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HIGHLAND FLING

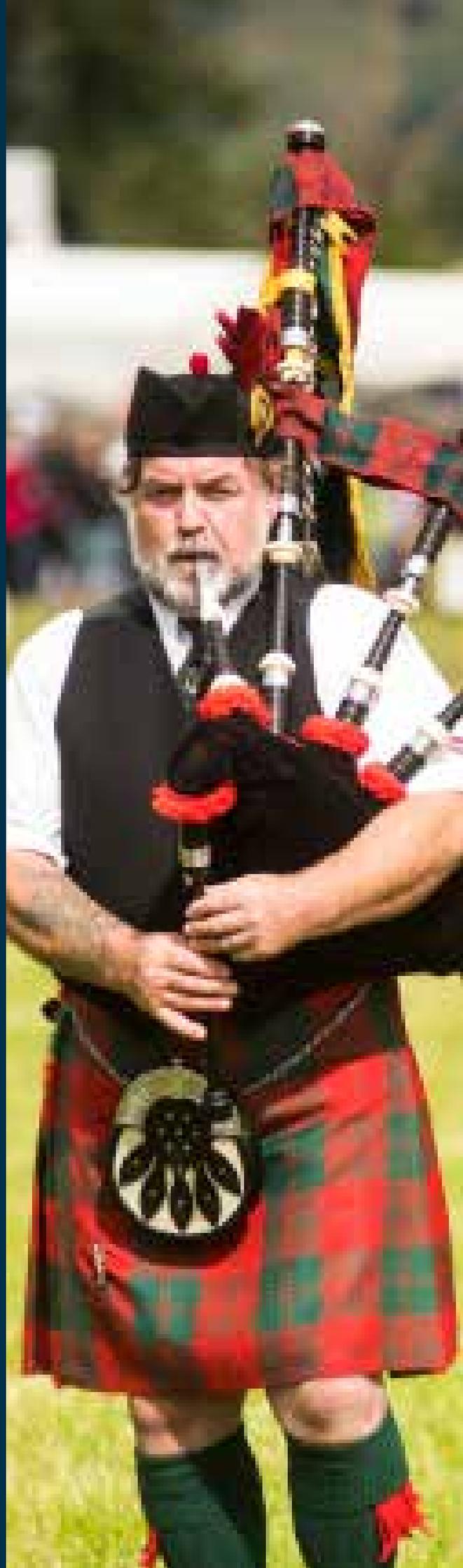
CYCLING PLUS HEADS TO SCOTLAND TO TRY OUR LUCK AT THE HIGHLAND GAMES. NO, WE HAVEN'T TAKEN UP THROWING TREE TRUNKS: GRASS TRACK BIKE RACING IS AS INTEGRAL TO THE GAMES AS ANY OF ITS MORE EYE-CATCHING SPORTS

I've naively assumed that an event that includes caber tossing, tug o' war and dancing to bagpipes will be relaxed about the type of bike I can ride in its grass track races. Of course, I'm wrong.

The Highland Games – which date back 1000 years and are celebrated throughout Scotland every summer weekend – may not come under the remit of British Cycling or the UCI, but everyone racing around one of its tight grass circuits is required to be on a standard track bike with fixed gear and no brakes.

A junior club based in Aberdeenshire comes to my rescue. Grampian Tigers has an active grass track racing scene, and has a sleek, adult-sized Dolan Pre Cursa track bike, complete with 32mm file tread tyres, it is happy to loan me in return for a mention for its sponsor, energy consultant Cambla. It comes with a 48-19 fixed gear, but

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coach Neil Kininmonth throws in a couple of extra 16 and 17 sprockets, along with the advice that Highland Games grass tracks come in all shapes and sizes and I should “expect the unexpected”.

My first practice is around my local park’s football pitch. It’s a drizzly July day and the schools are on their summer holidays, which means a group of kids are loitering in one corner. At first I think they are taking out golf clubs but then realise they are actually unsheathing a bow and arrows and setting up a target. Elsewhere, a man is walking his dog.

The grass is shiny, slick and overgrown. I hold on to a goal post and clip in before pushing off. I’ve opted for the 48-16 gearing and this, combined with the heavy turf, makes the chainset and wheels feel as if they are chiselled from stone. My legs are aching before I’ve even reached the halfway line. It soon becomes clear the lack of brakes won’t be a problem, as I’m struggling to get up any head of steam at all on the short straights. I’m also extremely nervous on the bends as the drizzle becomes more persistent.

My debut is in three days time, and heavy rain is forecast between now and then. I’m going to need some professional help, and a bigger sprocket.

HELP IS AT HAND

The help comes from Olympic, World and European track gold medallist Katie Archibald who raced the Highland Games grass track circuit for a season when she was 17.

“The highlight was probably at the Luss Games where I was second instead of first out the Devil because the other rider concerned took pity on me,” she says. “Lowlight was how often I punctured



ABOVE
Getting the push start wrong can lose valuable seconds

ABOVE LEFT
Trevor represented the mag from top to toe on his loaner bike from club Grampian Tigers

my own tubes changing from my slick city tyres to knobbly grass tyres for races. The most valuable lesson I learned? Being polite to the handicapper can get you far – about 180 yards to be precise.”

I arrive at the St Andrews Highland Games early. The Highland Dancing is already in full swing, with the crowds of adoring parents around a small stage in one corner of the field. The oval track – which will be used for cycling and athletics – is about 300m long. Only the finishing straight has been mown. People are starting to set up their deck chairs and umbrellas around the perimeter. The forecast is for “showers”.

I sign in, collect my number and am directed towards the handicapper, Ian, an elderly gentleman with a clipboard and a hearing aid. I tell him it’s my first time, remembering Archibald’s advice to smile politely, but he’s unmoved. “Aye, well, we’ll see how you get on in the first race,” he says.

As I push my bike out of the arena, my seatpost gets snagged under the perimeter cordon and I bring part of it down. Ian watches disapprovingly and writes something on his clipboard.

“MY DEBUT IS IN THREE DAYS TIME, AND HEAVY RAIN IS FORECAST BETWEEN NOW AND THEN. IT’S CLEAR I’M GOING TO NEED SOME PROFESSIONAL HELP, AND A BIGGER SPROCKET”



LEFT
Not quite matching the form of his rivals meant plenty of room between Trevor and the competition



Until the racing starts in just over an hour, I am free to warm up around the track. Runners and other competitors are also going through their paces, and the words, “What could possibly go wrong?” echo in my head as I pedal my fixed gear, brakeless bike through groups of stretching and jogging athletes.

I’m soon joined by another rider, 19-year-old Ryan Keir, a member of the local Synergy road race team. I notice he’s got a gash on his knee. From the road? “No, grass track last week. A rider took me out with his handlebar after we’d crossed the line.”

KNOW YOUR ENEMIES

Ryan is the youngest of today’s field, while 62-year-old Iain Grant, a retired solicitor, is the oldest. He was given a track accreditation course for his 60th birthday, so decided to have a go at grass track racing. “Previously, I’d done a lot of road cycling, but this is tough, there’s so much rolling resistance,” he says.

David Mathieson, wearing a vintage Cinelli hairnet/skullcap, and a grass track racer of 20 years – “I switched after road racing for 20 years” – says this is definitely the toughest cycling discipline. “It’s totally different from the indoor track, or cyclo-cross or mountain bike racing, there’s nothing like it,” he says.

He volunteers to be my holder in my debut race, the first heat of the 800m handicap. His push gives me an extra 10m on top of the 190 I have, after all, been granted by handicapper Ian. A month later, at the Stirling Highland Games, I am not to be so lucky, when my holder – a student plucked from the crowd – loses grip of me and I am forced to unclip exactly as the starter’s pistol is fired.



The only person ahead of me at the start is a female rider from Glasgow Ivy. I overtake her within half a lap, which I’m particularly pleased about after I learn that, though it was Janette Hazlett’s first time on grass, she had the previous day finished sixth in Scottish Cycling’s Ladies Omnium on the tarmac track in Caird Park, Dundee. “I’ve cycled since my teens and I’d always fancied giving grass a go,” she tells me at the end of the race. “But that was definitely hard, it was literally cycling through mud.”

Despite my flying start, I am caught on the line by two other riders, but have still done enough to qualify for the final. →

ABOVE
A respectable sixth place earned Trevor his bus fare home

TOP
A decent crowd was in place to offer words of encouragement/ridicule



One of the other qualifiers is James Melville of Glasgow United CC. A veteran of the grass circuit, he tells me: “I like it because you are racing from start to finish. The circuits are tight and compact so you have to race in a tactical way.”

He also points out that by qualifying for the 800m final, I am guaranteed a prize of £10 for just finishing. This will be the first thing I have won in a long and undistinguished career that has seen me ride bikes professionally as a paper boy, courier, tour guide and postman. It will also leave me with £6 profit for the day after deducting my entry fee.

At this point a silver-haired gentleman in a tweed jacket and kilt asks us to move further away, as the “Kilted Heavies” are about to start the hammer throwing competition. The gentleman turns out to be Charlie Murray, president of the Scottish Highland Games Association, and he’s not a happy man.

DECLINE IN POPULARITY

Not only is the tug o’ war in decline – “We once had 30 full-time teams in Scotland who would train three times a week. Now there are only seven, and one of them only started on the back of appearing in *It’s A Knockout*” – but the cycling events are also suffering.

“It’s dying up here,” he tells me. “We’ve seen a big increase in track and field athletes, but not cyclists. There are some Highland Games that don’t even have grass track cycling any more.”

It’s a surprising revelation, especially set against the continuing popularity of road and other cycling

ABOVE

At 19, Ryan Keir (middle) is the event’s youngest rider

disciplines. What more could a keen cyclist want for their sport – a beautiful setting, friendly competition, enthusiastic crowds and prize money?

But now David Mathieson is whispering words of encouragement in my ear as I line up for the 800m handicap final: “It’s just a minute and 20 seconds of all-out effort, and with the start you’ve got, you could win this.”

What he fails to mention is that the rider starting at the very back of the field is wearing the stripes of national champion. In fact, Charles Fletcher only won the 800m grass track title the day before, so this is literally his first outing as official British champion. Needless to say, the stripes go past me in a blur long before I reach the finish line.

Fletcher is a 24-year-old PhD student at Edinburgh University, so the Highland Games grass track season fits in perfectly with his academic year. Last year, he made £3000 in prize money. Today,

“MY PROXIMITY TO FLAILING ELBOWS AND SNARLING FACES – GOOGLING “GRASS TRACK RACING” BRINGS UP SOME ALARMING IMAGES – HAD LASTED ONLY AS LONG AS IT TOOK THE OTHERS TO OVERTAKE ME”



however, the national champion is pipped by Stevie Jackson, another regular on the circuit.

Pocketing his envelope containing £50, he tells me his favourite circuit is a few miles away in Ceres. "It's a great atmosphere because it's free for spectators. It also has a tight little circuit that runs alongside a burn (ditch). If you're not careful, you can end up in it. Two years ago, that's where I landed after I bunny hopped over Charles after he'd crashed. The spectators just carried on drinking."

My next race is the 1600m. Again, I'm given a generous handicap, and again I overtake Janette, but it's a photo finish whether I manage to just catch Iain Grant on the line or not. What's certain is that there won't be another envelope handed to me this time.

I'm not in it for the money. Which is just as well, as Charles, Stevie and the others seem to have an informal little cartel set up in which they divide up the races between them. I'm nowhere near fast enough to be invited to join. I am getting a buzz from the crowd, who almost spill over onto the outside lane of the track. Never has my pain and suffering given so much pleasure to so many excitable strangers.

I'd been expecting each race to feel like an aggressive bunch sprint all the way around, but that had been on the flimsy assumption that I'd be able to keep up with my more experienced rivals. My proximity to flailing elbows and snarling faces – Googling "grass track racing" brings up some alarming images – had lasted only as long as it took the others to overtake me.

The one time the combat felt slightly more prolonged was during the Devil, the curtain-closer of

ABOVE RIGHT

While grass track events are declining caber tossing still draws the crowds

BELOW

A 'Kilted Heavy' prepares to launch



the day. For the first, free, lap I was one of the bunch and felt among peers, not remotely out of place with my gearing. As the pace quickened for the first elimination lap, I managed to hold on to the wheel in front, aware there was at least one other rider behind me.

I survived that first elimination, but now a gap had opened up between the bunch and me. I stood up and stamped down on the pedals as we entered the back straight.

For the first time all day I didn't reflexively ease off on the curves. The lack of brakes and greasy surface didn't inhibit me any more. I felt as invincible as the Kilted Heavy I'd earlier watched throw a 52kg weight over a height equivalent to a double decker bus. And when I heard my name and number being announced over the speakers, I knew my reckless burst of energy had paid off. But of course, it hadn't. The announcer was merely confirming my elimination and telling me to leave the track.

Highland Games grass track races are open to all riders. The season runs from May until September.

For more information, visit shga.co.uk. [RUS](#)

