

# KINGS IN THE NORTH

For the past 150 years, in a small village on the eastern edge of the Cairngorms, the Aboyne Highland Games has been turning boys into men and men into warriors. But while tradition continues to be strictly upheld, the athletes who compete for honours hail from very different beginnings

WORDS BY DAN MASOLIVER — PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHIE HOPSON

## GREAT SCOT

01 During his 9-5, Lorne Coulthart works for Scottish Hydro Electric; at the Games, the hammer-swinging giant generates power of a very different kind





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raig Sinclair hinges at the hips and rests the thick, 80kg timber trunk against his collarbone, nestling it between neck and shoulder. Clamping his prodigious hands around the log, he interlocks his fingers tightly and, bending at the knees, quickly slides his hands down and underneath the pole, lifting it off the ground in a single, powerful, fluid motion.

As one, the thousands-strong crowd takes a sharp intake of breath as Sinclair rises to his full 6ft 5in stature, the 6m column teetering precariously above his head. As it wobbles, the native Highlander takes a correctional step backwards and another to the side before launching into a sprint – at least, as close to a sprint as an 145kg behemoth balancing an ex-tree is able to muster.

Approaching top speed, and with the pole starting to lean forwards, Sinclair suddenly stops dead, drops into a squat and hurls it high and explosively into the air, his roar temporarily drowning out the drone of a nearby troupe of bagpipers. Upended, the top of the trunk lands with a thud on the grass – as high and straight as a flagpole – before toppling away from its ejector. The spectators enthusiastically applaud the successful tossing of the caber, which Sinclair, breathing heavily, acknowledges with a single, raised hand.

## BATTLE LINES

Observed from the rolling conifer-lined hills that border the small Aberdeenshire village of Aboyne, this scene is a familiar one. The Aboyne Games is one of the oldest and most venerated of its kind. As one of dozens of global Highland Games, it forms part of an ancient series of cultural-cum-competitive events that take place in this arresting region of northern Scotland throughout the summer months.

From Ballater to Braemar, Lonach to Lochearnhead, each of the Games are divided – just as they always have been – into four distinct categories. There are the dancing events, in which “bonnie wee lassies” don their finest Highland dress to perform traditional, regional routines. There are the piping events, responsible

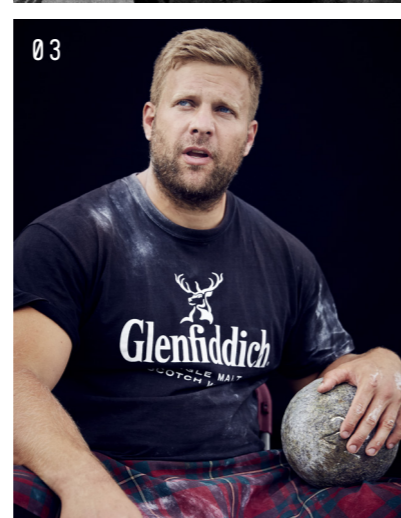
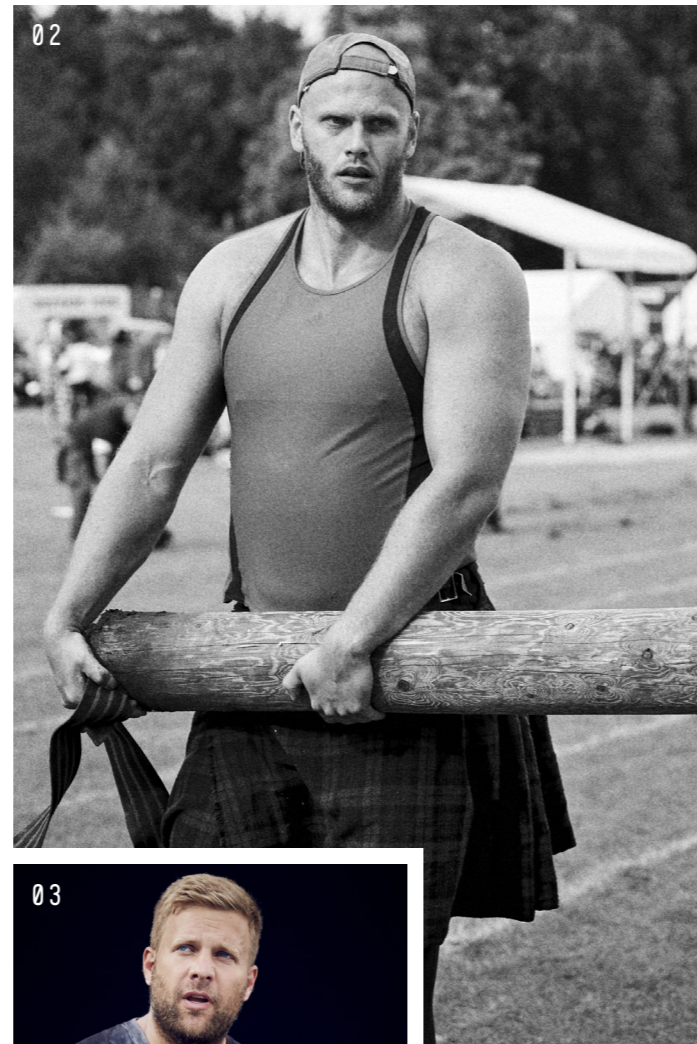
for the relentless murmur of bagpipes that soundtrack the Games’ proceedings. There are the light events, which include the long jump and the 100-yard dash. And then there’s the main draw: the Heavies. Kilt-clad and invariably giants among men, the Heavies spend the course of the day attempting to outdo each other by throwing variously sized and shaped objects as high and as far as they can. Their motivation is not for the prize money, which is token at best. Nor is it for the small replica stag-antlered trophy. It is all for the glory.

Sinclair is one such giant. For the past 14 years he has planned his life around training for – and competing in – the Highland Games. “When I was younger, in the winter I would train in the gym for two to three hours, up to four times a week. Squats, cleans, bench press – big compound lifts. Then during the summer I would throw for hours a night,” he says, the tightly buckled weightlifting belt around his waist making his considerable, top-loaded mass even more pronounced. Now, for the 31-year-old from Banchory, a mere Highland stone’s toss from where we stand, pursuit of glory comes at the expense of any semblance of social life. Working full-time as a joiner, he must make do with a couple of hours of throwing each evening.

## CLASH OF CLANS

Throwing is the name of the game in the Heavy events. Stone orbs are putted; unwieldy tree trunks are tossed; lumps of iron with ringed handles are hurled overhead for height; meanwhile, the Scots Hammer – a long wooden stick topped with a 22lb steel ball – is swung and flung for distance. These events have remained unadulterated throughout the centuries-long history of the Highland Games. In fact, apart from the Nike rugby boots and compression base layers now worn by competitors, a Highland chieftain from the 19th century might discern little difference in the look and feel of today’s proceedings.

Aboyne native Murray Brown is the convenor of the Heavies, whose job it is to oversee goings-on and officiate. Wearing full, formal Highland dress – black gillie brogues, a kilt of red, green and gold, leather sporran hanging from his belt and a sgian-dubh dagger tucked into his long woollen socks – Brown was a Heavy himself between the early ’70s and late ’90s. Having famously (at least



## TEST OF STRENGTH

**02-04** Once upon a time, the Highland Games pitted rival clans against each other to find the strongest men north of the English border. Today, competitors travel from across the globe. From top: Vladislav Tulacek of the Czech Republic, England's Scott Rider and Scotland's Craig Sinclair

**05-07** The Aboyne Games' Heavies have remained unchanged for 150 years. The tossing of the caber, which must topple end-over-end, is the day's high point

“The throwing events are all about warriors, manhood – about finding the strongest men in the community”



in these parts) beaten Commonwealth Games gold medallist and World's Strongest Man hero Geoff Capes in the hammer, Brown has attended the Aboyne Games in almost every one of his 61 years.

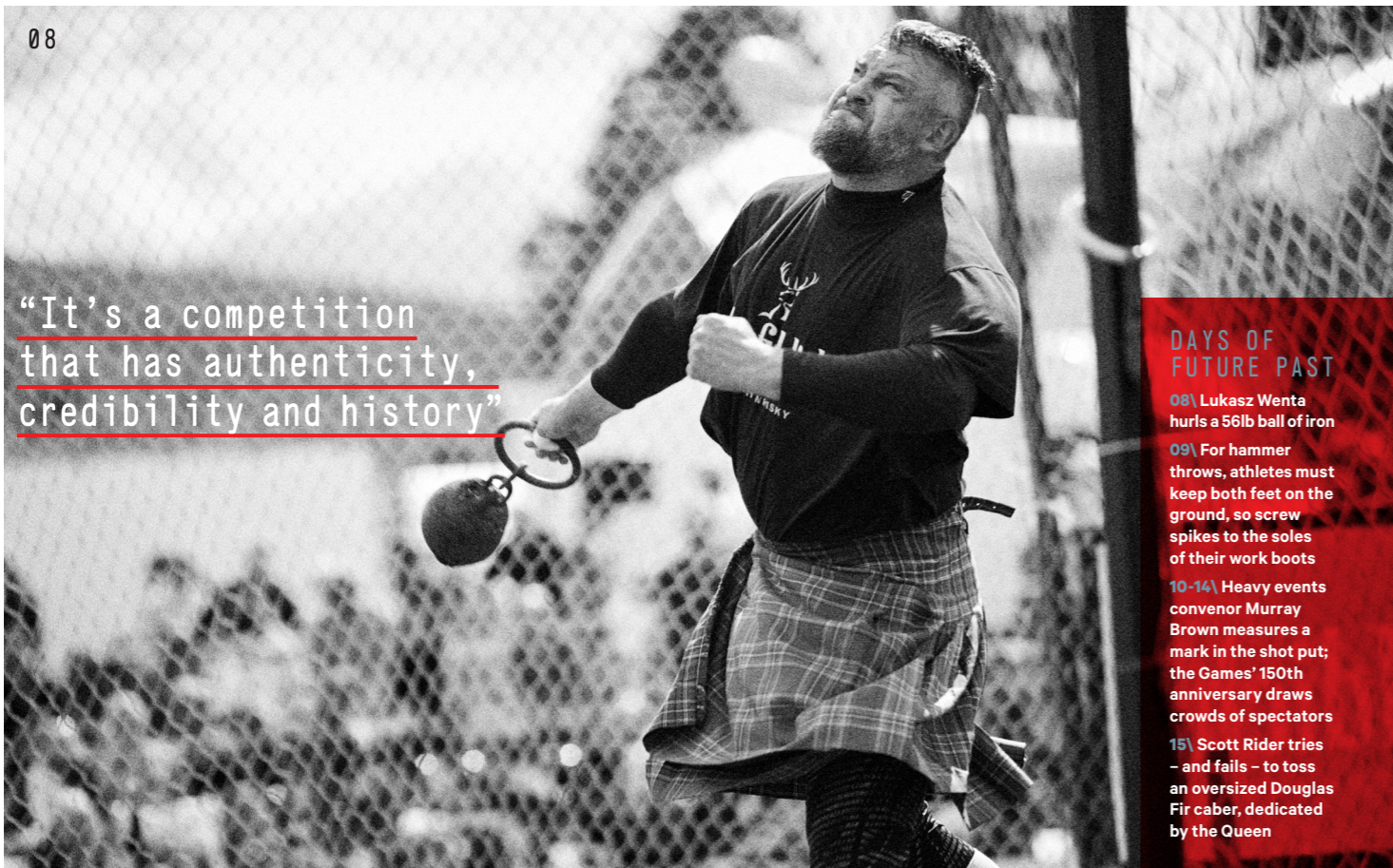
“Nothing much has altered in the Games over the years,” he agrees, with a Deeside accent as thick as the white moustache adorning his upper lip. “Going way back, the throwing events were all about warriors, about manhood, about finding the strongest men in the community. It still is today. And people still wear their own tartan, or the clan tartan that they’re entitled to wear.”

Then, as he scans the field, something



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“It’s a competition that has authenticity, credibility and history”



DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

- 08\ Lukasz Wenta hurls a 56lb ball of iron
- 09\ For hammer throws, athletes must keep both feet on the ground, so screw spikes to the soles of their work boots
- 10-14\ Heavy events convenor Murray Brown measures a mark in the shot put; the Games’ 150th anniversary draws crowds of spectators
- 15\ Scott Rider tries – and fails – to toss an oversized Douglas Fir caber, dedicated by the Queen



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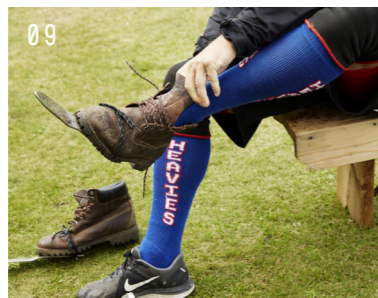
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catches Brown’s eye. His mouth flickers into a broad, gap-toothed grin. “Though if you look at that kilt there, it’s a bit short. It’s verging on a mini-kilt,” he chuckles, pointing over to the towering, shaven-headed figure of Vladislav Tulacek.

NEW TERRITORY

Whereas most of his rivals’ kilts hang modestly below their knees, Tulacek’s reaches but halfway down his thighs – a fact that owes more to the sheer size of the man than a risqué dress sense. Once a promising shot putter and member of the Czech national track and field team, the 6ft 7in strength coach from Prague has travelled over especially for the occasion. In fact, he plans to participate in eight Highland Games competitions across Scotland before his flight home in 10 days’ time. The commute from Prague has forced him to be selective about which Games he attends over a season that runs between late May and early September.

Some things do change, it would seem. Growing up in Eastern Europe, Tulacek hadn’t even heard of the Games until a friend told him about them two years ago. Nowadays, he’s a convert, and quite possibly the only man in Prague with a caber in his back garden. After



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his athletics career stuttered to a halt in his mid-twenties, Tulacek was attracted by the chance to continue competing in a familiar event. Now it’s becoming an increasingly common theme: three of the seven-strong field of Heavy athletes are former international shot putters. Along with Tulacek of the Czech Republic, these include Lukasz Wenta of Poland and England’s Scott Rider.

With victory in the 58lb weight for distance, another in the 58lb weight over bar, a successfully tossed caber and high placings in all the other events, Rider will eventually emerge as today’s overall winner. Bearded, barrel-chested and with legs as thick as any caber, Rider was first a bobsledder, representing Great Britain in the 2002 Winter Olympics, before becoming a shot putter, representing England at three Commonwealth Games. These days, the 39-year-old is a PE teacher in Dartford during term-time, and one



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of the world’s foremost Highland Games Heavies over the summer holidays.

“There just happened to be a Games down in London and they needed competitors,” recalls Rider of his first foray into the sport, now more than a decade ago. “They asked if I wanted to come along and try it, so I said yes. I had a couple of good events right off the bat thanks to my shot put background. And, of course, we got paid for it, too, which was a big draw.”

SPOILS OF WAR

It’s true that some of the international Highland Games events, taking place anywhere from North America to Australia, will cover competitors’ travel and accommodation costs – sometimes even offering a flat fee to top athletes to take part. But the Aboyne Games is a little more low-key. Cash prizes are awarded for every event, ranging from £10 for a sixth place finish to £120 for a win in a marquee event. Rider will take home roughly £520 for his exploits today – not bad for a day’s work, admittedly, but not especially lucrative given the hundreds of hours training required to make the grade.

“The competitive aspect is the most important thing for me,” insists Rider. “I take part all over the world in front of



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crowds of thousands. It’s good fun. It’s a competition that has an authenticity, a credibility, a history. OK, we’re not pretending that we’re the world’s best athletes, but the Highland Games has its challenges, for sure. A lot of guys have come to this sport from track and field over the years with mixed results. There are a lot of unpredictable elements and a lot of adjustments to be made – I mean, the stones we’re throwing today are huge. You never know what you’re going to get, but that’s part of the charm.”

Not everyone shares this unequivocally sunny outlook, however. With only four Scots in today’s competition – only one of whom is under the age of 25 – many fear for the Heavy events’ future. “It’s a sport that, in Scotland at least, is sadly starting to die out,” laments Sinclair, whose foreboding size belies a gentle disposition. “There just aren’t that many young Scottish guys taking it up.”

Sinclair’s fear is that the Games to which he has devoted his entire life’s training could end up being relegated to little more than a themed attraction for visiting tourists. Indeed, there is widespread concern that what was originally a quest to find the strongest warrior in the land could end up only as a quaint picture adorning the lid of a souvenir shortbread tin.

Nevertheless, he remains upbeat. “Today’s Games might be close to home for me, but last weekend I was up at Falkirk,” he says. “I left home in Banchory at 6.30 in the morning and wasn’t back until 11. I’ll do 28 Games this season. And why? Simply for the love of the sport.” He glances over at the runners running, the pipers piping and the dancers dancing. “I’ve been doing this for 14 years. What will it look like in another 14 years? Exactly the same.”