

# HIGHLAND DANCING

makes a home in Eastern Oregon

Three young dancers take competitions 'quite seriously'

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**A**THENA — The Caledonian Games last weekend brought a Highland dance competition to the region for the first time in six years.

The competition was hosted in Athena but the 19 competitors came from as far as Seattle and Boise, Idaho, to take aim at winning medals for their stamina, precision, and timing.

The three carrying the torch for Oregon were some of the youngest competitors.

Kimberly Kilgore, 7, and Penelope Benitez, 8, both of Athena, competed in the beginner's bracket, and Annie Pankratz, 4, of Milton-Freewater, performed as well.

They all donned traditional kilts, tartan hose, velvet jackets and ghillies — shoes that look like ballet slippers, but with many more straps.

Their teacher, Cassandra Humphrys, an organizer for the competition, has been dancing for over 20 years. She teaches at the Mid-Columbia School of Highland Dance in the Tri-Cities while attending school full time to become a nurse.

While the competition offered a brief glimpse into the world of Highland dance for the audience, it's a year-round reality for those interested in perpetuating the rich Scottish heritage represented by the dance.

With a grant from the Umatilla County Cultural Coalition last year, Sue Friese, president of the Athena Caledonian Games, invited Humphrys to begin instructing in Athena.

Now, she drives down to the historically Scottish town weekly to teach the young dancers.

"Athena needs to have the dancing, and by golly we get to see them," Friese said before Saturday's competition.

Humphrys said she hopes the competition will drive new dancers her way. At its peak, the Athena program had 10 dancers, but currently it's just the three girls.

She said that competitions are becoming few and far between in the Pacific Northwest area.

Pankratz' mother, Emily Holden, sells clothing at the



Four Highland dancers perform July 13 during the Caledonian Games in Athena.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney



Bree Ross of Colbert, Wash. (left), Kimberly Kilgore (center) and Penelope Benitez (right) perform the Highland Fling during the Highland dance competition on July 13.

Staff photo by Jessica Pollard

Caledonian Games. She said last year, her daughter saw the Highland dancers and fell in love.

"She's always very excited for a competition," Holden said. Pankratz had the stage to herself, as she performed some beginner's steps, and gave a gracious bow.

Holden said her daughter takes the competitions quite seriously.

After the competition, Benitez and Kilgore ran around the park and spotted ladybugs in the grass. The pair attends Athena Weston Elementary, and appears to be inseparable. They've been dancing with

Humphrys for a year and a half. "When we're not dancing we like to do stupid stuff together," Benitez said with a giggle.

But when it's showtime, the girls put on serious faces and get down to dancing. Right now, they just know two dances but are both hoping to learn the Scottish Lilt, a national dance with ballet influence.

Their favorite, in the meantime, is called the Sword.

There's something jaw-dropping about watching elementary schoolers hop over swords with seemingly synchronized precision.

The swords are props, but

that doesn't make the reality of the dancing any less interesting. Like many of the Highland dances, the Sword dance — or Ghillie Callum — is steeped in varying tales of folklore.

One of the most prominent, according to the Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association, is that centuries ago, Scottish prince Malcolm Canmore defeated one of his enemies, crossed his bloody sword over that of the slain and danced over the weapons victoriously.

Highland dancing is considered a sport by the Sports Council of Scotland, and watching it happen live can

lend clues as to why.

"For her it's a lot of work. It's not easy. It's pretty athletic," said Kilgore's dad, Brian.

He said sometimes she gets distracted, but she loves the art form.

Kilgore and Benitez both said they plan on dancing for a long time.

Benitez, who sported blue last Saturday, said she wanted a red kilt like Kilgore. But the color of her kilt didn't stop her from placing fifth in the beginner's bracket.

She said she loves Highland dancing because, as she puts it, "you move your legs and it makes you strong."



Staff photo by Jessica Pollard  
Annie Pankratz performs the basic steps to the Sword Dance on July 13 at the Athena Caledonian Games.



Three young Highland dancers compete July 13 at the Caledonian Games in Athena.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney