
Caber pick


Stone to shoulder

Main: The New Hampshire Pipe Band

Left: Joshua Mackintosh, founder of No Fame Games

Below: A festival atmosphere in New Hampshire

Casting Long Shadows

Highland Games in America have become a living expression of Scottish identity abroad

by RACHEL McCONACHIE

ON a crisp morning in the mountains, the sound of bagpipes carries across a field as a caber rises, pauses, then turns cleanly through the air.

For a moment, it feels unmistakably Scottish. But this is New Hampshire, not the Scottish Highlands – and scenes like this are playing out across the United States with growing frequency.

The Highland Games in America are no longer simply echoes of a distant tradition. They have become something more complex: a living expression of identity for a diaspora still trying to understand itself.

"People are looking for connection, for a sense of place and belonging," says Joshua Mackintosh, founder of No Fame Games and organiser of the Celtic Strength Championships. "Highland Games give that to the Scottish and Celtic diaspora across the country."

That pull is what draws tens of thousands each year to events like the New Hampshire Highland Games.

At their largest, American Highland Games are immersive cultural gatherings. Music, food, livestock displays, clan tents and competition all sit side by side, creating a festival atmosphere.

"They are just a great day out," says Terri Wiltse, executive director of NHSCOT, who organise the New Hampshire Games. "You can come with friends or family, listen to music, watch competitions, learn about Scottish culture and enjoy a wee dram and proper Scottish food."

Beneath that surface is a powerful emotional current. Families return year after year, often across generations, using the games to reconnect with Scotland and each other.

"For a lot of people, this is how they connect to their heritage," Terri explains. "We see generations of families coming back every year. It's about being together and celebrating family bonds as much as the culture. Being Scottish here means celebrating your heritage through shared traditions, history and community."

Part of what makes the American Games so powerful is how fully they recreate a sense of place.

At New Hampshire, the setting does much of the work.

"The landscape is huge for us," Terri says. "We're in the mountains, by a river, and in the fall the trees are turning. It really does look and feel like Scotland.

funfact

The first Highland Games in the States took place in New York in 1836

"We have had some people from Scotland tell us that the Games here feel more Scottish than back home," she says. "It's incredibly gratifying."

There is, too, a clear sense of what audiences come for.

"People want the full experience," Terri explains. "They want to hear bagpipes all day. They want haggis, whisky, the caber toss, the bands, the clan parade. Those things really matter."

These are more than traditions – they are markers of identity, carefully preserved and proudly displayed.

For all the atmosphere, the Games in America are also a serious and evolving sport.

For elite thrower Spencer Tyler, the growth in the US has been impossible to ignore.

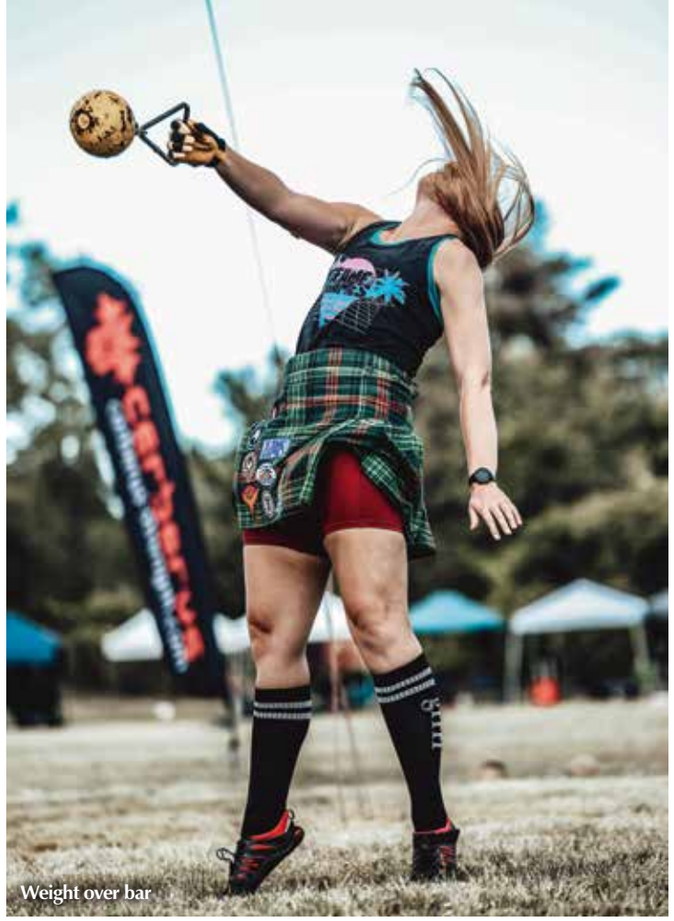
"The sport is growing fast," he says. "There are more athletes coming in, and a lot of them are incredibly strong."

Something that sets the American scene apart is its scale and accessibility.

"There are so many competitions across the country," Spencer explains. "You've got the huge Games with big crowds, and then you've got small, almost backyard »


Westford Pipe Band


Athletes train year-round


Weight over bar


At the opening ceremony of No Fame Games

"The sport has centuries of history"

events where it is just athletes getting together to throw."

That openness has created a competitive field.

"When you look at the numbers, the US is incredibly competitive," he says. "The depth of talent here is huge – far more athletes pushing at a high level."

But that competitive edge can sometimes be overlooked within the festival setting.

"There's still this idea that we're just part of the show," Spencer says. "But the athletes who are serious about it train year-round. This sport has centuries of history behind it, and for a lot of us it becomes part of who we are."


People want the full experience

Despite the intensity, the joy remains central.

"I keep at it because it's still fun," he says. "The level these athletes are reaching now – it's exciting to be part of it, whether you're competing or just watching."

For many involved in the American Games, travelling to Scotland brings the sense of heritage into sharper focus.

Spencer's visit left a lasting impression.

"It's a beautiful country, and the people are amazing," he says. "I was only there for a short time, but I would love to go back and spend more time there."

For Joshua, the experience was transformative.

When competing at the historic Ceres Games, he found himself struck not just by the competition, but by the continuity of tradition.

"I was blown away by it," he says. "The Games there feel ancient, but they're also alive and vibrant in a way that's hard to describe."

It was in the landscape, though, that this connection felt strongest.

"When I lifted the Fianna testing stone in Glen Lyon, it felt like stepping back in time," Joshua recalls.

"There is a sense of power in those places. It is something you can feel."

There was also an unexpected personal resonance.

"When I visited Moy and connected with my clan, I felt a real sense of belonging," he says. "It's hard to put into words, but it stays with you."

Those experiences underline a key truth: while American Highland Games have evolved into something distinct, their emotional centre still lies firmly in Scotland.

Despite their popularity, the Games face challenges.

Costs are rising sharply, particularly for traditional disciplines like piping, dancing and music.

"Sanctioned competitions are incredibly expensive to run," Terri says. "We are investing heavily just to keep those traditions alive."

At the same time, participation in heavy athletics continues to grow.

"There's definitely increasing interest in learning to throw and compete," she adds.

Across the country, organisers are also grappling with bigger structural issues – funding, insurance and the need to bring in younger generations.

"There's no central governing body for athletics in the US," Joshua says. "It's something we're trying to change, to create more structure and opportunity for the sport."

Innovation is becoming essential. At New Hampshire, "Try It" classes, covering everything from Gaelic language to stone-lifting, draw thousands each year.

"Our workshops are packed," Terri says. "People don't just want to watch, they want to take part."

Joshua's response has been to think even bigger. His inaugural Celtic Strength Championships this month aim to unite strength traditions from across Celtic nations.

"For us, it's about bringing everything together," he explains. "Celtic strength isn't just one tradition – it is all of them, connected."

Spencer agrees that evolution is necessary.

"This kind of innovation is exactly what the sport needs," he says. "If you want it to grow, you have to let new people see it and experience it."

What emerges from these perspectives is something that is layered and alive.

The Highland Games in America are not simply preserved – they are rebuilt, reinterpreted, and re-energised with every passing year.

"People tell us they come here and feel connected – to each other, to something bigger," Terri says. "It's a place where differences fall away."

That might be the most powerful element of all.

From the vast crowds to the smallest backyard gatherings, the Highland Games continue to grow.

Rooted in Scotland but shaped by the diaspora, and driven by those who compete in and organise them, they have become something uniquely American.

Not simply a copy of tradition, but a continuation of it.

A GREAT ATHLETE

Spencer Tyler is a top professional Highland Games athlete from Texas, known for his strength and his throwing ability.

A former collegiate track and field competitor, he switched to Highland Games and quickly rose to elite level. He won the 2019 World Championship and holds multiple world records in events like the sheaf toss and weight throw.

Tyler is widely regarded as one of the greatest athletes in the sport's history.


Spencer Tyler

Pictures: NO FAME GAMES, TYLER RYAN DESIGN