

**Step dancing** (sometimes referred to as "Irish dance") is a type of recreational and competitive [folk dance](#) that has been popularized by the world-famous "[Riverdance](#)" and "[Lord of the Dance](#)." Although it is most widespread in Ireland, it is also found in Scotland and the North of England (where it is better known as clog dancing). When performed as a solo dance, it is generally characterized by a stiff upper body and the quick and precise movements of the feet. Couples also dance with other couples, in a manner similar to a [square dance](#); these dances are called "country sets" and are danced throughout Ireland with many regional variations. Larger groups of four, six, eight, or more people can dance traditional [céilí](#) dances, in which the steps are prescribed. Some of the ceili dances are named after the traditional Irish tunes to which they are danced; others can be done to any jig or reel.

A related Irish form is **Sean-nos dancing**, a solo form from Connemara. Sean-nos is usually danced to reels, with much stamping. It is very improvisational, and the arm and leg positions are not nearly as rigid as those in step dancing, and can be quite athletic.

One folk tale about the stiffness of the upper body in Irish step dancing originated when the practice of Irish culture, including dance, was forbidden in [Ireland](#) under British rule. When people wanted to dance, they would just move their feet, and if anyone happened to look in the window, they would see only the motionless upper body and think nothing of it. However, there is no firm evidence that this claim is true. Another explanation points to the various quirks of the traveling dancing masters of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The dancing tradition probably grew in tandem with Ireland's rich tradition in **music**. "Reel", "slipjig", "hornpipe", and "jig" usually refer to dances, but they really mean the timing of the music. Reels are in 2/4 or 4/4 time; slipjigs are in 9/8 time and are more or less unique to Irish music; hornpipes can be in 2/4 or 4/4 time; and jigs are in 6/8 time, like "Pop Goes the Weasel". (The "treble jig" is a different story; these are danced in a slow 6/8.)

Much of the footwork of softshoe dances is based on the footwork of [Scottish country dancing](#), while some hardshoe dances more closely resemble flamenco style dancing. The movements and positions of hardshoe dancing are much more restrictive than those of the more fluid flamenco style, though, and hopping is far more prevalent. Unlike most softshoe dancing, hardshoe dancing involves rhythmic and very fast striking of the floor with the tips of the shoes.

Three types of **shoes** are worn in competitive step dancing: hardshoes and two kinds of softshoe. Legend has it that **hardshoes** were created in the 17th or 18th century by hammering nails into the soles of walking shoes. In reality shoes of this time and later were often equipped with metal *tackets* on the toes and heels by their owners in order to lengthen the life of the soles. The hardshoe ("heavy shoe", "jig shoe") is often mistaken for a tap shoe, but the taps on the sole of the shoe are made of wood, fiberglass, or resin, rather than of metal. ([Michael Flatley](#) replaced the front taps of his hardshoes with metallic taps.) Each shoe has eight striking surfaces: the front, bottom, and sides of the front tap and the back, bottom, and sides of the back tap (the heel). Hardshoes are made of black leather with rigid or flexible soles. Sometimes the front taps are filed off in order to enable the dancer to stand on his or her toes. Hardshoes are worn when dancing the hornpipe, the treble jig or "heavy jig", and the treble reel or "tap reel". The same hardshoes are worn by all dancers, regardless of gender or age.

A legend about hardshoe dances is that the Irish used to dance at crossroads or on the earthen floors of their houses, and that they removed and soaped their doors to create a resonant surface for hardshoe dancing.

**Softshoes** are also known as "reel shoes" and come in two types. Those of the first type, called "ghillies" (or "gillies"), fit more like ballet slippers, but they are of black leather, with a soft leather sole and a very flexible body. They lace from toe to ankle and do not make sounds against the dance surface. They are worn for the simple [jig](#), the [reel](#), and the slipjig, by female dancers of all ages and by the younger male

dancers. (Only female dancers dance the slipjig.) They also can be worn for [céilí](#) dancing, though this can be done in any kind of shoe. The second kind of softshoe is worn by older male dancers; these are usually only called "reel shoes" and are basically men's ballet slippers, in black leather, with fiberglass heels that the dancers can click together. (Note: Although hardshoes are also known as "heavy shoes", softshoes are not generally called "light shoes".)

**Irish solo dances are composed of steps**, each step being a sequence of foot movements, leg movements and leaps. In reels danced by older boys, heel clicks are added. Hardshoe dancing also includes clicking, tapping, and stomping, and in hardshoe several steps in sequence are called a "set". Steps are developed by Irish dance teachers for students of their school. There are approximately thirty solo "set tunes," mostly jigs and hornpipes, to which hardshoe dances are done in competition. These tunes vary a bit in tempo but are always played in basically the same way. Teachers choreograph the sets their dancers dance. A similar group is the "traditional sets", which are set tunes to which the steps (and sets!) are always danced in basically the same way. Almost every set dance is either a treble/heavy jig or a hornpipe.

**The group dances**, céilí and set, vary widely. The [céilí](#) dances used in competitions are bouncier and more precise versions of those danced in pubs and church basements. The country sets are almost never used in competition; they use similar movements to the ceili dances but use different, less balletic and more shuffling foot movements. Many country sets are based on polka steps. They are more "conversational", though still often very fast-paced, and they are often ornamented with rhythmic stamping of the feet. The country sets are always danced in the same way in the same region, and sometimes they are "called" -- that is, the upcoming steps are announced during the dance for the benefit of newcomers.

[\[edit\]](#)

## Competition Structure

Competitive step dancing has grown steadily since the mid 1900's, and more rapidly since the appearance of "Riverdance". An organized step dance competition is referred to as a feis (pronounced "fesh"). Participants in a feis must be students of an accredited step dance teacher. Dance competitions are divided by age and level of expertise. In North America, dancers progress from Beginner/Advanced Beginner to Novice to Prizewinner (in some areas this level is referred to as Open) to Preliminary Champion to the final level, Champion. Feis competition levels vary around the world (e.g. in South Africa there are Beginner XXX, etc.), generally depending on the local history and the presence of more advanced dancers.

Rules for feiseanna are set by the World Irish Dance Commission (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha). In addition, there are An Comdhail and Festival dancers, of which the former is more comparable to An Coimisiún. Local organizations may add additional rules to the basic rule set. There are seven regions in North America. An annual regional Championship competition is known as an [oireachtas](#) (pronounced "ur-rock-tus"). In North America, regional Championship competitions are held the weekend of the [Thanksgiving](#) Holiday. Annual "national" championship competitions are held in Ireland (known as the "All-Ireland" competition), North America (including Canada and the United States), Australia, and Europe. Annual World Championship competitions have been held in The [Republic of Ireland](#), [Northern Ireland](#) and [Scotland](#). The World Championship competitions are held around the [Easter](#) Holiday.