

# Maine girls twirling to Florida

## Instructor reviving passion and leading students to contest recognition

BY LYNN TUKEY  
FOR THE WEEKLY

BREWSTER — Many may not see baton twirling as a sport, but it is, said Diane Higgins, coach at Diane's World of Twirl, home of the River City Twirlers, which combines twirlers from Brewer and Bucksport and Capital City Twirlers in Augusta. The sport involves gymnastics and dance under a baton, hand and eye coordination, teamwork and aerobic exercise, she said.

"They're moving everywhere," Higgins said. "They're using an entire gym floor."

For the 2004 East Coast

Twirling Association Competition season, involving four different competitions, Higgins' twirlers won 289 individual first-place awards, 271 individual second-place awards, 198 individual third-place awards, 174 individual fourth-place awards, and 87 individual fifth-place awards.

Of those in her programs who participated in the 2004 Maine Games, which was a single competition, 11 individuals received gold medallions, seven individuals and two teams received silver medallions, and three individuals and two teams received bronze medallions.

Twirlers must have a pres-

ence while performing, she said. They have to maintain eye contact with judges during competitions. The skills they acquire from twirling, such as performing in front of an audience and looking people directly in the eye, are carried with them into other areas of life. They may still get nervous, but they know how to hold themselves together, she said.

Higgins teaches twirling to those "age 3 right on through college." She teaches in three towns during the school year: 3-8:30 p.m. Tuesdays at the Brewer Auditorium; 2:15-8:30 p.m. Wednesdays at the Hussey

*See Baton, Page 4*

Continued from Page 1

School in Augusta; and 2:30-7:30 p.m. Thursdays at the Miles Lane and Jewett schools in Bucksport.

The Brewer and Augusta programs are offered through the parks and recreation departments in each town. The Bucksport program is offered through the Bucksport Adult and Community Education Program. The cost in each location is \$35 for residents and \$40 for others for a five-week session.

Summers, from the end of June through August, Higgins teaches at Med-O-Lark Summer Camp in the town of Washington, where she has "taught girls from all over the world," she said. And with all of her travel for each of her classes, competitions and events, she logs about 35,000 business miles each year.

Higgins teaches private classes for competitive twirlers. Otherwise, instruction is in a group setting. She teaches all five levels of instruction: novice, beginner, intermediate, advanced and superior. The students learn 12 fundamentals and build on them as they progress through the different levels.

Twirlers in Higgins' classes participate each year in the Memorial Day parade in towns around the Augusta, Bucksport and Brewer areas. They also participate in the Fourth of July parade in Augusta, the Fort Knox Festival as part of the parade and as a demonstration, at the Windsor Fair as a demonstration, and in the Festival of Lights parade in Bangor. This year, the Cobbosseecontee Yacht Club saw them in the Fourth of July parade and asked them to perform for the club, which they did the first weekend of August. Higgins' classes also have an end-of-the-year recital.

For the first time, 10 junior and senior twirlers ages 10 to 17 from both the River City Twirlers and Capital City Twirlers will head to Florida as one team to participate in the 2005 Twirl Mania Competition at the Wide World of Sports Complex in Disney World. Though not a world championship, athletes from all over the world will participate in this event.

"It's just to share a love of the sport," Higgins said.

The event will cost about \$1,000 per twirler to cover airfare, meals, motel stays, cos-



River City Twirlers (top) who will attend the Twirl Mania Competition in Orlando are (from left) Megan Smith, Lauren Perkins-Fields, Meleah Roy, Katherine Tilley, Rebecca Tilley and Meagan Sawyer. Capital City Twirlers (above) who will attend the Twirl Mania Competition in Orlando are (from left) Sarah Clark, Megan Williams and Kaitlyn Honea. Absent was Amanda Burns.

tumes and the entry fee. Through the fund-raising efforts of parents, a little more than half the needed money has been raised so far, Higgins said.

Of Higgins' 120 students, only one is male. World champion twirlers include males, Higgins said. She would like to see more boys participate in her classes.

Higgins, 38, goes to the gym three days a week at 5 a.m. to keep fit and strong, and she is learning to twirl three batons concurrently. She also attends coaching conventions to keep informed and current with the sport.

The Verona resident first picked up a baton at age 5 when her grandfather gave her one that had been left at a camp, and she has been twirling ever since. At age 12 she started teaching the sport as a junior instructor in her hometown of East Corinth in her parents' living room.

"There are still dents in the ceiling to remind us of that era," she said.

In 1982, at age 16, Higgins was crowned International Miss

Twirl Champion. In 1990 she formed a twirling organization known as East Coast Twirling Association Inc.

The organization has a current membership that stretches from Canada to Boston and includes both males and females. Higgins sold East Coast Twirling Association Inc. in July "to focus more on coaching the sport and to begin the long journey to try and introduce the sport back into the schools here in the state of Maine, along with taking these local athletes to the next level of competition," she said.

"I like [coaching] because I enjoy twirling," Higgins said, adding that she wants to share with her students what she enjoys about the sport.

"I've been able to turn a hobby into a career," Higgins said.

For information about Diane's World of Twirl, call 469-3377.