



Highland Games

Highland Games, which take place from Cowal to Tomintoul and all points in between, are a unique mix of sports, culture and community. They usually comprise a programme of field and track events, piping and Highland dancing competitions and 'heavy events' like the tug-o-war, the hammer throw, the shot put and tossing the caber. Highland Games are as iconically Scottish as bagpipes, kilts and whisky — all of which feature heavily at any gathering.

Kilt



Bagpipes

Highland Games history

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 Scotti into Dalriada (Argyll) and beyond.

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.

Over time the Games grew in number and popularity but suffered a mortal blow with the Act of Proscription in 1746 following the crushing of the Jacobite Rebellion. The act outlawed Scottish dress, customs and gatherings and was in force for almost 40 years. After its repeal the Games started to revive and the fortunes of the national customs were given a tremendous boost with the visit to Scotland in 1822 of George IV. This event is commemorated to this day in two famous Edinburgh landmarks — George Street and George IV Bridge.

Today, in addition to the Games all across Scotland itself, there are more than 200 annual games and gatherings across the US and Canada, with games also in New Zealand and Australia.

Most famous Highland Games traditions

Tossing the caber



The caber toss has come to almost symbolise the Highland games and no gathering anywhere in the world would be complete without it.

In the caber toss, a full length log, usually made of Scots pine, is stood upright and lifted by the competitor using both hands under the bottom of the caber to rest against their body. The competitor then runs forward, building momentum, before tossing the caber into the air so that it turns end over end with the upper end landing before the end originally held by the competitor follows through and hits the ground.

The aim is for the caber to land in line with the original run. If it is straight the toss is said to be in the 12 o'clock position. Competitors are judged on how closely their toss lands to 12 o'clock.

Hammer throw

The hammer throwing event features a hammer made from a metal ball weighing around 22 lb for men or 16 lb for women, attached to a wooden pole or handle.

Participants use the handle to whirl the hammer around their head and then throw it as far as they can.



Shot put

The shot put is a favourite at all good Highland Games. Competitors throw a large stone of around 20–26 lbs in weight as far as they can. The stone is thrown either after a short run-up to the toeboard or from a fixed standing position, depending on the rules of the competition. The contestant who throws the furthest wins.



Tug o'war



The tug o'war is one of the most fiercely fought over competitions at the Highland Games. This involves eight men pulling against another team of eight, coached by an additional member of the team who encourages the team and shouts instructions of technique to ensure they pull their opposite number across the line. Well worth a watch at any Highland Games.

Piping and Highland dancing

The Games, of course, are as much about music and dancing as they are about sports. Dancing, piping, fiddling, and playing the clarsach (Gaelic harp). There was a competitive element here too. The clan chieftains pitted their pipers against those of other clans and the prestige that came from success was considerable.



Dancing



Clarsach



Fiddling

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