

AN ELITE FEW COMPETE THROUGHOUT THE NATION TO PERFORM IRELAND'S ANCIENT 'FEISANNA'

A typical performance by the Breffni School of Irish Dance means jigs, reels, a hornpipe number or two accompanied by a profusion of instruments - pipes, whistles, strings - played at high volume over a tight pulsing rhythm.

The elite dancers, mostly teenage girls with six and seven years of experience, keep themselves airborne longer than seems quite natural, arms at their sides, feet tapping quadruple time when they actually do land. They met an enthusiastic crowd in the fourth- and fifth-graders in the cafeteria of Key Largo Elementary/Middle School on Thursday morning and there was no shortage of volunteers - children and their teachers - to try a few steps of their own, at a much slower pace, afterward.

But most of the dancing at Miami-Dade's Breffni and schools like it has to do with performance of a very different sort. It takes place in gyms and ballrooms across the country in front of judges who award and deduct points on the basis of style and technical proficiency.

Expert dancers travel a national circuit of feisanna (pronounced fesh-anna), dance competitions descended from village festivals in 18th-century Ireland, accumulating points and rankings. The very best travel to the World Championships each year in the home country of Ireland. This year's contest is in Kilarney over Easter weekend.

"A lot of people aren't sure what to expect," said Michael O'Hara, who runs the Breffni School along with his wife, Nicola. "In ballet or modern dancing the recital is central; here it's about the competition. This is as much a sport as anything."

Michael's experience in competitive dance was a short one; when he started teaching professionally at the age of 21, he was ruled ineligible for the amateur contests.

Nicola danced the circuit for 26 years before a foot injury ended her career and she turned to teaching. Nicola, 30, hails from the Irish town of Donegal; Michael was born in New Jersey to Irish parents.

NAMED AFTER AREA

The school is named after the region in Ireland where Michael's mother was born, territory dominated by the O'Rourke clan from the seventh century up to the time of Cromwell's invasion in the mid-17th century.

"I think my parents thought of the dancing the way a lot of immigrants would - a way to keep some of the old traditions alive," he said. "But it was more about the trophies for me, at least in the beginning. My older brother came home with a couple; that was as much a motivator as anything."

Today they teach 50 students out of Miami Shores, Coral Gables, South Miami and Miami Beach studios. Most of their students are girls.

The five Breffni students who traveled to Key Largo Friday are all competitive dancers. A couple of them, Kiera Daley and Brianna O'Neil, have Irish backgrounds; the Rodriguez sisters, Lianne and Cristina, don't. Neither does Carolyn Ho.

"That's not really the point," said Cristina. "Anybody can do this. If you work hard at this, you will get better. You can't help it."

The girls attend three-hour rehearsals, twice a week. "We do repetitions," said Carolyn. "Sometimes we do the same three or four steps again and again and again."

The footwork in Irish dance is hard enough. But the strict rules about "carriage" and bearing mean that a dancer must keep her upper body rigid and can't use her arms for balance at all.

ARMS IN

Whatever the reason behind it, the "arm rule" puts a premium on technique and footwork.

"It breaks the way the body normally moves," Kiera said. "You have to be sharp - arms in, always on your toes, always standing up straight. Our teacher always says it's like dancing around fire."

The girls changed out of their dancing outfits, dresses in intense purples and yellows with miniature capes fixed on the backs, designed to flare up on the jumps. They put on shorts and T-shirts. They took off their fiberglass-heeled shoes and put on sneakers.

There was a long drive to the last performance of the day, at a school in Plantation, and then the girls of the Breffni School had been promised lunch at the Hard Rock Cafe, which they surely deserved.