



Getting out of the gym. Irish step dancing offers a workout that mixes culture with cardiac fitness. **1E**

Celtic cardio

Joy Victory
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Do the jig to lose the jiggle. That's the advice of Karen Hanley, an adult Irish step dancer with the O'Rourke Academy of Irish Dance in White Plains.

Six years ago, Hanley was searching for a fun way to exercise. Around the same time, she saw "Riverdance"—a blockbuster Irish dance show—and was entranced.

"Not only did I think it was joyous, I was looking at the way their feet were moving," says Hanley, who was a physical therapist before she had children. "Your feet actually become a percussion instrument."

After extensive searching, Hanley found a school that taught adults—most Irish dance classes are for kids.

Learning Irish step-dancing also is a workout for the lower body—just for kicks ... and hops ... and twists ... and turns

She signed up for a beginner class and quickly learned that Irish step dancing is not for the out-of-shape. It's high-energy, high-impact and burns at least 400 calories per hour.

"You develop great endurance and strong leg muscles from it," Hanley says. "It's happening without you noticing because you're having so much fun."

The fun is evident during the Monday night advanced class, held at Trinity Lutheran Church in White Plains. The dancers laugh while they practice routines set to common Irish steps like the jig, reel, slipjig and hornpipe. But the women leave class drenched in sweat, panting and fanning their

flushed faces.

What makes Irish dancing especially strenuous is the dancer's form—a dancer almost perpetually dances on the balls of her feet, and each time a dancer lifts her heel back, she must hit her heel against her buttocks.

"You'll see T-shirts that say 'Irish dancers kick butt,'" Hanley says. "Most people can physically do it, but to remember to do it as your trying to remember every little twist and jump, it's something you work on forever."

Indeed, in Irish dancing, it's all about the kicking and jumping. The dancers occasionally clasp hands and dance in circles, but for the most part, they keep every part of their body mo-

tionless, except their lower legs.

It's not known for sure why the dance is so rigid, although one theory is that it symbolizes the English oppression of the Irish, Hanley says. Another theory is that stiff arms seem less provocative than moving arms, and therefore more acceptable to the Catholic Church.

Hanley's daughter, Angelica, also dances. She and Hanley frequently travel across the Northeast to compete in "feisanna," or dance competitions, where they regularly win awards. Both also have danced at weddings and parades.

"It's great for the kids. At competitions, there are live musicians playing and live judges. It's the anti-pop culture," Hanley says.

Do you practice an unconventional form of exercise? If so, contact Joy Victory at JVictory@thejournalnews.com or 914-694-5049.