

Nationals 2020 | A HUGE success



Chris Stevens

To understand why Invercargill won the bid to host the 2020 contest, following another South Island contest in 2019 (Dunedin), let's take a quick trip back to the contest in Nelson 2017, and at the Annual General Meeting where Otago and Southland went head to head vying for the right to host 2019. On that occasion, Otago won the race. Leap forward a year, and despite efforts by the management board to secure a bid from a North Island band or centre, there were none, and just as it was being decided to hand the task of finding a host to the Board, Southland spoke up again, saying they were ready and willing to revise their plans, given they'd already secured support in their community, including financial.

We probably should dispel a commonly believed myth that NZ national contests alternate North then South Islands. Now I can't be 100% certain about the rules of the association before the restructuring in the early 1990's but I can be certain that since then, there has been nothing in the contest rule book to suggest this is a requirement. There have been other instances of consecutive contests in an Island (1966 and 1967 South Island, 1960 and 1961 North Island, 1958 and 1959 South Island and so on), with the most recent being Masterton 2010 and Tauranga 2012 when the Timaru contest was cancelled due to the Canterbury earthquakes, Tauranga was due to hold the contest on two consecutive years but allowed Timaru to hold its event in 2013.

Anyway - I digress.

So here we were, off to Invercargill - the first time since 2005. Because of the back to back South Island contests, and both being in the south of the south, there had been murmurings by a few bands that rather than facing the expense two years in a row they were considering not attending Invercargill, and going to the Australian

Champs instead, as the Australians were promoting with intensity their 60th Anniversary Contest as something of a celebration. As it transpired, we had a pretty full muster, so it would seem no-one wanted to miss out on our own championships. And as we were to later discover, the Australian contest didn't go ahead.

As you may recall, we had two overseas adjudicators on the panels this year, being Paul Turner from Scotland (ensemble) and Terry Tully from Ireland (piping). It is always a great experience working with people with the knowledge and skill levels that these two possess. We've been very fortunate over a number of years to have top class overseas adjudicators - this year was certainly no exception.

For readers who attended the last contest in Invercargill, you may recall the venue caused a few issues for bands. To be fair the weather was appalling, but the venue didn't help the cause, with ankle-deep water lying in parts. This year couldn't have been more different. The venue was the Invercargill Cricket Grounds right next to Queens Park. We LOVE cricket grounds. They're flat and well groomed, and perfect for our purposes. It helped too that over the two days, we had wonderful sunny weather.

I've written the contest roundup for NZPB for a few years now, and on several occasions have done this as an adjudicator. This year was the same - I was on Panel 1 with Terry Tully and Martin Frewen (piping) and Scott Michell (drumming). I've spoken at length with various members of Panel 2, which included Lance Turnbull and Brian Switalla (piping), Paul Turner (ensemble) and Ross Levy (drumming). Floating between the two panels was Ian Steel (bass and tenor) - he had the busiest of times. And of course, we have the luxury of being able to review all performances from the livestreaming which is now available on Youtube™.

So let's take this event by event, day by day.

Friday - Day 1.

The sun was up, and it looked as if a great day lay ahead. With the first band on at 9:00am however, and probably having arrived at the ground at 8:00am, there was dew on the grass, and it was a little cool.

Grade 4A MSR event kicked off first, with the bands progressing to the Medley event within an hour. The 4B MSR followed 4A on Board One, and Grade 3 MSR followed the 4A Medley on Board Two.

4A had a field of 10 bands including seven from the South Island, two from the North, and one from Australia (Brisbane Boys College Old Collegians PB), and Grade 4B included 13 bands, with just three bands from the North Island, and the Clan Gordon PB from San Diego & Seattle from the USA. The top end of the event proved to be of a quite high standard, with most bands selecting music commensurate with the grade, and player capabilities, but typically in Grade 4A and 4B, each band will present with strengths and weaknesses, so it can really be difficult to place bands consistently through the results sheets. As it happened, the bands eventually taking the higher finishing positions were typically strong in all disciplines, without huge variation across the results sheet.

In Grade 4B it was a battle between two of the North Island bands City of Rotorua and Hamilton Caledonian, taking an event each, and tying in the Championship. The 14 point tie was split by ensemble preference in the MSR for City of Rotorua to take the win. Scottish Society of NZ had two 3rd places to finish 3rd overall, and ILT City of Invercargill finished with two 4ths.

Grade 4A was also very tight at the top Hokonui Celtic, Celtic PB (Nelson) and ILT City of Invercargill jostling for position in both events, with Papakura taking second spot in the Medley, but in the final analysis Hokonui Celtic hoisted the top prize from Celtic PB (Nelson) by a single point, with ILT City of Invercargill taking 3rd place.

A point we on Panel 1 noted - very few bands were able to get away cleanly. In a performance, it's the one element all bands need to work on to improve. It was astounding how many players were caught off-guard when the command came to 'Quick March', given the "pipee" had been singing away there for a few bars, hopefully at the tempo and timing that the band

would commence playing. I have an opinion that not all players know how to go from a standing still position to one of forward movement. Here's the way I see it:

If you lean forward, your body takes a defensive position to protect face and teeth, so it sticks a leg out. Voila! Marching! So, it's just a matter of listening to the count, and leaning forward at the appropriate (and well-rehearsed) moment. I know that a key instruction in military days was to "not anticipate the order", but in musical events, you need to have educated anticipation to make sure the first step forward lands on the already determined first beat of the opening rolls. There you go - that's the lesson for the day

Grade 3 was a smaller grade than usual both last year and this, with just five bands, and only Canterbury Caledonian from the South Island. In 2018 there were nine with again just one from the south, and nine also in 2017.

Regardless of the size, the competition was close - VERY close. In the MSR, Manawatu Scottish and City of Tauranga tied for 1st place with 9 points (Manawatu Scottish winning on ensemble preference), while Canterbury Caledonian and Hawkes Bay Caledonian tied for 3rd with 11 points (Canterbury Cale 3rd on ensemble preference). The Medley was much the same with Canterbury Cale winning with 6 points in ensemble preference, tied with Manawatu Scottish. In the Championship, Manawatu Scottish sneaked in with a 2-point margin over Canterbury Caledonian, with City of Tauranga finishing 3rd. This was an excellent grade to listen to.

We'd been treated to some wonderful music during the course of a very busy day, and to cap it off, the Juvenile event.

Nine bands, nine great performances - all great for their own special reasons. Celtic PB (Nelson) was up first. This band and its higher-grade sister bands have been a success story to behold over the past few years, and the Juvenile band put on an excellent performance. The Kiwi adjudicators have become used to an extraordinarily high standard in Juvenile over many years, but this was a great start to the competition.

One of the tremendous attributes of the Juvenile event is the support every band gets from the listening public. Each received rapturous applause at the conclusion of their performance, for a variety of reasons. The precision and powerful sound, the gumption, the nerves, the size of band great or small - every band had its moment in the sun. The last band to perform was



ILT City of Invercargill Juvenile A (yes, like St Andrew's College, ILT City of Invercargill had two bands in Juvenile), and that was it - the most amazing performance, exuding confidence, proficiency, accuracy, musicality, control, exuberance - you name it, they had it. So, from first on to last on, we were treated to the jewel of the contest. Terry Tully was astounded at the quality of performances, comparing the event more than favourably to any competition day in Ireland.

Saturday - Day 2.

The bottom quarter of the South Island is steeped in the heritage of Scotland, so given a fine morning, and a pipe band contest out on the street, you can only imagine what it was like. The locals came out in force to support the street march. All manner of furniture was dragged "oot th' hoose" to the nearby footpath to take prime position, and a more appreciative yet parochial crowd you would not meet. They cheered for everyone, but they knew the locals. The applause given to the southern bands was unbelievable. Waimatuku Southern Scenic was resplendent in the big uniform, ultimately winning Grade 4A, The three ILT City of Invercargill bands (4B 4th but 2nd in music, 4A 2nd but 1st in music, G2 1st overall), and Hokonui Celtic were clapped and cheered the length of the course. Canterbury Caledonian Society won Grade 3, and Canterbury Caledonian Society won Grade 1.

At the conclusion, the Grade 4 bands combined for a massed-band back down the street from end to start - a highlight for many onlookers. A great showing of bands to the general public, which I'm sure contributed to the crowds who came into the park for the afternoon events.

And so, it was time for the Grade 2 and 1 music events. Grade 2 comprised seven bands, the first up on the MSR board being Northland Caledonian PB based in Whangarei, with three others from the North, and three from the South Island. Between the MSR and Medley panels there was a bit of jostling for position with ILT City of Invercargill, St Andrew's College, Celtic PB and Wellington Red Hackle all getting into top three positions, but with one band scoring eight 1st's, the winner was undisputable. ILT City of Invercargill was head and shoulders above the rest, and deserved Grade 2 Champions. Great to happen on home turf in front of the appreciative home crowd and sponsors. St Andrew's College, who have won this Grade for a number of years, finished second ahead of Wellington Red Hackle.

The Grade 2 events were run end to end, leaving then just

the four Grade 1 bands to do the same. The play order was Canterbury Caledonian Society, Auckland & District, New Zealand Police and Manawatu Scottish. The gathered were treated to four high quality performances in both events, the proof of the closeness highlighted in a tie for 1st place on 6 points between Canterbury Caledonian and Manawatu Scottish, with Canterbury Cale taking it on ensemble preference, but then winning the Medley event just 2 points ahead of Manawatu Scottish to win the NZ Champion Grade 1 title by just 2 points overall. An outstanding medley in particular, giving the relatively young leadership team a remarkable result.

The day gradually drew to a close as the Mace Flourishing took place, ultimately won by Callum Thomson of Papakura, the Display event with two competitors this year being McAlpines North Canterbury, and the American visiting band Clan Gordon, who had come to NZ to "get as much out of the trip as possible".

The massed bands March Past and prize giving followed, and ALL the results are available at www.nzpipebands.org.nz/contests for anyone to download and peruse.

So that was that. If we had to find a word to describe the contest as a whole, I'd suggest "brilliant", "outstanding" and "unforgettable" would have to be in contention, and that would apply also to Brendan Copeland and his organising committee. They ran a good ship, with a focus on the bands having a memorable weekend in Invercargill. Mission accomplished.

Although the competition was over, the weekend was not. On the Sunday morning a number of people gathered to hear Terry Tully and Paul Turner present their thoughts on various topics, including, specifically, medley construction, leadership and succession planning, percussion arrangements and drum scoring, as well as aspects of adjudication, and numerous other topics. These Sunday mornings have become something of a tradition at our national contests now, and invariably offer something for every attendee to take away.

Now we need to look at what the days may have been if the contest was scheduled for the following weekend. If there was a question in relation to this ponderous thought the answer would be straight forward - it simply would not have happened. COVID-19 would have had the final say in our year's work. Now THAT is a sobering thought.

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NZPB received a couple of emails from special attendees at the contest and we're delighted to present them.

Clan Gordon Pipe Band (USA)

- Pipe Major Ross Naismith

The 2020 New Zealand Pipe Band Championship experience far exceeded my expectations. Traveling over from the United States took a lot of planning. The Clan Gordon Pipe Band is based out of Tacoma, Washington. For this New Zealand trip, a group of players from San Diego, California were mixed in. Watching from afar in years past I had an idea of what to expect, but I and we in the Clan Gordon Pipe Band could not have been happier with the overall experience. Sure, we would have liked to have performed a little better in the MSR and Medley competitions, but the supplemental events on offer, the Street March and Display, offered us two more chances to perform. We thoroughly enjoyed all of the events.

The Championships were first class. It reminded me of being at the Worlds or another major in Scotland. The grounds were all about the bands, with a few vendors mixed in. The arenas were superb. I have to give a massive thank you to the organizers and the stewards who helped usher the bands around throughout the two days. They were all very helpful, eager to assist, and that was greatly appreciated. As I watched some of the bands go from final tuning to the main arenas, the stewards would gather all the bands' water bottles and get them out of the way for the next band coming in. Such great attention to detail here.

We wanted to make the most of our time during our nine day stay in New Zealand, with our first stopover being Dunedin. A number of us enjoyed a place called Best Cafe, good food and good people, and the area known as the Octagon was also a sight to behold. We practiced mostly at a local park and squeezed in a quick blow next to the old Cadbury factory, which was also across from the local police station. Thankfully no-one called the police on us! After a few nights in Dunedin we hired a Coach to take us to Invercargill.

Upon arriving in Invercargill the first order of business was practice! The local newspaper even came by for an interview and stayed at the practice for a while. They did a nice write up on the band that appeared in the paper the next day.

Invercargill is a great place and the locals were very hospitable during our stay. We had a couple of Burt Munro fans in the band, and the local Motorcycle Mecca served as both a great museum and restaurant!

If any overseas bands are looking for a high quality new band experience, consider New Zealand and the New Zealand Pipe Band Championships. I can't recommend it enough, and I look forward to returning some day.

- Ross
Clan Gordon Pipe Band

NZ Pipe Band Championships

- Terry Tully

What a great honour and absolute privilege to be invited as one of the piping judges for the 2020 New Zealand Pipe Band Championships. Having been to New Zealand just the previous year solely as a tourist it was my intention to revisit as soon as was possible. New Zealand is a beautiful country in many ways, it's impressive spectacular scenery and its friendly welcoming people to mention a couple, not unlike Ireland at all.

New Zealand has always been very strong in the pipe band world as well and for a small country to produce so many great pipe bands is truly amazing. I remember as a young pipe major in the early 90's hearing the New Zealand Police Pipe Band at the worlds and thinking, wow, that'll be hard to beat. I can't remember where the band finished on the day but the respect for New Zealand and its pipe bands went up a lot by many people who listened.

The main highlight for me was the high standard of the juvenile grade. There were some very fine performances delivered from some of the youngest competitors on the park. Scotland also has a very high standard of juvenile bands and I honestly feel the best juvenile performances I heard on the day are on a par with the best in Scotland. It must be said, these young people would not be as good as they are if it wasn't for the excellent instruction from their tutors, hats off to them.

I had many highlights over the two-day event of the championships, another one of them being the street parade. I think as a player, for some bands this might have been something they could have done without. In hindsight, given the very warm conditions this may have been a blessing in disguise for bands as it helps to generate sufficient moisture to settle and stabilise the reeds. With the street lined with people, the sun shining and all the bands sounding well it was a great start to the final day of competitions.

I feel the weather conditions took its toll with some performances. While nice sunny weather can often bring out the best in a performance, too much of it can ruin one. Some bands were maybe a little lucky to have slightly cooler weather than others which helped them manage their sound better. Some bands maybe not expecting the extreme heat on the day, were just a little high in pitch to begin with. Others had the sun come out very hot during their performance which put some distance between drones and chanter and also caused sensitive notes on the chanter to become unstable. All in all, and taking everything into consideration, the standard of all performances was very strong across all the grades.

I must complement the staff of the RNZPBA for their very professional running of the championships. The venue and organisation of the two-day event has to be one of the best I've seen, congratulations to all concerned.

My trip to NZ came to an untimely end because of the Covid-19, but while on my short visit I've learnt that NZ Pipe Bands are some of the best in the world, Also up there is NZ Lamb and the finest Sauvignon Blanc I've ever tasted.

My best wishes to all New Zealand Pipe Bands for the future.
Slan,
Terry Tully

