

# Bennett School of Irish Dance

## Feis 101

### **The Basic Stuff You Need to Know About Irish Dancing Competition by Bill Bennett 09/04/07**

#### **1. Feiseanna, Oireachtais, and their Kin**

A feis (pronounced “fesh”, plural “feiseanna”) is the local level of Irish dancing competition. The Gaelic word originally meant simply, “a gathering”. A sanctioned feis is one that is registered with the North American Feis Commission and follows its rules. Among the rules that a feis must follow in order to be sanctioned, it has to have the appropriate number of adjudicators (judges) who have been awarded the appropriate qualification by the governing body of Irish dancing, the Irish Dance Commission (An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha, in Gaelic.) This qualification is generally referred to by its Gaelic initials, ADCRG.

A feis is under the direction of a feis committee. They have sole charge of all aspects of the feis and are the only people who can address adjudicators, etc.

An oireachtas (pronounced “or-ach-tas”, plural “oireachtais”) is a competition above the local level. The Gaelic word means, “an assembly of important people”. These include the Western US Regional Oireachtas, in November of each year, the North American Championships in July, and the Worlds at Easter time.

Our Western US Region mostly corresponds to the Mountain and Pacific time zones in the US. There are five regions in the US and two in Canada whose feiseanna are governed by the North American Feis Commission . Their web site at <http://www.northamericanfeiscommission.org/> is a good resource. You might also be interested in the Irish Dance Commission’s web site at [www.clrg.ie](http://www.clrg.ie).

Not that this is a matter of any concern to most of us, but while feiseanna in North America are registered with the Feis Commission and must abide by its rules oireachtais are under the direction of the teachers’ associations in the region, nation or continent where they take place. Worlds is under the direction of the Commission, as is the All-Ireland.

At the moment, any dancer whose teacher is willing to certify their entry form is welcome to compete at the Western US Regional Oireachtas. Competing at North Americans or Worlds requires qualification via placing at the Regionals.

A feis has to have a series of levels for solo dances, from beginners to open championships. Oireachtais don’t have levels - they’re purely open championships. A feis may also have competition in a variety of figure (multiperson) dances. At an oireachtas, 8-hand (8-person) dances and choreographies and dance dramas involving greater numbers of people are the only multiperson dances that are competed in our region.

Some feiseanna don’t use the word “feis” in their title. Feili Denver is an example. Some

also have appointed themselves the state championships of their state. Since states, at least in the Western US Region, don't have governing bodies for Irish dancing, they're welcome to do so.

Every school which is eligible to enter its students in feiseanna must be under the direction of a teacher who is certified by the Commission. Such teachers have to be at least 20 years of age and pass a series of five tests administered by examiners chosen by the Commission. Successful candidates are awarded the designation, TCRG, signifying their certification. (All ADCRG's have to have been TCRG's first.) Molly's TCRG diploma is hanging in the waiting room at the studio.

## **2. What a Feis Is and Isn't**

A feis is supposed to be a showcase for us to show how good we are and to test ourselves against other dancers and schools. It is not a holy war. The other schools are not evil sneaks who intend to win by underhanded means. They are dancers who work as hard as our dancers under the direction of excellent teachers.

## **3. The Seven Solo Dances in Feis Order**

There are seven types of dances that are competed in solo dancing, four soft-shoe and three hard-shoe. They are always competed in what's called "feis order" in our region -

- Reel
- Light Jig
- Slip Jig
- Single Jig (note - under Commission rules, it is optional for a feis to offer competition in this step. It is also known as a "hop jig" in some places)
- Double (or Treble) Jig
- Hornpipe
- Traditional Set

## **4. The Local Schools**

There are 9 Colorado schools. The others, in order of their founding, are

- McTeggart
- Wick
- Celtic Steps (formerly, St. Brendan's)
- Heritage
- Reed
- Liberty
- Martin Percival
- Connally

The program will identify dancers by school, as will the results sheets. Some dancers from schools outside Colorado will enter our local feiseanna, so you'll see some exotic names.

## **5. Local Feiseanna**

There are currently six feiseanna held each year in Colorado. They are listed below with their approximate dates and the organizing school:

Winterfeis - January or February (Wick)  
Feili Denver - March or April (McTeggart)  
Pike's Peak - 2d weekend in June (St. Brendan's)  
Colorado Irish Festival Feis - 2d weekend in July (McTeggart)  
Long's Peak (Estes Park) - 1st weekend in September after Labor Day (Reed)  
Fall Feis - 1st weekend in November (McTeggart)

## 6. Feis Levels and Moving Up

Although your first glance at the bewildering matrix of dances, ages and experience levels in a feis syllabus (the organizational plan for a feis) may make you think it's an exercise in confusion, the intent of grouping dancers by age and experience is to make competition more enjoyable. In the Western US Region, male and female dancers compete in the same categories at feiseanna. In some larger feiseanna in other regions and at all oireachtais, dancers compete separately by sex as well as age and experience levels.

The Western US Region has recently adopted a standardized system of numbering competitions and a uniform set of criteria for determining experience levels. (NAFC calls experience levels, "grades.:".) These do not necessarily apply to feiseanna outside our region; the syllabus for a feis will give the criteria for the levels used at that feis. These are the current Western US Regional levels for regular competition:

First Feis (Optional - not all feiseanna will offer this category)  
First Beginner - someone who has never won a 1st, 2d or 3d in that particular dance  
Second (or Advanced) Beginner - someone who has never won a 1st or 2d in that dance at that level  
Novice - someone who has never won a 1st in that dance at that level  
Prizewinner or Open

Your results don't count for moving up if there were fewer than five dancers in your competition. That may not seem like as much of a problem now that there are often dozens of dancers in a particular age/experience level, but it occasionally happens, particularly at the youngest or oldest age groups. The feis committee has the option of combining age or experience levels if too few dancers are entered in one.

Adults generally follow the same scheme as younger dancers, except that Beginner 1 and Beginner 2 are combined into a single Beginner category. A feis committee may also elect to have a special beginner category for those over 40. This category is generally limited to soft-shoe dances. If you place 1st, 2d or 3d in a dance in that category, you enter the novice category along with the young whipper-snappers.

An adult beginner has to be 18 or over who never competed as a child. First-time competitors who are 18 or over should consider whether they want to compete in regular or adult competition - both are open to them. A recent decision by the Irish Dance Teachers Association of North America to forbid adult championships sent a lot of adult dancers scurrying to the regular ranks, including the president of the North American Adult Dancers' Association! So if you've set your sights on being a champion, enter regular competition.

There isn't yet a central database of feis results or individual dancers' competition levels in each dance. Your teacher (that's Molly) is your official source for your experience level in

each dance. The quality and timeliness of feis results which are now being provided to schools makes it easier to track those levels but they still need to be checked - mistakes happen.

Competitors are usually eager to move up to higher levels of competition. It represents an achievement, another stepping-stone on the path to championships. This eagerness should be tempered with a realization that moving up puts you in a whole new league with new expectations. The adjudicators who were so friendly and understanding when you were a beginner look at you with sharper eyes when you advance to the novice ranks. They expect more of you, as indeed they should. So you must be prepared to dance better, with more advanced steps and better attention to technique, at each level. Don't let ambition outpace dedication!

## **7. Figure Dances**

Figure dances are multiperson dances. They are designated by how many people or "hands" perform them. (Think farm hand, deck hand, etc.) Some are choreographed by teachers while others are "book" dances following the instructions in a book published by the Commission, "Thirty Popular Figure Dances." All 2- and 3-hand dances are choreographed. The feis syllabus will say whether 4-, 6-, and 8-hand dances need to be "book" dances.

As feiseanna have gotten bigger, there's an increasing tendency to limit the number of figure dances a competitor can enter. Some figures may only be available to particular age groups.

Figures in regular competition may be divided into "Beginner" and "Open" figures. Which you belong in depends on your experience level in solo competition, not figures! To enter a Beginner figure, everyone in it has to be entered in at least one Beginner solo dance.

A dancer may dance "up" in figure dances (that is, in an older age category) but not "down". Dancers who are entered in regular competition for solos may not enter adult figures.

There are rules governing how many dancers may "repeat" as members of different teams in the same figure (say, appear in two different 8-hands in the same competition.)

## **8. Championships**

There are two levels of championships at feiseanna, Preliminary and Open. (This distinction doesn't exist at oireachtais, which are purely Open.) In order to enter a Preliminary Championship, a dancer is usually required to have placed 1st, 2d, or 3d at the Prizewinner level in each of the solo dances. Moving from Preliminary to Open requires placing 1st in two Prelims.

Championships require three adjudicators. Each scores every competitor individually. The scores are then combined to rank all the competitors.

Championship dancers compete a category of dance that is not available in regular competition, the nontraditional set. There is a recognized group of hard-shoe dance tunes which form this category. It isn't the tunes which are nontraditional; it's the dances. While the traditional sets are standardized such that everyone in the world is supposed to do them more-or-less alike, each teacher choreographs their own steps for the nontraditional sets.

The common way to compete Preliminary championships is for each competitor to do one soft-shoe dance (reel or slip jig for female dancers, reel only for males) and one hard-shoe dance, which may be either a double jig or hornpipe, or their nontraditional set. Opens usually require three dances, a soft shoe, a hardshoe and a set.

(The reason that female competitors get a choice of reel or slip jig while males don't is that until the late 1980's men and boys were not permitted to compete in slip jig, the traditional "ladies' dance." It's a curious survival. Before World War I, women did not learn hard-shoe dancing - it was a male preserve. The hard shoes were originally the men's working brogues, which women didn't wear. The story is that so many Irish men were killed in the war that unless the women had taken up hard-shoe, that whole style of dancing would have died out.)

Championship competitors are forbidden to enter regular solo dances although they may compete in figures. Some feiseanna have special solo categories in which championship dancers may compete against each other in the solo dances they are not doing in their championship. Since gents are limited to reels in championships, they are often permitted to enter the separate competition in reels as well.

## **9. Special Trophy Competitions**

Most feiseanna have special trophy competitions for particular dances. There might be a boys' reel special and a girls' slip jig special, or a traditional hornpipe special, etc. The syllabus for the feis will give the qualifications for that particular competition. Some may be open only to those who do not compete in championships, for instance. Specials are outside regular competition; your success in a special does not affect your level in that dance at your next feis.

## **10. What You Need**

If you've decided you want to compete, you need to talk to your teacher! Although online registration has made the teacher's role in your registration less evident than it is for manual registration, it is still the case that a dancer can only enter a sanctioned feis with the teacher's approval. Molly will advise you on which dances you're ready to compete and which steps will be appropriate for you. She'll also help you get ready for the feis.

You will need the appropriate shoes. For female dancers, that means Irish-style ghillies for soft-shoe dances and hard shoes for the hard-shoe dances. For male dancers, jazz shoes or boys' reel shoes for soft-shoe and hard shoes for, you guessed it, hard shoe. Tap shoes are expressly forbidden by the rules.

You will also need a costume. That's easy for guys - show up in a decent-looking, long-sleeved shirt and long black trousers. Female Bennett School dancers have several options. You may rent a Bennett School dress that is owned by the school or purchase one from It's Knotwork to Me. You'll have to supply your own long-sleeved white blouse and socks or tights - poodle socks for regular competition, black tights for adults. (There's nothing in the rules that requires tights for adults but some adjudicators are traditionalists in this.)

More advanced female dancers may also wear the uniquely designed and colorful "solo" dresses. According to a rule that went into effect in 2007, dancers may not wear solo

dresses for First Feis, Beginning 1 and Beginner 2 dances. They must wear either school dresses or a skirt and blouse. If you have all your soft-shoe dances in Novice or above, Molly may allow you to get a solo dress but you'll have to change it along with your shoes for your hardshoe dances if any of them is still in Beginner. This helps keep the focus that a solo dress is a distinction that you have to earn.

So what about your hair? Again, things are easy for guys. For women and girls, there's a tradition of having Scarlett O'Hara curls. The story goes that feiseanna were held after church way back in the old days, and the churchgoers would have curled their hair to look their best. Whatever the origin, the tradition exists. Practically speaking, many adjudicators are favorably impressed by evidence that you've invested some effort in looking right. The importance of the curly-haired look varies with age and competition level. Many dancers are pulling their hair back into a bun and wrapping a curly-hair scrunchie around it. Many are also buying falls and wigs with the "authentic" look. Those are good alternatives to the work of curling your own hair (assuming it will take and keep a curl!) The one thing to be careful of with a wig is making sure it stays on when you dance.

Do not wear dangling earrings or a necklace that's going to flop up and down as you dance. They're not only distracting but will beat you up.

## **11. Registration**

All Colorado feiseanna have gone to online registration. There are currently two different software packages that different feiseanna are using, with varying degrees of user friendliness. You also have the option for mail-in registration should you not have internet access or get too frustrated with the package a particular feis is using. Please talk to Molly or me if you have trouble or questions. If there's an error in your entry and you can't fix it yourself, Molly can get it fixed for you.

## **12. Getting Ready**

*Tourist in New York City - "How do you get to Carnage Hall?"*  
*Street musician - "Practice, man, practice!"*

If you don't stretch or exercise routinely, take it up before the feis - and not the day before, either. If you don't practice regularly, ditto. You want to do your best at the feis, and that doesn't start the night before. As the school gets ready for a feis, classes will increasingly be organized to approximate the feis situation, to help you function more easily in that environment. You don't want to be distracted by unfamiliar details that will take your mind off your performance.

Practice with as many different tunes for each of your dances as you can. Shop at Irish Butterfly for some new CD's, swap CD's with your friends, etc. The feis syllabus may announce the names of the musicians; try to find CD's from those musicians if possible. Even if you can't find recordings from those particular musicians, find as many different reels, jigs, etc. as possible. It really throws younger dancers, especially, off if their class always uses a particular reel and suddenly the feis musician strikes up a different one! If you usually practice to accordion music, and the feis musician on your stage is a fiddler, that can throw you off unless you've prepared by practicing to different tunes. Also select different speeds. Make sure you can dance to the music that's being played, even if it's different from what you're familiar with. The easiest way for an adjudicator to separate the "also-rans"

from the potential medalists is if they're off time.

If you need to work on particular steps or improve your technique beyond what you're getting in class, talk to Molly about private lessons or about attending additional classes. The better practiced you are, and the more feedback you've gotten to help you prepare, the better and more confident you're going to be when it counts.

I've attached a very perceptive document, "Top 11 Reasons Why You Might be Losing Points" by Caitlin Gray. The author was 13 at the time she posted this, a Preliminary Championship competitor for one of the Eastern schools. One thing that she doesn't mention in getting ready for competition is having yourself videotaped - an excellent source of feedback! For instance, I always think my legs are perfectly straight although videotape tends to say otherwise. Only if I know I have a problem can I do anything to remediate it.

Take Molly's advice to heart. She's been through the rigors of passing the five tests for certification as a teacher, and she doesn't fuss about things like straight arms and legs, turnout and cross, etc. because she's a fussy person. There are people who can goof off in class and perform brilliantly when the time comes, but chances are that you're not one of them. If you're lucky, you'll perform as well as you practice, so make the practices count.

### **13. The Day Before**

Make sure you have everything you're going to need. Specifically, check your costume - all of it. Don't assume that because there was a pair of poodle socks in your dance bag last time you looked that they're still there. Verify that they are and they're not covered with orange flakes from your Cheetos. Check the laces in your shoes. Make sure you have pins to fasten your cape. In general, behave like a worrywart. (Parents of younger dancers will want to do the worry-warting for them.)

If you discover you're missing anything, call 303-750-3510 and talk to Molly or me. Don't wait until you arrive at the feis site to report that your flash pants don't fit or that you can't find your cape!

What else to take? Make sure you have your water bottle. You'll want snacks and maybe something more substantial if you're going to be there a while. All feiseanna have some sort of food service available but you have to consider cost, lines, and possible inconvenience. All Colorado feiseanna forbid coolers.

**Leave the video camera at home.** Videotaping or motion-picture photography is forbidden by Commission rules. As of January 2005, so is still photography while dancers are in motion although the Colorado feiseanna rapidly gave up enforcing that rule.

Get a good night's sleep.

### **14. Feis Day!**

The instructions for the feis will tell you when to report to the registration table. Feis committees are being as considerate as they can about dividing the day's events to minimize the amount of time you have to wait around, but it's understandable that there's only so much they can do to anticipate how long things are going to take. Show up on time! Even though you may have heard that feiseanna run on "Irish time" you can't afford to risk being late.

The first thing to do is to locate the registration table. Competitor numbers are generally filed alphabetically. Give the official your name and they'll give you a rectangular card with your number on one side and a list of your dances on the back. It should also give your stage assignments for each dance. There may also be a "parent card" which duplicates the list of dances and stage assignments. Your number is your identification for the feis; it must be displayed for every solo competition and to pick up your awards. It may also be your ticket through the door. (For figure dances, only one member of the team needs to display a number during the event but every registered competitor, even if they're only doing figures, needs to pick up their number.)

Family members and friends may need to pay an entrance fee if the particular feis isn't one that tacks on a "family admission fee" to your registration. The feis committee will also be selling programs which you might want to buy.

Find Molly. She will help you find your backstage area and give you whatever advice you need. She will know where Bennett School families are congregating. She also has access to the Feis Emergency Kit the school maintains, which has socks, flash pants, shoe laces, safety pins, bobby pins, Band-Aids, and painkillers in it.

## **15. The Setup**

Modern feiseanna are run on multiple stages at the same time. One musician or group of musicians will be assigned to a group of stages, which will be arranged in a row. The stages may be numbered or may be color-coded. Each stage will have an adjudicator sitting at a table in front of it. There will be seating for spectators behind the adjudicator. Spectators must not stand or sit where they might distract the adjudicators or interfere with their view. And never, never, speak to an adjudicator!

There will be a backstage area for dancers to assemble before they compete. Ideally, it will be behind the stages, with curtains separating it from the adjudicators' view. There should be signs indicating the backstage areas; they may say, "Dancers Only".

## **16. Your Competition**

The feis committee will have backstage managers who are in charge of rounding up all the dancers for each competition, getting them lined up, and getting them on stage. You can recognize them because they're harassed-looking people with fat notebooks in their hands.

When you're backstage, listen for your competition to be called. Then check in with the manager.

Don't wander off unless you know for certain that you have a long time until your next dance (for instance, if the adjudicators have taken a lunch break.) There's nothing worse than going through all the preparation for competition and then missing a dance because you're not there!

While you're waiting, go over your steps in your head or with your feet. Get settled in your mind to do your best when you get on stage. Stretch and warm up if you have time and space. Create a quiet zone within yourself if that helps you.

With so many age and experience levels for each type of dance, the only efficient way to get through them is if all the competitions for each type of dance are done on their various stages before they move on to the next type of dance. So all the reels will be competed first, with different aged dancers in the different experience levels competing on different stages. Then, when all the reel groups have danced, they'll move on to light jigs, etc.

All the dancers for a particular competition will go on stage at once. They'll be lined up in a row or rows. Even if your best Bennett School friend is in the same group with you, don't line up next to each other. If two dancers from the same school are doing the same steps at the same time, it's all too easy for the adjudicator to compare you. Comparing you with all the other dancers is their job, and they're trained and experienced in doing it, but you don't have to help them too much!

Always remember that you're within sight of the adjudicator from the moment you go on stage until the moment you go off. Although only the actual dancing is supposed to be scored, your poise and confidence are evident from the moment the adjudicator first sees you until they don't see you any more. If you need to scratch your nose or adjust your hair, do it backstage. Once you step onto the stage, even if you're two rows back from the actual dancing, do not do anything distracting. You don't have to grin like a Cheshire cat the whole time (your teeth would dry out!) but try to look poised and confident. Stand straight, don't talk to your neighbor, and don't wave to your friends in the audience.

Dancers go two or three at a time, starting from the right-hand end of the row. The music does not stop between pairs of dancers - only the first pair gets an "8 for nothing" that doesn't have someone already dancing. Each pair of dancers does two complete steps (right and left foot of each) and then the next pair goes. In many cases, the feis committee will provide a "starter" (which may be the backstage manager) to help you start at the right time. **Do not blindly depend on the starter!** Make sure you know when the music tells you it's going to be time for you to start. There have been instances where starters were wrong, or only started counting out loud on the number "6", or did other things which would unsettle you. If you know when it's going to be time to start, you can get through these and still have a good start and good performance.

When everyone's out on stage, and the first two dancers are in position, the adjudicator will signal that it's time to start. The music will strike up, the starter may count, and away you go.

Your mind might go blank at this point. This is why it's so important to have practiced the exact steps you're going to do, in the exact order. Never, never, just vaguely decide, "Well, I think I'll do John One and then Fred," and not practice them until you could do them in your sleep in just that order. (The transition from one step to the next is what confuses people the most - make sure you practice both steps together!) It's so difficult to focus on all the form points, like pointing your feet, turnout and cross, keeping your arms straight and your hands gripped, etc. - don't wait until you're on stage to focus on them. And practice smiling!

Keep dancing until you've completed your steps. If you panic (and I think we all have) **don't stop!** Keep smiling and keep dancing. If you make a mistake, don't grimace, slap your forehead or give any other signal. Just keep dancing as well as you can. You have 32 counts to get through, and make sure you get through them. Then stop - don't run overtime!

When you're done with your two steps, stop, point, and bow. Do not step back until you

look behind you. The next dancers will already have started and you want to show them the courtesy of staying out of their way. Return to your place in line and stand there with the others, remembering to look poised and dignified. This is also not one of those times to grimace or tell your neighbor how well you did. Save all of that for when the adjudicator, starter, or backstage manager tells you to exit. When you're backstage, you can wave your arms around, cheer or cry and it won't affect your score.

One of the most inspiring things I've seen at feiseanna is when a competitor has an absolutely terrible reel and then comes back to medal in their light jig. It takes real strength of character to recover from a disaster and come back like a pro. Every time I see something like that, I feel really proud of the dancers who did it.

A word about adjudicators. Most of them try to keep a neutral expression, not because they're indifferent to the dancing but to avoid encouraging one dancer more than another. Although the adjudicators' tests emphasize consistency in scoring, each has their own preferences. Some feiseanna try to even out the effect of particular adjudicators' preferences by rotating their stage assignments every dance or every so many dances. Other feiseanna try to accomplish the same thing by rotating the dancers' stage assignments.

## **17. Awards**

Feiseanna have awards ceremonies for championships and special trophy competitions. Awards for regular competition are handed out at an awards table. The results will be posted on the wall at some designated point. They're generally arranged by age. Each competition will have a sheet giving the competition number, age group, type of dance and level. It will list the award-winners in order by place, along with their school.

If your name is listed on the sheet, you're entitled to a medal (or for some dances, a trophy.) Find the awards table, present your number card, and tell the official the number of the competition. They'll check you off and give you your medal!

If you have to leave before you have a chance to pick up your awards, leave your number card with Molly and she can pick your awards up for you.

Most feiseanna will give you a chance to purchase any comments which the adjudicators make about your dancing. In general, that's probably not a worthwhile investment for local feiseanna both because there tend to be few comments and because the school is getting comments on all our dancers very quickly as automated record-keeping becomes the norm. In a larger school which might have hundreds of dancers competing at a feis, it might take some time to disseminate what comments there are. As few of us as there are, we can do it very rapidly. However, for out-of-town feiseanna, it's a worthwhile investment unless Feisworx is handling the scoring.

## **18. Protocol for Family Members and Spectators**

Our job is to support and encourage the dancers. You and they have invested a lot of time and energy (and money, in your case!) getting them ready and getting them there, and you can help make the occasion a positive one for them.

I've been to a couple of feiseanna where Dr. John Cullinan, a distinguished adjudicator and historian of Irish dancing, has turned around and criticized the audience for being "mean"

(stingy) with their applause. On one of these occasions, he exclaimed, "Those are your children up there - the least you can do is clap your hands!" Even though my facetious idea about having Bennett School cheers would probably get us all ejected from the feis, the point is sound: to show our dancers that we admire and appreciate their performances. It doesn't matter how well they did - it takes courage to get up on stage with all those other dancers and perform in front of blank-faced adjudicators, and we need to communicate our approval.

Applaud our own dancers, but it's also polite to applaud all the dancers at the end of each competition. The aim of the feis is the improvement of Irish dancing for everyone, so you should applaud all the dancers as they exit the stage.

Keep your comments positive while you're watching a competition. That not only creates a positive atmosphere but avoids offense to others who may be sitting near you - you never know who they are or what school they're rooting for! And always, always be positive when you're talking to your dancers. If there are corrections to be made, Molly's an expert at making them.

**No videotaping and no flash photography of dancers "whilst in motion"** (to quote the January 2005 An Coimisiun rule.)

Don't block aisles or exits. Winterfeis got temporarily shut down by the fire marshall once upon a time over this issue, and he wouldn't let the feis resume until everyone had found a place to sit.

## Top 11 Reasons Why You Might Be Losing Points

Caitlin Gray

*From e-zine Irish Dance Rave 08/19/00*

\*Sloppiness: When you practice dancing, don't "cheat". If you practice while looking down at your feet and half-kicking your way through your reels, odds are, you won't do much better in a feis. So when you practice, pretend you're being judged. Have a sibling or parent tell you when you get sloppy.

\*Hiding: Don't stand behind the other dancer so the judge won't see you! And they give you a HUGE stage: *USE IT!*

\*Nerves: Everyone gets an adrenaline rush before performing: It's perfectly normal. But if it gets so bad that you always forget your dances, you might need to take some time out before you get in line to dance. Sit down somewhere quiet and *SLOWLY* plan what you're going to do, and walk it through. And even if you *ARE* nervous, look composed onstage,

because a confident dancer will do just great :o)

\*Physical Distractions: Mom (or dad) with the video camera waving [*note - videotaping is not allowed at Feiseanna*] aren't helping your performance. Your sore ankle keeps bugging you when you dance. As with sports, you need to create a "zone", meaning you block out EVERYTHING except you and the dance floor. Maybe you'll need to say something to close out the distractions. Like in the movie "For Love of the Game", the pitcher says "Quiet the Mechanism" before pitching, and the world around him closes out so he focuses on what's important at the moment.

\*Mental Distractions: Ok, you've sold your house, you're going to a new school, you broke up with your boyfriend (or girlfriend), your best friend was in a car accident....THE PRESSURE! For the 2 minutes you're dancing, a lot can go through your head (which can make you forget about what you're doing). A major part of your performance is mental. Many athletes and performers do this mental exercise almost like meditating: Find a quiet place and sit down. First, picture the stage on which you'll be dancing, and block EVERYTHING else to the back of your mind. Then, still keeping clear thoughts, picture yourself in full costume standing in line to dance. (If something else pops into your mind, start this over!) Now, imagine it's your turn to dance. Hear the music. Run slowly through your dance the best you can imagine, and walk back to your line. If ANYTHING other than what you're supposed to be visualizing pops into your mind, work on blocking it out by repeating this exercise.

\*Poor Equipment: Are your hard shoes giving you blisters? Do your ghillies keep coming untied? Be aware of this before you compete. Bad equipment can throw off your peak performance. Put gel inserts into your shoes or triple knot your ghillies, WHATEVER you need to do to ensure that everything works on Feis Day.

\*Mistakes: If you kick the judge's table and spill her coffee, or drop your wig, SHAKE IT OFF (well, not literally). Give a big smile and move on! They're grading you on performance, not things you can't control. As for kicking the table, accidents happen. If you dance the rest of your routine well, it should all work out.

\*Personal Reasons: Not all judges like the same kind of dance. One might like one with lots of leaps and energy, but another might like low-to-the-ground dances that maybe cover more floor area. Every judge is different, so if you dance well and don't win, don't take it personally.

\*Arms and Hands: Though it might feel like your arms are at your sides and your hands are neat, you're nervous and you might forget about

them. Focus deeply on your hands, because its VERY noticeable when you overlook the importance of them.

\*Living up to your potential: If you're dancing prizewinner, and you know lots of hard dances, but you don't feel like exerting the energy to try them at a feis, you'll get blown away by dancers who try. Put your ALL into it!

\*Injury: If you're hurt right before a feis, definitely get it checked out. Not only will it affect your dance, but it could cause permanent damage.