

HEARTBEAT World Eskimo-Indian Olympics

by Jill McGuire

For the Tundra Times

Alaska photojournalist Mark Kelley attended his first World Eskimo Indian Olympics in 1975. His fascination with the festival led him to research its historical roots, the meaning of the dances and the cultures that produced such traditions.

Kelley returned eight times in 10 years.

In the course of his studies, Kelley found, much to his surprise, that nothing had been written on Alaska Native sports, and very little on their dances. Kelley decided to produce a book.

Last year, Kelley, along with journalist Annabel Lund, former managing editor of the Homer News, traveled across Alaska — to Anchorage, Barrow, Bethel, Fairbanks, Kotzebue, Minto, Point Hope and Wainwright — to interview WEIO participants in their home villages.

Their work produced "HEART-BEAT: World Eskimo Indian Olympics," a fascinating look at Alaska Native sport and dance traditions. The book has been endorsed by WEIO's Board of Directors as the official book of World Eskimo Indian Olympics.

Through Kelley's sharp images and Lund's often lyrical prose, the reader is taken on a journey through the Eskimo and Indian villages and into the homes of WEIO participants.

The reader meets Reggie Joule, a champion Native athlete, who after 10 years of winning awards and shattering world records, has dedicated himself to teaching youngsters the Inupiat values and skills needed for survival. It is here that the uninitiated learns the games are designed to teach the children patience, respect, good humor, courage, sharing and cooperation.

In sharp contrast to the competitiveness and violence of European sports, the Natives value cooperation. An example from the book illustrates this:

"During the 1984 International Olympic Games in Los Angeles the bitter contest between American runner Mary Decker and South African Zola Budd had been making headlines for weeks. Decker's fall and subsequent angry accusations sullied that track and field competition, leaving a bad aftertaste for spectators and athletes alike.

"On that same day, in the Fairbanks



Leader of the Barrow dance team, Robert Okpeaha, wears the traditional loon headdress. The Barrow dance group holds the record for the Eskimo Dance Competition, having won the gold medal 14 times. photo by Mark Kelly

ice rink, young Brian Randazzo was attempting to break the world record for the One-Foot High Kick. He had already won the gold medal for the contest and was competing against himself to top his personal best. But something went wrong on his third and final try and he missed.

"In one voice, his fellow contestants rose to their feet shouting, 'Give him another chance! Let him do it over!' The judges acquiesced, and carried away by the enthusiasm, Randazzo

leapt 9'2" into the air and broke the world record. The crowd went wild. Randazzo was swept off his feet by his fellow athletes and carried triumphantly across the stadium.

"Mary Decker would never have been given a second chance. Brian Randazzo might have been given a

third."

In a chapter devoted to the village of Wainwright, Kelley and Lund portray one village's attempt to preserve its heritage in the midst of the encroaching pressures of contemporary

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society. Lund describes a practice session of Wainwright's award-winning dance team, where the distant sound of rock music played on urban boom boxes mixes with the ceremonial music of the village dance team's drummers.

Kelley's photographs and Lund's writing succeed in showing the determination and respect the young athletes have for the games and dances. Kelley photographs Greg Nothstine of Anchorage, as he strives for a new record in the Two-Foot High Kick at WEIO.

Another photograph shows Nothstine strolling along the Avenue A bridge.

The photos are striking. Even without reading the text, we realize that the Native games have helped Nothstine and other youths to preserve their cultural identities in an urban setting.

The final chapter offers a standard explanation of each of WEIO's 26 events. It is here that the insights gained by Kelley's eight plus years of photographing WEIO are most evident.

His images capture the pain of a

Knuckle Hop contestant as he literally hops across the floor on his knuckles. Kelley's breathtaking shots of the Blanket Toss illustrate the concentration and cooperation needed for that event. And his photographs of the seal and fish skinning contests and the dress and parka contest and the Native Baby contest all capture the intense pride and respect that Natives have for their heritage.

In the book's forward, Kelley wrote that he hoped to foster a greater understanding of the Alaska Native culture to the uninitiated, while providing Native people with a book that chronicles their games and dances.

He need not worry. HEARTBEAT does both.

HEARTBEAT World Eskimo Indian Olympics. Photographs by Mark Kelley, written by Annabel Lund. Published by Fairweather Press, Juneau, Alaska 99802. 1986