



Above, the River City Pipe Band of Portland performs during the Highland Games and Celtic Fair. Right, Paul Manson of Portland gets ready to heave the caber. Photos by Tatyana Sanders. Opposite page, Ryc Rienks of Baker City likes the freedom of motion a kilt provides. He wears a rabbit-fur sporran around his waist and a Sgian Dubh (black knife) strapped to his right leg. Photo by Debby Schoeningh.



Highland Games

Celtic pride and Scottish brawn are showcased at festival in John Day

By Debby Schoeningh

An old Scottish proverb says, “Twelve highlanders and a bagpipe make a rebellion.”

But they also can make a parade and toss a few trees in friendly competition if they participate in the Eastern Oregon Highland Games and Celtic Fair in John Day.

The air was thick with Scottish brogue and ancestral tartans September 15 as participants stepped back into history at the Grant County fairgrounds. Nearly 400 people gathered to celebrate their Celtic roots and to test their strength.

Many dressed in traditional kilts—bearing their clan colors—as they participated in the “heavy events,” which included the open stone throw (similar to the shot put), the Braemar 22-pound stone throw (shot put from a stationary position), the heavy- and light-weight throws for distance, the heavy and light hammer throws, and the caber toss.

The caber is a 100- to 160-pound log, 18 to 23 feet long that is tossed end over end.

The athletes balance the narrow end of the caber in their arms, run forward and then stop to heave the caber upward. The caber must spin

so the large end hits the ground.

A perfect throw will land at the 12 o’clock position in a direct line “away” from the athlete.

The hammer toss is similar to the Olympic event, with a metal ball attached to a wooden handle thrown for distance.

The Highland Games are derived from an era when Scots were forbidden to bear or train with that era’s traditional weapons, so they used other implements to improve their strength and stamina.

Historians believe the Olympic Games are directly descended from the ancient Scottish games and English track meets.

Kaelyne Mowel, a Highland Games athlete, says female competitors is a modern development.

Women began competing in the games in North America in the mid-1980s at a few games using the men's equipment.

Within a few years, women were allowed to compete with lighter equipment. The hammer for men weighs 16 pounds for the light category and 22 pounds for the heavy. For women, it weighs 12 and 16 pounds.

"When I started competing in 1996, there were still only a few women competing, and not all games had a women's division," Kaelyne says. "I would often be the only woman competing at smaller games. In the last five years, the women's division has really grown. Women have only recently started competing in Scotland. Historically, the games there have been for men only."

Stylish and Comfortable

Ryc Rienks of Baker City didn't participate in the heavy events. He was in John Day representing the Clan Stewart as a kilt-wearing astronomer, providing close-up views of the planets with his telescope.

Ryc was adopted into the Clan Stewart after wearing a kilt with friends in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to a Highlands chili event.

"I wore a tropical kilt, which is a little lighter for warmer climates, and thought it was such a great idea, I kept wearing it," he says.

Since then, Ryc has added the traditional tartan kilt to his wardrobe, which is made with 8 meters of wool fabric compared with the 2.7 meters of fabric needed to make a tropical kilt.

Ryc also sports a rabbit-fur sporran worn on a belt around the waist. He says it holds your valuables as



well as protects your valuables.

Ancient kilts required a sporran for decency's sake because the long draped cloth gapped open in front. Some historians believe the sporran also served as armor during combat for a vulnerable part of the body.

"Trousers are not built for gentlemen," says Ryc quite frankly. "Anyone who wears a kilt finds it to be much more comfortable."

Ryc says ancient kilts received their colors from vegetable dyes, which were somewhat muted in comparison to the vibrant colors available today. Each clan adopts its own colors.

The pleats on a kilt, Ryc says, add freedom of movement, but "anyone who wears a kilt should have to iron their own pleats."

Along with the traditional kilt, Ryc also wears a Prince Charlie jacket, which is shorter than the Americanized jacket. He says with a kilt and Prince Charlie jacket, you

have an ensemble suitable "for tea with the Queen."

Following Scottish tradition, Ryc often wears a Sgian Dubh, pronounced (Skeen' Doo), which translates to "black knife."

It traditionally was worn as a weapon hidden in the folds of the kilt, but now is usually worn inserted in the top of the right kilt hose.

"If you find something that brightens your day (like a kilt)," says Ryc, "then you should go with it. I like to wear a kilt as often as I can."

Clan Camaraderie

You don't have to be a member of a clan to participate in the Highland Games, but if you go to an event, before the day is over, don't be surprised if you have been adopted into one, especially if you wear a kilt.

Individual clans march in a parade and join in the Clan War Cry Rally. There is usually a friendly Clan rivalry going on with sheep stealing (in this case, the sheep are made of material and stuffing), whiskey napping and general hazing.

It's all in fun and usually ends with the sharing of food and drink.

Organizer Karin Barntish says they plan to make the John Day games and fair an annual event. The next one is scheduled for September 13. Baker City also is considering holding a Highland Games and Celtic Fair next year during the fourth weekend in August.

"The event gives an economic boost to the local community, and we hope to continue to grow in the years to come," Karin says. "Both clans and athletes commented that they like the smaller events—more relaxed and less intense than the larger events. Also, we host amateur games as opposed to the professional games. And they have said they like traveling to Eastern Oregon because of our slower pace, as well as the beauty of the area." ■