
Antigonish Highland Games: An Ethnic Case Study

ALYCE TAYLOR CHESKA

University of Illinois

Urbana, Illinois 61801

The Highland Games of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, considered the oldest continuing annual sports event in Canada, is dedicated to preserving Scottish tradition through competition in athletics (track and field), bag piping, Highland dancing and dress. Records of the Games historical viability were sought through the local weekly newspaper *Casket* archives from 1860 to 1980. Accounts of the development of the Games, community involvement, and local leadership provided evidence that the 118 year-old Games was a community rallying vehicle for Scottish ethnic identity.

The first Highland “picnic” was sponsored in 1863 by the Antigonish Highland

Society, a local group of Scottish Highlanders dedicated to preserving “the martial spirit, language, dress, music, games and antiquities” of Old Scotia. Since its inception the Highland Games has grown and survived inroads from rival Scottish Games, increased popularity of other sports events, controversy of amateurism vs. professionalism, and insular nationalism.

The equitable ratio of favorable references of community involvement and Antigonish leaders’ contribution to the Games (50%) compared with those concerning growth and development of the Games (50%) indicated a positive relationship between the Games’ longevity and the communal involvement. Underlying features of this relationship were the local acceptance of the Highland Games as an expression of Scottish ethnic preservation, an appreciative response to the Highland Games’ volunteer sponsorship by the Highland Society, and the continuing commitment and public support of the Games by the people of Antigonish county, as well as the favorable reporting by the editors of the local newspaper.

The athletic competition of the Games center on three major programs: Scottish strength events, running events and field events. The traditional Scottish Highland strength events includes the “tossing of the caber” (a tree trunk sixteen to twenty feet, tapered four to six inches in diameter, weighing up to 154 pounds is thrown from a vertical hand-held front position for distance); throwing the hammer (a sixteen to twenty-four pound metal ball attached to a link chain—or wooden handle—which is grasped by hands, swung concentrically and released over the shoulder for distance); and putting the shot (hand-held metal ball—originally stone—weighing from twelve to sixteen pounds is pushed from shoulder for distance). The speed events includes various running events of 100, 200, 400, 800, 1500, 6000, 10000 meter races and the mile, medley, and 400 meter relays. Field events are high jump, long jump, triple jump, pole vault, and javelin.

Other traditional competitive events include Highland dancing, such as the fling, reel, sword dance; while the Highland bag piping includes reditions such as strathspey, jig, and reel tunes; marches; and great classic or “Coel-Mor” music. Pipe and drum bands compete, as well as individuals. Prizes for the best Scottish dress are also awarded. Amid the colorful backdrop of plaid, kilts, and Gaelic decore, additional features of this Scottish festival include parades of bands and floats, concerts, military Tattoos, dances, and golf tourneys. During these two special summer days townspeople, visitors and competitors alike celebrate with the Scotsmen of Antigonish county their ethnic heritage.

The general conclusions of the study are: the Antigonish Highland Society regards the Highland Games its major commitment to which members devote untiring stewardship; the Antigonish Highland Games has been a vehicle for Scottish ethnic expression and preservation in Nova Scotia; The Highland Games, through support of the Antigonish leaders and community involvement, has become an important showcase of Scottish culture in eastern Canada; and the Antigonish Highland Games has become so successful in size, variety, attraction, and community impact that volunteer service may not be adequate to maintain the level of excellence now demanded by the community, its 13,000 visitors, and 1200 competitors to the Highland Games.