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THE DANCE OF CHAMPIONS

Cristina Rodriguez, 16, a fan of palomilla steak who speaks Spanish to her housekeeper, holds a routine that doesn't reflect her heritage. Every day after school, she rushes home, pushes the living room couches against the walls and spreads a large mat across the carpet. White socks rolled up to her knees, black ballerina shoes on her feet, the petite brunette holds her arms straight to her sides, clenches her fists and speeds across the room kicking. The music - a tight rhythm of pipes and strings. Cuban? Try Celtic.

"It's what I love, it's my passion," says Cristina who rehearses up to three hours a day. "I would really love to join a show like Riverdance."

An expert dancer from the Miami-based Breffni Academy of Irish Dance - a group of about 50 mostly teenage girls - the teen is among three Breffni students who made the cut to represent the United States at the yearly World Irish Dance Championship in Ireland.

Carolyn Ho, 14, who can trace her family lineage to China, also qualified to attend this year's contest in Ennis, Ireland during Palm Sunday weekend. Only Kiera Daley, 13 - whose mother, Pat Daley, teaches at the Breffni School - can say the trip will take her back to her ancestors' land.

"It's funny when we go to the World Championship and people are like, 'Miami?' " said Michael O'Hara, who runs the Breffni School along with his wife, Nicola. "But you don't have to be Irish to Irish dance."

If Irish dancing means keeping up with traditions for the Daleys, the Rodriguez and Ho families never dreamed their daughters would fall for it after watching a Riverdance video.

"Both of us were born in Cuba," said Lyan Rodriguez, Cristina's mother, referring to herself and her husband. "We would have never imagined [Cristina] would want to Irish dance."

THE BIG TIME

It takes years of intense training for dancers - or rather athletes - to get to the World Championship level, Michael O'Hara said. The girls, who admit getting a few sprained ankles, have all been taking lessons for nearly a decade and rehearsing daily.

Kiera, Carolyn and Cristina have their eyes set on someday joining an international show such as Riverdance, and qualifying for the world championships places them among the best around the globe.

"Only a very small percentage qualify to go, and it's already an honor," said Nicola O'Hara. "It's kind of the Olympics of Irish dance." To qualify for the world contest, the girls competed in gyms and ballrooms across the country in dance competitions descended from 18th century Irish village festivals.

During the competition, each girl dances three rounds in her own age category, where winning means a cup and tiara. Judges will grade them based on style, technique and appearance.

"A couple of hundred years ago, a lot of competitions were on Sunday so people would wear their Sunday's best," explained Michael O'Hara. "Women would have curly hair and a shawl on their back."

With time, the contests' requirements evolved. Women are now allowed to wear wigs, shawls have been replaced by little capes stitched to dresses, and men can wear pants instead of kilts. But a good footwork, choreography and the strict rule about "carriage" - which means that dancers must keep their upper body rigid - remain a must.

It will be Cristina's second visit to the world championship and Kiera's first - the two placed as the top Florida dancers during qualification. Although Carolyn also made the cut, she won't be going to Ireland this year because she wants to wait for younger sister Melissa, 9, to be old enough to compete. The teens are among the original students of the southernmost Irish School Dance.

THE ACADEMY'S REACH

Today, the Breffni Academy - named after the region in Ireland where Michael's parents were born - offers lessons out of Miami Shores, Coral Gables, South Miami, North Miami and Pembroke Pines. The couple are both certified from An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha, the World Irish Dance Commission in Dublin, Ireland.

While many South Floridian girls shake it to the tune of the latest Latin sensations, the Breffni elite dancers opt for dances with names such as jig, reel and hornpipe.

"It gets to be a pain sometimes; my brothers play around and act like Michael Flatley, or they complain about the music," Cristina said. "But I'm grateful of what my family has been able to do for me. I intend to keep Irish dancing in my life."