

THOSE WERE THE GAMES !

Seeing the adverts for and the reports of Highland Games always gives me what I call "The Red Rum Syndrome".

Readers will recall how after he been retired from racing, the champion racehorse would be brought each year to the Grand National at Aintree. As soon as he came on to the racecourse his ears would prick up and his eyes would sparkle as if his brain was telling him, "I can do this again".

Like Red Rum my racing days are well in the past and although my ears may not prick up at the sight of a Highland Games event, my memory can at least re-run the days gone by.

My first experience of taking part in Highland Games came in 1954, when along with my brother and a school mate we entered for the schoolboys' relay as a Tiree team at Mull Highland Games.

As usual leaving Tiree was an early departure, but when we arrived in Tobermory there was already a crowd of people around the harbour. They were watching an escapologist being tied in chains and then put in a large canvas bag, which was closed with a large padlock.

For some reason a policeman was standing by, perhaps in case he failed to escape or the crowd became impatient and decided he should become part of the Tobermory treasure. Of course, this would- be Houdini escaped from his bonds – to the relief of all!

When the King George arrived from Oban loaded to the gunnels with the Pipe Band, competitors, and spectators we followed the Games Chieftain up the hill to Erray Park.

Unfortunately the third member of our team, Billy Whiteside, was needed at home, so we roped in a young lad, John MacNaughton, who was visiting his grandparents in Tiree and had entered for a chanter competition.

Although my brother and I had competed at the Argyll School championships on a couple of occasions, the track at Tobermory was a new experience, as uniquely, you ran round in a clockwise direction to bring you to the finish in front of the spectators sitting on the trackside banking.

We were beaten by a Keil School team consisting of Gordon Grant, Murray Gilfillan, and Pete Mason, but the chanter player won his competition, so didn't we return to Tiree empty handed.

However what was really memorable was seeing the other events, especially the performances of Tom and Jay Scott from Inchmurrin in Loch Lomond. Tom was a sprinter and jumper, but Jay was the complete all-rounder, moving between heavy and light events all afternoon – a complete Decathlon in one afternoon. Were it not for the strict amateur athletic rules of the time he would have represented Scotland, if not Britain, in major events such as the Empire Games(Commonwealth Games) and Olympics. All the "heavies" wore the mandatory kilts with the tartan noted in the Games programme, which also detailed all the events' records.

In those days there were no landing pads for high jumpers and pole-vaulters. You had to modify your style to deal with the situation and land safely on the grass. No mean feat to vault around 11 or 12 feet and land facing backwards so that you could turn your landing into a backward roll. In the High Jump some athletes used the Western Roll or Straddle style, but even those were not easy on grass landings. Pole-vaulters used a metal pole which had spikes on the end and they were stuck into the ground prior to take off, unlike the amateur method where you slid the end of the pole into a sloping, sunken box. The pole had no flexibility and was fairly heavy to carry – no fibre glass poles in these days.

We also saw adults taking part in a sack race, and another event called Maide Leisg (lazy stick) which involved two men sitting on the ground facing each other with the soles of their feet in contact. They grasped a piece of wood like a walking stick between them and each tried to pull his opponent onto his feet.

1955 saw us back again at Tobermory. This time as my brother and I were now both pupils at Keil we were part of a Keil team with Iain Wotherspoon from Campbeltown (one of Scotland's fastest schoolboy sprinters) the third member of the team. For our winning performance we were presented with small silver medals.

The highlight of the day was seeing Jay Scott set a new British Professional record of 6'3" in the high jump. His main rival that day was an American student, who found using one of the modern styles and landing on the grass a problem, while Jay was using his modified scissors style, which allowed him to land on his feet. This was an outstanding performance as the British amateur record stood at 6'7 1/2", created by an athlete using a Western Roll style, which it was said to add at least 6" to the height achieved using a Scissors style.

However there was a footnote to our relay victory.

On returning to school in the autumn we were told by the teacher in charge of athletics that he had been contacted by the Scottish Schools Athletic Association. It had come to their notice that Keil School boys were competing at Highland Games, which was against the strict rules governing amateur athletics. If the SSAA became aware of this in the future, the school would be banned from competing in school events.

At that point it would seem that my Highland Games career was over.

However in 1959, now a student at Glasgow University, I was working for the summer in an hotel just outside Fort William and on the day of the Fort William/Caol Games, I was given the afternoon off.

When I arrived at the King George V Park where the Games were being held I found that I would be competing against Jay Scott! I had met Jay and Tom when they had come down to Keil (where they had been pupils) to give us some coaching, but this was competition. Now being a member of an athletics club and representing the University in both athletics and football, I decided to adopt the old professional's dodge of using an assumed name. So for the afternoon I became Neil MacAlister.

My afternoon was successful as I won the long jump, beating Jay in the process. To be fair he was at the end of his career - with his knees wrapped in enough crepe bandage to moor the Claymore at Scarinish pier.

Later that evening as I was serving wine in the dining room the owner asked me to come into the bar (my other work station). As I did so I was greeted with laughter by Jay and his fellow Games heavyweight, Louis Stewart from Corpach, who were sitting at the bar. The reason for this was that when they had come into the bar the owner had said to Jay, "You're not much of an athlete. I've got a barman who can beat you".

That was the only time we competed against each other, but met socially on a couple of occasions.

Having graduated from University in 1961, and tired of running handi-cap sprints with few opportunities to compete in my favoured event – the long jump – I decided to join the Scottish Games Circuit - under my own name this time!

I began by competing at Cupar Games in the sprints (still handicaps) and in the jumps.

My first truly professional prize was a third place in the high jump which earned me seven shillings and sixpence .Probably less than the cost of a travelling clock which I had won at the famous Glasgow Rangers Sports a year earlier. It was clear that my new sporting career was not going to be a source of great wealth, but I enjoyed being able to take part in a number of events in the one afternoon.

At the Games on the East coast and Central Scotland there were bookies present and bets were placed on the running events. I had never thought of myself as a greyhound or horse until then, except once when playing football for Glasgow University, I heard a spectator call out to our opposition, "Get that greyhound".

At some Games there was cycle racing which on a wet grass track could sometimes be quite spectacular, especially in one event called "Deil tak the hin'most" where the last rider at the end of the lap had to drop out.

Another event which featured in some programmes was "Tilting the Bucket". For this there was a tall framework with a platform on which was fixed a pail filled with water. One competitor carrying a long pole sat in a wheelbarrow and was pushed by his fellow competitor. To be successful and not be soaked, the one with pole had to insert the point of the pole into a hole in the platform thus tipping the bucket to the front and pouring the water away from them both. Simple, but not easy!

When competing at one of these Games and not having qualified for the final of the 100 yards, I went up to watch the finish. There were two or three men there with stop watches and one of them said to me, "You're MacNeill from Glasgow, aren't you? What school are you in"?

Such was my innocence that I replied, "I haven't started teaching yet".

His response was to say, "I meant sprint training school, and without being in one you will not get anywhere." He was right of course, but I was enjoying myself. Twice I was asked to go on a special preparation for the famous Powderhall New Year Sprint, but I was now teaching, which would have made training time difficult. Perhaps I was

influenced by a friend who had been on one those “preps” many years before and had been made to eat lots of cabbage as this was meant to bulk you up – mass x momentum being considered important. A diet heavy in cabbage did not appeal, especially as my father had fed cabbage to a Suffolk ram once in the belief that it made its nose more prominent. While a large proboscis might have been an advantage in close finishes, I didn’t think my wife would have thought the same way!

In July 1961 I came to compete at the Games in Inverary for the first time, travelling there by bus and staying at the Youth Hostel. Arriving at the Winterton Park the next morning, I was asked by Andy Robin (of Hercules the bear fame), “Where were you last night? You should have camped here in the Castle grounds with us”. There was also mention of a special evening meal of fish they had had, but I am sure there was another story connected to that. *His camping companions* were the Bell brothers from Stirling, wrestlers and pole vaulters.

Having been on the Games circuit I had got to know a number of the regular competitors. Like the Bell brothers, Andy was an all-in wrestler, but sometimes he would compete in the high jump. His technique was to take off from both feet and dive head first over the bar- not the Fosbury Flop, more a Robin Dive. The normal rules stipulated that you had to take off from one foot, but Andy was a friendly guy, short in stature for a high jumper, and anyway who in their right mind would argue with an all-in wrestler.

My Argyllshire background allowed me to take part in the Local events and I ended up winning the trophy for the most successful athlete in the light events, being presented with the trophy by the Duke. I also won some prizes in the open events, so I went home with rather more than seven and six. However it had been quite a tiring day as between the Local and Open sections I had competed in thirteen events.

The following day I was competing (with less success) at Luss.

The next day I came back to Tobermory for the Mull Games and another hectic programme of events. Here I was competing against Gordon Grant from Iona, alongside whom I had played in Keil’s first fifteen at rugby. Gordon was a former Scottish Schools half mile champion and no slouch at other events either.

While Gordon dominated the events from 440 yards to a mile, I collected enough points to win the Chieftain’s Cup. One slight blip in the day was that, while competing in the Open long jump, I beat the Local record that had stood for very long time. However I was told that it could not be counted as I would have had to have been beaten it during the Local event in the morning session. Every event has its rules, so it was fair enough.

The next event was the Lochearnhead Games on the Saturday, but having competed the previous Saturday at Airth I had now taken part in over thirty events and there was nothing left in my legs.

Because Oban Games were held on a Thursday I only managed to compete there twice; once while I was a student and the other when I had decided that the time had come to hang up my spikes, and concentrate on coaching sport instead. As I was now a Primary School Headteacher I gave myself the day off.

It was during my first year on the circuit that I managed to compete at Aboyne and Braemar as they were held on a Wednesday and Thursday. As I was living in Glasgow at the time it meant catching a train for Aberdeen at 3o'clock in the morning. All I remember about that journey was that even in September the train was very cold.

From Aberdeen I caught a bus to Aboyne for the start of the Games – hardly the ideal preparation for an athletic competition. Fortunately I gained a second place in the long jump and that paid for my train fare and B&B that night as the prize money at Aboyne was better than at many other Games. Uniquely at Aboyne there was a hurdles race, which I tried, but as the hurdles appeared to have been constructed from timber akin to fencing material, I was more concerned with self-preservation than winning anything.

The following day I made my way to what are probably Scotland's best known Highland Games – Braemar.

At one point during the afternoon everything came to a halt and the pipebands lined up to await the arrival of the Royal Family. All I can recall of this procedure is that a side drummer who, delayed by the call of nature or a visit to the beer tent (or both), had to sprint to get into position before the cars came.

While the Queen was there she presented some of the prizes, but although I won the long jump it did not qualify me for that honour, so it was just as well I hadn't spent time practising to bow. However my prize money of £10, the largest amount being awarded at that time for light events competitions, was a fair consolation. The disappointing thing about Braemar was that when the Royal Family left before the Games programme had been completed, the announcer appealed to the crowd to wait and see the rest of the events. Many people only came to Braemar to see the Royals and, once they had seen them, their interest disappeared like the limousines in the distance. While I was waiting to get a lift down to Perth with one of the "Heavies" I got chatting with Bill Carragher, who used to write for the Stornoway Gazette. He was going round asking officials what the Games' motto, which is in Gaelic, meant. To their embarrassment they did not know.

Another Highland Games event, which is famous because of its association with the Raising of the Standard for the 1745 Rising and begins each year with the singing of a Gaelic song, is Glenfinnan.

One year while I was Headteacher of Banavie Primary School, the indefatigable Games Secretary, Ronnie MacKellaig, allowed me to compete, although at that time the rules did not qualify me as a genuine "local".

While the Games might have been historic, at that time the actual field from a light events athlete's point of view, was not ideal with a ditch across it! Despite that I had an enjoyable, successful afternoon.

On another occasion Ronnie asked me to help officiate at the light events competitions. As the field was undergoing improvements the Games were held in a field in the Cameron-Head estate. The day turned out to be an absolute scorcher with the result that the beer tent ran out of the refreshing liquid. Apparently some tried to

quench their thirst by drinking greatly diluted whisky - prolonged action which might have had the same effect as imbibing sea water. However that may have been a "Whisky Galore" type story.

Over the years I got to know quite a number of my fellow athletes, as, like in any sport which revolves in a circuit, we were meeting up regularly during the summer months.

Apart from a few "heavies" who could compete in some of the "light" events, I knew most of the others by sight rather than through conversation. They were always paid larger prize money – no doubt on the basis that seeing large, kilted figures throwing things around had more spectator appeal.

Among those I got to know well was former Partick Thistle goalkeeper, John Freebairn. I had seen him many times at Firhill when, as a student, I had gone to watch fellow Tirisdeach, Johnny MacKenzie, playing for Thistle. Incidentally, the latter is the only fluent Gaelic speaker to have played for Scotland. John Freebairn often nearly caused Thistle fans to suffer heart attacks with his habit of coming well out of his goal area to make a clearance.

On one occasion at Inverary a young newcomer appeared on the scene in the long jump. At one point during the event my teacher's brain must have taken over and I pointed out something he could do to improve his performance. John came up to me and said quietly, "I don't mind you coaching, but don't do it during the actual competition". Later on John became a Scottish National coach for throwing events.

There was one major difference between long jumping rules at Highland Games and those applying in the amateur sport i.e. there was no take-off board.

The judges simply watched for the point on the grass where the athlete took off and the jump was measured from there. Usually there was one of the other competing athletes in close attendance- just to help with the accuracy!

Some Games allowed the term Triple Jump to mean not just hop, step and jump, but hop, hop and jump. The latter favoured those with a strong take off leg.

Another Partick Thistle player, who made a brief appearance, was centre forward, George Smith.

In the early sixties the heavy events were dominated by Bill Anderson, who re-wrote the record books in those events. Among those competing against him were Sandy Sutherland, Charlie Allan, who, like Bob Aitken, was also a good high jumper; and Henry Gray, who was so tall he actually looked slim, and Louis Stewart. Charlie liked to have a few attempts at the high jump in his kilt. For a couple of years I travelled to Games with Charlie, in the process teaching him a Gaelic song he could sing to his young daughter. Later he recorded some songs of Aberdeenshire.

On one occasion the Games commentator, ex-Provost of Dollar, Jimmy Millar, challenged Henry to throw the Weight-Over-the Bar at a certain height and, if successful, he would give him a bottle of whisky. "Give me the bottle first and I'll do it no bother," replied Henry.

In the sixties the former European shot-putt champion, Arthur Rowe, joined the Heavy Circuit. He was known as the Barnsley Blacksmith and using the amateur style of putting where you stood with your back to the trig, he began to wipe out the various records. Gradually he learned the skills of the Scotch Hammer and Caber, and was a formidable competitor.

Another world class athlete, who tried the Games experience was the great Gordon Pirie, but, as I recall, it was a brief appearance. Compared with even the cinder tracks of that era where you all start from the same line, running on a grass track which may only have been marked out for Games Day, and weaving your way through a queue of handicap runners, is a totally different experience.

Each year at Tobermory and Inverary I would meet up with and compete against the other Argyllshire athletes; the talented Gordon Grant from Iona; Angus MacNeill from Gigha, always a dogged competitor; from Liosmore, the long striding Archie MacGillivray with the stamina of a hill-shepherd; towards the end of the sixties a young man from Tobermory joined the Scottish Games circuit. He had the shortest and fastest sprinting strides to be seen at the Games or elsewhere, and with tremendous leg strength was a record breaker in both long and triple jump. Later on Kenny MacIntyre was to become a familiar figure as a reporter on BBC Scotland TV. Another local athlete, Charlie Kirkpatrick, from Iona, was to prove in later years to have fingers that moved even quicker across the accordion keys as a Scottish Dance Band leader, than he had been as an athlete.

At Luss there would be Stewart MacColl, and whose brother, John, competed as a Heavy Events athlete and was to be such a stalwart for the Kilbride Games.

Although suffering an injury is not what any athlete wants to happen, as it did to me one morning at the Mull Games, it gave me the opportunity to capture many of those mentioned in this account with my cine camera.

One year at Luss Games two Dutch students decided to have a go at wrestling. After the first bout, Andy Robin took them aside and explained that what he and the Bell brothers were doing was really a demonstration, and to avoid being hurt they had to follow their moves. That was the kind of person Andy was.

Although I never paid any attention to Games records, even on one occasion only learning that I had set a long jump record at Fort William, by reading a report that it had been broken later by someone else.

However I may still hold one record.

In the sixties, after winning the Open Sprint at Inverary, I was called over to the centre of the field by the Commentator, Jimmy Millar, who said, "I hear you won a medal for Gaelic singing fairly recently. Give us a song now." So rather like the Irish boxer, Rinty Monaghan, who used to sing in the ring after winning a fight, I duly obliged.

I haven't come across any other athlete who has done so.

In the sixties the amateur code as opposed to the professional code was still strictly guarded by the Amateur Athletic Association to the extent that after I turned

professional” and was training as I had done for the previous three years at the Glasgow University sports ground at Westerlands, the groundsman told me that he shouldn’t really allow me to continue training there.

On another occasion one of Scotland’s National Athletic coaches came along with one of his athletes to do a training session. As I had met him when he was a PT teacher in a school where I was student teacher, he invited me to join in the session. This was something that the AAA would have frowned upon, but it was the hardest training session I had ever experienced. It proved without doubt that if you really want to reach a high standard it takes a lot of very hard and painful effort. However I was enjoying my athletics as a hobby and therefore continued in my solo way.

Competing on the circuit meant different places and situations.

On one occasion warming up for the long jump, I ran up and jumped into the pit, only to find that the pit was just a length of tarpaulin covered with sand. My back suffered such a jar that by the time the Games were over for the day, I could only travel back to Glasgow kneeling and facing backwards on the passenger seat of my pal’s car.

Arriving one year at Fort William, I went to the Tourist Accommodation office to book a bed for the night as the Glasgow train would have left before the Games were over, only to find there were no single rooms available and no way would they allow me to book a double room even although I was willing to pay for it. So it was on to the Games field and forget about it for the afternoon. When the Games were over I returned to the Tourist Office in the hope that there may have been a cancellation. The answer was no, but there was another gentleman in a similar situation, who was willing to share a twin room in a house in Inverlochy. Isn’t there a phrase, “Needs must when the Devil drives” and another saying called “Hobson’s choice”, appropriate in the situation as my companion for the night was a Mr Hobson!

Although in years to come The Scottish Games Association had to deal with the question of performance enhancing substances, during my time the substance taken because it was thought it could help your energy level was glucose in tablet form. Perhaps it was more the thought than the actual effect, but as someone once said, “I don’t care if it’s a placebo, as long as it works”.

The other substance widely in use was a mixture of something called wintergreen mixed with olive oil which was rubbed on one’s muscles to make them supple. I only have to think about it and I imagine I can smell the inside of the small changing tent at the Mull Games!

In 1972 after 11 years on the circuit I decided to retire as coaching school sport, choral singing, and conducting a school choir at Mods did not allow enough time for training.

Some years later I took the opportunity to gain a qualification as a British Amateur Athletics Board Club Coach and add to the knowledge of the sport I had gained as a competitor.

So Oban Games saw me finish off what had been a very enjoyable past-time at a time when the Games were what people came to see and there were no stalls or sideshows.

Well, not quite.

For two years afterwards while at home on holiday in Tiree I competed at the Summer Sports Day organised by the Glasgow Tiree Association at Cornaigmore Secondary's playing field, winning two years in succession the Alistair Straker Trophy before finally hanging up my spikes.

It was appropriate to bring things to an end in this way, because it had all begun at Balemartine, thanks to Head Teacher, Miss MacDonald, and at Cornaigmore due to Head Teacher, Mr MacDougall. It was also appropriate that my last trophy win should be the Alistair Straker Trophy, as Alistair, like my brother, John, had been a great role model for a youngster showing an interest in athletics.

Alistair MaNeill.. North Berwick .. June 2017