

German dancers step into 90th year

October 9, 2012 by DAVID J. CRIBLEZ / davidcriblez@newsday.com



Boys wearing lederhosen form a circle in the basement of Plattduetsche Park restaurant in [Franklin Square](#), clapping, stomping their feet and slapping their thighs, ankles and heels. Girls spin around them in dirndl dresses that form the shape of an upside-down teacup.

These youngsters are the next generation of the Original Enzian German-American Club, said to be the second-oldest Schuhplattler dance group in the country. This year marks its 90th anniversary.

ABOUT THE GROUP

Schuhplattler dancing is the core of the club, which is separated into child and adult groups. Most members are of German / Bavarian descent, which fuels a shared interest in keeping the tradition alive.

"The dancing is something that bonds us," says vice president George Mueller, 53, of [Dix Hills](#). "This is everybody's second family."

Dancing is the club's signature pastime -- the group performed in Manhattan's annual German-American Steuben Parade last month and appears as the entertainment at various private and public [Oktoberfest](#) celebrations in the fall. The club will hold its own marquee event -- the Bauernball -- early next month. It involves a venerable German feast with brats and beer, followed by a Schuhplattler performance and an open dance floor with music provided by a German-American band.

FOLLOWING TRADITION

Practice is held on Thursday evenings to sharpen moves ahead of weekend appearances.

Sweat glistening on his brow, Mike Teplansky, 7, of [Smithtown](#) takes a quick break for a sip of ginger ale, then jumps back into the circle. He dances with confidence because he's a three-year veteran.

Schuhplattler dancing has been part of his family since his grandparents Karl, 69, and Karin Rubenacker, 65, of Douglaston, met on the dance floor in the mid-'60s. While they still dance, their real joy comes from watching their grandchildren participate.

"We start them young so they grow into it," says Karin. "They see the adults and copy their moves. It takes a lot of effort to get it together, but it's worth it."

Peter Mechler, 40, of [Glendale](#), came to the club without any family ties. It was one of his buddies who got him into it. While other single guys his age are hitting the nightlife scene, Mechler is working on his Gamersprung -- a mountain goat jump dance.

"I was a latecomer," he admits. "It took me a lot longer to learn the dances because I didn't grow up with it."

TELLING A STORY

Dances are based on German trades such as the miners' dance, woodchoppers' dance and the millers' dance.

"Each dance tells a story," says Christina Kraker, 22, of upstate Mahopac. "In the millers' dance, you make a figure that looks like the gears in the machine. This evokes going to a mill and making the wheat."

One of the most popular is the kissing dance -- it's not the kids' favorite. The courting-type dance involves a pause and the dance couples kissing the air on each side of their cheeks.

"It's a difficult one to sell," admits kids' instructor René Gaspar, 54, of Douglaston. The children giggle a bit, but power through.

In addition to celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, Original Enzian was honored that one of its own -- Kirsten Mueller of [Dix Hills](#) -- was named Miss German America Steuben Parade [Queen](#).

"Keeping the youth in the mix and not just leaving it up to the adults is important," says Mueller, 21. "Without us, our culture isn't going to move forward."

Original Enzian Schuhplattler Dancers

INFO 516-482-6417, originalenzian.org

Upcoming performance

90th Bauernball

WHERE | WHEN 8 p.m. Nov. 3, Plattduetsche Park restaurant, 1132 [Hempstead](#) Tpke., [Franklin Square](#)

ADMISSION \$50 (\$46 advance) includes dinner, dancing, live music and beer/wine/soda