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Illinois Wesleyan Sophomore Pursues Passion for Irish Dancing

March 16, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. -- Illinois Wesleyan sophomore sociology major Mallory Wendt has been Irish dancing since the age of four and competing at the Open Championship level of Irish dancing, the highest level of competition, since the age of 14.

With her arms held straight at her sides and feet moving rapidly in complex patterns, Wendt has made this type of dancing one of her passions.

Wendt attended her first Irish dance World Championship in 2000, hoping only to be noticed by the judges. Since then she has placed as high as 13th at the World Championship, putting her among the best Irish dancers in the world.

Recently, Wendt returned from Ireland where she danced in the All Ireland Championships February 5 through February 12, placing seventh out of 80 dancers. As the highest placing American she received the Overseas Award.

One of the earliest records of Irish dancing is in 1569. It started among the Irish peasants and was performed by single dancers or in groups at social gatherings. Though hundreds of years have passed since the origination of Irish dance, Wendt and other modern dancers perform the dances today much as they were performed then, using the same types of steps.

Those who have seen Wendt practicing dance steps while chatting on the phone know that she is always on the move. Perhaps that is why, at the age of four, she deemed ballet and figure skating "too slow," choosing to focus instead on Irish dancing and her other passion, ice hockey. After years of playing hockey in a house league with the neighborhood boys, Wendt helped to form a women's varsity ice hockey team at Loyola Academy College Prep in Wilmette, Ill., and led them to win three state championships.

According to Wendt, the competitive spirit that helps her succeed on the ice is the same that pushes her to succeed in dance. Aside from the Irish dance World Championships, she placed second at the American National Championships three years ago and won the Midwest Championships in 2004. In 2005 she won the Pat Roche Perpetual Award for the Senior Lady Championship Dancer in the Chicago area.

"Even though it's an art form in theory, this is definitely a sport in practice," Wendt said. As in any sport, performance is the most important, but there is a uniform involved as well. Wendt's uniform, worn for every competition, includes an elaborate dress, special shoes, stocking, artificial tanner to provide a contrast between her legs and socks she wears, and make-up and a wig.

Before every competition Wendt travels to her hometown of Glenview, Ill., to practice dance for four hours a day. She can also be found practicing in the dance studios at IWU.

With all the hours devoted to dancing Wendt said there were times that her life felt like "eat, sleep, school and dance," and she was compelled to question her decision to dance. However, "I love Irish dancing for the beauty and the art that it is," Wendt said. "It's not just something that you do, it's something you create. It becomes a part of you."

Wendt hopes to compete in this sport for two or three more years. After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, she hopes to become a lawyer as well as a certified Irish dance instructor, and eventually an adjudicator (judge) at dance competitions. "Even if I'm not competing, I'll always be involved," she said.



Mallory Wendt