

SCOTLAND: HIGHLAND GAMES

by Ross Mulkern

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Every year a festival takes place in Scotland called the Highland Games. This is a sort of Scottish version of the Olympics, intended to celebrate Scottish culture. It's said the Highland Games originate from Ireland in 2000 BC and that they crossed the water to Scotland with the fourth and fifth century migrations of the Scots to Scotland.

The Braemar Gathering, held in September, is the biggest and most prestigious Highland Games event and enjoys the annual attendance of the Royal Family. Its origins are Royal too. The contests of strength – jumping, running, throwing and riding – were introduced by Malcolm Canmore in 1040 as a means of selecting the most able men for soldiers and couriers.

The games consist of three types of events. The first is music. Traditionally, the chiefs of different Scottish clans, or families, would have a competition to see which of their musicians was the best. The instruments used include violin, harp and, of course, the Scottish bagpipes. These days the air at any Highland Games event is filled by the piercing sound of bagpipers playing patriotic Scottish songs.

To go with the music, we naturally need dancing. Dancers wear full traditional dress, including the kilt, to perform energetic group dances collectively known as Ceilidh dances.

The reason the Highland Games are so famous, though, is for the so-called “heavy” events. These ancient athletic challenges show off the strength of the competitor and include throwing bags of hay, tug-o-war, in which two teams pull on the same rope to decide who is strongest, and the most famous event of all: the caber toss. A caber is a very long stick weighing about 79 kilograms. Competitors have to throw, or “toss” this stick in the air so that it rotates 180 degrees and lands on the other end. The closer the caber lands to a “12 o’clock” position, the better the throw.

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Today the games are very popular and events are also held outside of Scotland, for example in America and Australia where there are significant Scottish communities. However, the games were actually banned from 1746 following a rebellion in which the Scottish were unhappy with the king. New laws made traditional Scottish clothes, customs and gatherings illegal and was in force for almost 40 years. After the law was removed the Games started to come back to life. This process ended with the visit of king George IV to Scotland which was great promotion for Scottish culture. This event is commemorated to this day in two famous Edinburgh landmarks – George Street and George IV Bridge.

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