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Trinity Irish Dancers (from left) Riley Berg of Port Washington, Katie McLaughlin and Grace McLaughlin of Grafton, Victoria Wise and Stephanie Brill, both of Cedarburg, will perform about 7:30 p.m. Thursday, St. Patrick's Day, at the Patio Bar and Grill in Port Washington. The McLaughlin sisters wore school uniforms. The other girls wore solo competition dresses *Photo by Sam Arent*

St. Patrick's Day is the best time of the year for Port Washington seventh-grader Riley Berg and her fellow Trinity dancers, who spend countless hours practicing and performing traditional Irish dances

March madness means basketball to most people, but for Riley Berg, a Trinity Irish dancer and seventh-grader at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington, it means almost nonstop rehearsals, parades and performances for St. Patrick's Day celebrations throughout the area.

Riley and four friends will perform about 7:30 p.m. Thursday during a St. Patrick's Day post-parade party at the Patio Bar and Grill in Port Washington, where they will dance lively jigs and reels.

It's not a Trinity-sanctioned event, but the girls received permission to perform in their colorful outfits, Riley's mother Stacey said. It was too late to schedule the dancers this year, but the

Trinity Irish Dancers will be in
Port's parade next year, Berg said.

Riley also performed at the Cedarburg Cultural Center's Irish Eve on Saturday.

The St. Patrick's Day hoopla and four-day Irish Fest in Milwaukee are Riley's favorite times of the year.

As soon as shamrocks and leprechauns start appearing, Riley said, she gets so excited she can't help but dance.

"At school, I'll do an Irish dance, and people say, 'How can you do that?' It's easy for me. It's fun," she said.

"St. Patrick's Day is like Christmas for these girls," her mother said. "It's electric. She doesn't stop dancing. She skips in and out of the house. The girls love to perform and people seem to really enjoy it."

Riley, 12, joined the Trinity Academy of Irish Dance in Milwaukee when she was 7 after participating in a Taste of Trinity workshop.

While other toddlers watched Disney movies and cartoons, Riley grew up watching Michael Flatley's Irish dance show "Riverdance," said Berg, who also loves the production.

For Riley's 12th birthday, her parents took her to see "Lord of the Dance," Flatley's most recent show.

Berg's father is 100% Irish and her mother Italian. Riley inherited a mixture of nationalities from her father Larry.

"My grandfather, who was born in Ireland, always wanted his kids to take Irish dance," Berg said. "My aunt did it for years to please her father, but she didn't really like it."

Riley and her great-aunt often dance together. The elder dancer gave her cape to Riley, who has it hanging in her bedroom.

Berg soon learned that being a Trinity Irish Dancer meant as much of a commitment from she and her husband as from Riley.

"I had no idea what I was in for. Not a clue," Berg said. "It's a huge commitment."

Although there are several other Trinity dancers from Ozaukee County, Berg said, their rehearsal times are usually different, so carpooling is rarely an option except for performances.

The dancers started rehearsing for St. Patrick's Day events in November. They learn a new dance each year, Berg said.

This year, more than 200 dancers were divided into teams. Each team, which includes beginner to high-level dancers, has at least nine performances during March at a variety of venues, including schools, nursing homes, community events and parades.

Riley rehearses two to three times a week for one to two hours at a time. Her solo dance practices are often held at North Shore Academy of the Arts in Grafton, but all the team practices are in Milwaukee.
Weekends usually include at least one show, parade or competition, which can draw dancers, many of whom are Riley's friends, from throughout the country.

Riley competes in six dances, so she must learn six new routines every year. She performs three dances in hard shoes to make noise and three in ghillies, soft-soled, laced slippers.

"The more worn they are, the better they work. They have to be like a second skin on their feet because they move so fast," Berg said.

Riley gets a new pair of hard-soled shoes every six months. The ghillies last about a year.

Each time Riley moves up a level, she gets a new school uniform. When she won first place in a solo competition, she earned the right to wear a solo dress.

One-of-a-kind solo dresses can cost anywhere from $1,000 to $6,000, Berg said, depending on the material and embellishments.

Riley's solo dress is made of black velvet and has green panels with scrolled designs embroidered on the bodice, skirt and back cape. There is a white, lace flounce under the skirt panels.

Her school dress, which she wears for team dancing, is black wool with a white lace collar and colorful embroidered Trinity symbols on the bodice, stiff skirt panels and cape. The dress cost $500 and can be resold only
through the school, which retains a portion of the sale.

"You treat these dresses like gold," said Berg, who has sold some outfits, but plans to keep Riley's first solo dress.

Riley's beautiful red curls aren't her real hair. She wears a wig of ringlets that closely match her hair color. The wig is replaced when it looks worn.

"The hair hurts," Riley said. "You need combs in front and back (to hold it in place while dancing)."

Riley said she wants to continue dancing through high school and achieve Trinity II, a semi-professional level.

"I like the shows better than competition," the girl said. "It's fun to see all my friends and dance

with them."