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Local Girl Wins Regional Irish Dance Competition

Eight-year-old Zoe Gallagher beats out 38 competitors to take first place. She will perform Thursday at the Florida State Fair.

By **Deb Kelley** February 16, 2011

Zoe Gallagher began performing a mere three years ago. However, on Feb. 5 she claimed the title of Southern Regional Champion for Irish Dance, competing against 38 performers from 14 states and Mexico.

This would be a rare accomplishment for any experienced dancer, yet the pint-sized Gallagher was 7 during the competition.

Each week Gallagher, of Westchase, spends hours at the McGinley Academy of Irish Dance practicing the moves required of Irish Dance. The upper body remains still, while the lower body jumps and kicks.

Gallagher's love of Irish dance stems from watching a class.

"When I was little, I was taking ballet and tap lessons and saw people doing Irish dancing and thought that it looked cool and fun," said Gallagher, who recently turned 8. "Now, I want to compete in as many competitions as I can and have fun."

Because of her advanced skills, Gallagher often practices with older dancers.

"She picks up new dance steps very quickly, and she's enthusiastic to learn more than what is given to her," said her dance director, Eileen McGinley-Watson. "She always wants to learn new steps and what the older girls are doing. It is not very common to be able to keep up with the older pace. Because she picks up on material quickly, it makes it easier for her to join in with the older girls."

The regional was Gallagher's first major competition, so McGinley-Watson and Gallagher's mom, Lynn Gonzalez, were "shocked and ecstatic" when Zoe made the top 10.

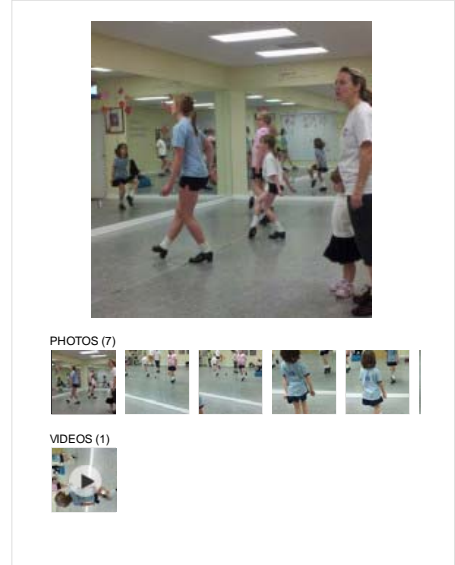
"We knew she was up there, but we never dreamt she would be in first place," McGinley-Watson said. "We are so proud of her."

Gonzalez added: "I burst into tears and was jumping up and down. Zoe, on the other hand, was a complete professional, so composed."

Gallagher later confessed to her mom that she was afraid if she let herself get as excited as she felt, "her head would explode."

Gallagher has more competitions planned throughout the year, in and out of Florida, with performances in restaurants and public and private venues.

Gallagher and the McGinley Academy of Irish Dance will perform at the Florida State Fair Thursday.



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