

COVER STORY

No jazz hands, we're sword dancers

Teens from around the country will step lively in a battle of fancy footwork and sword handling in a competition of English folk dance

By **Anna Marden** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 26, 2011

Sixteen dance teams from across the United States and one from Canada will compete this weekend in Cambridge, but their routines will include no tutus, no pointe shoes, and definitely no jazz hands.

The competition is called the Dancing America Rapper Tournament or DART. But before you imagine a two-step featuring Eminem, it's not that kind of rapper.

In this case, rapper refers to an English sword dance, an old folk tradition. Dancers step in time with carefully choreographed footwork and sword handling as they perform to lively jig tunes from a fiddle or concertina, played in 6/8 time. The dancers dress in matching outfits called "kits," and each team has a signature color scheme.

The rapper dancers carry dull-edged, double-handled "swords," which are fluidly maneuvered into different shapes - bent over shoulders, held above their heads, across their bodies or down low for the dancers to jump over. Meanwhile dancers also hop and step in time, bend their knees, and tap their toes audibly, like a clog dance. Groups



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Team SnickerSnack practicing for the Dancing America Rapper Tournament.

quickly shift positions, from circular formations into lines. Sometimes a dancer will somersault over a sword held by teammates, or a group will weave the swords into a star or another shape as they dance.

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And you thought teaching your kid how to do a bicycle kick for soccer was tough.

"There's five dancers, and they are very close together, connected by these flexible swords, doing intricate, fast-paced figures," says Tom Kruskal, a Sudbury resident who has been teaching English folk dancing to young people in greater Boston for more than two decades. "It's a very energetic and dramatic form of dance."

Kruskal oversees a large group of high schoolers, called Great Meadows Morris and Sword (GMMS), as well as a younger dance group called Hop Brook Morris. GMMS is divided into four teams: Candyrapper, SnickerSnack, Pocketflyers, and Rapport D'or. They practice together with Kruskal weekly at the First Parish Church in Sudbury. All four teams are getting ready to compete at DART.

Alex Pratt, 18, an Arlington High School senior and member of Pocketflyers says their primary goal for the DART tournament this year is to have fun, but they're serious, too.

"The secondary goal, but the one we focus on more, is looking good, looking quick, professional, and sharp," Pratt says. "It's a very exciting dance and it works especially well when all movements are crisp."

Rapper is competitive in its origin. It is believed that the tradition began in the 19th century in northeast England, when many small coal mining villages were springing up at the start of the industrial revolution. The miners made the flexible swords out of scrap metal and began developing the rapper sword dance.

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"It became a competition dance even from its early days where groups from different towns competed against each other for being the best and the fastest," Kruskal says.

The rapper movement is based on an older traditional English dance called long-sword, which involves inflexible swords. According to Kruskal, the miners practiced in pubs when they went for their after-work drink. The small performance space explains the tight dance formations.

Eventually, the rapper sword dance tradition faded and was rare until the 1970s when a folk-revival movement led to a revitalization of many styles of traditional folk dancing in England and America, Kruskal says. Dancing England Rapper Tournament (DERT) began, following the folk revival, in the 1980s.

Kruskal's youth teams have been traveling to DERT for the last several years, and he eventually decided to organize DART in the United States last year, with the help of a committee.

"We decided we were going to de-emphasize the competitive part of it and emphasize the skill-building aspect," Kruskal says. "So everyone gets judged and scored but we only announce the top three and give them prizes."

Nathaniel Diamond-Jones, 23, a Bunker Hill Community College student was a member of one of Kruskal's former teams, called Beside the Point, and attended GMMS's first trip to DERT. He says he was disappointed with his team's scores at the English competition.

"Beside the Point danced really differently," Diamond-Jones says. "British teams dance really controlled - they're deliberate and precise. . . . Our team was goofy, we did back-flips. There was an exuberance of energy that made our team exciting to watch, but did not get us the best tournament scores. Our precision wasn't very good, our sword handling was OK, we were a blast to watch, but when it comes to score, they can only give you a certain amount of buzz scores."

DART takes place at four Cambridge venues: Tommy Doyle's, All Asia, Asgard, and the Field.

"In England, pubs are a family place, they're a part of the social lives of the town," Kruskal says. "The places we're dancing are pubs, not bars, they're restaurants, they serve food and that's why we're allowed to go in there with kids."

Kruskal says he makes it his mission to recruit young dancers, because he doesn't want to see his passion for folk dances disappear.

Anna Blachman, 17, is a senior at Arlington High School, and member of Candyrapper. Her parents are folk dancers and she says she knew some of the kids who started the original Candyrappers, so she joined as soon as she was old enough.

"I really like that it's my own community," says Blachman. "It's something that people at school don't really know about. Most of my friends have no idea what it is. It gives you the opportunity to know people from all around Massachusetts, from all over the country and people in England as well."

Catherine Stark, 17, a senior at Falmouth High School and member of Clownfish Rapper in Woods Hole, embraced the traditional folk dance scene after a friend convinced her to join. Stark is now the group's teen leader.

Stark says her Falmouth-area team is different from many of the metro-Boston rapper sword groups, because not many of the members come from the folk community. She says she's looking forward to the tournament because of the interactions with other rapper dancers.

"We are a little bit isolated out here in Falmouth, we don't [typically] get to interact with other people our age that do this sort of stuff," Stark says. "It's a great networking opportunity - to be able to go and exchange figures and learn stepping techniques and . . . also to realize there's something outside of our team and that this is a movement that's growing."