

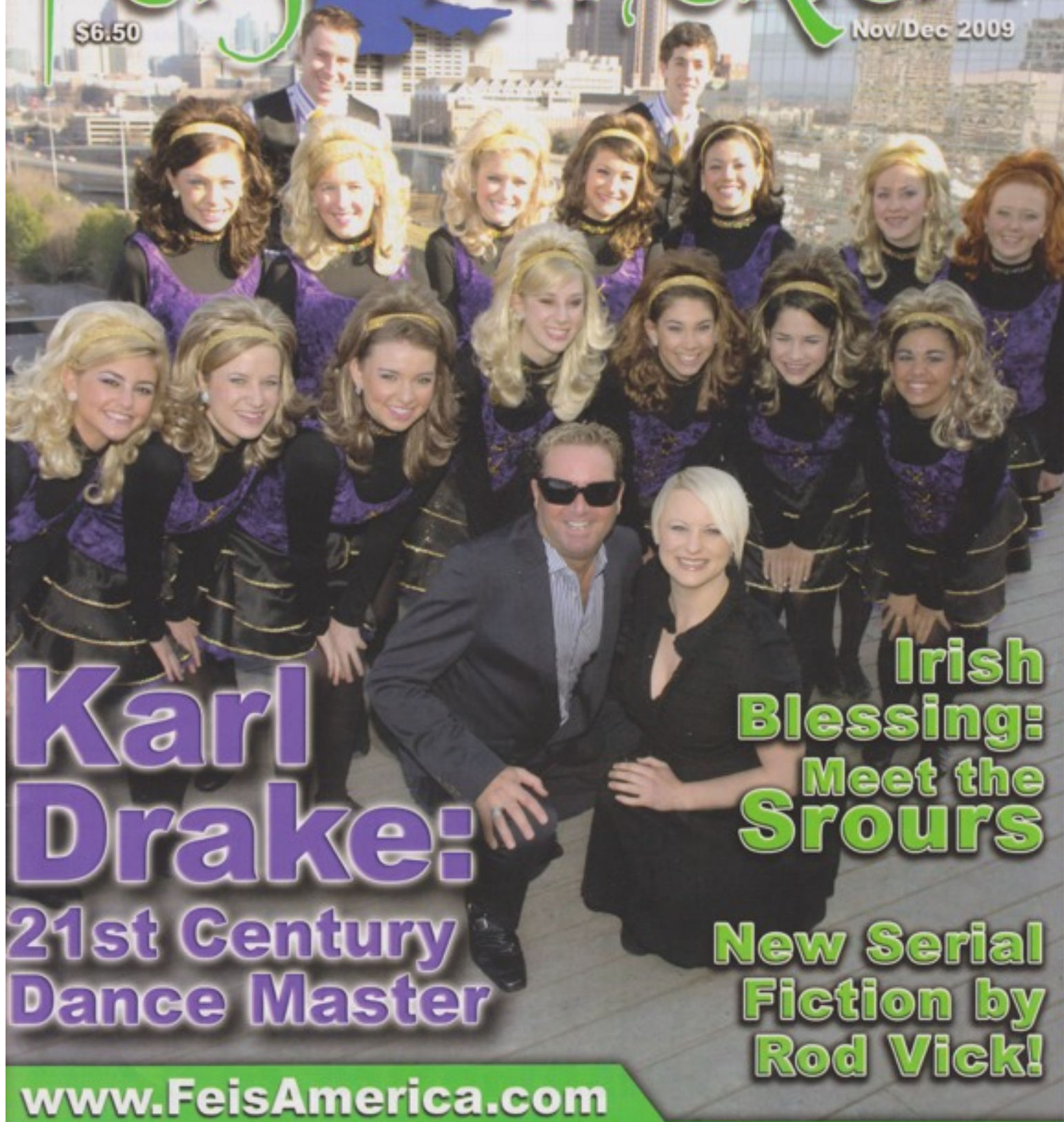
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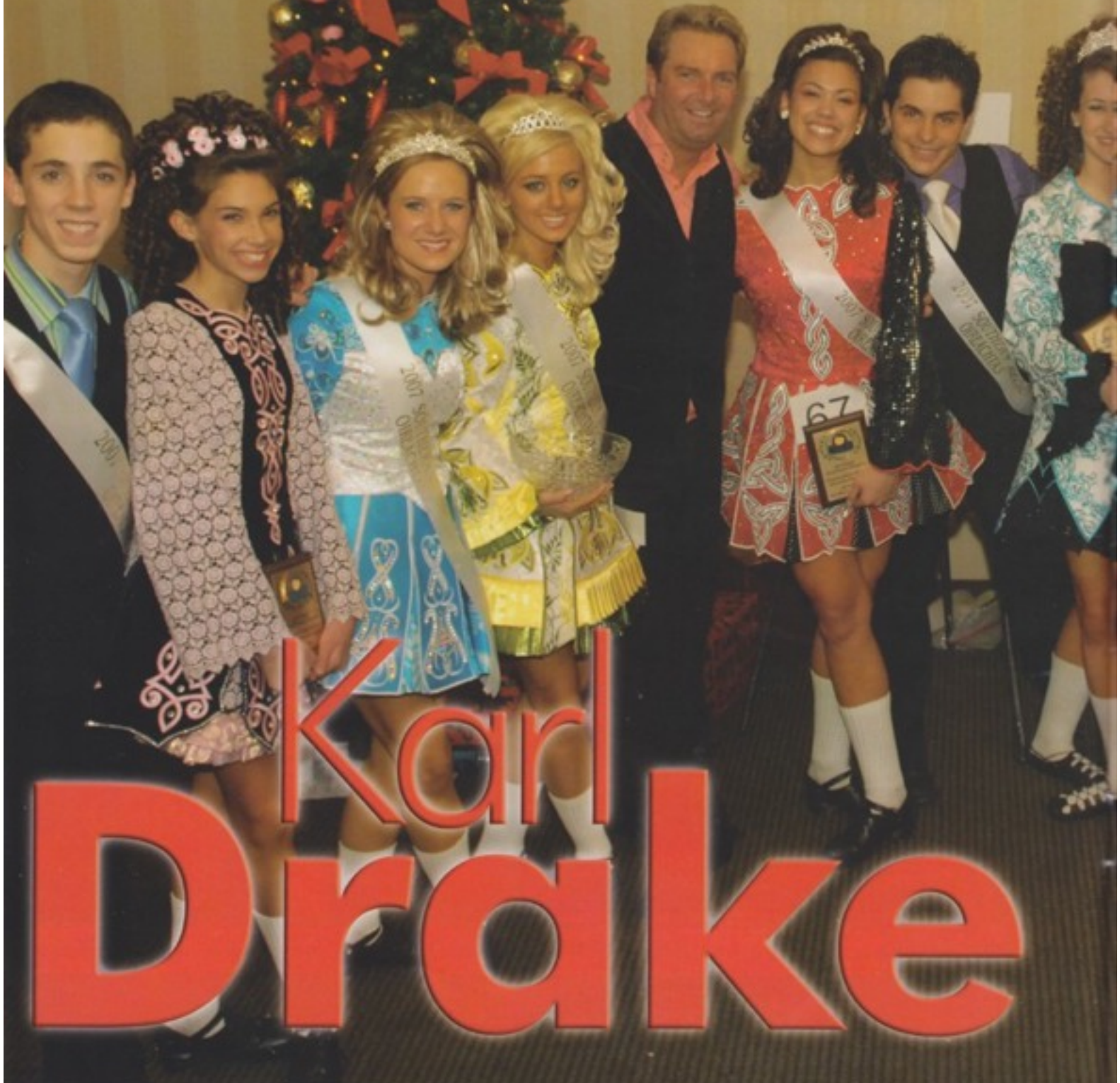
**Karl  
Drake:**  
21st Century  
Dance Master

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# 21st Century Dance Master:



# Karl Drake

O15 wins 8H at  
Oirnachta 2007.



The tradition of the **traveling dance master** moves through North America, with **Karl Drake, TCRG.**

*by Patricia McNamara  
photos by Kay Horton*

W

ell before Irish dancing fever touched the shores of North America, the craze was extending through the villages of Ireland. As early as the eighteenth century, pride and adoration for Irish dance instructors filled the Emerald Isle. Dance masters, as they were called, traveled from village to village teaching steps in kitchens, farm outbuildings or crossroads in exchange for free room and board with a host family.

## A SKILLFUL SIR

Their territory was their pride and each master had a collection of steps, which grew over time. As these talented instructors often paraphrased dances to fit the music available, they taught steps in eight-bar units, laying the basis for much of today's traditional Irish dance. These creators of set and ceili dances introduced discipline and refinement in dance and developed a lot of the movement and footwork in solo steps, such as battering used for rhythmic emphasis.

Communities boasted about well-known masters associated with their village.

Some would go head-to-head at feisianna, with quantity taking precedence over quality; winners were those who knew more steps, not necessarily those who danced the best. The stages were nothing like today's. Many dances were performed on tabletops or half doors, or atop barrels or soaped tables for an extra challenge. Losers forfeited a part of their territories to the winners.

## FLYING HIGH

Karl Drake, founder of the Drake School of Irish Dance, has adopted a modernized traveling dance master lifestyle, and is known as the "Frequent Flyer" Irish dance teacher

by many. Drake started dancing in Ireland with the O'Shea School. This year, he celebrates 20 years of teaching, and will be honored at the Southern Region Oireachtas in Dallas, Texas.

After heading to America to compete in Nationals more than two decades ago, Drake "fell in love with the States" and immigrated to New York. There, he studied with Donny Golden before achieving his TCRG with An Coimisiun. Securing his certification was only the beginning of his grand plan, and Drake quickly set his sights on expanding Irish dance in North America.

"My main interest was the South," Drake says. "I wanted to go to a place where there were no TCRGs or even an Irish dance school." At the first New Orleans Feis in 1989, Drake met Brent Wood (now a Drake School teacher) and Wood's family. They advised to look into Atlanta, Georgia—a place where there was no certified Irish dance instructor at the time. After testing the waters with a workshop of 12 attendees, Drake spent a year commuting from New York to Georgia for classes. Mimicking the lifestyle of original dance masters, he stayed with the Wood family while in town and gave their boys private



Karl with Senior ladies dancer Amanda Carpenter, Nationals 2009.



Karl with Cattie Foley at Peach State Feis.



Group photo from Peach State Feis 2008 with teachers.



*Karl and Myriam Patino with future TCRGs, Mexico, 2009.*



*Group from Drake School of Irish Dance, November, 2001.*



*Karl with former dancer Katrina Gray, sister dancers, Mariah and Lindsey Horton, and teacher Ashley Williamson, Nationals 2009.*



*Karl with Christina Lee, Katie Carver and Jessamy Bloth.*



*Avery Cruz, Audrey Greene, Cali Page and Maddie Page. Photo by Emily Page.*



*Oirnachtas dancers from 2000.*

lessons in exchange for room and board. Today, such arrangements are rare as many traveling teachers opt for more luxurious and hassle-free accommodations: hotels. "It just gets too complicated staying with family members involved in the school," says Drake, who, when not staying in a hotel, spends his time at home in Atlanta or in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Introductory workshops and a coastal commute turned into a permanent move to Georgia, but soon after, Drake ventured into Florida. After meeting Kathleen Rondeau of the Rondeau School of Irish Step Dancing and doing a few workshops for her school, Drake decided to open his own school in the Sunshine State. It eventually expanded, and today Drake holds classes in Ft. Lauderdale, Sarasota, Ft. Walton Beach and Jacksonville.

### RAVISHING ROUTINE

While the life of a traveling dance master might seem hectic, Drake, a "Million Miler" with Delta Airlines, has gotten it down to a formula. He teaches classes in Georgia Monday through Wednesday, with help from TCRGs Rowena Ryan-Schultz, Mary Ujda and Deirdre O'Connor. Come Thursday morning, he hits the road, rotating between classes at his studios in Florida and Alabama (Birmingham and Auburn) with four TCRGs: Brent Wood, Cindy Brainerd, Marie Marzi and Deirdre O'Connor.

"Yes, a traveling dance master travels around, but we need to have a TCRG in each location we're teaching in," says Drake. "There's one of us in each location each week," he says, which many enjoy because students receive different input from every instructor. More eyes mean more constructive feedback, and increased opportunities for dancers who want to advance and expand their own knowledge and skills.

### LAY OF THE LAND

As the historic traveling dance masters were very territorial, there was a strict honor code among them that they would not infringe on each other's zones. With the huge popularity and demand for Irish dance schools today, such a rule is nearly impossible to follow,



*Celebrating with O15  
1611 winners at the  
Oirvachtar 2008.*



*Karl at 2007  
Oirvachtar with  
a14 winner  
Avery Crow.*



*Karl teaching tiny tots steps to perform in a school exhibition, along with teachers Brent wood (a former student) and Ashley Williamson, November, 2006.*



*Karl with musicians and adjudicators  
at Fort Lauderdale Feis 2007.*



which could potentially cause tension and competitiveness between neighboring schools. Fortunately, because of the smaller amount of schools in the south or the different goals of each, Drake doesn't find much of a problem—particularly in Georgia.

### **SOUTH OF THE BORDER**

Good relationships will hopefully keep growing as Drake continues traveling. Next, he will move farther south, delving into his latest project—a new branch in Mexico City, Mexico with Myriam Patino, TCRG. Drake and Patino began their work together when Patino reached out to various TCRGs after

the Riverdance video sparked her interest in Irish dance.

Drake will become one of three certified TCRGs in Mexico (the other being Alicia Mosti, founder of Irish Dance Mexico). "I knew I could have a good working relationship with [Drake]," says Patino. "I saw the great dance level his students have and knew I was making the right decision, as he has acquired so much wisdom and knowledge throughout his many years of experience." While Drake currently heads to Mexico City about six times a year, the team has made a mark on the dancing world, sending the first ever two competitors from Mexico to the Worlds.



"Adaptability, discipline and passion for teaching is what must drive a successful traveling teacher," says Patino, who hopes to travel throughout Mexico to spread the joy of Irish dance. Drake, too, hopes to spend more time there, opening more branches and training more TCRGs.

### **ALL IN THE FAMILY**

Some might think that a sense of unity would be absent in a franchise as large as the Drake School of Irish Dance, with its branches in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Mexico. Drake and his supportive unit of TCRGs, however, bring all the cities together as much as possible; three times a year, they hold centrally-located workshops, led by Elaine Kavanagh, ADCRG.

### **THE NEXT CRUSADE**

Which new Southern spot will Drake move into next? Only time will tell, but the idea of constant traveling will not tire him out anytime soon. He considers the roaming dance instructor's job a refreshing one, saying "meeting new children and finding new talent" is the most rewarding part of it all.

When asked about the greatest challenge Drake faces? "The airport," he says, rather seriously, "When you know the person at the Delta Airline check-in counter, that's scary!"



*This article is dedicated to Kathleen Drake, Dublin, Ireland.*

*For more information on The Drake School of Irish Dance, visit [www.drakedance.com](http://www.drakedance.com).*