Beer and Bagpipes – the 2018 Scottish Games

By Alex Wilson
For Clay Today

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – Bagpipes, drums and the sound of boots stepping in unison broke through the din of the evening. A parade of kilts and instruments, marching in military fashion, made a path through the bustling crowd. The Scottish Games had come to Clay County.

On Feb. 24, an eclectic group of people came together, forgetting their differences in favor of celebrating their similarities. Their kilts sported a variety of colors, the different tartans marking the wearer's clan. Yet while they divided themselves by family, they united together in honor of their Scottish heritage.

"Here at the games, our goal is to promote Scottish culture, heritage and education," said Audie Gibson, president of the Jacksonville Scottish Highland Games.

From 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., the Clay County Fairgrounds hosted the 23rd Annual Northeast Florida Scottish Games and Festival. Vendors selling kilts and clan accessories set up shop next to kitchens serving traditional Scottish cuisine.

Yet, not everything was entirely authentic, and the air of the fair took on a distinctly Scottish-American tone. The smell of haggis, a traditional Scottish dish comprised of sheep's organs, oatmeal, barley and spices, mingled with the scent of funnel cake and nachos. Meanwhile, the music of live traditional folk music dueled with the modern Celtic punk band the Dropkick Murphys playing over the sound system.

While the Scottish Games host a huge variety of acts and events, such as the

From left, Clan MacLaren representatives Corey L. Patterson and Joe Clark .

competitive sports they're known known for, the highlight of this year's games didn't seem to be any particular game or band. Instead, the most popular feature was also the newest: a whole tent dedicated to beer. Gibson said that he's been working for six years to get legislation through to allow it.

"It's the first time there's been alcohol [at the Scottish Games] here in Clay County, but there are restrictions on it," said Gibson. "You can't walk around the fair with beer in your hand, you have to stay in the tent."

The beer tent operated on a poker chip system, where buyers would pay for chips at one booth, and then trade that in for beer at another. There were at least three officers and a number of volunteers monitoring the tent and checking ID's at the entrance, and throughout the day the tent stayed packed.

According to Gibson, the beer tent sold

STAFF PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON
A parade marched through the fairgrounds at midday, sporting traditional Scottish instruments.

at least 10 kegs between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., something that had him and other fair administrators excited. Due to the success of the tent, Gibson said that next year's games will likely have two tents, in order to double the access – and the profits.

For many of the participants, however, the Games are more than just a friendly get-together or competition. Instead, the event provides a medium for preserving their heritage and passing it down to the next generation. About 47 clans set up booths under the shade of the main arena, where they created a place to meet and educate themselves and others about their clan histories.

Grant Baker of Jacksonville manned the Clan Davidson stand. He's been participating in the games for over 20 years, but

he's only worked the clan's stand for four.

"It's a really a form of teaching. We have a lot of people who are first timers who are wanting to find out more about their heritage," said Baker.

After the closing ceremonies, only a small crowd stayed to hear the last of the bands. The rest headed home, weary and ready to hang up their kilts. Yet, they'll be back next year. Another clan representative, Corey Patterson of Clan MacLaren, felt the games aren't just about education, but also camaraderie and a little bit of comfort.

"We're here as a meeting place for any clan member who's in the area. Every year, they have a place to go and meet old friends," said Patterson. "And it's also a place just to hang out in the shade."