

Today's weather picture by: Cole Schneider, 8, Vancouver, Sifton Elementary School



SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2004



DAVE BARRY

Insects make any wedding special

It's wedding season again. You can tell because the average bridal magazine currently weighs more than the average bride.

Bridal magazines are massive because they carry enormous amounts of advertising designed to convince the bride-to-be that her wedding will be a hideous disaster if it costs less than a nuclear aircraft carrier. "If your parents have any money left over for retirement, you have FAILED" is the message to brides from the U.S. wedding industry.

There are no magazines for grooms, of course. The groom's sole wedding responsibility is to arrive at the ceremony wearing pants and not actively throwing up. Everything else is up to the bride, who must make thousands of critical wedding decisions, such as: Should she invite all her relatives, or just the attractive ones? Where should the guests sit? Should they shoot firearms into the air?

On that last question, my advice is: No. I base this on an Associated Press story, sent in by many alert readers, concerning a wedding last October in Serbia, which, as you are no doubt aware, is a country located somewhere. The AP story, which I swear I am not making up, begins as follows:

"In an apparent first, wedding guests shooting off celebratory rounds in central Serbia brought down a small aircraft, local media reported Sunday."

You read that correctly: Wedding guests "shot down a plane." The AP states that "Shootings and fatalities are frequent at Serbian weddings because of the centuries-long tradition of blasting away with firearms in celebration."

Now, I have been to some exuberant wedding receptions, including one where a good friend of mine — whom, out of respect for his privacy, I will identify here only as "Joseph DiGiacinto, 235 Main St., White Plains, NY 10601" — waded into a large fountain and attempted to overthrow, via hand-to-hand combat, a religious statue. But as an expression of joy at the union of a man and a woman, this pales by comparison with shooting down aircraft.

Fortunately, the two people in the plane survived. But this

BARRY, page D3

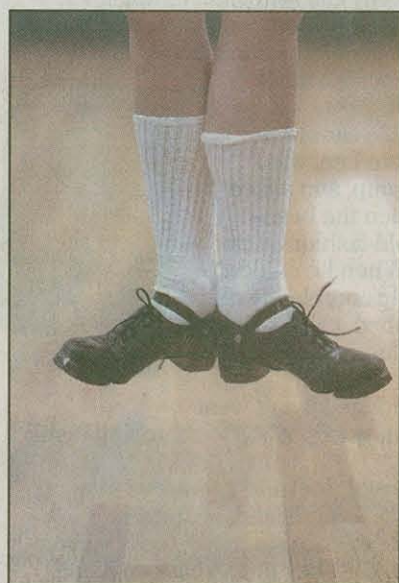
Other improvements in The Columbian

The "People & Places" feature published on A2 can now be found each day on D2 in the Life section.

Two columns which appear on D2 will move to other pages in the section.

Ken Swamer's "Family Man" column moves from Sunday page D2 to the Wednesday page D3.

Look for Dr. Paul Donohue's "To Your Health" column to appear on Friday on page D3 on the Health and Fitness page.



Irish dancer Mckynzi Smith goes through a pair of hard shoes (\$140) as well as two pairs of soft shoes (\$40 a pair) every year.

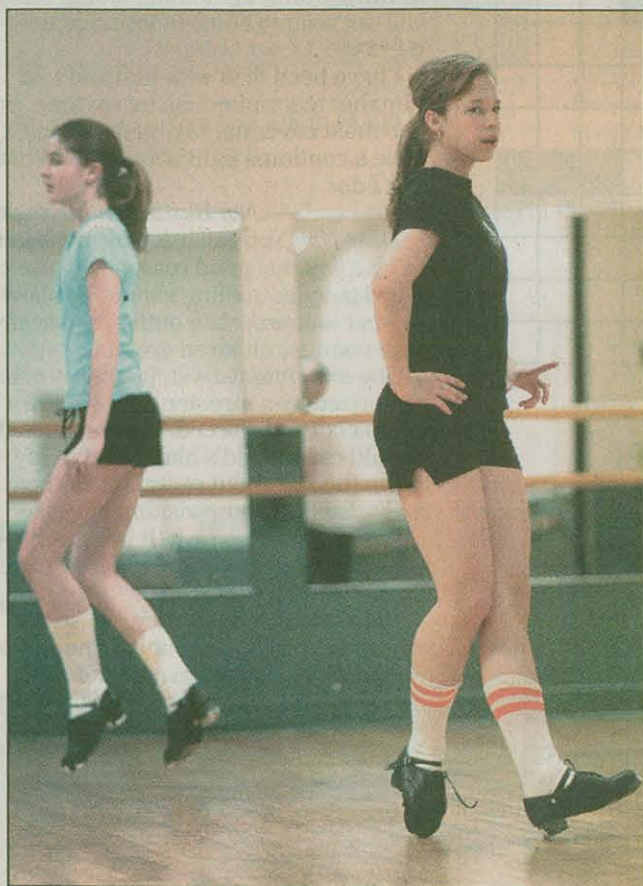
Dancing with her destiny



Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

St. Patrick's Day performances give local Irish dancers the most visibility. Yet this competitive sport is a year-round commitment for many, including, from left to right, Shelby Barr, 13, Anna Sims, 11, and Mckynzi Smith, 14, Clark County's lone qualifier for the world Irish Dancing Championships.

Clark County teenager earns chance to compete against the world ... but passes



There's a folk tale, which might not be true, that explains why Irish dancers keep their upper bodies so stiff: When the Brits outlawed dance in Ireland from roughly the 14th to 18th centuries, the people responded by focusing on frenetic leg movement. That way, if authorities looked in their windows, there'd be nothing suspicious to see.

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

This is Mckynzi Smith's show. At her school, in front of her classmates.

Bouncy brown curls. Braces. Yet with maturity and wit, the 14-year-old Irish dancer from Salmon Creek clearly has taken control of the situation.

She's waving thumbs-up, thumbs-up, to the sound booth during the dry run. The music needs to be louder or the dancers can't hear the beat. Backstage, a few minutes later, she's leading the company in its last-minute prep, spreading enthusiasm and encouragement as well as coaching. "We need to watch our lines." When everyone gets quiet, she suddenly starts humming the music, stamping the steps, saying, "We've got to hit those beats."

Meanwhile, a crowd of about 500 students, staff and senior citizens (bused in for the occasion) gathers in the King's Way Christian School auditorium to see Smith and the rest of the Comerford School of Irish Dance performers. Introductions begin with a teacher talking about Smith as "our own world qualifier."

That statement goes beyond just allegiance to her school. Smith is the only person from Clark County this year who qualified for the world Irish Dancing Championships in Belfast, which are being held this week, attracting more than 12,000 people from throughout the globe. So why isn't Smith in Ireland

right now?

Finding her gift

Mckynzi Smith played select-level soccer, tried ballet and tap, yet found herself most intrigued by an activity that family friends Camille and Bryanna Ford were toying around with, inspired by such flashy stage shows as "Riverdance" and "Lord of the Dance."

She joined a dance class for beginners in Portland. Then, after switching to the Comerford school in 2000, Smith rose in rank four levels to the highest classification in just two years, a rapidly accelerated pace. She competed at the regional championships in 2001 and finished 21st out of roughly 100 participants in her age group from 11 western states. The next year, she finished 11th, one place away from the cutoff for the Ireland competition. In 2003, she finished 10th, which qualified her for the trip this

The debate

Should you force children to do things that they don't want to do, even if you think it's the best for them in the long run?

On one side:

The more you push, the more you risk the relationship.

On the other side:

This could be one of those opportunities of a lifetime. It might never present itself again.

DANCER, page D7

your Guide:



The Queen Mary 2 is billed as the "queen of queen" cruise ships /D4



Here's a handful of movies to get you ready for the baseball season /D9

Coming Monday:

Christopher Burkett is photography's Ansel Adams of color



Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

As fellow dancers at the Portland Comerford school worked on last-minute preparations for the world Irish Dancing Championships in Belfast, Clark County's Mckynzi Smith, far left, could only wonder what it would have been like if she had made a different decision and chosen instead to go to Ireland.

Dancer:

From page D1

year but didn't exactly trumpet her existence to the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, Smith and her family were extremely excited about the achievement. And Smith told her parents she wanted to go to Ireland, even though that meant she would be dropping out of the Greater Columbia Volleyball Club, another select team, that already had her non-refundable summer fee.

Yet as the weeks passed after the November dance competition, Smith began having doubts. "I started feeling it after Christmas," Smith said. "I started going over it in my head. ... (The other girls going to Ireland) all have been dancing since they were born, so I want to go there acting like I already have been there before. ... If I would have went this year, I would have been scared. I wouldn't have performed as well. I want to practice a lot, perfect all of those things I want to perfect. I want to be really confident. One more year will make me more ready."

She kept these concerns to herself for months, though, growing more and more withdrawn whenever the subject came up for discussion.

One day in early March, her mother, Chris, called her into the home office and started chatting about the trip and what accommodations still needed to be made. After a few minutes of enduring the discussion, Mckynzi couldn't take it anymore and finally blurted out, "I don't really want to go."

Chris recalled being stunned, and almost hoping she had heard wrong. Her first response: "What?" Followed by: "Why?"

Ready, or not?

Lauren Mueller, one of Mckynzi's instructors and co-founder of the Portland branch of the Comerford school, said she considers Smith a potential "superstar" in the art form.

"For her age group, she's the best in the Portland area," Mueller said. "And she's dancing better now than she did (when she qualified for the Ireland competition). She has a new set of material that she's mastered. She has a great work ethic. She's a perfectionist, and those attributes will help her become one of the most successful people on the planet. ... She is going to be one of the best Irish dancers that the world has ever seen. I really believe that. Once she feels that she has all of the pieces, she's going to be unstoppable."

Mueller and her husband, Jim, who also helps run the local school, have gone to the world championships several times and even competed themselves. Both felt Smith was ready for it. So did Tony Comerford, who directs the chain of institutions.

"But none of us would pressure a student to go," Lauren Mueller said. "They are the ones who have to walk out on the stage. They are the ones that are being judged."

Mckynzi's father, Rick, a commander in the Vancouver Police Department, played professional baseball and has coached his son, Zach, who's two years older than Mckynzi. Regardless of the sport, he said, there's a disturbing number of parents who try to live through their children, pushing the kids to the point where

"I want to practice a lot, perfect all of those things I want to perfect. I want to be really confident. One more year will make me more ready."

Mckynzi Smith

what they used to love is no longer even enjoyable. Rick said he and his wife were not going to do that to Mckynzi, regardless of some of the advice they received from fellow parents and family members.

"I'm not against trying to get the best out of kids," Rick Smith said. "I think that's healthy. But (sometimes) people really are putting their own wishes onto a child. ... I've seen it in every sport, football, baseball, dance. It doesn't matter. There are cases where people feel like they have something to prove. Feel like they are going to show that their kids are better than someone

else's kids. They didn't do it, so now their kids can."

Chris said, "Rick and I talked about this a lot, and as parents, we struggled with what to do. We know it would be such a great experience. We thought if we made her go, she might realize how great it is once she was there. We were really torn, because she's 14. She's young enough to not really get the significance. But she's old enough to have some very good reasons for why she didn't want to go. ... Eventually, we decided that we wanted to honor her decision. This is about her, and our long-term relationship to her, not her sport."

Mckynzi said, "I wasn't scared to tell (my parents). I knew they wouldn't get mad. I just wanted to make sure I was making the right decision. I kept thinking about all of the reasons I should go, back and forth. Thinking what if something weird happens. But once I knew what I should do, I felt really good about that decision. ... I think I'm the one who needed to make it."

So Mckynzi Smith has been preparing as if she would be in Belfast this week, making sure that when the time comes next year that she won't regret this decision.

She's practicing 60 to 90 minutes a day on her own, plus taking classes at Comerford three days a week. Once a month, she and her mother travel to Seattle to take a class from Comerford himself. She watches tapes of her performances, watches tapes of professionals and thinks a lot about what kind of dancer she might become. The focal point of her bedroom is a dresser topped by the more than 30 trophies she has won so far, but her proudest accomplishment, she says, is the medal she has showing that she qualified for the world championships.

Her recent performances instead were geared toward St. Patrick's Day, dancing at Kells Irish Restaurant and Pub, McMenamins Kennedy School and that special show on a sunny March afternoon at her middle school, King's Way.

During the company's dry run,

instructor Jim Mueller generally offered positive feedback, yet also snapped at one of the girls, "Do you know those arm (positions)?"

"Yes."

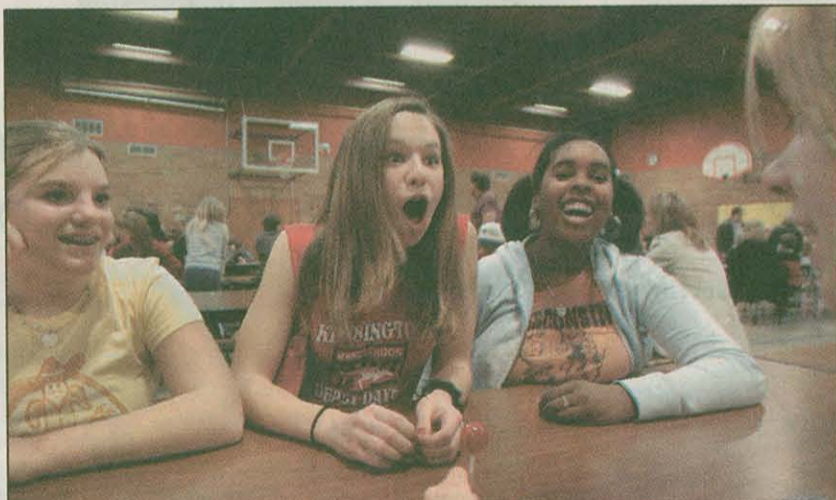
"Because you haven't hit those marks ... in a week." Backstage, the 11-year-old girl was crushed, crying from the scolding and her inability to do what the rest of the kids were doing. Lauren Mueller estimates that 50 percent of the people who start Irish dance drop out within the first two years. Neither of the Ford girls who sparked Smith's interest in the activity, for example, are participating in it anymore.

Smith understands the pressures, which are all relative. She puts her arm around the crying classmate at King's Way and consoles her. She later talks about the trip she took to Tennessee last year for the national competition, during which she felt so weak, possibly from nerves, that she had trouble climbing the stairs of the stage and danced poorly. Some of the girls at that competition were throwing up backstage from a combination of fear and anticipation. Performers danced two at a time, and Smith had to share the stage with the girl who had placed third in the world the year before. At the start of the song, Smith bumped into her.

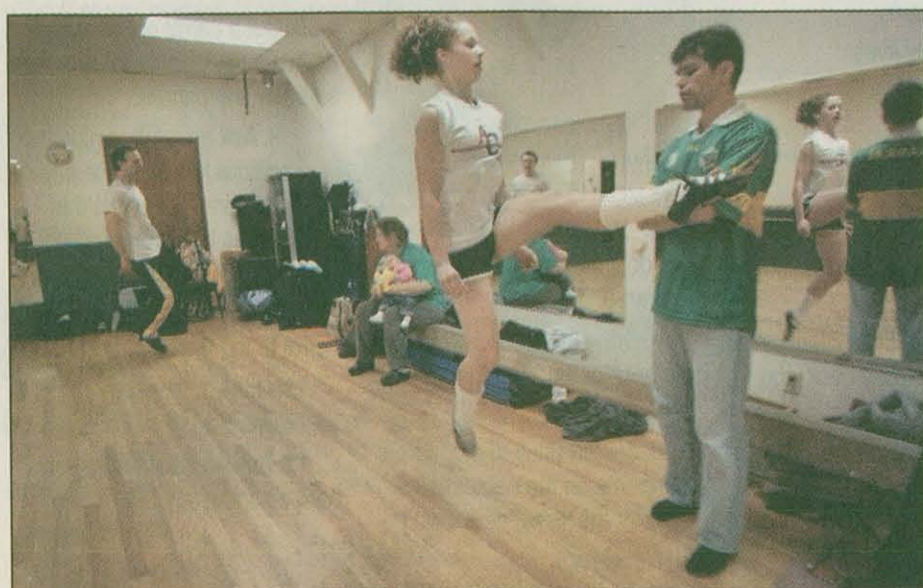
"I've never felt that kind of nerves before," she said. "My legs weren't holding me up. They were so weak when it was my turn to dance, it felt really weird. ... (Going through that tough experience) is going to make me feel more confident this year, and it's going to make me work really hard."

This is part of Mckynzi Smith's motivation. From here on, it's inevitably her show, and she wants to prove that she made the right choice about the world championships.

"I just got a feeling that another year of (preparation) would be good for me," she said. "Another year would be good. I can practice more. I can get better than I already am. Next year, I'll definitely go ... if I get the chance."



Besides dancing, Smith, center, also enjoys being just a regular teenager, hanging out with friends here at her school's science fair.



Smith, kicking for instructor Jim Mueller, considers herself an athletic performer, with most of the work to be done on her technique and elegance.

At right: Smith also excels in the classroom, with a 3.9 GPA, at King's Way.

