pastoral Counseling at Loyola College in Maryland.

Tickets are \$6 in advance or \$8 at the door. Advance tickets may be purchased at the Mercy Prayer Center or by calling 716/473-6893.

AQ to host fashion show

HENRIETTA — Fashion '92, an annual fashion show and luncheon sponsored by the Aquinas Parents' Association, will take place at noon on Saturday, March 14, in the Holiday Convention Center, 1111 Jefferson Road.

Tickets for this event are \$15 and can be purchased at the Aquinas Institute Alumni Office, 1127 Dewey Ave., Rochester. Reservations should be made by March 9.

Call 716/889-4446 or 647-2990 for information.

DeSales to host barbecue

GENEVA — DeSales High School, 90 Pulteney St., is offering two public events later this month.

A chicken barbecue will take place Saturday, March 21, from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in front of the school. All dinners (takeout only) are \$5.

Proceeds will help pay for new uniforms for the girls' softball program.

On Friday, March 27, the school's fourth annual Sock Hop will run from 8 p.m. to midnight in the DeSales gym. The event is open to people age 21 and over. Admission is \$15. Reservations, which must be made by March 20, can be made by calling 315/789-3864 or 315/539-2179.

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