

She's straining for 2 inches in her high kick

by Jeffrey R. Richardson
for the Tundra Times

FAIRBANKS — Cathy Bennett is concerned, and time is running short. She hasn't been able to train effectively during the past few months she's

been attending vocational school in Seward.

With the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics opening in a matter of days, she's determined to break the world record in the Alaskan High Kick. She

has met the record — 5 feet 10 inches — in previous games, but has her sights set on 6 feet.

For 30 years, the games have provided an opportunity for hundreds of people, young and old, representing

all Alaska Native cultures, to compete in traditional games of skill, speed, strength and stamina.

WEIO also includes Native dance competition, and the games host

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athletes, dancers and visitors from Canada.

The 1990 games are scheduled for July 25-28 in Fairbanks.

This year, for the first time, Soviet visitors from Fairbanks' Siberian sister city of Yakutsk may be on hand to observe and demonstrate Native skills from across the Bering Straits.

Billy Mills, the renowned Indian runner and hero to many Native Americans regardless of their athletic interests, will make a special presentation at the games this year.

Mills, in a stunning performance taking on legendary qualities with the passage of time, won the 10,000 meters at the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964.

Upholding the high standards of world-class competitors like Mills, participants in WEIO pursue the games for a variety of reasons: camaraderie with other athletes, pursuit of personal excellence and maintaining a personal link with a treasured past.

Rex Snyder, originally from Barrow, remembers learning of the traditional games:

"When I was younger, my relatives — aunts and uncles — they showed me. They touched on some of the games they used to play a long time ago, those being the kicks, and I caught onto those at an early age. As I grew, I became a stronger and stronger competitor."

Snyder says the games largely originated as a vehicle for teaching crucial survival skills and developing stamina.

"The kicks were designed as a signal, such as Indians might have a smoke signal. With Eskimos, when you could not make verbal contact,

like across ice floes or open leads, a hunter would jump up and kick his feet out in front of him and people would see that and that would signify a successful kill of some sort. And it's also a joyous expression of the hunt," Snyder said.

Such games are still the focal point of winter festivities in Barrow.

"I've been back to the hometown every now and then to compete in Eskimo games held between Christmas and New Year's. We compete for 24 hours a day for four days. You sleep when you can and compete when you can.

"That's how they used to do it long ago during the dark, cold winters when everybody gathered together and tested skills amongst each other," Snyder said.

For Lina Allen, a 16-year-old Athabascan from Fairbanks, there is a strong perception that the games and the qualities they are intended to nurture are strongly linked to cultural survival.

"I think maybe we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those skills," Allen noted.

Games originating in Athabascan country include the Indian Stick Pull, in which two contestants pull on a stick tapered at both ends. The manual dexterity needed for this game comes in handy when pulling fish out of a fishwheel or net.

The greased pole walk simulates walking on a slimy fishwheel platform to retrieve the catch.

A newcomer to the games, Allen is less interested in competition than the

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personal sense of achievement from testing her own limits.

"I think in the old days it wasn't as competitive. It was to do your personal best. At WEIO now, they emphasize for me just to do my best."

In all, there are 25 events featured in the games, from fish-cleaning and seal-skinning to the ear pull, knuckle hopping and the four-man carry.

Snyder plans to compete in most events, including the fish-cleaning competition. He laughs remembering the mixture of pride and embarrassment the year he placed second in this event, besting a number of venerable elder fish cutters.

Meanwhile, Bennett catches up on her Alaskan High Kick workouts.

"I know I can get at least 5 feet, 10 inches. I want to get 6 feet. Two inches is a lot to get. I never realized that, but when it comes to kicking, yes it is. It's so much fun. It's a real challenge, and I love challenges. The Alaskan High Kick is perfect for it," Bennett said.

Steve Crosby, general manager of WEIO predicts continued growth for the games. Having come a long way

from humble beginnings, he hopes to continue increasing the number of athletes participating, from Alaska and Canada as well as from the Soviet Union.

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"One of the things we've talked about with the board is getting some of these games into the world Olympics," Crosby said.

A feature in *Sports Illustrated* this year won't hurt that effort. And the organization will continue pushing to have Native olympic events added to physical education programs throughout the state.

"There's a growing awareness of the importance of the games, of keeping the games alive," Crosby said.

"There are many goals for continuation of cultural practices and awareness. Teaching awareness requires a tremendous amount of discipline. Discipline is the core lesson, and discipline needs to be applied to survival in different settings now."