

Bangert Has Fling

By Tom Barnidge

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The explanation of the rules was the simple part. You just take this 16-foot pole, stand all 160 pounds of it on end, run forward and toss it end over end.

The reason anyone would want to do this was a bit more vague.

Let it suffice to say that the caber toss is an accepted part of any Scottish Highland Games. Equally accepted are the beer barrel toss (both empty and full), the Scottish hammer throw, the putting of the stone and the throwing of weights.

And on Saturday, amid the wheezing of bagpipes and the bah-bah-bah of the sheepherding demonstration, the Highland Games visited Webster Groves.

The entire production was under the direction of the Scottish St. Andrew Society of St. Louis. When the tickets are counted and the money banked, the proceeds will go to children's charities. But Saturday at Memorial Stadium represented more. For many, it was an education.

"I remember my first Scottish games," said Rev. Arnold Pope. "I was intrigued by them, I just kept coming back."

Pope was a bit different from most of the folks on hand this time, because he was competing. In fact, he competed and won the caber toss, his specialty, with three perfect throws.

(The object is to fling the caber—or, in this case, a telephone pole—so that it makes one full turn in air and lands in a position perpendicular to the thrower.)

"I have two cabers back where I live," said Pope, a resident of Fayetteville, N.C. "I practice with them at least once a week. And I've damn near caused some traffic accidents with people gawking at me."

Another of the entrants in the open division was Peter Hoyt of Altamonte Springs, Fla. A graduate of Lehigh University and an Amateur Athletic Union shot putter, he took time off from his job with Westinghouse Corp. to win the beer barrel toss.

He threw the empty container (weighing about 30 pounds) more than 41 feet.

"I go to seven or eight Scottish games a year," he said. "I just enjoy competing and staying in shape."

By far the most fascinating of the competitors had traveled only 25 miles to make an appearance. White-haired Bill Bangert, mayor of the Village of Champ, was a crowd pleaser.

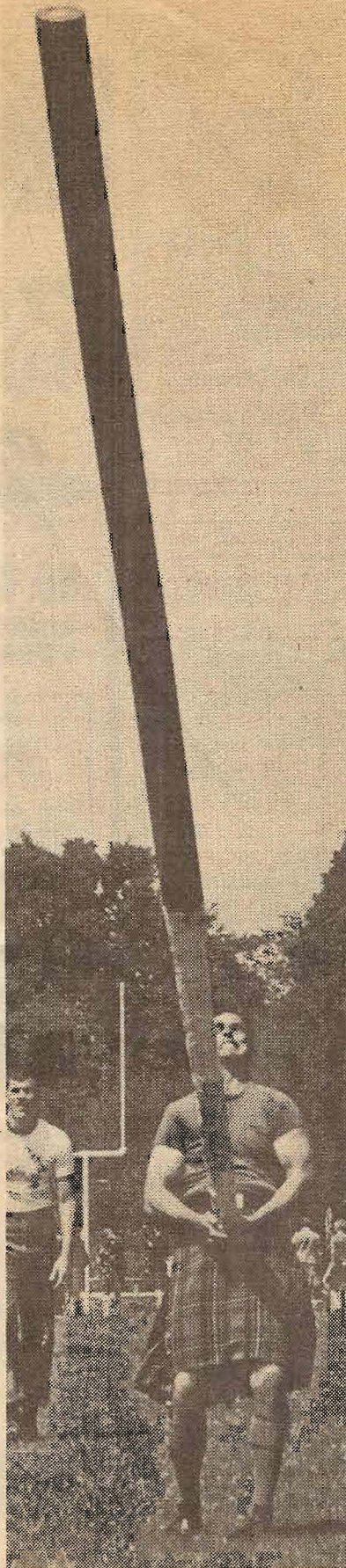
At age 53, he gave away years to both Pope (44) and Hoyt (35). He gave away little else. He won the 28- and 56-pound throws, the stone put and the 56-pound weight throw for height.

"I think the older spectators enjoy watching me," he said. "They see my white hair and they identify with me. You know, the age of aquarius."

Only Bangert was able to heave the 56-pound weight higher than 12 feet 10 inches. He felt, however, he owed it to himself and his middle-aged fans to go a bit higher. So he had the bar raised as high as it would go.

"Bill Bangert will now attempt to clear 15-4," the announcer said.

Clear it, Bill Bangert did. On his first



REV. ARNOLD POPE shows how you toss the caber. (Post-Dispatch Photo by Lynn Spence)

surprised. He holds the world record at 16-9.

Bangert's background in Scottish games goes back a good many years. He said a friend of his once entered him in the Royal Highland Games in Scotland — without asking. Bill dutifully arrived, was introduced to the crowd ("right in front of the queen," he said) and proceeded to wind up on his backside under the weight of a caber.

With a laugh, Bangert remembered someone saying at the time, "You're supposed to bow before the queen, Bangert, not sit."

Saturday's competition marked only one of many meets at which Bangert, Pope and Hoyt will renew acquaintances this year. Bangert, for instance, plans to compete in at least four more games between now and July. He has planned appearances as far ahead as October.

"There's a little vanity in all of us," he said. "Wherever I go, it won't be so much who will win, but can beat the old man. That's what keeps me going."

What keeps the rest of the faithful tossing cabers and heaving barrels? Neither Hoyt nor Pope were quite certain.

"The events are a bit strange, aren't they?" said Pope.

Then he straightened out his kilt and bade good by.