

How Competitions are Judged

BAGPIPING

Men and women who have trained and practiced on their bagpipes and drums all year will gather at the Skagit Valley Highland Games & Scottish Faire to put forth their best effort in several levels of competition. If you'd like to more fully appreciate the fine points of their performances, here are some tips on what to look for.

Solo Performance

For solo contests, there are 6 different levels or grades of performers; for pipe bands, 4 classes. Soloists select a tune that's either a 2/4 March, a Hornpipe/Jig or Medley. Sometimes soloists march or move to the music; at other times they stand still and tap a foot. Neither marching style nor uniform is judged, but traditional Highland dress is required of each performer.

In the lower grades of solo contests, judges are mainly concerned with technical execution of fingering. The judge wants to see if all of the gracenotes are sounded clearly and precisely. Tremendous dexterity is required to do this.

With practice, execution improves and other aspects are considered, such as quality of tone and tuning. Expression is also considered, as the judge listens to how tunes flow one from the next, and how consistently tempos are maintained.

Group Performance

Criteria for bands is similar to that for soloists, with a few additional requirements. A judge will be listening for the "attack" of the band, meaning how well the group starts up together. The goal is for every piper to hit the first note at the same time, with a true pitch. The band should sound as one, with well-tuned instruments and steady tempos. At the end of a performance a sharp cutoff, where all pipers cease at once, is highly desired –and somewhat difficult to achieve.

While a competing band is performing, two of the judges will move around the corps listening to tone and unison. They will write down comments about the musical performance, expression and selection of music. Another judge will focus on drumming - how the drum corps performs together, if the bass drum keeps a steady tempo and if the settings are musical and well expressed. Finally, the ensemble judge will see how the two parts of the bands efforts blend together.

All of this is much more difficult to accomplish than many of our excellent performers today would lead you to believe. For instance, just keeping a bagpipe in tune is a complex and difficult matter. Cane reeds and fluctuations in temperature and humidity make the pipes one of the world's most fickle instruments. Suffice it to say that both individuals and bands spend hours getting instruments to the level where they are ready to compete.

HIGHLAND DANCING

Scottish dancing takes 3 basic forms. First there is folk or country dancing, involving men and women, and frequently performed for pure recreation. Highland Dancing was originally performed by men. National dances, where the flowing tartan skirt is worn, was developed later when females became involved in Highland Dance. Today females are usually the performers in both National and Highland dancing competitions. You'll have the opportunity to enjoy all 3 forms at the Skagit Valley Highland Games & Celtic Festival.

During competition dances, judges look for the precision and timing of the steps in conjunction with the required arm and leg movements. The dancer should appear relaxed and in control of all movements. Two of the most notable dances are the sword dance and the sailors hornpipe, both steeped in tradition. The sword dance is traditionally performed by a Highland warrior on the eve of battle. The warrior's sword and scabbard are crossed and place on the ground, to define the dancing spot. According to legend, a

warrior that completed the dance without touching his sword would be successful in the approaching battle.

Of Celtic origin, the Sailor's Hornpipe is a traditional solo dance known throughout the British Isles. The name is derived from the English wind instrument made from an ox horn and dancers wear a costume based on the historical British seaman. The dance depicts shipboard activities such as rope hauling, climbing and looking to the sea.

ATHLETIC COMPETITIONS

According to Scottish folklore, competitive field events originated centuries ago when Scots drilled rigorously to stay in shape for battle. They trained with their everyday work tools. Farmers tossed sheaves, anglers thrust stones and woodcutters hurled logs.

Modern games involve similar activities, such as caber tossing. A caber is a tapered tree trunk, up to 20 feet long and weighing as much as 125 lbs. "Ye casting of ye bar", as it was once known, consists of grasping the log at one end and heaving it so that it flips in the air in a semi-circle and lands as near as possible in a straight line from the competitor. It is an art calling not only for extraordinary strength, but also keen balance and timing.

Other events include putting the light stone (weighing 14 pounds), a competition that has evolved into the modern day shot put, as well as tossing the sheaf, a 20 pound sack filled with grain.

SHEEPDOG TRIALS

This competition was developed from the practical need of handling sheep in the open areas of the Scottish Highlands. It's a job handled traditionally by border collies and shepherders. The handler chooses the area in which the sheep are to graze and shows the dogs the boundaries. It's up to the dogs to keep the sheep within the area, with the handler taking advantage of each dog's best skills -- pushing, short running or long running the sheep.

The youngest dogs are commanded using the handler's body language. As they get older the dogs are taught to follow voice commands and then to respond to a whistle, which allows the handler to control a dog from as much as a half mile away.

At the Skagit Valley Highland Games & Celtic Festival, the sheepdog trials will mimic this nearly extinct tradition by asking handler and dog to move 3-5 sheep through an obstacle course. The goal is to get as many sheep through the obstacles as possible. One point is won for each sheep that passes through an obstacle. The competitor with the most points is the winner. In a tie, the winner is the one who completed the course in the fastest time.

The top 12 performers in the preliminary trial on Saturday will move to the finals on Sunday. Top prize is \$600.