

The Games We Played

In Balemartine Primary School in the 1940s and 50s we played football, rounders and the, now banned British Bulldog, which we knew as "Black Peter". The players, boys and girls, ran from the "safe haven" of the shelter shed which had been built onto the outside wall of what at that time was the P3 - P5 classroom, to the opposite boundary dyke. Once you touched this wall you were safe until you tried to run back into the shelter. The catcher's job was to stand half-way across and catch the players running towards him or her. When you were caught you became the catcher's helper. The last person caught became the new game's catcher. A game of football or rounders would be continued through each of the "playtimes" as we called the intervals or lunchtime. There were no proper football goals – stones on the ground marking where posts would normally stand.

There was no P.E. teachers then, but all the running we were doing kept us fit.

In the summer term the Head teacher (Head Mistress as ladies were called in that era) Miss MacDonald took her P6/7 along to the machair near the church to practice for the Sports to be held at Cornaigmore Secondary. It was from the Cornaigmore Championships that the Tiree team for the Argyll Schools' Championships was chosen. Here there was a long jump-pit with a take-off board sunk in the ground, so we adhered to official rules of jumping.

While football dominated our sport at Cornaigmore we also occasionally played a loosely organised form of shinty. As in Primary school there was no P.E. specialist.

My memory of this part of my school life does not contain what girls played during school intervals, so I hope someone who reads this will fill in the blank.

At home in Hynish when visiting children were there we would play Hide and Seek with the door of the Signal Tower as the base. To choose a catcher one method used was to arrange everyone standing in a line holding out their clenched fists. One person would stand in front of the line and tap each fist, counting as follows: one potato, two potato, three potato, four, five potato, six potato, seven potato more, you are het – meaning you are the catcher. This rhyme and method of selecting a catcher seems to have been used in many parts of Scotland. The catcher then turned his or her face to the door of the Tower and started to count to one hundred as the others ran to find a hiding place, which had to be within a limited area. Once you were sighted you could try to out-run the catcher back to the base, but if unsuccessful you had to help the catcher. The last person caught became the new catcher.

Football was played at home as at school. In Hynish we were fortunate to have the level ground in front of the houses between the wall surrounding the houses and the Tower, and my brother and I played there: sometimes at night when a full moon would act as "floodlighting"!

I can remember going to Balephuill with my brother, John (travelling on the crossbar of his bike), to watch him playing in a game there. As far as I recall it was a Balephuill against the other villages e.g. Balemartine, with jackets or stones for goals. There was at least one Locals v. Visitors played over at the Reef where there were proper goals – a left over set from wartime? I never played in any of these games – no doubt a victim of the often Scottish call of "You're too wee"! My friend, Billy Whiteside, who was a year older, played in the latter game, and remembers the ability of Tiree's Scottish Internationalist, John MacKenzie, playing for the visitors. I wonder what his manager at Partick Thistle would have said if he had learned that his star player was risking his shins in such a game.

Very often if had no one to play with I would kick the ball or take throw-ins against the of wall of the our house's outdoor sheds or run up and down the length of the outside of the front garden wall passing the ball against it and returning the rebound. During his two weeks holiday from Glasgow with his parents and staying with grandparents in the Lower Square, I would be joined by John MacNaughton. He was a fanatic like me so each day was filled with football activities, such as a one against one heading games on the paved square in front of the outdoor sheds using a rubber ball, or "three and in" on the grass area. We were both collectors of football cards and played a game called "face or a blank", in which you held a card in your hand and covered it with your other hand. The other player had to guess if the card's picture or side with information was facing upwards. A correct guess would gain you the card. Sometimes one would give some information from the player's biography written on the back of the card, and the other would have to name the player in order to win the card. If there had been a Mastermind for children in those days, I am confident that John and I would have scored very highly on our chosen subject!

In the comics Hotspur, Rover, Wizard and Adventure which my maternal grandmother sent to us from Glasgow there was an advert for a football game called Subuteo. Unfortunately we could not afford to buy a set, so I made my own primitive version by cutting players from my card collection and sticking them with flour paste to L-shaped pieces of card. Using a ball bearing as a ball I then played left finger against right finger on the table top. I was also a boxing fan (like most males in Tiree at the time) and played a similar type of games with cut out boxers. A modern child reading this would think I must have arrived from the planet Zog, where the alien people were more than strange. However I would argue that one's imagination was developed more by such pastimes than simply staring at a screen and manipulating your thumbs.

Another pastime was created by reading speedway magazines and seeing the pictures of the riders hurtling round the track. On the dry sand down at the harbour we marked out a track and then ran round it, leaning over as if we were the riders on their bikes going round the bends. No wonder we didn't suffer from obesity!

One summer John MacNaughton, his cousin and I made little boats which we sailed in the trickle of water coming into the Dry Dock from the Dam Park. Perhaps this was the Hynish equivalent of Christopher Robin's Poo Sticks.

During the summer two families from England came on holiday to Hynish House (Mary Ann and Walter Hume's home). They taught us to play cricket and we taught them how to fish from the rocks – what you might call a cultural exchange. During this period I won a cricket bat for writing in one of the comics mentioned earlier about the occasion I set a junior championship record in the high jump at the Argyll Schools Sports in Dunoon in 1953. In 1955 I was playing cricket at Keil Scholl so the introduction was useful.

My brother and I were keen athletes and were fortunate to be given a set of high jump stands, which we used with a rope as a bar. Three six inch nails were hammered into the end of what had been a bar in a set of wall bars from the RAF camp, and this became our pole vaulting pole as we tried to copy the athletes we had seen at Mull Highland Games. I learned to perform the long jump action known as the Hitch Kick by running and jumping off the top of sand dunes.

To celebrate the Queen's Coronation in 1953 Sports were held, and in the month of July each year, during what was known as the Glasgow Fair fortnight, the Glasgow Tiree Association organised a Sports Day at the Secondary School playing field. Prizes for events were in the form of money, which made us, unwittingly, "professionals" according to the extreme rules of

the Amateur Athletics Association, as I was to discover a few years hence. Fortunately no one from the Schools Athletics Association holidayed in Tiree in those days!

Although, like most of Scotland, not a lot was made of the Christmas season, we had the school Christmas parties at which we played games such as The Farmer's In His Den, Musical Chairs, In and Out The Dusty Bluebells, and The Hokey Cokey. The Grand Old Duke of York also featured, although it was perhaps more of a dance.

It may be appropriate to mention Christmas in general at this point. At home the Christmas stocking was a much anticipated item on Christmas morning, with the flat lead roofs of the Upper Square "making it easy for Santa's sleigh to land". However only our parents heard the noise as the sleigh slid to rest. Stockings always contained a silver coin and a tangerine stuffed into the toe, along with whatever our parents could obtain or afford. A gun which fired caps and a diary stick in my memory. Perhaps the cap gun came in handy when we played cowboys and Indians among the Balemartine houses at the school playtimes. My patience with regard to the writing of a diary lasted about a week as I did not realise its usefulness at that age. Christmas trees were not readily available in Tiree! In the 40s and 50s the plastic tree had not reached our shores. On one occasion we used a bare tree branch, which had come ashore, and decorated it with some strands of tinsel, which my Aunt had brought from Glasgow. Nowadays a tree made of a piece of a twiggy branch painted white can be seen being sold in a number of shops. We were creating a distant future trend in Hynish!

Parcels and Christmas cards arriving by post added to the excitement, but cards were not displayed as nowadays.

As for Christmas Day dinner I remember one of our hens was enjoyed in roasted form, followed by a fruity dumpling.

No doubt my brother and I would spend the day playing football or board games such as snakes and ladders. If our Aunt had come to visit us from Glasgow we would also play many games of cards such Rummy or Canasta.

Alistair MacNeill .. North Berwick, December 2018