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IN-DEPTH

Meet Sláinte: UW-Madison dance group connects students with Irish culture

University of Wisconsin-Madison's Irish dance club, Sláinte, brings together students of diverse backgrounds and abilities to celebrate Irish culture.

By [Avery Chheda](#)

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For University of Wisconsin-Madison sophomore Audrey Catlin, dance is where she feels most connected to her Irish culture. Catlin comes from an Irish family and grew up going to Milwaukee Irish Fest, where she first experienced traditional Irish dance.

"I thought it was super cool, I just never really did it," Catlin said.

That all changed when Catlin joined Sláinte Irish Dancers, UW-Madison's Irish dance club. Founded in 2010, Sláinte serves Irish dancers at the competition level and recreationally. The club practices twice a week at the Nicholas Recreation Center.

In addition to performing on and off campus during the school year, Sláinte travels for national competitions. In the past, Sláinte took home the College Ceili Championship at the Mid-America Oireachtas as well as the video competition at the College Irish Dance Association (CIDA).

Choreographer Vivi Andersen invited Catlin to her first Sláinte practice.

"I was like totally, that sounds like fun, because college is for trying new things," Catlin said. "I just kind of stuck with it, it's been one of my new passion projects as an adult."

After just a couple weeks, Catlin was invited to compete with Sláinte at their first competition of the season, the Mid-America Oireachtas. She said her experience with Sláinte has given her an opportunity to be more involved with her Irish heritage.

"I feel like Irish dancing is a really cool way to feel more connected and traditionally act on your culture," Catlin said.

Her favorite way to connect with the community with Sláinte is through performances at bars with live Irish bands and senior centers.

Noelle Cataldo, who spends her days working on her Ph.D. and researching the mechanisms of antidepressants, uses Irish dance as her own form of dopamine.

"It's really nice to have a creative outlet. It keeps me in shape and all my best friends [dance too]," Cataldo said.

Cataldo is from Boston, a city rich with Irish culture and one of the first homes for Irish Americans during the [Irish Potato Famine](#).

"We have a deep-rooted history living in Ireland. Some of my family still lives there," she said.

But not all club members come from Irish ancestry.

Andersen isn't Irish at all, but she said she grew up with an appreciation for the culture, playing the fiddle and dancing at the Milwaukee Irish Fest from seven to 13 years old.

Andersen was recruited at the student organization fair, where she said they picked her out of the crowd.

"They pulled me out and they were like 'you look like an Irish dancer,'" she said.

She said the club was very welcoming and accepted her with open arms despite her long hiatus.

"It's so chill, and everybody is super welcoming. I did miss [Irish dance], just not in the environment I was in when I was younger," Andersen said. "Such a significant portion of our members have no Irish dance experience, and I think something that's really cool about our club is how accessible it is."

The club draws beginners and dance experts alike.

One of those beginners is Owen Goff, a graduate student who took up dancing in 2023 after a trip to Ireland sparked a desire to connect with the culture despite having no Irish background. Goff is the only man in the club, which originally held him back.

"I initially was hesitant to join because I realized I'd be the only guy, but then I said to heck with it," Goff said. He advises others to join despite similar hesitations. "It might be daunting and takes practice, but everyone in the club seems to genuinely enjoy what they do."

Freshman Zoe Scheel has been dancing since she was four. Although her mom's side is Irish, Scheel said she dances for the "sport" and "social aspect."

"The club is so welcoming, and everyone is so kind. They're the nicest people I've ever met," Scheel said, encouraging anyone interested in dance to join the club.

Before joining Sláinte, Scheel was a member of Glencastle Irish Dancers, where she performed a handful of times at world championships. There are different events at Worlds, such as four- and eight-person Ceilis — or group dances — and individual events.

Scheel qualified for Worlds in 2023 after placing seventh at the Mid-America Oireachtas. At the 2024 North American Irish Dance Championships, Scheel's U19 4-Hand team took first place.

The club will compete at CIDA in Dayton, Ohio, on April 5, sending nine dancers to the event. Their performances will include nine solos, two 4-hands, one 8-hand, an Irish dance set to Dolly Parton and one video competition set to the "Mamma Mia!" soundtrack.

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