

A CONTESTANT'S VIEW

M Cherry

In 1976 I set out to compare my skills, through the medium of the North Eastern Counties Clog Contest, against other clog dancers. As far as I was concerned the result was very favourable because the very best of the country's clog dancers at that time competed in the earlier revival contests.

There was however a surprise, contesting was not fun, it is a very serious business. Immediately both myself and at least one other competitor complained to the organisers because we were penalised for being one step short.

During 1978 I was prompted to inform the organisers of my thoughts which I have now attempted to update for the readers of "Instep". My friends inform me that much has been done to implement some of my suggestions but much of what I said may still be relevant today.

I learnt my first clog step as the result of a chance meeting with a past member of a Newcastle University rapper dance team. I was already in possession of a pair of clogs and from this time onwards (1960) I began to take an interest. It soon became apparent that although there were a few people around who could show me the odd step or two, they appeared to know very little about dancing technique or timing and had little or no idea how to write the steps down. With this in mind I began to analyse what little I knew and subsequently produced a method of tap tabulation which I still use as a teaching aid.

In 1965 I married a lady whose late father came from the small mining community of Annfield Plain and have visited Durham most years since that time. In 1978 I was indeed very grateful to the Victory Club of Annfield who put their facilities at my disposal for practice purposes.

It was not until 1974 that I was prompted to contact Johnson Ellwood, my purpose being to learn something of the clog contests. My visits covered a period of three years prior to his death. These visits enabled me to enter the revival contest in 1976 and again in 1978.

Johnson Ellwood was possessed with a fanatical enthusiasm for dancing which fortunately for myself and many others lasted throughout his life. He once said to me, "I ask nothing of you except that you go home and teach my steps to your friends". We all know what is happening throughout the country and I think he would be pleased. Following my visits with him I made the following notes from the information he gave me.

There were two contests. (1) Floor
(2) Pillar

Music Always the traditional hornpipe.

Steps. Varied in number, as many as twenty had been known. There was no mention that the contest was limited to particular types of step. A great deal of importance was put on variety of step. The contest always finished with a double shuffle off the toe.

Judges. 5 in number, adjudicating the following aspects -

Time.
Beats.
Execution.
Carriage.
Originality.

Performance. The dance was performed on the spot with very little movement. The arms were held loosely by the sides. Each competitor was expected to indicate his speed to the musician by beating the floor with his foot, prior to commencing the dance. If the dancer varied his speed he was penalised. If the musician varied the speed the competitor lost no marks.

The problems of competition

In the main the revival contest is run very much as it was prior to the time it lapsed around 1951. In 1978 I believe there were only five local competitors, the rest were enthusiasts such as myself who had travelled many miles, in my case 300. A number of us felt that the rules were in need of clarification and in fairness to the organisers we had the opportunity to debate the problems at the open forums which followed the contests at that time.

The points which showed up very clearly were -

- 1) The North East were to promote the premier contest.
- 2) The rules were in need of clarification.
- 3) There was a reluctance to clearly define the rules.
- 4) The major points of controversy were - style, execution and adjudication.
- 5) The contest did not appear to give equal opportunity to all the competitors.

Expansion of 1-5

1) In 1978 we all agreed that it was appropriate for the North East to have this honour. Now that the contest has had a few years to develop there must be others better qualified to comment.

2) Clarification of the rules.

I submit that the rules in all contests should be written in such a manner that there can be no misunderstanding between individuals which result in entirely different interpretations.

The following phrases are from "Clog News Sheet" April 1978 -

"impossible to verbalise"
"includes both style and footwork"
"there are no strict rules"
"half beat"

These phrases refer to different aspects of the rules and I consider them to be unacceptable. If something is impossible to define or verbalise, how is it taught? If there are no strict rules, how can it be marked or penalised? What is a half beat? In the context in which it is used the term "half beat" refers to sound or loudness of a beat. I consider this to be a misuse of the term.

Johnson Ellwood used to tell a story about an argument he once had with a judge, it concerned quarter beats. I am lucky enough to have this story on tape. The judge, I am sure, was referring to music. There is no doubt that Johnson was talking about the sound or loudness of the beats.

During a performance a dancer will make the taps loud and soft and he will vary the time between the taps. Put them to music; in common time the half beat is a quaver, the quarter beat is a semi-quaver.

The performer gives the expression by adding weight to the taps, that is, he makes them loud or soft. How is it done? Usually it is achieved by the movement and position of the trunk. In no way can the loudness be called a half beat.

3) I still await the rules to be clearly defined.

4) The major points of controversy -

Style - What do contest organisers mean if they refuse to give an adequate explanation.
How is it adjudicated, and how is it penalised?
What are the differences between Northumberland, Durham, Lancashire etc.

How do the teachers of dancing define style!

Execution My understanding was that execution is the ability to put in heel clicks, rolls etc. into steps.
A dictionary definition is as follows -

The act of executing, performance, accomplishment, the mode of performance, a work of art, skill, dexterity.

Adjudication Now that several years have passed and the judges have gained in experience perhaps they would care to express their point of view.

5) Equal opportunity. Any contest irrespective of medium pre-supposes that the contestants compete on equal terms. In order to give each competitor the same chance to win the contest, the rules, conditions, and adjudication must be seen to be fair in all aspects.

Interpretation of the aspects of adjudication.

Time The ability of the competitor to keep in time with the music. The ability to control speed throughout the dance.

Beats The ability to produce differing rhythms by striking the floor with different parts of the clog or by striking the clogs together.

Carriage May simply be described as deportment.

Execution The mode of performing a work of art, skill, dexterity.
Style!
The ability to add kicks, heel beats, rolls etc.

Originality The ability to embellish a simple step so that it is particular to an individual dancer.
For some reason this aspect was not included at or since the revival contest of 1976. Why?
Surely this is an area which allows the art to develop and grow. It is the means by which individual ideas and personality are expressed.

Very simply the areas of adjudication are split into two categories -

- 1) The aspects which you listen to - Time and beats.
- 2) The aspects which you look at - Carriage, execution and originality.

Some suggestions

Audible aspects - If the judges were screened from the competitors complete concentration could be given to what is heard.

Visual aspects - Add dress to the carriage section, to date it is not judged and carries no marks.

Replace execution with "artistic performance". Define style within the artistic performance so that there are no misunderstandings or drop it completely.

Reintroduce originality to cover the content of the dance.

Why not carry out some detailed research into the rules and conditions of similar contests. e.g. Highland dancing, Irish

dancing, Ballroom dancing, Eisteddfodds and Music Festivals. To date only one thing is compulsory, the double shuffle to finish. Why not have a dance of compulsory steps.

The competitors

- 1900-1950 Who were the competitors and what was their background.
- 1950-1975 Clog dancers appeared on television and at festivals so it did not die out completely. They were always announced as "champions". Who were they, where are they and why did they dance.
- 1976-present Who are the clog dancers today? Why are they spread throughout the country and what is their background?

Prior to the Second World War were clog contests confined to the areas where the clog was made and worn as a working shoe? The regions which come readily to mind are the mill areas of Lancashire and the Durham coalfield. These regions were made up of small and very close knit communities. Each community very likely had it's own champion and there was very little need to define every facet of the rules.

Did the decline of the clog contest commence with the advent of the war or did the war accelerate the decline?

Following the war and throughout the twenty five years without contests there have been vast changes in education, living standards, and travel. Clog dancing like many artistic pastimes very naturally was absorbed and became a folk art.

In consequence the people who took it up around 1960 had a vastly different educational and social background. In order to do it, someone like myself had to pick up the threads wherever they were to be found, piece them together and inevitably impose on it their own personality.

This I believe is the reason for the questions in connection with the contest rules. It obviously has some bearing on the fact that there is extreme difficulty in answering queries.

I present this article in order to promote discussion, argument and debate within this journal in the hope that the clog dance and contest will continue to develop and thrive.

EFDSS N.W. Area Conference

Campaign for Real Reels

'Putting the stepping back into
our traditional dancing'

Reading Traditional Step Dance Group
Saturday 22nd October 1983

Moss Side Community Centre, Leyland

- 10.30 am Assembly and Coffee
11 to 12.45 Morning Session
2.30 to 5 Afternoon Session with tea break
~~~~~

St Ambrose Church Hall, Leyland

Dance 7.30 to 11 pm

Rattle & Rant Band  
with Madeleine Hollis

Bar applied for  
~~~~~

Tickets available from Alan Barber, 38, Howick Cross Lane
Penwortham Preston Lancs PR1 0NS

Conference including dance EFDSS Members £3 Non Members £3.50
Morning and Afternoon £1.50.
Dance EFDSS Members £2. Non Members £2.25