



'Cajun-Italian' kid David Bologna makes his mark in Irish dance

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By **ELIZABETH A. PERRY**

It all started when Rick and Holly Bologna took their son David to see "Lord of the Dance" at Beau Rivage four years ago on Mother's Day. He was 6 years old and his mother was trying to get him interested in gymnastics or some kind of dance to work off his youthful energy.

A self-described "Cajun-Italian family," the Bolognas went to see "Lord of the Dance" with family friend Father Billy O'Riordan, knowing nothing about Irish culture or dance. As the lights dimmed, the troupe of dancers dressed in colorful costumes took to the stage beating out thunderous pounding rhythms with their hard shoes, adding percussion to the fast-paced traditional and contemporary Irish music. Holly watched David's eyes grow wide as he took in the movements of dozens of strong, athletic male and female dancers battering the wooden stage and leaping through the air and knew he was hooked.

"That's it," he told her. "I know what kind of dance I want to do."

FATHER O'RIORDAN, pastor of St. Joan of Arc Church, LaPlace, accompanied the family and bought a videotape of "Lord of the Dance" for David. The Bolognas knew something was going on when David would disappear into their room with his tape, emerging two hours later dripping in



DAVID BOLOGNA defies gravity at a recent Irish dance competition.

sweat. When his father checked on him he saw that his son was using the video as an instruction manual, trying to learn the steps. When Father O'Riordan visited the family one night, Rick asked David to show the priest his dancing. Father O'Riordan stunned the family when he said he thought David had the mark of a champion.

"We didn't know anything about this Irish stuff," said Rick. "We didn't know this whole Irish sub-culture of music and dance even existed. Holly and I said, "Champion of what?' We didn't know if he would really be able to do it."

Luckily for them, Father O'Riordan is connected with the Irish community in New Orleans and Ireland. A native of County Cork, Ireland, Father O'Riordan was once a competitive step dancer in his homeland as a boy. He said when he saw David dance, his movements naturally flowed and he caught on quickly.

"He's light and has very strong legs, so he can get incredible height," said Father O'Riordan. "Anything you can do to get the judges' eyes off your competitors and on you at (the World Class competition level) is important. He can get a lot of lift."

Father O'Riordan put them in touch with Mary Ann McGrath Swaim, founder of the New Orleans School of Irish Dance, when she opened a school on the West Bank. All aspiring step dancers start learning basic movements wearing ghillies (soft ballet-type shoes). As they progress with their footwork, they graduate to hard shoes, which look like a loafer with a strap across the instep.

Like other step dancers, David couldn't wait to move to hard shoes so he could make some joyful noise. He was just beginning to learn hard shoe when McGrath Swaim was severely injured in a fall. Although she was bedridden for more than a year, she continued to teach David.

"We went to her house and she called out the steps to him from her bedside," said Holly.

DAVID DANCED his first "feis" (pronounced "fesh") or competition in New Orleans at the 2002 Feis La Louisianne. By this time his entire family, Father O'Riordan and a number of friends knew about his new passion and showed up to see him compete. Everyone knew it was one thing for David to dance in a studio or around the house, but quite another to perform in front of a panel of judges and a hotel ballroom full of strangers.

"It was scary," said David. "I had only done it a couple of months and I was worried about messing up. But I won and I loved it."

David's dancing caught the eye of one of the judges, Neil Reagan, a 1986 world championship dancer, who wrote down the boy's competition number.

He told Rick that he would be giving the boy his vote for Most Promising Dancer, even though he would not win, because he was the only judge to see David in that competition. David ended up winning three other gold medals in his first feis.

Within a year David was on his way to becoming a champion-level dancer. Rick and Holly knew it was time to step up his lessons and find someone who could help get their son ready for international competition.

Rick remembered meeting Reagan at the Feis La Louisianne the year before and asked him to work with David. Beginning in March 2003, Holly and David flew to San Antonio once a month to take lessons with Reagan. For 18 months Holly videotaped the lessons in San Antonio and helped David learn them at home in New Orleans. She also videotaped the practice lessons and sent them back to Reagan for review and corrections.

"David is a quick learner," said Holly. "But he is also a processor. He might have a little difficulty learning a step right away. He has to let his subconscious work on it and then he gets it."

A TURNING point in David's progress came during a summer dance camp with Neil and other dancers in 2003. Suddenly the kid who was so good was having problems with the steps.

"It was frustrating," said David. "I thought, 'I'm not doing well; I'm not being a good dancer right now.' My friends in the class came over to me and said they had been through it and told me I would get through it, too."

At that point he grew closer to his new friends and his steps began to flow. Within two years of seeing "Lord of the Dance" David went from a spectator to a champion-level dancer. In August 2004 Reagan joined forces with local Irish dance teacher Joni Muggivan to begin Inishfree, Louisiana. Students preparing for national and international competitions train with Reagan twice a month and Muggivan the rest of the time. The school boasts three top dancers including David, Joe Ledesma, who placed second in the Southern Regionals and Haley Close, who placed eighth in the Southern Regionals.

David went on to win the Southern Regional Championship in December 2003 and the North American Championship in July 2004. He placed seventh in the World Championships in Ennis, Ireland, this spring and is gearing up for the nationals, which will be held in Nashville.

"He's still got huge potential," said Reagan. "He's just starting to touch on where he can go. It's a question of self-motivation, practice and getting through the circuit (of world class competitions (All-Ireland, World and North American). The more times he can get up there, the more people see him. For the age he is, he is a protege."

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