

Scottish Heavy Athletics - COVID Challenges and the Future

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It's hard to believe that it's been nearly two years since the last SAAA heavy athletics competition at the 2019 Scottish Fest in Costa Mesa, CA. In 2019, we had 100 amateur and professional highland games athletes, competing in front of thousands of Southern California fans, and we can't wait to get back to this and put on a great show for you all in 2022. Dealing with health and safety restrictions has impacted us all, but for most of the Scottish Festivals nationwide, and especially on the West Coast, we have seen competitions come to a grinding halt since March 2020.

Considering that our Scottish Festivals are gatherings of family, friends and local spectators looking to have a good time, COVID has been extremely hard for us. Without the ability to safely gather large groups of people, there have been no competitions for athletes. On top of this, access to gyms and parks has also been limited, so just trying to stay in shape and practice has also been very challenging for our athletes as well. We all look forward to returning to the Orange County Scottish Fest in 2022, but there have been some signs for optimism here in 2021.

Celebrating our Scottish heritage and coming together with family and friends has been dearly missed by many. We are now in serious discussions about how we can deliver several opportunities for athletes to compete in 2021. The state of California has announced that all tier restrictions will drop as of June 15, 2021, so look for some big announcements soon for opportunities here in Southern California, as well as Northern California, for our athletes to compete and friends and family to gather to give them support.

We have so many bright stars in our sport that we look forward to seeing on the field again soon. Athletes like Colin Dunbar, who competed at Long Beach State, as an all American Track and Field athlete, finished the 2019 Highland Games season ranked #3. Dunbar was the 2016 US National Champion in the 35 lb weight throw at the USATF Indoor Championships. Kyle Lillie, who competed at Arizona State and now coaches throwers at Sacramento State, finished the 2019 season ranked #2. They were in just their first and second seasons as highland games professional athletes, respectively in 2019, but have had their throwing careers put on hold during the pandemic. We all look forward to seeing both of them get opportunities to throw and compete again soon.

On the women's side, we have some very bright local female athletes here in Southern California. Jarvina Routt of Orange County has won a lightweight national title in highland games for 2018 and looks to make a big impact at the Elite Women's level. A former world record holder, in 2019, Routt finished with a national ranking of 35th. We will all have our eyes on Felicia Baltren, a lifetime resident of Vista, CA as well. Baltren finished the 2019 season ranked 20th in the country, and has been eager to get back on the field and make a push for

the top 10. Baltren once broke five world records in a single day in 2016, but like Routt, has her eyes focused on the the women's Elite ranks moving forward.

We hope to provide opportunities for all of our athletes soon and hope that in 2022 we will be able to provide the same high level highland games competitions that Southern California residents have come to enjoy for many years. Starting the year in February with the Scotts Festival at the Queen Mary in Long Beach, then the Scottish Fest at the Costa Mesa fairgrounds in May, the San Diego Scottish Highland games in Vista, CA every June and finishing up the year at the Seaside Highland games in Ventura at the Ventura County Fairgrounds each October. We are very optimistic that we will have these events, and others to announce in the weeks and months to come.

For more information on local Southern California Highland games competitions and festivals, please visit our website at www.saaa-national.org.