

The Isle of Skye Highland Games History of the Skye Games

By ROGER HUTCHINSON

The first ever Skye Games were held on the dry, bright Thursday of 6 September 1877. A weather pattern was established on this auspicious day, which would continue (with one or two rule-proving exceptions!) for over a century, on the Wednesday before the Games it rained incessantly, but the day of the Games dawned clear and bright, and perfect sunshine illuminated the spectacle from dawn to dusk.

The Skye Games were established by the great and good of the island in this heyday of high Victorian confidence. For many years the Skye Gathering Ball in Portree had been an essential part of the Highland country house itinerary, a couple of sleepless nights of reels and kilts and sparkling gowns, enjoyed by those who retired afterwards to the lodges and stately homes of Skye: those same buildings which now, in their later incarnation as hotels, still bed and board the visitors to the Gathering and the Games.

In the summer of 1877 a meeting took place of elevated persons. Lord Macdonald of the Isles and MacLeod of MacLeod buried past differences; Captain Macdonald of Waternish, Mr Macdonald of Skeabost, Mr Robertson of Greshornish, Mr Lachlan MacKinnon of Duisdale, Mr Stewart of Duntulm, Mr MacDonald of Tormore, and brothers Alexander Macdonald and Harry Macdonald, both of Portree, all assembled and formed a committee with the expressed purpose of giving Skye an annual Highland Games to match those of Inverness and Oban.

Of this assembly, it was Harry Macdonald of Viewfield in Portree whose family would become most associated with the Games. Harry Macdonald had spent his working life in the tea plantations of India, but he had always retained the exile's love of the song, dance and language of his homeland. A huge man who had a bath especially made to accommodate his great bulk, Harry Macdonald and the Skye Games became synonymous.

Subscriptions were invited towards a prize fund, which quickly raised the astonishing sum of £180, over £9000 in the value of the late 1990s. This enabled handsome inducements to be offered to southern and east coast athletes and pipers. Ten guineas, or over £550 in 1998,

was offered as the first prize for the piobaireachd, and a total of £25 11s 6d (£1300) was divided between the different athletics events. The tug of war alone was allocated £10 (£500).

In the event, the number of entries from local men was disappointingly small, partly due to the novelty of the occasion, and partly thanks to the fact that September was a key month in the east coast fishings, which annually drew away a large number of Skyemen.

But the first Skye Games were patronised by a gratifyingly large number of the Scottish select. The gallery in front of the arena at the Home Farm was filled with a bustle of silk, lace and fur from all over the north-west and the islands, and from as far afield as Edinburgh and the Indian hill stations of the Raj. And the rope around the proscenium was crowded by 3000 of the ordinary folk.

It was a matter of some pride to the organising committee that they managed to attract to these inaugural games the great all-round athlete from Stonehaven, Donald Dinnie. Dinnie duly walked off with the light hammer, heavy stone and light stone prize money, but won the foot race only after an extraordinary dispute. In the first run he was well beaten by the excise officer in Portree, M Macaulay. But Dinnie protested that his rival had overtaken him unfairly on an early corner. The committee, doubtless anxious to pacify the Stonehaven star, ordered the race to be run again. Macaulay refused to do so, and Dinnie took the prize of £2 (£100). Macaulay satisfied himself by taking revenge in the high jump, which he won by a good two inches over Dinnie. Donald Dinnie walked away from the first Skye Games with a total haul of £11 19s 6d (£600); Macaulay the exciseman took one guinea, and a lot of satisfaction.

CHAMPION ATHLETES, 1881.

DONALD DINNIE & GEORGE DAVIDSON,
CHAMPION HEAVY-WEIGHT ATHLETES
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OPEN FOR ENGAGEMENTS

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Athletic Sports or Out-Door Entertainments,

THROWING THE HAMMER;
PUTTING THE STONE;
TOSSING THE CABER;
SCOTCH WRESTLING;
LEAPING, &c.

AT

Theatres, Concert Halls, Circuses, &c.,

PERFORMING WITH THE HEAVIEST DUMB-
BELLS IN THE WORLD;
STEEL BAR;
HALF-CWTS;
SCOTCH WRESTLING, &c., &c.

DONALD DINNIE has won over 5000 Money Prizes,
and over 100 Champion Medals, Cups, &c.!!!

G. DAVIDSON has won 1000 Money Prizes, and 25
Champion Medals for Athletic Feats!

These Champion Athletes are now open to MATCH ANY
MAN IN THE WORLD a General Athletic Supremacy for £500
a-side!

Donald Dinnie poster

Dinnie had one other opponent of note in these inaugural Games. Harry Macdonald, the cornerstone of the organising committee, took on the distinguished visitor in the heavy events in order to provide some local competition, and set an example to his fellow islanders. He did not

defeat Dinnie in open competition, of course, but Macdonald did have the satisfaction of winning three local heavy events.

Two days of bad weather before the Games on the following year, 1878, reduced the crowd, but once again the day itself dawned bright and sunny. Donald Dinnie had returned, although this time he was challenged by another east coast luminary of the circuit, George Davidson of Aberdeen, and the two men neatly divided the heavy events between them. The tug of war on this occasion attracted particular interest, as the men of Raasay had challenged the whole of Skye, and to enormous applause, the ten men of Raasay won on the first two pulls.

By the Games day of 1879 the regatta which had been a part of the event since its inception was attracting boats from all the airts, and Portree harbour became a vivid display of bunting. In the evening all of the vessels lit up, and a firework display soared through the darkening sky. The yacht of Mr Herbert Wood of Raasay was prominent among the prizewinners.



Skye Games Regatta

Steamers into Portree from Oban and from the mainland rail head at Strome were busier than ever in the first week of September 1880. The attendance at the Games was higher than ever before: proof positive that the occasion had established itself as a key part of the Highland summer itinerary. The local entries from Skye and its neighbouring

regions were also up, leading the organisers to hope that shortly "the Skye Gathering may be expected to show excellent results in manly exercise, without any outside professionals". Indeed, John Ross of Portree won the open long jump, George Dickson of Portree the high jump, and John Maclean of Stenscholl the Highland Fling. Particular attention was paid to "a patched, ragged, barefoot boy from Breakish near Broadford" named Alexander Robertson, who danced so well that he was told to go round with his cap, and thereby "had perhaps the best prize of the day".

The year of 1882 saw a rare spell of bad weather afflict the Gathering, reducing the attendance. Those that did turn up, however, enjoyed a feast of celebrity piping. The Skye games were illuminated by the presence of Donald MacKay, piper to the Prince of Wales, and Donald MacRae, piper to Sir Edward Scott, the Harris laird.

By 1883 things were properly back on course, with a three-week bout of rain magically clearing on the day of the Games. Shortly before noon on Wednesday 29 August the committee, the judges and the competitors assembled in front of the Royal Hotel, from there they were marched by the pipe band to the arena.

By 1883 all of the competitors were from Skye and the rest of the Scottish Gaidhealtachd. The initial enthusiasm for attracting outside stars, and of those stars for travelling great distances to attend, had reduced, possibly in line with the prize money, which had effectively halved since 1877. In 1883 most first prizes were a simple one pound note, fully £50 in the late 20th century, but not enough to attract Dinnie and Davidson and their like from the east coast. So Ross and Dickson were left to keep the jumping honours in Portree, and the purser of the MacBraynes Strome-to-Portree steamer Clydesdale, Kenny MacAskill, won the new-fangled pole-vault by going over at a height of 8' 4".

On the following year, 1884, the regatta races for gigs were both won by the Raasay crew of that island's laird, Henry Wood. The Skye Games were an unashamedly patrician event. As well as the immediate local gentry, the MacDonalds, MacLeods and Woods, the Dunmores of Harris, Grants of Rothiemurchus, the Willoughbys of Applecross, the Murrays of Lochcarron and such of their ilk were to be seen annually promenading before the stand.

In 1885 the late-August weather so surpassed itself that two

spectators fainted in the close heat of the arena, holding up events for some time. When things restarted the event of the day turned out to be the hurdle race, which was dominated from the gun by Portree's Murdo Murchison, until the closing yards, when Angus MacRae from Raasay put on a thrilling burst and took the five shillings prize at the tape.

It was noted by the middle of the 1880s that the regatta which followed the Games were becoming possibly a bigger draw than the athletics events. Admission was charged for entry to Portree pier for a vantage point of the boat races in which the gig attached to Henry Wood's yacht Rona, with its Raasay crew, was invariably a strong contender.

The year 1886 saw both depressing weather and the worst attendance thus far, a small crowd, which trickled away and grew smaller as the afternoon wore on. It was noted that the number of visitors held up well: the absence was in local people both attending and competing in the events. It is impossible to divorce the Skye Games from the rest of ordinary life on Skye: the 1880s were a time of great unrest and land rebellion, and in the summer of 1886 sheriffs-officers were despatched to Skye to claim rents with-held by strike action. It is likely that many crofters had things on their mind other than watching Lord and Lady Macdonald stroll before the stand.

But peace returned to the island. The attendance, and the weather, quickly revived. By 1887 substantial prize money was once more being offered by the committee. The MacBraynes purser Kenny MacAskill dominated the games, with Kenneth Macdonald of Rodel in Harris narrowly taking the main piping award from the late Henry Wood's (he had recently died) piper on Raasay, Angus MacRae. MacRae compensated by lifting two dancing awards; and Angus Michie of Achnashellach was the star of the heavy events, going back to Wester Ross with all three prizes.

Heavy rain for once disrupted the occasion in 1888, but the reasonable attendance was rewarded with one great innovation. The "keepers, shepherds and ghillies" race was originally intended as a three-mile hill contest between practitioners of just those trades. So few keepers, ghillies or shepherds came forward, however, that the race was thrown open. Twelve men then entered to race the three miles from the ground to half way up Fingal's Seat and back again. Roddy Morrison of Ardlair was first to re-enter the arena, but he unfortunately slipped and allowed Murdo Nicolson of Glenmore to overtake him at the last. Nicolson reached the finishing line in front, and then collapsed with

exhaustion. He was rewarded with a prize of £4, over £200 a century later.

But the star of the 1888 Games was another local man, a young Portree athlete named Billy Ross, who won the long jump, the heavy hammer, light hammer, 300 yards race and obstacle race, and, naturally, the new silver cup which was put up by Mr Macdonald of the Portree Hotel for the best all-round athlete of the day award.

The following year, 1889, saw two items of considerable interest. Both Morrison and Nicolson re-entered the hill race, and this time Morrison made no mistake, beating Nicolson to the finish and gaining his revenge. And it was noted that the champion in the light hammer, heavy stone and light stone events was a divinity student at Edinburgh University who originally hailed from Sleat. His name was Malcolm MacInnes, and he was the brother of that redoubtable radical Myles MacInnes of the Highland Land League.

In 1891 the rain was so untypically torrential that it seemed briefly as if the Games would have to be postponed. By the time everybody gathered before the Royal Hotel at noon the arena closely resembled the surface of Portree Bay itself. But the events went ahead, and by early afternoon the Skye weather asserted its fickle nature by clearing up sufficiently for the large attendance to enjoy watching John McColl of Oban dominate the piping events. The hill race was clouded in some controversy, however. As Roddy Morrison has won the event for the past two years (and been many people's moral victor the year before that, when he had slipped in sight of the finish), the Ardlair man was lumbered with a three minute handicap, with the result that he finished third, behind a MacKinnon from Crossal and a Macleod from Miodle. Morrison gained scant compensation by winning the Potato Race.

In the spring of 1892 the Skye Gathering committee bought a piece of ground on top of a Portree landmark known locally as 'The Lump' or 'Fancy Hill'. This was, reported the Inverness Courier, "a picturesque site, and commands a fine view of the harbour; indeed, not only a fine view but a commanding view, for a gun could be placed upon it so as to defeat half-a-dozen of the finest ships of any navy."

In the August of 1892 it was considered, however, that the new site on the Lump was too far from Portree village centre to be suitable for the Games, and so they returned for the moment to their old stomping ground on the Home Farm. Many familiar names were there to be seen:

the purser Kenny MacAskill winning the heavy hammer; Billy Ross winning the long jump and potato race, and Murdo Michie of Portree swept the board in the heavy events.

In 1893 the committee drew a deep breath and moved the Skye Games once and for all up to the Lump. Part of the rock surface of this natural elevated amphitheatre had been blasted away to create a small but perfect bowl on the acropolis above Portree Bay. The playing area was large enough, however, to cater for the stoutest hammer-thrower, and to accommodate a decent track race; and the surrounding slopes would hold up to 5000 people. What was more important: it was a permanent home; a symbol of the Games' guaranteed future and place in island life. No more were the Skye Games temporary tenants. They were stake-holding property-owners. They were here to stay.

And they were rewarded, in 1893, with hideous weather. The rain poured down pitilessly throughout the afternoon of Wednesday 30 August. It did not prevent Billy Ross from once more making his mark in the field events, nor did it stop one interesting new contest from going ahead. The Skye Games committee was nothing if not receptive to innovation: in 1893 it marked the new craze of bicycling by holding a five-mile road race, which was won by Murdo Nicolson.

The sun did not exactly shine a year later, but at least the rain restricted itself to a light drizzle: a bit of Highland mist for which all were duly grateful. Peter MacKinnon won the hill race (which now ran up past the village to the back of Viewfield House) and the mile race, but most field honours yet again fell to Billy Ross.

The early 1890s were not happy years for weather at the Skye Games. It was reported that the climate on Thursday 29 August 1895 was the worst ever for the Gathering. Competitions went ahead on the Lump in the face of blinding showers and in the teeth of howling winds. When the day began it seemed incredible that the full itinerary would be accomplished, but accomplished it was. Pipers, dancers and athletes were, it was widely concluded, little short of heroic. And as for the spectators . . . it could only be assumed that they were simply literally stuck to the hillside.

If 1895 was the climactic nadir of the Games, 1896, with Highland inevitability, proved the exact opposite. Never in their 20-year history had they enjoyed such a blissful day. The sun scorched down with Mediterranean intensity; the large crowd baked in the bowl; and the

events lived up to the conditions.

One or two east coasters were drifting back west, and two Aberdonians, George Johnstone and George Merchant, made rich pickings on track and field. Local men Billy Ross and Peter MacKinnon held their own in a couple of the races and jumps, however, and the crowd's patriotism was most fully roused by the hill race. There two outsiders, D Ross of Kincardine and James Craig of Inverness, were strongly tipped. So the loudest roar of the day was reserved for the sight of Peter MacKinnon storming towards the finishing line ahead of his two mainland opponents.

By the 20th anniversary Games in 1897 the event was a solid fixture. The bay filled up with visiting yachts; tourists streamed into Portree; the steamers were packed with returning exiles. And once more the glasses rose both in the bars and in the meteorological centres: the sun shone and a zephyr blew in from the west. The prize money was somewhat down, but a fair sprinkling of visiting competitors nonetheless turned up, although once more that popular old favourite Peter MacKinnon took the hill race.

Tug of war had been the closing highlight of the Games since their beginning, and in 1898 a fascinating spectacle was observed. A team of married men took on the bachelors, and the married men won. This successful outfit was not only blissfully matched in matrimony, it also included some of the most prominent figures of the Skye Games. Led by the inspirational figure of Harry Macdonald, Lord Dunmore, John Macdonald of Portree House, the Hon Mr Willoughby of Applecross House and several others pulled their way to victory.



Tug of war

By August 1899 the Boer War was about to erupt; a conflict which would as ever involve a disproportionate number of Skymen. The Portree Volunteer Company, readying themselves at home, exercised their martial valour in the tug of war contest, and to everybody's great satisfaction, won the event.

The war in South Africa caused the cancellation of three years of Games at the turn of the century, but in 1903 the Games were resumed on the same day as the inaugural cattle show held by the newly-formed Skye Agricultural Society. This naturally resulted in an even greater attendance from the mainland and from outlying regions of Skye than ever before, although the weather was unkind both to kine and to athlete alike.

In 1904 it was observed that the number of local entries was once more reduced, possibly owing to the hiatus in the Games caused by the Boer War. A visitor from Fort William, the brilliant all-round athlete Charles Maclean, dominated track and field, however, taking three of the heavy event first places, and winning all three of the jumping contests, the long, the high, and the pole.

Maclean returned in the following year, but he found thinner pickings due to the presence in 1905 of the Glaswegian John MacKenzie, who walked off with four first places, leaving Maclean a mere five trophies.

The year 1906 was notable for two particular features. That summer a flotilla of torpedo boats from Portsmouth dropped anchor in Portree Bay, and their crews put up for teams into the tug of war. And Donald Dinnie, the Stonehaven athlete whose presence had so elevated the first years of the Games, and who had helped more than anybody from outside the district to get them underway, returned as an honoured guest, and served as a judge in the athletics events.

Twelve months later the 1907 Games would long be remembered for a superhuman tussle in the heavy events. Charles Maclean was joined by his fellow from Lochaber, A A Cameron. Maclean proved his superiority in the jumping competitions, but Cameron edged him out of the heavy trophies. Following a particularly keenly-fought contest in throwing the 15 lb ball, Cameron triumphed by a mere half-an-inch in 45 feet 6 inches. The judges then offered each athlete an extra throw, upon which Maclean improved his distance by 17 1/2 inches, and Cameron by only 14 inches. But the judges ruled that Maclean had fouled; he was

relegated to second place; and Cameron triumphed after all. Billy Ross once more won the piping marches trophy, and added to it the Strathspey and Reel.

In the summer of 1908 brilliant weather saw Portree's hotels full to overflowing by the time the Games day came around. The occasion was marked by the distinguished presence of the greatest surviving Victorian general, the 75-year-old Viscount Garnet Wolseley, who was visiting Sir Donald Currie on Scalpay. Another hardly less distinguished septuagenarian, the 71-year-old Donald Dinnie was also once again present, wearing his champion's belt, acting as referee, and throwing up a challenge to any man ten years younger than himself to compete in an all-round contest! Nobody accepted his offer. William Ross, a Pipe-Major of the Scots Guards, took the Dunmore star for pibroch, but his fellow Pipe-Major, John Macdonald of Inverness, dominated the other piping awards.

In the absence of A A Cameron, who had become a world champion since his first appearance in Portree, heavy events at the 1909 Games were all taken by John MacKenzie of Partick. In 1911, for the first time disaster struck, the weather was so atrocious that the Skye Games were rained off. The morning had started well enough, but in early afternoon a wind got up which shortly achieved the force of a hurricane, carrying with it torrential rain. The piping competitions were moved indoors, but it was impossible to proceed with any outdoor contests up on the exposed amphitheatre of the Lump.

A year later, in order to encourage local participation, the 1912 track and field events were restricted to locals and residents of the district. This resulted in a broad spread of native success, with D Macdonald of Raasay having a particularly profitable afternoon. But this new regime was not tested for long. Within 24 months the clouds of war had once again reached over the Highlands. The First World War commenced, and the Skye Games went into abeyance for five long years.

Few regions of Great Britain suffered more from the 20th century's two global conflicts than the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Skye lost some of its finest sons in the Great War. All were deeply mourned, and all would be remembered with pride and dignity. Early in June 1915 the news reached Portree that among their Highland dead at the battle of Festubert (see page 72) on the Western Front had been one Company-Sergeant Major William Ross of the Cameron Highlanders, for 37 years a soldier, and a much-loved stalwart of the Skye Games. Ross died in

circumstances of great courage, having taken a German trench. His loss symbolised much that was lost in that conflict, and which would never be recovered.

It was fitting, then, that when the Games resumed they were held under the auspices of the Comrades of the Great War. The procession led by pipers from the Royal Hotel to the Lump in the late August of 1920 was a quiet and thoughtful parade. The peacetime Games were greeted by a large crowd and record takings, and a fine display of open athletics, dancing and piping. To some there were certainly poignant absentees in certain competitions. But life, and the Games, must go on. There was also a great familial continuity in these post-war Games: they saw the introduction to the executive of Harry MacDonald's son, Jock. Colonel Jock MacDonald would become as closely linked with this annual event, and as greatly loved a local figure, as his father.

The 20 years between the wars were a time of subtle change in society and also, necessarily, in the Skye Games. The committee came to be representative gradually less of the Highland aristocracy and more of the district's professional classes. Some would later regret the passing of the years of the great private yachts strewn with bunting which had filled Portree Bay, of the glamour and the flashing jewels of the maion stand, of the titled dignitaries who paraded possessively around the field. They were not in the 1920s all gone: the yachts still put in; the local lords and ladies and their invited guests still filled the Gathering Hall on the nights of the Skye Ball; still danced until dawn; but there were changes, slow and steady changes.

The year 1926 attracted a record attendance at the Games to see Colin Murchison of Bernisdale win the quarter-mile race and finish second in the hill race, and Donald Matheson of Portree triumph in the long jump.

The 50th anniversary Games took place over the two days of 24 and 25 August 1927, in perfect weather and before another large crowd, so large that many visitors were unable to find accommodation and had to sleep overnight in their motorcars. "On every side," wrote one witness to the occasion, "the view on such a day beggars description. The great Coolins loomed up in the south, Storr Rock in the north, while in the east the mainland hills of Ross-shire captured the eye. The Bay of Portree lay without a ripple at their feet. The grand stand was soon well occupied, and presented an animated sight of gay colour." The all-rounder Hector MacGregor of Spean Bridge won most of the track and field events, but Donald Matheson was still able to shine in the long

jump, and the Murchisons of Bernisdale were again well represented, with Colin this time winning the hill race.

Those motorcars which had provided temporary sleeping accommodation in 1927 were part of a phenomenon which was changing the face of tourism to the Highlands, and with it the Skye Games. The increased mobility that the car brought to ordinary people meant that increasingly visitors to Skye were not entirely the guests of the big houses, but were paying customers of the burgeoning hotel and bed-and-breakfast trade, and returned exiles from the south. Not everybody travelled by motorcar, of course, even if they could. The talk of the 1928 Games was the three-masted schooner Sunbeam which dropped anchor in Portree Bay, the property of the proprietor of Eigg, Walter Runciman MP. Not all of the big boats had gone with the passing of the Victorian era.

Hector MacGregor triumphed again in 1929, winning the award for the best all-round local athlete thanks to outstanding performances in the heavy events and the high jump. But Donald Matheson and Colin Murchison battled out the 300 yards race (Matheson won), and another Bernisdale man, Donald Beaton, came in first of the field after a thrilling hill race.

The 1930 Games took place in the same week as the final evacuation, much further west, of St Kilda. In that year and in years to come, Runciman's Sunbeam would be joined in Portree Bay by another vessel, another sign of the changing times, the cruise liner Killarney which put into the village on its way north, after its passengers had enjoyed an annual game of cricket against the villagers of Kyle of Lochalsh on the nearby mainland.

In 1932 a never-to-be-forgotten feature was enjoyed by the Skye Games, and yet another harbinger of 20th century change. The seaplane Cloud of Iona, the property of British Flying Boats Ltd, piloted by Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton, landed in the bay. All day long, at regular intervals she took off with eight passengers at a time, either for a few minutes' flying experience around the bay, or for longer trips to Kyle, Stornoway, and even St Kilda. Throughout the day of the Games long queues formed at the pier of people waiting to be taken by motor boat out to the seaplane and to that extraordinary joyride.

Those who stayed on the ground enjoyed a memorable exhibition by visiting heavy athletes led by Glasgow's G E Mitchell and the Andersons

of Dundee, whose presence forced the local favourite Hector MacGregor back into an honourable second and third place in most events.

The following year saw the return of the star attractions Cloud of Iona and the Dundee Andersons, although bad weather kept the former in the water all day, leaving the field to the latter, who duly went ahead and dominated the heavy events. The bad weather which grounded the seaplane also redirected the piping and dancing events indoors to the Drill Hall.

The years of the visiting Andersons stretched through the 1930s, and were only ended, like the golden Edwardian era of Cameron and Maclean, by war. In 1939 the Skye Games once more went into storage while the world erupted, and the young men of Skye once again left their crofts to fight and to die for their country.

They resumed once more, of course, and as the 1940s turned into the 1950s the Skye Games entered their modern era. In 1950 a downpour combined with the high tide put the river in spate, meaning that the hill-runners had to swim it to complete their course. And on the Friday after the Games the Kyle to Kyleakin car ferries, all three of them, vessels which had been undreamt of when the Games were first mooted back in 1877, broke down, stranding hundreds of Games-goers on the Skye side of the Kyle of Lochalsh. Once again, tourists and returning exiles found themselves sleeping in their vehicles.

In 1951 the Games returned to normal: a wet spell dried up just in time for Billy MacKinnon of Portree, grandson of the popular local athlete of the 1890s, Billy Ross, to receive the best local athlete award from Mrs Iona Maclean, under the benevolent eye of committee president Major-General Harry Macdonald.

It was noted in 1952 that only once in the past 31 years had Games Day been marred by serious bad weather, and that year saw a fine, bright, breezy day dawn over the Lump. A larger than usual group of heavy athletes from over the water arrived in Skye that summer, setting a precedent which would be sustained until the century's end. There were J Hunter from Dunecht, G Clarke of Grange, Ed Anderson of Dundee, J MacLellan of Kildary, the Scott brothers from Inchmurrain and L K Stewart from Corpach. J S Scott set a Games high jump record when he cleared the bar, for the first time in Portree, at over six feet. But most cheers were reserved for the schoolboy Kenneth Macdonald of

Skinidin, whose victories in the 300 yards and mile races won him the Robertson Memorial Cup for best local athlete.

The committee had, in 1952, gloated too soon over the weather. It turned in 1953, almost (but not quite) washing out competition. As ever the pipers and dancers retired indoors, and all prizes were presented by Dame Flora MacLeod of MacLeod in the Drill Hall, but up on the Lump the athletes battled on in dismal conditions, where a vintage display from the returning mainland heavies lightened the spectators' load.

Archie Fraser of Staffin was the best local athlete in 1954. Portree's Ronny Macdonald won the quarter-mile race against strong mainland opposition, but the hill race went to a Gairloch runner: M Fraser. His Staffin namesake Archie went on to complete a hat-trick of best-of-the-games awards in 1955 and 1956

In 1959 the number of visiting heavies was reduced slightly, but George Clarke was there, happening to remark that he had first competed 36 years ago on that very day. Clarke celebrated his anniversary by winning the heavy stone and the hammer competitions. The MacBrayne Centenary Challenge Cup for young dancers, that essential ingredient of the occasion since its inception, was shared between no fewer than three girls, all on the same points: Jean Nicolson, Murdina Jagger and Joan MacPherson. Lachie Lamont of Kilmuir went home with the best local athlete award.



Throwing Heavy Hammer

At the dawn of the swinging sixties on Skye, the Games of 1960 saw the Scots Guards give a display of drill and sentry duty as performed before Buckingham Palace. Immediately afterwards William Anderson of Bucksburn broke the ground record by throwing the heavy hammer 112 feet 7 inches. The hill race was won by another visiting celebrity, John Grundy, who had recently finished second in the Land's End to John O'Groats walk, with yet another record of 18 minutes. Local stars included John MacLeod of Portree as the best athlete, and mile race winner Neil MacKinnon of Staffin.

The shape and character of the modern Games were falling into place. They would regularly be graced by a bevy of visiting heavy athletes from the Highland Games circuit; they would feature good young local athletes on the track; they would regularly be enlivened by well known names anxious to include the magical name of Skye in their athletic curriculum vitae; and they would be strong and busy in the areas of piping and dance. Those bills of fare would each rise and ebb as the years passed, they would require encouraging and, occasionally, reviving. They would comprise, as they always had, the backbone of the day of the Skye Games: the biggest event of its kind on the north-west coast of Scotland.

William Anderson returned in the following year and took four of the six heavy events. James Young received the Dunvegan Medal for Piobaireachd from Dame Flora Macleod after playing 'Macleod's Salute', and promptly jetted off to Los Angeles to publicise a motel chain. The newly formed Isle of Skye Pipe Band performed throughout the day, setting another precedent in the long history of the Skye Games.

In 1964 it was California's turn to come to Skye. A 14-year-old girl from Long Beach, Judy Burner, who had Scottish ancestry and whose mother was a dancing instructor, entered the dancing competitions. Judy won no prizes, however, as the contest was dominated by Elsie Erskine. William Steele of Carbost was awarded the best all-round local athlete trophy.

In the following year, 1965, the open dancing events were swollen by even more entrants from abroad: from Australia, Vancouver and Toronto. One of the Canadians, Vancouver's Beth Buchanan, won the highland Fling. And the other sports entries were increased by a number of Scouts troops holidaying in the island, it was all indicative of the rapid growth of tourism to Skye. Lachie Lamont of Kilmuir was all-conquering in the local heavy events, however, while Charlie Simpson of Watten dominated the visiting heavies.

Bill Anderson of Aberdeen made his impressive mark in 1966, with a clean sweep of all the heavy events; Lachie Lamont doing the same in the local heavy competitions. 1967 saw another record-breaking crowd in glorious weather. The new car park was jammed to capacity, all hotels, boarding houses and bed-and-breakfast venues reported being fully booked, and Portree's restaurants and cafes had hardly an empty table. The growing international flavour of the event was reflected by the presence as guest of honour of Murdo MacDonald, the Chieftain of the Los Angeles Highland Games, and by the presence in the Isle of Skye Pipe Band of John S Hynd of the Los Angeles Scottish Pipe Band. In the Highland dancing events Anne Bawden of Melbourne and Kevin Desreaux of New South Wales both collected medals.

A year later, in 1968, the Games were dominated by a gigantic tussle in the heavy events between Bill Anderson and Arthur Rowe of Yorkshire, a contest which was finally equally divided between the two men, who won no fewer than four events each.

Four years later, in 1972, the two supermen returned in the company of

the Australian champion Colin Mathieson, a native of Tighnabruaich who had emigrated. This titanic series of battles resulted in Rowe and Anderson edging Mathieson out of the trophies. The Games were also enlivened by a display from visiting pipers and wrestlers from Brittany, and Aileen Arnott from British Columbia took first place in the Highland Reels.

Bill Anderson was back 12 months later, to take seven firsts in the heavy events. And for the first time the supreme piping award went overseas, with Ed Neigh of Toronto triumphing after a tournament which continued until 3.00 am!

The centenary Games took place in brilliant sunshine before a record-breaking crowd (who paid an equally record-breaking total of £2,900 for entry) on Thursday 18 August 1977. It was a time for reflection and no little satisfaction. Colonel Jock Macdonald, the son of the Games's founder Harry Macdonald of Viewfield, said that his father would have been "very happy" to think that his innovation would last for 100 years.



Colonel Jock Macdonald

"The Games were smaller then," reflected Colonel Jock. "About three times as many people watch them now as did in those days." Harry Macdonald's son had become a noted judge of piping, and Colonel Jock also offered his wisdom on the pipers of the 1970s. "They are very good, especially the younger ones," he said. "There are probably more good pipers around than there were then. I have only one complaint. There is less individual style around now; no longer can you tell who is playing as soon as you hear them. Something of the Highland lilt has been lost, and I think the reason is that almost none of the pipers today can dance. Then they could all dance, and they all had the rhythm."

A perfect centenary Skye Games was rounded off beautifully for the organising secretary, Bruce MacGhie, who saw his son Iain sweep the

boards in the local piping events. The best all-round local athlete in this 100th year of the event was Portree's Davie MacLeod.

By 1980 the Games were bigger and better than ever. That year saw the formidable Bill Anderson return, as he would throughout the early '80s, to establish two local field and track records. And the local competition was continuing to impress, with Willie Cowie once more supreme in the jumping events and John MacKenzie in the heavies. With Davie MacLeod these two men split the local all-round athlete award an unprecedented three ways.

Anderson was back the following year to take every single one of the open heavy competitions. And by the middle of the 1980s a fresh generation of local athletes was making its mark. Willie MacRae of Portree and Donald 'Deb' Bradley of Staffin had by 1984 begun a tussle in the track events which would last for more than a decade, and which would see Bradley move afield to become a star on the national games circuit. Unusually, that year the Dunvegan Medal and the Clasp, which is open to previous winners of the Medal, were both won by the same piper, Sergeant Brian Donaldson of the Scots Guards.

By the end of the 1980s the Games committee was expressing concern about the reduced number of local entrants. But a revival in the tug of war on Skye, spearheaded by the formidable Tattiepickers unit, was shortly followed by other people in other areas of track and field. In 1993 the record for the local 56lb over-the-bar event, which had stood since Lachie Lamont's extraordinary field season of 1963, was broken by Stuart Jackson, and Jackson's height was itself capped four years later.

In an effort to increase the profile and capacity of local entrants still further, however, the Games committee began in the early 1990s to hold practice sessions for various track and field events in the month before the Games. Progress continued apace in the hands of a diligent and imaginative committee. "Shadow-tolling" was introduced to encourage local sportsmen, by matching their prize money with a donation to their shinty or soccer clubs. In the summer of 1997 the Lump was once again remodelled and landscaped, and as if in tribute to this work, "a great success", judged Games chieftain Sir Roddy Macdonald, "it meant that not only did it look better, but more people were able to stand and watch in comfort and safety", the 1997 Games saw four ground records broken under a perfect sky.

New stars of the field and the heavy events, characters such as Peterhead's Francis Brebner, would appear in Portree in August to take up the mantle of Donald Dinnie 120 years earlier. New young local athletes such as the prodigiously talented Hector Mackie would thrill the consistently large crowds in the junior foot races. Unknowns would materialise from out of the crowd, as did an Austrian spectator in 1994, to join in the hill race and take first prize.

The Skye Highland Games moved effortlessly towards its third millenium. An event which had been launched in the height of the Victorian era proved itself time and again to be capable of renewal and innovation. The most popular tradition in the island of Skye; an event which annually drew back exiled Highlanders; which attracted first-time visitors in their thousands; strode confidently in the direction of the 21st century. The ageless appeal of Highland music, dance and athletics, set in the most glorious surroundings in Europe, continued to exert its powerful, magnetic draw.