

The Isle of Skye Highland Games Reminiscences

Douglas MacKenzie, local baker and Skye Highland Games committee member, reminisces to Fiona MacDonald, Assistant Editor 'Scottish Review', about Games gone by...

It was just such a big day when I was a wee boy. Oh, it was great. We used to compare the amount of money we could finagle out of our parents. Two bob was pretty good, but some contemporaries would have half a crown.

The Games weren't just men tossing cabers and gurlies dancing. They were toffee apples and candy floss. The Games are not the Games without wasps and candy floss. And on one occasion we had freak shows, hairy women and things. You paid your money and went into the tent to see them, actually we sneaked under the tent if the truth be told. It was dreadful really. We wouldn't have that today, of course, but it was hugely attractive to us at the time.

You could get your palm read, the girls did that, we were too busy getting cowboy hats. Some of the hats had horrible things on them like 'Kiss Me Quick', but you could tear that off and still be a cowboy.

So it was a big event. There were only two or three big events in the year then. The Mod was another. People would come in from all over Skye for the Mod, for the sheep and cattle sales, and they would come for the Games.

I was never a great athlete, but I reckoned as a wheelbarrow I might have a chance. But I was pretty fat, and we never won. I think we got third once. I remember being very determined to win the pillow fight, and I had it sussed that if I locked my ankles I would be fantastic...One batter from the other guy was all it took and off I went. No, I wasn't a successful athlete but the Games were very much in the blood. My father was on the committee, and his uncle was on it. Going back to at least the early 1900s, my family has been on the committee and I'm delighted to say that my son is now on the committee too. You'll find that continuous thread in quite a few families on the island.



Open High Jump

Traditionally, we held the Games on the last Thursday in August, but we've moved them forward to the beginning of August because the island is busier then. The problem is that because we have moved them into the main part of the tourist season, local people are at their busiest. As a baker, I have to start at midnight in order to get a day off to be there.

We used to have weather insurance, but they needed so much rain to activate the policy that it was just a waste of time. We don't have it now, it's so expensive in this part of the world anyway. But, do you know this? Donald MacMillan was President of the Games for years and he's on record as saying, and it's very true, that he's never known rain on the day of the Games. Now, there may be a little smirr now and again...a little dew. But no rain of consequence. There have been Games in my memory where we've worked all night and it has been torrential, absolutely torrential, and your heart would be in your boots come nine o'clock in the morning. But, come two o'clock, the sun's out, the wasps are there, and the candy floss, and all's well with the world. I don't ever recall a wash-out.

Midges, like wasps are an integral part of the Games. You need pipe bands, you need Highland dancers, you need heavy competition; but to make it a real Skye Games you need wasps and midges. And God hasn't

let us down on that score either. It's interesting to watch the spectators and competitors, many of whom are kilted, dealing with the midges. It's a wonderful spectacle.

I tend to be the one with the megaphone. I like to try to make things go with a little lightness of touch. I like to involve the crowd. A lot of the committee object to me singling them out for 3,000 pairs of eyes to focus on at any given moment, but I love to see them squirm. If you can get eight Germans, or eight central Europeans, or Canadians or Americans to form a tug of war team and actually take part in the Isle of Skye Highland Games, that's really something to tell their friends when they get back home.



Tug of War

Tommy MacKenzie re-started the tug of war here in quite a serious way and he did a tremendous job in making it an event that had structure and technique, instead of just being eight lads pulling. Tommy put the focus on leg movement, and body position, and joint work. He's done that with several teams, so now it's quite a good event. We have teams from different districts, and the Hydro, for example, will have a team, and the pipe band. The tug of war closes the whole thing very well. It keeps the interest going once the dancing and the heavy events are finished.

In the evening the pipe band leaves the field and pipes everyone down to the village. We go to pains to point out to everyone that there are

events on at night. The committee always had a dance on Games night. Friday night dances are ten-a-penny in the Highlands but a mid-week dance like the Games night dance...well, they were just fantastic. People came in from Staffin and Dunvegan and Carbost and all over the place for the Games, so it would be reasonable that a drop of the cratur would be partaken of, and then it would be on to the dance. And it's much the same today. The committee doesn't run the dance now, and it might be a little more continental, maybe some creme de menthe as well as the whisky, but it's still a very cheery night.

The Games are spectacular, and so colourful. And I enjoy the competitive edge. And the tradition. I recall the schools would get a day off. They would go back on the Wednesday after a long summer break and close again on the Thursday for the Games. It was a highlight of growing up here in the village, there's no doubt about that.

The whole event probably encapsulates the tourist's idea of Scotland. It's all the things the brochures say about Scotland. The arena is spectacular on all sides. The view is just magnificent. You've got the kilts, the bagpipes, the big men throwing cabers...all the stuff of the holiday programmes. But that's not the intention. I don't think we set out to make it anything other than it is. We're not pandering to tourism. We shifted the date, that's all. The Games you see are more or less the Games that were there fifty years ago. I feel very strongly that they're a genuine part of Scottish culture within the last hundred years.



Lone Piper