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Luke Spring, a tap-dance prodigy from Ashburn, takes the national stage



 **View Photo Gallery** — All eyes on tap-dance prodigy from Ashburn: Luke Spring, 10, is a YouTube darling and onstage sensation. The Virginia elementary school student made his Broadway debut in "A Christmas Story: The Musical" last fall.

By Rebecca Ritzel, [E-mail the writer](#)

The future of tap dancing in America may rest on the small shoulders of a four-foot-tall, 52-pound, 10-year-old boy from Ashburn.

Luke Spring is a [YouTube darling](#) who is even more astonishing in person. Locally, he has been impressing the dance and theater community since 2010, but his fame has since rocketed to New York stages and national TV. Luke's four-year career got another boost earlier this month, when he placed third in the Mini Division (for 7-10-year-olds) at the [New York City Dance Alliance's National Outstanding Dancer](#) competition. Had the competition just been just tap, Luke would have won, wingtips down.

Instead, the honor means that Luke isn't just a prodigious tapper, he's one of the best young dancers in the United States and Canada, whether the style is tap, hip-hop, lyrical or jazz.

The weeklong competition capped off a busy school year in show business for Spring family. Last fall, Luke took two months off from [fourth grade at Cedar Lane Elementary School](#) to make his Broadway debut in "A Christmas Story: The Musical." (He will join the musical's tour in the fall.) In March, Samsung began airing his first national commercials, and in June he performed at the Tony Awards. Lucky for those of us back home, he fit in performances at [DC Tap Fest](#) and the Ford's Theatre Gala. His big project this summer is taking [singing lessons](#), so he can belt a bit better at his next Broadway audition. Because there will be a next Broadway audition.

"Luke's future is beyond bright," said Chloe Arnold, a co-founder of DC Tap Fest who was also a judge in the Dance Alliance contest. "I see dancers all over the world, and I've never seen a kid like Luke. He's executing sounds with power, force, rhythmic clarity and speed. He's just phenomenal. And the best part is that he's just so much fun to be around. He's just here to work hard, do what he loves and have a great time."

When things began to click

Luke's dancing biography begins, like the back story of so many male dancers' [careers](#), with one too many trips to his older sisters' dance studio. One evening, while his mom, Jill, was trying to round up Lucy (now 18) and Cami (now 20) from their ballet and jazz classes, 4-year-old Luke rooted around in the lost and found.

"I found a pair of tap shoes," Luke recalls. "I put them on, and I started making noise with my feet."

More specifically, he started doing with his feet what he had been doing with his hands on a drum set he'd been given for Christmas. Luke's mom enrolled him in [classes at Studio Bleu Dance Center](#), where he quickly became a better tapper than his sisters. Eventually, the family added hip-hop, jazz and ballet to his dance regimen.

"How do I teach a prodigy and make him better than he already is? That has been an age-old question," said Justin M. Lewis, who has been teaching Luke since 2009. Luke was a natural, but needed guidance with counts, phrasing and showmanship.

When Arnold, a D.C. native whose dance accolades include serving as a dance double for Beyoncé, gave a master class at Studio Bleu, she was shocked by Luke's preternatural ability, and asked Jill if Luke could perform at DC Tap Fest in 2010.

"Luke's mom was like, 'Are you sure? He's 6, and he's never done a concert solo performance.'" Arnold recalled, laughing.

"She's so humble. Most moms aren't like that. They're like, 'Put my kid in the spotlight.'"

Luke and Lewis [performed a tag-team routine](#): a tiny blond boy and a six-foot-tall African American guy. The performance — at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts — was sold out. "They had every person in that house on their feet and going crazy," Arnold said. She had the whole show, which also featured renowned tappers like Jason Samuels Smith, professionally taped. "But you can't stop bootleggers," she said.

"The next morning, I woke up, turned on my computer, and my son was all over the Internet," Jill recalled.

Among the thousands of people who watched that first video of Luke was a friend of Arnold's who was working at "[The Ellen DeGeneres Show](#)." A producer got in touch with Arnold, and then with the Springs. Luke appeared on the show in May, 2010, [answering](#) the host's queries with a smile and a soft-spoken "yes" or a "no."

But [then he danced](#), and Luke got loud. Heel-toe taps. Step-ball-changes. Over-the-tops. Forward and back, and side-to-side, and all closed out with one big, gap-toothed grin.

Three months later, the Ellen gig was followed by an appearance on "[So You Think You Can Dance](#)," where Luke tapped alongside host Nigel Lythgoe. In June 2012, Luke performed at the Fred and Adele Astaire Awards, an annual event held in New York that honors excellence in dance on Broadway. A producer in attendance called Jill a few weeks later: Would Luke like to audition for a role in the musical adaptation of "A Christmas Story"?

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"Are you sure?" Jill recalls telling the producers. "You know he's a tapper. He doesn't sing." She let him audition, figuring it would be a good experience but nothing would come of it. Jill was more worried about her own future at that point: The day after the audition, she drove back to Virginia for an oncology appointment. Cami, who was preparing to start her sophomore year as a dance major at [George Mason University](#), mulled things over and had a talk with her mom.

"If you have cancer, and Luke gets this part, I want to drop out of college for a semester and [move to New York](#), because I really want Luke to be able to do this," Cami told her.

Jill went to the oncology appointment. She got bad news, Luke got good news, and the family prepared for difficult transitions.

"I have always been a protective parent," Jill said. "And yet there were my 9-year-old and my 19-year-old, alone in New York."

Cami and Luke got an apartment in the Theater District, and she shepherded her brother around Times Square to rehearsals, [tutoring sessions](#) and to the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre each day. Jill boasts that Cami was known as "the cool mom," but Luke chimes in with his version.

"The other boys were like, 'Your sister is so hot,'" Luke says, making a face and cracking his voice to impersonate the hormone-addled adolescents who portrayed Ralphie and his pals in "A Christmas Story."

By Dec. 30, Jill had recovered from surgery and was well enough to travel to New York so the whole family, including Lucy and Luke's dad, Mick, could go to the closing night performance together. But Luke and the girls had the stomach flu, and the stagehands positioned buckets just offstage. He made it through the show, much to the relief of his family and the swing understudy, who was panicking in the wings. He had never even attempted to learn Luke's tap routine.

In January, Luke headed back to Cedar Lane Elementary School, where he discovered he was way behind in the Virginia history unit. He still made occasional trips to New York, like to perform at the Radio City Music Hall for the unveiling of the [Samsung Galaxy S4](#). But for the record, he is not allowed to have a smartphone. "Just one with numbers on it," he says, glumly. He sneaks his sister's to perform typical 10-year-old boy tasks like checking sports scores.

"Luke and I talk football all the time," Lewis said. "He's such a trip."

With little prompting, Luke will tell you that he strongly dislikes Tom Brady, is bummed that Ray Lewis retired and is worried about the Redskins' wide receiver prospects. In the studio, he and Lewis do a good bit of joking around, calling each other Short Stump Spring and Long Legs Lewis. But they also get serious. Luke understands that tap is a historically African American dance style, Lewis said. When he goes to teach Luke a new step, he often suggests names of tappers for Luke to look up on the Internet. YouTube may have made Luke famous, but it's also a reason he's so good.

"Luke thrives off of that," Lewis said. "He gets really excited, and he gets inspired."

His dancing embodies so many of the great tap dancers of the past. He'll watch a video of Gregory Hines, the Nicholas Brothers, Savion Glover or Harold 'Stumpy' Cromer and be able to quote whole phrases, and he's been doing this since he was 6."

Growing up in Germantown, Lewis was a member of Tappers With Attitude, a D.C. touring group that has largely fizzled out.

The capital is not the tap capital it once was. Instead, the art form is practiced in suburban studios and galvanized at special events like the annual DC Tap Fest, which Arnold founded with her sister, and touring Broadway shows like "[Anything Goes](#)." On July 27, tapping brothers John and Leo Manzari will perform at the Kennedy Center's celebration of [National Dance Day](#). The Southwest D.C. natives will also be back in town this fall, to perform in Maurice Hines's variety show "[Tappin' Thru Life](#)" at Arena Stage.

"Tap is trying to make a comeback, and honestly, I think having Luke in the area is making it even bigger," Lewis says. "Just him alone. And that says something about his character. When Luke goes on [TV](#), he always says he's from Virginia. So that's how everyone knows him: as the little tap dancing kid from Virginia."

Ritzell is a freelance writer.