

# Alasdair MacKenzie

## – *the Newest Legend*

In this edition of NZPB we've talked with a couple of international superstars and learned a little about what makes them tick, but when we cast our eye around NZ, its obvious we have a number of equally super stars on home soil.

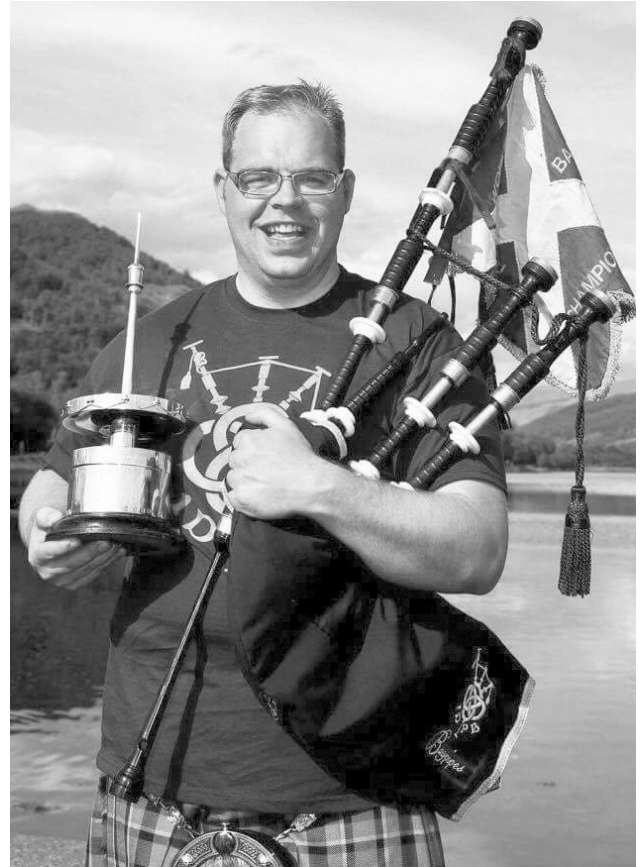
Whilst Nicole has given us the story behind Callum Gilchrist and the outstanding work he has done in the band movement, it's my privilege to present to you another mover and shaker on the NZ pipe band scene – Pipe Major Alasdair Mackenzie, or Ali as he's almost universally known. Ali's presence and impact has been evident since the day he set foot on our shores, and now, with even greater prominence with his involvement as musical director of the National Youth Pipe Band of NZ, we thought this was the ideal time to find out more about the man, and the road he's travelling.

So a bit of background first . . .

Around 2007 the piping, drumming and pipe band scene in Southland was in adversity. The oldest pipe band in the Southern Hemisphere, the City of Invercargill Caledonian Pipe Band, the figurehead and highest graded band in Southland was in recess.

Brendon Fairbairn and Quentin Wylie from the Mataura Kilties pipe band – (now merged with the Gore Pipe Band to become Hokonui Celtic Pipe Band) and an independent, ex-Southlander (now Auckland based) Allister Macgregor, formed the Southland Piping and Drumming Development Trust; sought mentorship from Greg Wilson and a plan was drawn up to revive the pipe band scene in Southland. A key part of that plan was again to have a premium band in Southland to inspire others and to give young talent the opportunity to play at a higher level.

The Invercargill based Southern City Pipe Band and the City of Invercargill Caledonian Pipe Band merged to become the ILT City of Invercargill Highland Pipe Band. Brendon Fairbairn temporarily took up the Pipe Major role to help out and a global search for a drumming tutor



Ali Mackenzie with the  
World Pipe Band Championship trophy

was started and Scott Birrell from Burntisland in Scotland, part of the Boghall and Bathgate G1 drum corps, was appointed to the fulltime role as Drumming Tutor.

In time, it became clear there was also a need for a fulltime piping tutor and while Brendon Fairbairn had done an outstanding job his absence from his home band, the Mataura Kilties, was starting to negatively affect that band and so a global search for a fulltime piping tutor was started. There were a number of applicants.

Scott Birrell had been to University with Ali MacKenzie from Garve, Scotland, who was part of the G1 Scottish Power Pipe Band, and convinced him to apply. Greg Wilson chaired the selection committee which got down to two outstanding candidates. Ali Mackenzie was one of those and it was he who was finally appointed to the role.

When the Southland Piping and Drumming Trust appointed the two young tutors, both then in their early 20's, it was the Trust's vision they would only be able to retain them for two years as part of a young person's global travel ambitions. But both Scott and Ali have made New Zealand their home and now both have families here.

Ali was brought up in a very musical household in the Ross-shire town of Garve on the Black Water River, about 30Km northwest of Inverness. The quiet village is has a number of small cottages originally built to house workers from nearby hydro-electrical works which brought power to the Highlands in the early 20th century. His parents recall him coming home from a highland games when about three years of age, where his three older sisters had been competing all day, marching around the garden with a bit of tartan and a couple of bamboo sticks tied together humming The Battle of the Somme or Highland Laddie, tunes he'd heard the bands playing during the day.

"My sisters all were highland dancers, the youngest a Scottish National champion" Ali recalls. "My father Alex was pretty much a full time "heavy", competing up and down the country every weekend tossing the caber, weight over the bar, throwing the hammer, so with my sisters and dad competing, life was busy early on for my mum, meaning a lot of fun memories. That's what it's all about." His father was fortunate to travel abroad demonstrating his skills at various highland games, inspiring Ali to make the most of any opportunity to travel.

Ok so we have dancing and heavy games, but what of other musical talents in the family?

"My dad had and still has a wee Ceilidh band that perform at weddings in the north of Scotland.. He's an accordion player, and goes alright on the fiddle and harmonica too. He can't read music interestingly, still to this day. Everything he's learned in his musical life has been by ear which is quite a gift to have".



It seems music was always around the house in Ali's formative years. In the small village of Garve in the Highlands, the local hotel and others around would have tourist bus parties up from Glasgow, Edinburgh or England, so the family were often out three or four nights a week. "Dad would play a few sets, some Scottish stuff, sing a long stuff, me a few sets on pipes, and then I'd play for my sisters who would do a few dances. That was a lot of fun". Ali considers himself lucky that he got into playing for highland dancing competitions locally and then nationally, which led to some trips overseas with pipe bands and dancing groups to Italy, Spain, Belgium and America, all while he was still at school. "I love to explore and travel to new countries, explore new music and cultures. Playing with Bagad Cap Caval for 2 seasons while I was at University in Glasgow and meeting the amazing Breton people and their music is one of the favourite things I've done in my career



Ali with his father, and the World Championship trophy

so far. That came about as Sylvain Hamon and Gus Sicard had just joined Scottish Power and I became really good friends with them over time, interestingly enough still play beside Gus in Inveraray. He's on the flank and generally when I'm back for July/August I'm playing in the corner beside him."

It's obvious that by this time, Ali was an accomplished player, but with dancers and accordions in the house, where did the piping start? Early lessons were from a Dingwall local named Donnie Armstrong, then at school by Andy Venters, then ex-Queens Own Highlanders Paul Harrison "who I got on really well with. A great piper and composer. He was the P/M of the local Grade 3 band I joined while at high school, Dingwall Royal British Legion." Ali continues – "During the early years there was plenty of input from Norman Gillies and John D Burgess, also which I count myself very lucky to have had, two very good friends of my dad's, and great pipers and teachers. I remember going round to the John D's house to pick up my first ever set of pipes that he set up for me. I still have them over here in NZ today.

Ali joined Scottish Power in 2004 while attending university in Glasgow where he studied accounting and financial services, graduating in 2008.. This was his first taste of Grade 1. Highlights early on included winning the International Quartet Challenge with Scottish Power, "which I've won three times now, and also four titles with Bagad Cap Caval". Solos took a back seat while he was at University but before moving to Glasgow, he'd won various major competitions in the North including the Dunrobin Castle Junior Champs and the Young Piper of the Year among various other Highland Games events "I'd been doing some part time teaching with the youngsters as part of the West Lothian Schools programme every Friday with my good pal Gordon Bruce. This was my first real taste of teaching" he adds.

We can see the development of Ali's career in piping starting to develop here, but outside of those who taught him, where was the inspiration coming from?

"I was very lucky in my younger years. In the winter months we'd have monthly recitals in Dingwall either in the Royal British Legion hall or Tulloch Castle.. Angus MacColl, Roddy MacLeod, Gordon Walker – the list goes on. For me, Angus MacColl was and still is my and my Dad's favorite player, musical as! Growing up, I'd always have Angus's, Chris Armstrong's or Gordon Duncan's cd's blasting. In more recent times I've been able to play under Stuart Liddell – he is unbelievable and I feel very lucky that I've had that opportunity.. A great musician, a great guy and a great pipe major."

Ali's greatest inspiration however has been his parents. "All the support, all the driving about when us kids were younger, to lessons or competitions or whatever else was on. It was nice to be able to take the "spike" home to Garve after our last win with Inveraray and District in 2019. Stuart Liddell took it up when he drove up for the Former Winners MSR in Inverness and I took it home for a night, and dropped back the next day, the parents were chuffed with that!"

Ali has certainly reached some lofty heights in his piping and band career, citing major highlights including winning two World Championships with Inveraray, about which he says "Best feeling ever. A great team

there, inspirational leaders and a great community in Inveraray. When we went back to parade through the village, it made the effort all worth while.” He has also had three International Quartet wins with Scottish Power, titles with Bagad Cap Caval in Brittany, and guesting with WAPOL in Australia and two national titles with them in G1. Here in NZ, on the solo circuit, he won the “double” at Labour Weekend in Christchurch, being the Silver Chanter on the Saturday night and the Clasp on the Sunday, and twice champion of the Former Winners MMSSRR in Dunedin.

The lure to Invercargill and New Zealand was the ultimate challenge for Ali. To create something from scratch, and the opportunity to travel and do what he loves to do, for a living. His contract allowed for seven weeks personal development which meant he could return home to Scotland once a year for the World Pipe Band Champs with his home band which in 2009 was Scottish Power and then 2014 Inveraray. “The chance to play at that level each year and see family was huge for me, and still is. Hopefully all the Covid problems

will settle a bit globally in 2022, as I’m desperate to get home to see the folks and the family again. I never imagined it could be three years potentially where I wouldn’t get back, but hopefully brighter news soon.”

For those who have heard the development of ILT City of Invercargill over the past decade or so, you’ll recognise the emergence of a distinctive style of musicality and medley construction. “Yeah there’s definitely a Highland twist when I put my medleys and selections together.” Playing with Inveraray and the style they present has been a huge influence, “but I love folk and Ceilidh bands. Much of his father’s family were from Mull and with some great Gaelic singers and folk musicians in the past”, and his mothers side is from Plockton, Skye, where she was brought up. “I love my 2/4’s, Gaelic airs, Highland jigs, and the harmony.”

As a tutor, Ali has experienced many highs with the Invercargill organisation over the last 10 years, having achieved National titles in grades 4B, 4A, 3, 2 and Juvenile. Juvenile in particular, the last two years

going back to back and breaking the phenomenal run St Andrews College has had, on home soil in Invercargill 2019 was huge. “It’s exactly why you pour all those hours into recruiting and teaching. It’s not just the winning though” Ali explains. “To see a youngster get on the pipes for the first time, or nailing a specific objective, that’s what its about. Even our Grade 4B at the nationals this year, with so many wee youngsters at their first nationals went on to be runners up is just as satisfying, and knowing some youngsters just figuring out how to march and blow tone, never mind nailing performances. They certainly raised the level that weekend”.

His role with ILT City of Invercargill is focused around the development of young players, so teaching skills are vital. “I love teaching. My mother was a teacher at the local school in Garve. I’ve close to 50 piping students a week now which keeps me super busy, and some solid local players/tutors doing some great work underneath. Just need to keep working away and not take a breath, as soon as you take a breather you’ll fall backwards.”

**On Point A, and in control. Hawkes Bay 2021**



Ali's most recent appointment is to the position of Musical Director of the National Youth Pipe Band of NZ. The Youth Band programme had gone into a virtual recession since Callum Gilchrist relinquished the role of musical director, but Education Group leader Mike Sander got the ball rolling again, and in 2020, announced the new image, new leadership team, and a plethora of new candidates for positions within the band. Since then the band has gone from strength to strength, and Ali is looking to build on this over the next few years. Now with a strong base of players, there are a number of projects on the horizon. Since Ali's appointment the band has gathered on four occasions, including a camp in Nelson, Summer School in January 2021, and Wellington in April this year, where they performed on live television at the ANZAC parade and service, and the most recent was a split camp with pipers in Wellington and drummers in Christchurch. An outstanding video has been released of the band from the ANZAC day, which is being used as a promotion for both the NYPBoNZ and the wider band movement.. Next stop is a week long South Island Tour penned for the beginning of October. "I've thoroughly enjoyed my time with the youngsters so far. They have a great attitude, bags of talent, and I'm very excited to see where we can take it. We have a great team both in terms of the management with Kim Eagle but also in the tutoring team with Davey Welsh, Davy Clark, and Tiffany Gilchrist. Everyone is excited to see what's in store but for sure yeah, the first stop is Southern Tour of Christchurch, Timaru and Dunedin this October which myself and the whole squad are looking forward to showcasing the talent within".

Ali's drive, leadership, determination and skill is taking the youth band to new heights. With a number of public performances ahead, including a concert in Christchurch's newest performance venue The Piano on 6 October, kicking off "The Evolution Tour" with subsequent performances in Timaru and Dunedin. "We hope to keep developing players musically, and create exciting innovative sets and take new fresh material on tour in 2022 around the Central North Island. While NZ borders remain shut, the band will perform around NZ as much as possible. A goal of Ali's is also to make an album during his tenure, work already beginning around that. In the meantime, each meet we have, the team is moulding, the tunes are getting tighter, the more fun we are having. Looking forward to October certainly!"

And if all this isn't too much, Ali and Renee are expecting their first child in December! Ali and Renee were married in 2019, and met through the Invercargill

Pipe Band, Renee was a drummer in the Grade 3 and 2 band when Ali moved across to take on the P/M role.

"Just busy enough being a G1 pipe major in Invercargill, looking after Inver's other bands, Musical Director of the Youth band, solos etc.. haha! Better to be busy though than not!"

Ali's piping CV currently has a multiple time World, Scottish, Australian, NZ and an International Quartet Challenge Pipe Band Champion on it. His youngsters in Invercargill are the current NZ Juvenile Champions, and the Invercargill system is constantly growing with a Grade 1, Grade 3, Grade 4B and 2 Juvenile bands established with work underway on a 3rd Juvenile. In the last 12 months, his pupils have been picking up National Titles in B Grade at Hastings, Silver Chanter, Queen's Birthday solo competitions, including his brother in law Adam Waghorn who recently took out the Silver Medal at Hastings. At 35 years old he has plenty more goals and objectives to complete, certainly a man on a mission and a man in demand! Ali cites having a good attitude and being humble as two of the key characteristics to be successful. Being respectful, everyday you are learning!

\* \* \*

This has been great insight into the "big man" and the people who have influenced him and given him the drive and focus he undoubtedly has. Family and friends obviously play a huge part in his success, but so does talent, leadership ability, dogged determination and the desire to achieve excellence. When you take more joy out of seeing others succeed, the unselfish characteristics become ever more apparent.

To move to a far flung land and create such a legacy in such a short time is unparalleled, and we look forward to seeing how the National Youth Pipe Band of NZ and ILT City of Invercargill bands continue to develop under his guidance, but to be sure, what we'll experience won't be dull, and it will be successful.

-Chris Stevens



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4th Prize \$100 (plus medals for 1st, 2nd and 3rd)

### Event Two

#### Hornpipe & Jig

Minimum 4 parts for each tune (2 x 2 parted tunes not permissible). Only one set required.

1st Prize \$500, 2nd Prize \$300, 3rd Prize \$200,  
4th Prize \$100 (plus medals for 1st, 2nd and 3rd)

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