

*“Galway Races” is a four-part narrative about 48 hours during the 1994 World Irish Dance Championships when all seemed lost for Trinity Academy of Irish Dance’s Under 13 Figure Choreography team. Central to the story is Trinity Associate Director and Team Manager Anne Blume –*

*who 25 years later has coached eight Trinity teams in preparation for the World Championships, six of them returning home with the gold medal – and former Trinity Instructor Katie Hughes whose spirit and dedication during the 1994 competition, and beyond, inspired an annual award for Trinity dancers. The story chronicles the dedication of Anne and Katie who took to the world stage themselves under the direction of a young coach, and former Trinity Managing Director, Amy Campbell Moran.*

---

## *Galway Races: Chasing Gold*

*Written by Mary Ann Fergus*

In the damp, cold hours of a Dublin morning, Anne McCarthy wakes before sunrise. First, she must deal with her hair, always the hair.

At 12, Anne has traveled to Ireland for the World Irish Dance Championships with her father, Dan, who is a passionate booster of all things Irish, particularly his daughter’s school, the Trinity Academy of Irish Dance. But a hair stylist he is not.

Just before 6 a.m. on this Sunday in April 1994, Anne steps out of her room and meets a Trinity mom who carefully unrolls 120 pink sponge curlers from Anne’s long, thick, brown hair, then separates each curl into two or three more tight ringlets.

Within a few hours, Anne will dance in her first solo competition on the world stage.

While her stomach is aflutter with butterflies, Anne is even more excited about the next day’s competitions. Monday will start with a Ceili, an eight-hand traditional folk dance of uniformity and precision that has been passed on for generations of Irish the way other cultures teach their young to toss pizza dough or skip across a high beam.

No American team ever has come close to winning the Ceili competition. In fact, the notion that an American team could place in this category – or most others – in 1994 considered so far-fetched by European hosts at this time that the Irish Dance Commission still awards an “Overseas Award” for non-European dancers and teams. The consolation prize is to nod their effort, if not their skill.

Anne likes the Ceili but she knows that she and her teammates have a better chance of wowing the judges later tomorrow night with their innovative figure choreography dance, called “Galway Races”.

The choreography begins with dancers standing in two straight drill lines, a dramatic variation from the traditional half circle or horizontal lines of most choreography. The dancers then leap out in pairs, like horses shooting out of the starting gate. They move on to a series of complex patterns requiring extraordinary swiftness and no room for error.

For Anne, such team dances capture the soul of a shy girl who gradually has become more social and outgoing through Irish dance. She loves working



Anne McCarthy takes a moment to pose for her proud father, Dan McCarthy, before her solo competition at the 1994 World Irish Dance Championships in Dublin. (Family photo)

toward a common goal, enjoys those fleeting moments on the dance floor when she faces one of her teammates – now all of whom are friends – and they make eye contact.

The choreography team is comprised of the best 11-year-old and 12-year-old dancers from Trinity, and it puts



Anne, from the Milwaukee suburb of Wauwatosa, together with dancers from Chicago, including that fun, wisp of a South-side girl, Katie Hughes.

Katie, the youngest of four, laughs and jokes easily, but Anne mostly knows her as the best Trinity dancer of her age group. Katie is the daughter of a Chicago Police Officer and lives near Midway Airport. She shows up early to practices, stays late, and often earns the top spot on the podium at feiseanna.

The team runs through Galway Races in a hotel hall in Dublin days before the competition. The innovative choreography features lightening-fast staccato arm movements. *(Photo by Jon Sall)*

Anne and her teammates know they'll each need to take on Katie's work ethic and drive if they are to have any chance at beating their peers from the British Isles.

Trinity Head Coach and Choreographer Mark Howard wants nothing more than to triumph over his ancestors' children on the dance floor. He already has tasted victory, with Trinity winning several World medals for team dances, including the first two golds for the United States in the Drama Category in 1987 and 1990.

This year, for the world competition's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he has landed in Dublin with yet more ground-breaking choreography, an unprecedented 50 dancers making up six teams, and a mission for his Illinois and Wisconsin-based school to break through another category or two.

To his dancers, of course, Mark stresses first and foremost that they're on a journey to build the character and resilience that will serve them for life. He also tells them to have fun.

"It's not a contact sport; it's about dancing as perfectly as you can, it's about dancing beautifully and thrilling the audience," Mark had told the team months earlier. "If you get a tin cup out of it, that's nice, but we're making art and we're here to see how far we can go and how far we can push ourselves."

The team has practiced for months, putting in at least two five-hour practices each weekend, in addition to their regular dance classes. The girls have missed birthday parties, TV time and other simple joys in the process.

As a qualifying solo dancer for the Worlds, Anne also has put in countless hours fine tuning her soft and hard shoe dances.

So on this Sunday morning, Anne slips into her solo dress, which features multi-colored Celtic knots against black



Amy told the girls to focus on the journey, dance their best on the Worlds stage and if they win a medal "it's a bonus." Shown here with Amy Campbell are Molly Dunn (left) and Meghan Phillips on the right. *(Photo by Jon Sall)*

velvet. A couple of mothers apply her make-up and rub a bit of mousse through her hair. Trinity Costume Supervisor Rie McGarry looks Anne over, adds a few more bobby pins to her curls and nods in approval.

Anne and her father take a taxi to the competition hall. Barb and Dan McCarthy, Anne's parents, decided early on that only one of them could make the expensive trip overseas. As the grandson of Irish immigrants, Dan was the logical choice.

Through the social time with parents at feiseanna and the celebration of Irish culture, Dan McCarthy has grown to love the Trinity family that he jokingly refers to as his cult.

Now his oldest daughter steps on the world stage to dance a reel. It's her favorite soft shoe dance, because as she would explain years later, the music that accompanies it "makes you want to jump up and clap your hands and feel free."

She doesn't expect to place or even get called back for the final round. Still, Anne feels confident and ready to enjoy her chance to compete among the more than 100 dancers her age from around the world.

The accordion opens and Anne is on her toes, and, as always, in step with the music.

Her father and other teammates steal themselves and pray for a perfect performance.

However, just seconds into the dance, as Anne springs into a right-foot leap, her ankle rolls. She stumbles two steps and stops dancing.

The accordion wheezes to a stop. A hush sweeps the crowd.

A stage monitor grabs Anne's arm and she limps off the stage. Soon her father and coach Amy Campbell are at her side.

With a quickly swelling ankle and a face contorted in pain, it's clear Anne won't go back on stage to finish her reel.

Anne's mind immediately turns to the next day's team competitions. She cries on her dad's shoulder, distraught about what this might mean for her friends and teammates in Ceili and figure choreography. She wonders if she'll be able to dance tomorrow or if another dancer will have to replace her.

Dan McCarthy lifts his daughter and cradles her in his arms as they leave to find Mark and the rest of the team. Anne can't help but wonder if Trinity's chance for a new American title is dead.

***Coming next Thursday: Galway Races Part II: Katie Steps Up*** Mary Ann Fergus is a Trinity mom and former reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Houston Chronicle*. The accompanying photos were taken by Jon Sall, who is a former *Chicago Sun Times* photographer who followed the 1994 team to Dublin.