For Irish dancing teen, prayer pivotal in world championship quest

Cameron White, a parishioner of St. Mary in Hagerstown, performs with the Broesler School of Irish Dance at Roland Park Place Retirement Home March 8. White will be competing at the 2014 Irish Dancing World Championships in London, April 13-20. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Maria Wiering

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Cameron White can't keep his feet still. An Irish stepdancer, the 16-year-old practices constantly – in the kitchen, the car, the grocery aisle. His mom once caught him rehearsing his steps under his cassock while serving at the altar.

"You could see the black shoes going the whole Mass," she said.

For Cameron, the answer to why he dances is that he can't stop. He actually tried, once, two years ago, after a rotten competition experience. After a short break, he begged his parents to let him return to the sport.

"It's hard to stay away from it. My feet – they're always … tapping away," he said. "It's not something you can let go very easily."

Now, a combination of talent, prayer and fundraising has the parishioner of St. Mary in Hagerstown on his way to the 2014 Irish Dancing World Championships in London, where he'll compete with the top 1 percent of Irish dancers in the world. About 5,000 dancers are expected, according to the event website.

Known for his high "overs," or kick-leaps, Cameron started dancing on a fluke. His older sister, Sara, danced, and his mom, Darlene, enrolled him, then 6, in an all-boys trial course to entertain him while his sister was in class. To Darlene's amazement, her son had a natural aptitude for the quick-footed steps.

Now, all six of the White children Irish dance, but not all compete, like Cameron, who dances at the highest level, Open Champion.

Cameron has competed five times in Oireachtas, a regional Irish dancing competition. Each time, he qualified for the world championships. He was able to attend the 2009 championships in Philadelphia, but the Whites couldn't afford to

send him to Europe, where subsequent world championships were held.
(The 2013 world championships were in Boston, but Cameron had recently switched dance schools, making him ineligible to compete for a short time, missing the Oireachtas.)
Each year the Whites told their son "next year," but the cost remained insurmountable.
After Cameron qualified again for the world championships in December, Darlene and Chris White told their son, once again, they couldn't afford to send him. He was disappointed, but not surprised. He set his sights on the North American Irish Dance Championships in Montreal in July.
Then the Whites changed their minds.
The day after telling Cameron's classmates at the Kevin Broesler School of Irish Dance that, once again, her son wouldn't be going, Darlene was still ambivalent.
"I think it's important that he learn that when there's a roadblock, sometimes there's a detour," she said.
She went to church and prayed before the tabernacle, asking God to give her a "neon sign" if he wanted Cameron to go, and then show her how to finance it.
The next day, she was notified that Cameron was chosen randomly for a $500 travel stipend. Wondering if that was the sign, she asked friends for advice on Facebook. An hour later, $100 arrived via PayPal from a friend in California with a note: "Get that kid to London."
It was what Darlene needed.
The Whites launched an online fundraising campaign and held a dance at their parish hall. Their goal was $5,000, which they surpassed by the end of February.
The about-face shocked Cameron, he said. Assuming he wouldn't be going to London, he had taken a break from dance during the Christmas season. Now that he was on track to compete, he was frustrated that he had lost stamina and speed, and had to train hard to make up for lost time.
Then he fractured his tibia in practice and thought his chance was gone. Thanks to cross training, chiropractic care and physical therapy, it's not. His physical therapist has given him the green light, and he's dancing again, in time for St. Patrick's Day.
The Whites, who have Irish heritage, have made considerable sacrifices for their children's dancing. Darlene is on the road three days per week shuttling kids between their home in Boonsboro and Baltimore, where Kevin Broesler, a renowned Irish dance instructor, has a studio. She sometimes drives Cameron, whom she homeschools, to another Broesler studio in Delaware for extra instruction. She runs a Facebook page for moms of Irish dancing boys, Moms to Reel Boys.
Cameron is serious about dance, but a goofball otherwise, Darlene said.
It shows when he's asked what he loves about dancing, he answers "the girls." With

his thick wavy hair, they think he looks like a member of the English-Irish pop band One Direction, and he's fine with that. He plans to marry a Catholic, Irish dancing girl, he said, preferably with red hair, and preferably from Ireland, who, like him, wants a large family.

By then, he hopes to be realizing his two-fold dream: to dance on tour, ideally with the show Heartbeat of Home, and to teach Irish dance himself.

For now, Cameron is focused on Holy Week, when he'll be in London. His goal is the first-place trophy. His parents said they don't care how he places, as long as he does his best.

For all of his talent, Cameron keeps perspective. Tucked into the lapel of his dance costume is a finger rosary, a gift from his instructor. He prays a decade before going on stage, he said.

"It helps me with my confidence," he said. "I understand that all I do, all of my gifts, everything that I have accomplished through dance has been a gift from God."

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