

The Isle of Skye Highland Games Skye Games

By ROGER HUTCHINSON

They always were more than just field-and-track meets. The most famous Highland Games of them all, the Braemar Gathering, started as a fund-raiser for casualties of the Battle of Waterloo, and rode the wave of Victoria and Albert's Scottish fetish to become the Royal Highland Gathering in 1866.

The Braemar Gathering consequently became the model for all of its descendants; the hub of a great wheel of games which circled around Scotland from Sutherland to the Borders (and even into England's Lake District).

But down through the decades they developed individual identities. And none of them, from Cumbria to Caithness, can be more idiosyncratic than the Gathering which has taken place every peacetime summer for more than a century on that hilltop overlooking Portree. The setting must have something to do with it.

The Lump, despite its prosaic English name, has a classical situation. A perfect little amphitheatre huddled in the centre of a rock acropolis high over the village and the bay, this is one of the great natural sporting arenas.

When its steep grassy banks are packed, and they usually are packed, for this is the biggest annual event of any kind west of Inverness, north of Oban and south of Reykjavik, and when the August sun is smiling, and when there is just enough of a breeze to keep the midges elsewhere, there is simply no better way of spending a Highland afternoon.



Throwing the Hammer

It is a perfect example of a strong and proudly independent local tradition. It is a yearly trysting-place for resident and exiled islanders, which also acts as an immensely attractive draw to visitors. The direct and subsidiary role played by the Skye Games in the economy of the island is inestimable.

People do not flock in their thousands to the Games to watch world records being broken. They go there for rough-and-ready, honest and accomplished athletics; for competition between people rather than against the clock or the measuring tape; for the cream of Scotland's heavy athletes; for the piping and the dancing and the crack...

But occasionally, very occasionally, they will witness the exceptional. On just such a perfect afternoon as we have pictured, in a recent year, for almost an hour the village of Portree seemed to be in the possession of a new world record. It was what we might call an unadjusted world record, and it was fairly soon adjusted in the wrong direction, but who was counting? It was good while it lasted.

The excitement began at about 2 p.m. Halfway through the throwing of the heavy hammer Stephen King hurled the thing such a distance that the packed assembly drew in its collective breath with a noise like take-off at Baikonur. It was clearly a winning throw, but when the compere came to announce Stephen's distance it turned out to be rather more than that. The big man from Inveraray, and they are big,

these guys, they breathe thinner air than the rest of us, and they move about the stage together in a familiar clump of muscle, like a superhero version of the Back Street kids, had propelled the object 125 feet 11 inches. Now, the world record for chucking the heavy hammer, everybody agreed, was something like 123 feet. Stephen himself seemed happy, if a little uncertain. His own previous best, five years earlier, had been just 120 feet 2 inches. 'It felt good', he said of his world-shattering throw. 'Sometimes you just catch one. But...well...it seemed a bit under. A bit short of twenty-two.'



Ross Edgar, Local Hammer

The heavy hammer is supposed to weigh twenty-two pounds. The hammer which Stephen King had just despatched a record distance was carried down to the butchers to be weighed. It returned shortly afterwards with the discouraging news that the scales had logged it at a mere twenty pounds four-and-a-half ounces.

Nobody was really discouraged, of course. They just moved on...to the sight of the formidable Francis Brebner volunteering to increase with gratuitous extra throws his own iron grip on a clutch of local records; to Staffin's own Deb Bradley hurtling gracefully around the track; to the famously turbo-charged eight-year-old Hector Mackie streaking ahead of the under-12s pack...

To the tug-of-war teams slogging it out as the shadows lengthened and the low sun flashed between the trees, before the pipe band skirled into life at the end of a perfect day, and the sunburnt thousands reluctantly edged away from the Lump, and down to the warm streets, the laughter-filled pubs and the fish restaurants of Portree. No world records, perhaps, but certainly what has become known as a life experience. A long, long way from Waterloo and Victoria and Albert's Highland Gathering.