

Olympics are a fine fun tradition

One of the finest and funnest and most entertaining of Alaska Native traditions will begin on July 30 when 400 athletes and participants in the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics gather in Fairbanks to compete in three days of good-natured competition.

The 20-year-old annual event heralds back to days gone by when Native peoples gathered in the villages to trade goods, bring news of other places and visit with friends after a year of isolation.

Then and now the games provided a chance for individuals to compete in friendly events. They also provided competitors a chance to match skills of strength, agility and endurance necessary to live in a harsh environment but also featured and emphasized the softer and equally important skills of cultural knowledge and crafts.

The olympic games are the center of attention now, but the friendly atmosphere today, as in the past, is what brings people together, a time of meeting with friends not seen for a season, a time for rest, for talking and for laughter.

The games also have grown in size and importance since they began. But they have not become too big for their roots. The World Eskimo-Indian Olympic committee and the people who work to put on the WEIO are still all volunteer save for one paid office employee. The dedication possessed by those volunteers is a warm and wonderful thing.

In this, the people who work for the games are emulating the two men who organized the Olympics in 1961.

The games were introduced by two men who were already aware that Natives would have to fight hard to preserve their traditions. Bud Hagberg and Frank Whaley were fearful that the influx of white settlers in the state would erode the importance of Native traditions and values and their fear has been transformed into a monument to two people who cared enough to work hard and provided a monument to the culture that nurtured them.

To them a great debt is owed.

And what better way to show appreciation and respect and gratitude for their commitment than to attend the games and applaud the people - athletes and workers - who have worked so hard to retain the important values and skills of the Native people.