

# Highland Dance contest a Scots-Irish highlight

Dandridge event  
September 24

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Main Street Dandridge welcomes one and all to come and enjoy the fabulous fifth annual Scots-Irish Music Festival, Saturday, September 24.

The celebrations begin early in a bagpipe competition, sanctioned by the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association, featuring members of the Knoxville Pipe & Drums corps, and other individual pipers, who will be competing for handsome wood and pewter awards fashioned by the Nagle Forge & Foundry.

On the heels of the piping competition is the ever-popular Highland Dance contest, where young dancers vie for medals, trophies and cash prizes while exhibiting their skill in Highland flings, Irish jigs, sword dances and the sailor's hornpipe. Highland dancing demonstrates athleticism, strength, stamina, and technical precision, as well as representing stylish traditions that originated on the



## **High steppin' at Scots-Irish Festival**

Two of the dancers participating in last year's contest kick up their heels during competition. (Staff photo - Steve Marion)

green hills of our ancestral Celts.

The beginnings of many highland dances, regrettably, have been lost to the mists of time. Little academic research has been dedicated to this winsome art form, in part, because very little was recorded since Highland culture was chiefly an oral culture – with stories, songs, dances and traditions passed down by word

of mouth. As a result, various stories were disseminated regarding the origins of the dances, and many of them conflict with one another.

However, according to custom, kings and chiefs of Scotland used Highland dancing as a way of selecting the best men for their personal staff and for military regiments. Dancing was one

of the ways men were tested on quickness, vigor, endurance and accuracy. Scottish military leaders also used Highland dancing as exercise to keep their troops in shape, and ready for battle. And since Highland dancing evolved through a martial procession, its steps most likely reflect such moods as antagonism, active combat and/or victory.

Two popular dances performed by today's competitors are the Sword Dance, which was done in preparation for battle, and the Highland Fling, a victory dance performed by the warriors who won the battles.

The Sword Dance dates from between 1054 and 1096, and owes its origin to a bloody duel in which Malcolm Canmore, a Celtic Prince, killed one of Macbeth's chiefs. Taking his victim's double-edged broadsword, and crossing it with his own on the ground to make the Sign of the Cross, Malcolm Canmore danced over and around the naked blades with the elation of victory. It was also supposed to have been danced before a battle and, if the dancer completed the dance without touching the swords with his feet, the omens were promising.

The dance is performed to the pipe tune Gillie Callum and the object is to get through the dance without touching the swords.

The Highland Fling is a dance of celebration performed following victory in battle. Clansmen did the dance on a shield embellished with a sharp spike in the center. Some people believe the Fling originated as a fertility dance or the celebration of a successful stag hunt, but whatever its origin, it is done to stirring pipe music such as Monymusk, and performed in hard shoes. This dance emanates from around the late 18th century, and is animated and joyful.

The rich heritage of Irish dances has been modified over the centuries. Today, jigs, hornpipes and step dances are quite popular in dance competitions. Solo dancing or step dancing first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, while the Jig itself is a form of lively folk dance performed to spirited pipes and fiddles. The Jig began in England during the sixteenth century. Its steps and movements imitate an angry fishwife, stomping and flouncing her skirts at her errant husband.

Another energetic dance slated for competition during the Scots-

Irish Festival is called the Sailors Hornpipe. This one was widespread throughout the British Isles in the 18th and 19th centuries, and developed out of a form of exercise and boredom relief for sailors aboard ships for long periods of time. The movements to this one recreate chores done by seamen, such as hauling, hoisting, looking out across the sea and waving farewell. There is also a lot of shuffling, stamping and kicking. "The Jig of the Ship" it was called by Captain Cook, who took a piper on at least one of his voyages. Cook is noted to have ordered his men to dance the hornpipe in order to keep them in good health. The dance on-ship became less common when fiddlers ceased to be included amongst ships' crewmembers.

Those are just a few of the dances spectators will see at the Fifth Annual Scots-Irish Music Festival. Observers can even take part in the fun by clapping and jiggling along, if they like. Beginner, novice and primary awards will be presented at the end of the morning events, plus a Dance of the Day Trophy goes to the best of the best. The competitions take place at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.