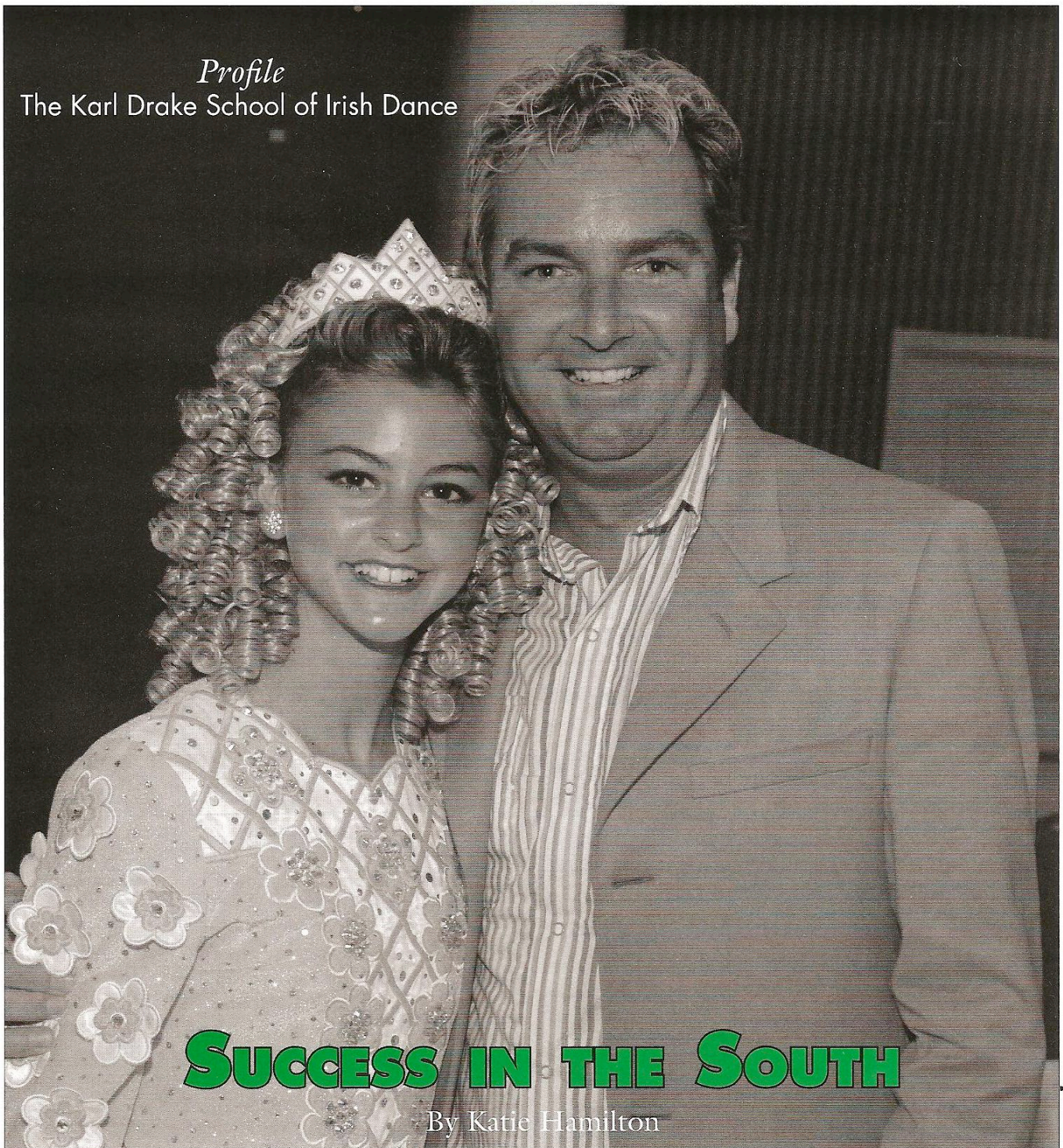


Profile
The Karl Drake School of Irish Dance



SUCCESS IN THE SOUTH

By Katie Hamilton

While attempting to complete a click in last year's North American Nationals (NANs), 13-year-old Catie Foley fell and tore her hamstring, but not before breaking her arm on the way down. One year and several months of physical therapy later, Foley received second place in her age group at the 2006 NANs and is currently training for the All-Scotlands in October; not to mention the Southern Oireachtas in November and the World Championships in April.

While Foley is one of the top dancers at the Karl Drake School of Irish Dance, her trials and accomplishments aptly represents the spirit of every dancer that comes under the direction of Mr. Karl Drake. And as one of the largest Irish dance schools in the southern region, that is certainly saying a lot.

The Drake School has expanded from small beginnings in Atlanta, Georgia, to include locations in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina. Needless to say, Mr. Drake is one busy person.

"I'm constantly on a plane," said Drake. "I'm in Atlanta on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday every week, then I travel south to the other states on Thursdays and Fridays, and weekends are in Florida."

Though Drake often teaches for seven days straight for periods as long as three months, he takes the summers off to relax and travel, including to his favorite destination, Costa Rica, one of the few places left that doesn't have any Irish dance. After all, even the best need to "just to get away from it all," as he said.

Drake is no stranger to hard work or success, having begun Irish dance at the age of eight at the O'Shea School of Irish Dance in Dublin. He continued to excel in competitive Irish dance even after he moved to the United States when he was just 18-years-old. Upon his arrival, Drake joined the Golden School of Irish Dance in New York and became the Eastern Regional Irish Dance Champion, placing fifth at the World Championships.

Though Drake was an outstanding competitor and performer – he is a former member of popular Irish dance shows such as Rhythm of the Dance - his main focus on coming to the U.S. was to teach the art.

"At that point, there were not many teachers in the south," Drake said. "I always wanted to introduce Irish Dance to areas where there never was Irish dance before."

When Drake was 21-years-old, he successfully passed his T.C.R.G. exam, opened his first studio, and danced at the Worlds – all in the same year. He credits the tremendous growth of his school to the new, younger Irish immigrants in Atlanta, the burgeoning popularity of Riverdance, and simple word of mouth.

The Drake School runs three feiseanna each year: the Peace State Feis in May; the Fort Lauderdale Beach Feis in June; and the Carolina Coast Feis in September. Drake has set his school apart from other Irish dance schools by gearing it specifically toward the championship level dancer and openly focusing much of its attention on success at feiseanna.

"That shows the success of Catie Foley," Drake said. "She started when she was five-years-old, and now has won second at the NANs Under 14, the Southern Oireachtas several times, and got eleventh in World's."

Drake said that Foley is such a successful

Irish dancer because she has natural talent, combined with a great personality that comes through in her dancing and onstage. He also added that what defines Foley is not only her competitive record, but her enthusiasm for all aspects Irish dance, including team dancing.

Foley gave a lot of credit to her teacher of many years.

"He's a really, really good teacher," said Foley. "He tells us what we need to do. I don't know - he's just an incredible teacher. He supports everyone in our school. He has a lot of good dancers, but looks out for everyone, too."

With practice three to four times a week at the studio and private lessons with Drake, Foley still finds time to be a normal eighth grader, and is a member of the choir and track team at her school. She said that her favorite part of Irish dance is traveling and being with her friends.

"I've been to Ireland six times and I'll be going to Scotland this year," said Foley. "I've been all over the nation, from California to Florida, New York...That's my favorite part - traveling to different places together and being with my friends."

"It's really helped to broaden my horizons and travel the world," said Open Championship dancer, Shannon Cantwell.

Though Cantwell, 17, takes Irish dance in an entirely different state than Foley, her time with Karl Drake has resulted in similar experiences.

"He's a fabulous dance teacher," said Cantwell. "He does what he needs to help us and critique us and to perfect our dancing."

Cantwell began Irish dance at the age of seven in Colorado and moved last year to Charleston, S.C. Transferring to the Drake School was an easy choice for Cantwell.

"His school is very renowned across the country and the world," she said. "I think it's cool that he's the pioneer of Irish dance in the south. It shows he has initiative, to spread Irish dance and culture where there wasn't any before."

A senior in high school, Cantwell is currently training for the Southern Oireachtas, as well as the upcoming All-Irelands and World's – and completing her college applications in her spare time. She has qualified for the World's four times, competed twice, and recalled at last year's 2006 World's, placing 36th.

"I haven't been with him as long as his other dancers, but I've enjoyed every minute of it," said Cantwell. "He critiques us and helps us and motivates us to do better and push

ourselves, to work on our stamina. He helps to nitpick all our steps and perfect them."

A vital addition to the Drake School has been Elaine Kavanagh. An old friend of Drake's, they grew up together in Dublin, and though the two danced with separate schools, they remained friends throughout the years by visiting each other at feiseanna. Kavanagh comes to the States a few times a year to conduct workshops and teach new material to Drake's dancers.

"Karl is very successful and a very good dancer," said Kavanagh. "He has a good personality and is good with the kids. He makes it fun for the younger ones. He is very encouraging, and not just for the ones who are going to be amazing – he finds strengths in different kids."

The dancers seem to enjoy their time with Kavanagh as much as they do with Drake.

Miss Elaine is great at making up steps – it's a lot of fun when she comes over," said Cantwell. "It's an intense couple of days of workshops, but fun. Everyone gets excited about dance again. It's amazing what she comes up with."

Whether one is speaking to the teachers or the students, the high level of respect and attachment are two qualities that shine through the Drake School.

Wherever his dancers compete, Drake is sure to be there, as he makes it a priority to attend the major competitions with his dancers. With so much attention lately on the expensive and sometimes outlandish fashions in competition, Drake offers a refreshing perspective.

I love it," he said. "I love the costumes at the moment. It's about progression, and it is 2006 and this progression keeps the kids interested in Irish dance. They are excited to get their new costumes. As for the price...the costumes are all individually made and unique."

"I love my dress – it's my favorite dress so far," Foley said of her new Siopa Rince Teoranta dress. "I also like my hair now, it's kind of softer. The make-up doesn't really bother me because I've been doing it for so long."

For Drake, the dress simply completes the art form.

"The kids are on stage and they are performing," he said. "If you were on Broadway, you'd be on stage with a costume and make-up as well – it's all about performing."

If it's all about performing, Drake is one standout director, his dancers are truly stars of the stage, and this show deserves a standing ovation. ^{HM}