ED CARNES

Fiddler, Competition Judge & Advocate for Traditional Fiddling

Champion Fiddler • NOTC Qualified Judge • Contest Director
Developer of the Normalized Scoring System

Ed Carnes has been involved in competitive fiddling for nearly five decades—as a fiddler, championship competitor, judge, contest director, organizer, and advocate for the preservation of traditional fiddle music and the competitions that help keep it alive.

A native of Leitchfield, Kentucky, Ed began playing violin in 1974 as a charter member of the newly formed Grayson County School Orchestra. His introduction to fiddling came through orchestra instructor Jesse Haycraft, a fiddler and musician who had performed with the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and who used old-time fiddle tunes to keep his young students interested. Before long, Ed was learning those tunes himself and becoming increasingly interested in the world of competitive fiddling.

That school orchestra produced an unusual group of accomplished fiddlers. Along with Ed, fellow students Jimmy Mattingly, Mark Ralph, and Erik Payton went on to become successful competition fiddlers, with all four eventually placing among the top competitors at the Grand Master Fiddler Championship.

Ed began playing fiddle in 1977. What began as a hobby became a lifelong passion.

Over the years, Ed has won fiddle championships in six states—Kentucky, Indiana, Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, and Georgia—and has competed successfully throughout the United States. Among his accomplishments are five Mid-America Fiddle Championships, the Empire State Championship, the Western Kentucky Championship, two Texas Old Time Fiddlers Association Out-of-State Championships, and numerous other contest titles. He has placed as high as Runner-Up in the Grand Master Fiddler Championship, one of the premier fiddle competitions in the country.

Ed has performed throughout the United States and Canada. He has recorded two solo fiddle projects, has appeared on several compilation recordings, and has performed multiple times on Nashville's WSM Grand Ole Opry.

As the years passed, competition judging became an equally important part of Ed's involvement in fiddling. A NOTC Qualified Judge, he has judged major competitions across the United States, including state championships in Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Indiana, and Texas; the National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest and Festival in Weiser, Idaho; the Western Open Fiddle Championship; and numerous other regional and national competitions.

His approach to judging is grounded in a broad appreciation of fiddle styles rather than allegiance to a single school of playing. Ed believes good judging requires not only an understanding of technical execution and competition standards, but also an appreciation for the different regional traditions, styles, and musical approaches represented by the contestants on stage.

That concern for judging also led Ed to focus on another issue: how to make fiddle competitions as fair and consistent as possible.

After years of competing, judging, and administering contests, Ed developed the **Normalized Scoring System (NSS)**. The system is designed to reduce the effect of differences in the way individual judges use the same numerical scoring scale. One judge may naturally score within a narrow range while another uses nearly the entire scale; NSS is designed to reduce the unintended influence of those differences while preserving each judge's musical judgment.

The underlying principle is important to Ed: mathematics and technology should support human judgment, not replace it. Fiddle playing is musical and subjective by nature, and qualified judges must remain responsible for evaluating what they hear and judging the performance. The purpose of NSS is not to tell judges how to judge. It is to help ensure that differences in individual scoring habits do not inadvertently give one judge's numerical scores more influence over the final result than another's.

The development of NSS also draws on another side of Ed's background. Away from fiddling, he has spent his professional career in information technology, technology consulting, management, and executive leadership. He has worked with organizations including EDS, Perot Systems, NCR, Dell, Sony Music Publishing, and Round Hill Music, and has founded technology consulting and managed-services businesses. His professional work has involved technology, systems, organizational leadership, problem solving, and the management of complex operations. That combination of technical experience and decades spent inside fiddle competitions provided a natural foundation for examining competition scoring as a system that could be improved without sacrificing the human judgment at its center.

Ed holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Western Kentucky University, where he studied Computer Science with a minor in Business Administration, and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree from the University of Texas at Dallas, which he earned summa cum laude.

For Ed, fairness in competition and preservation of the music are closely connected. Contestants—especially children and young musicians—should leave competitions feeling that they were given a fair opportunity and encouraged to continue playing. Healthy, well-run competitions give young players a place to perform, meet other musicians, learn from accomplished fiddlers, and become part of a musical community that can remain with them for life.

That commitment to younger musicians has become an important part of Ed's work with the Grand Master Fiddler Championship. In addition to his responsibilities with the competition itself, he has helped design and develop educational workshops offered free to young musicians. The workshops give young players opportunities to learn directly from accomplished musicians while exposing them to the history, styles, techniques, and traditions that have shaped fiddling across generations.

Ed describes his own playing as a mixture of Texas or contest-style fiddling and the Southeastern fiddle tradition, with influences of his own added along the way. Among the musicians he has regarded as important influences are Benny Thomasson, Mark O'Connor, Jim “Shorty” Chancellor, and J.T. Perkins. At the same time, he has maintained a strong appreciation for regional old-time traditions as well as bluegrass, Canadian, Celtic, and jazz-influenced fiddling.

That breadth of musical perspective has shaped much of Ed's involvement with fiddle competitions. He has long believed that the remarkable technical advancement of modern fiddlers should not come at the expense of understanding the musicians, regional styles, and traditions that created the music. He is particularly interested in helping younger fiddlers appreciate styles beyond the contemporary contest circuit and learn about the generations of musicians who preceded them.

Ed's contribution to competitive fiddling extends well beyond playing and judging.

He is a co-founder of the Grand Master Fiddler Championship and today serves as its Executive Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer. In those roles, he has helped lead the organization, direct the competition, and shape its long-term operations and programs. He was also instrumental in establishing the Grand Master Fiddler Championship as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, helping position it not simply as an annual contest but as an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting the art of fiddling.

Ed also helped establish and direct the Twin Lakes National Fiddler Championship in his hometown of Leitchfield. His work there extended beyond the contest itself, and he played a role in having Leitchfield officially recognized by the Kentucky State Legislature as “The Fiddling Capital of Kentucky.”

He later worked with the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame & Museum to re-establish the Kentucky State Fiddle Championship and served as its contest director. His other organizational involvement has included service with the Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Convention as a Board member and fiddle judge, as well as providing technology support for the Texas Old Time Fiddlers Association.

Throughout his life, Ed has deliberately kept fiddling as something he does because he loves the music. Although opportunities existed to pursue music professionally, he chose a separate professional career while continuing to compete, perform, judge, organize competitions, and support fiddle organizations throughout the country.

That decision allowed fiddling to remain what it was when he first encountered an old-time tune in a Kentucky school orchestra: something worth enjoying, studying, sharing, debating, competing over occasionally—and preserving for the next generation.

Nearly five decades later, those ideas remain at the center of Ed's involvement in fiddling. Whether he is judging a competition, helping operate one, working to improve scoring fairness, preserving the history and traditions of the music, or encouraging a young musician, his goals remain much the same: respect the music and the people who created it, treat competitors fairly, strengthen the organizations and competitions that keep fiddle music visible, and help ensure that another generation has the opportunity to discover the same lifelong enjoyment that fiddling has given him.