

The Isle of Skye Highland Games Some Memories and Impressions of the Hill Race

By IAIN F. MACLEAN

I never competed in the hill race at the Skye Highland Games but I can claim to have played my part in that unique event.

For several years, in my teens, I acted as flagman for the race. That important, if little known role, entailed that just as the principal events were getting underway on the games field I would be sorting through the detritus of generations in one of Colonel Jock's outhouses at Viewfield, searching for the flag (an old, once-white sheet suspended between two poles) which later on I would transport three-quarters of the way up Fingal's Seat, the hill that looms over the village of Portree.

Having planted the flag atop a rocky outcrop I would settle down in the drizzle and swirling mist (typical Games weather) invariably assailed by squadrons of midges to wait for the hill race competitors to reach me. When the runners arrived at my lonely eyrie I handed them each a ticket from a numbered roll. The ticket constituted the proof, when they reached the finishing line, that they had completed the course. To my youthful disappointment never once in my years as flagman was I offered any financial inducement to part with one of these potentially valuable tickets before the race was run!

The Hill Race is, in any view, an odd sort of event in which short cuts are not prohibited but are on the contrary positively encouraged. My father, the race starter for nigh on forty years, a few minutes before the appointed starting time, would assemble the motley crew of entrants in a corner of the games field, point out the flag, just visible on the hill on the far side of the bay and laconically inform them that the race was to the flag and back by any such route as they individually cared to devise. Over the years many Skye residents have exploited their local knowledge of the quickest and shortest route to achieve a notable place in the finishing order.



William Daniell print of 1819

The Hill Race each year attracts a large field of men, and some intrepid women of varied levels of athletic attainment: from the semi-professional athletes who travel the Highland Games circuit, through north of England fell-runners and talented amateur runners to hardy (or possibly fool-hardy) locals and tourists with no pretensions towards fleetness of foot across country who simply want to be able to say that they took part. It is the participation of that last group that gives the Hill Race its special flavour but I must confess that as I waited at flagside for the stragglers to pass I probably felt more resentment against them for having prolonged my exile in the middle of nowhere than admiration for their sporting determination to complete the course!

From my elevated vantage point I could track the progress of the competitors as they made their perilous descent from the games field on the Lump, snaked around the shore at Fisherfield, sometimes thigh deep in glutinous mud if the tide was out, and then forged through crofts and gardens of Viewfield into the woods of Viewfield House. They then for a short period, disappeared from sight during which time a number of barbed wire fences, pigsties and other more or less natural hazards required to be surmounted before they emerged onto the hill,

by now well strung out, to face up to the rigours of the final lung-bursting ascent to the flag. Having collected their tickets the runners turned and set off down the heather-clad slope in a headlong, freewheeling plunge back to the games field and a hero's welcome from the crowd, which in the best traditions of the Skye Games, would be extended even to those competitors who struggled back an hour in arrears of the victor!