

HIGHLAND GAMES

FUN FACTS

Between May and September over 60 Highland games take place throughout the country every year. The atmosphere and excitement draws in thousands of locals and visitors – why not make it part of your vacation in Scotland?

Games and sports have been part of Scottish culture for centuries. Some believe the roots of the Highland games date as far back as the 11th century, when King Malcolm III called a foot race to the summit of Craig Choinnich, near **Braemar**, in the hopes of finding the fastest runner in the land to become his personal courier.

In the modern format we know today, Highland games have been celebrated around Scotland since the 1800s and regularly draw in crowds of thousands. Amongst the most historic is the **Braemar Gathering**, which was awarded Royal Patronage by Queen Victoria and is still regularly attended by Her Majesty The Queen and other members of the Royal Family.

An authentic Highland games combines sport, fun and culture, all with a unique Scottish twist. Heavy contests like the hammer throw see competitors put their muscles to the test, while field events such as the hill race test speed and stamina. Pipers show off their skills in both solo and band competitions, while dancers give dazzling displays of fancy footwork in set pieces including the sword dance and the famous Highland fling.

Perhaps the games' most iconic event, the caber toss, is rumoured to have stemmed from the need to toss logs over chasms. Nowadays, however, it is judged on style rather than distance: competitors aim to flip a log weighing up to 11 st so that it falls away from them as close to the '12 o'clock position as possible'. The length it travels is entirely unimportant.

World records are regularly broken at Highland games in Scotland and beyond. Last year a new Guinness World Record was set at the Masters World Championships in **Inverness**, when the most cabers were tossed at the same time. Over 160 kilted athletes took part, with 66 cabers being successfully tossed in the allotted time.

Tug o' war competition

The Weight Over the Bar competition at the Inverness Highland Games

Ryan Dolan lifts Paul Craig, Scottish Backhold Wrestling at Cowal Gathering 2014





Highland dancers
© Grant Paterson

Highland dancing at the games was originally an all-male event, and it wasn't until the late 19th century that women started to enter. **The Cowal Gathering** is renowned for the quality of its Highland dancing, drawing in the best performers from around the globe as they compete in the Scottish and World Championships.

For many, one of the most memorable sights of the Highland games is the massed bands, when hundreds of pipers from different groups come together to play and march in unison. Look out for the solo piping competitions, where competitors play in a range of styles, including the pibroch, which is considered the classical music of the **bagpipe**. Pibrochs tend to be slow, stately and complex.

Every year, the world Championship haggis eating competition takes place at Birnan Highland Games. A fun, yet fiercely competitive event, the winner is the competitor who finishes eating a pound of haggis in the quickest amount of time.

You never know quite what you'll see at a Highland games. Often one of the highlights of the local community calendar, they usually include a range of side shows, such as livestock events, parades, pet shows and even bonny baby competitions. At the Aberfeldy Show and Games in Perthshire, you can even watch the more unusual sport of terrier racing!

Several games have boasted famous chieftains, including the singer Susan Boyle, who was Chieftain of the **West Lothian Highland Games** in 2014. Ewan McGregor (*Star Wars*, *Trainspotting*) was named Chieftain of the games in his hometown Crieff in 2001, and fellow actor Dougray Scott (*Desperate Housewives*, *Mission Impossible: II*) has held the honour at the Markinch Games in Fife.



Open Hammer competition

Did you know that Baron Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, was so greatly impressed by a Highland display he saw at the 1889 Paris Exhibition that he introduced the hammer throw, shot put and the tug o' war to his competition? The former two are still included to this day.

Haggis hurling began as a practical joke in the 1970s but is now a popular event at many Highland games – there's even a World Haggis Hurling Association dedicated to the sport! The current world record was set at the Milngavie Highland Games in 2011, when Lorne Coltart hurled a haggis an impressive 217 ft.

Highland games now take place all around the world. The mostly northerly are held in Finnmark, Norway and the furthest south in Dundedin in New Zealand. The US and Canada host hundreds of Highland games, and there's even a Latin American edition of the event in Brazil's Sapucaia do Sul each year.

The Scottish Highland Games Association, who represent over 60 Highland games in Scotland, state that all competitors in open heavy events must wear a kilt when they compete. Great news for kilt makers, and fans of the **tartan** look!

Competitors in the heavy events use a range of techniques to improve their chances of winning. One movement in the weight for height event goes by the somewhat surprising nickname of 'the handbag technique', because the starting position is similar to where one would hold a handbag.

For full details about specific games and where they take place, visit the Scottish Highland Games Association's **website**.



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Weight for
Distance competition