

Arctic Winter Games gaining in popularity

By BILL HESS

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Native sports have reached a point of popularity where they are now a top crowd drawer and press attention-getter in events such as the Arctic Winter Games. If Reggie Joule has his way, they will continue to grow until they are accepted just like basketball now is in the athletic schedules of high schools across the state.

They also will receive the status and consideration in competition at events such as the Arctic Winter Games as other sports which currently draw less public interest but which more athletes are allowed to participate in, Joule predicts.

Joule, an athlete from Kotzebue who has set records in the blanket toss, and who participates in most of the Arctic Native sports, was the coach of Team Alaska at this year's Arctic Winter Games, held two weeks ago in Fairbanks.

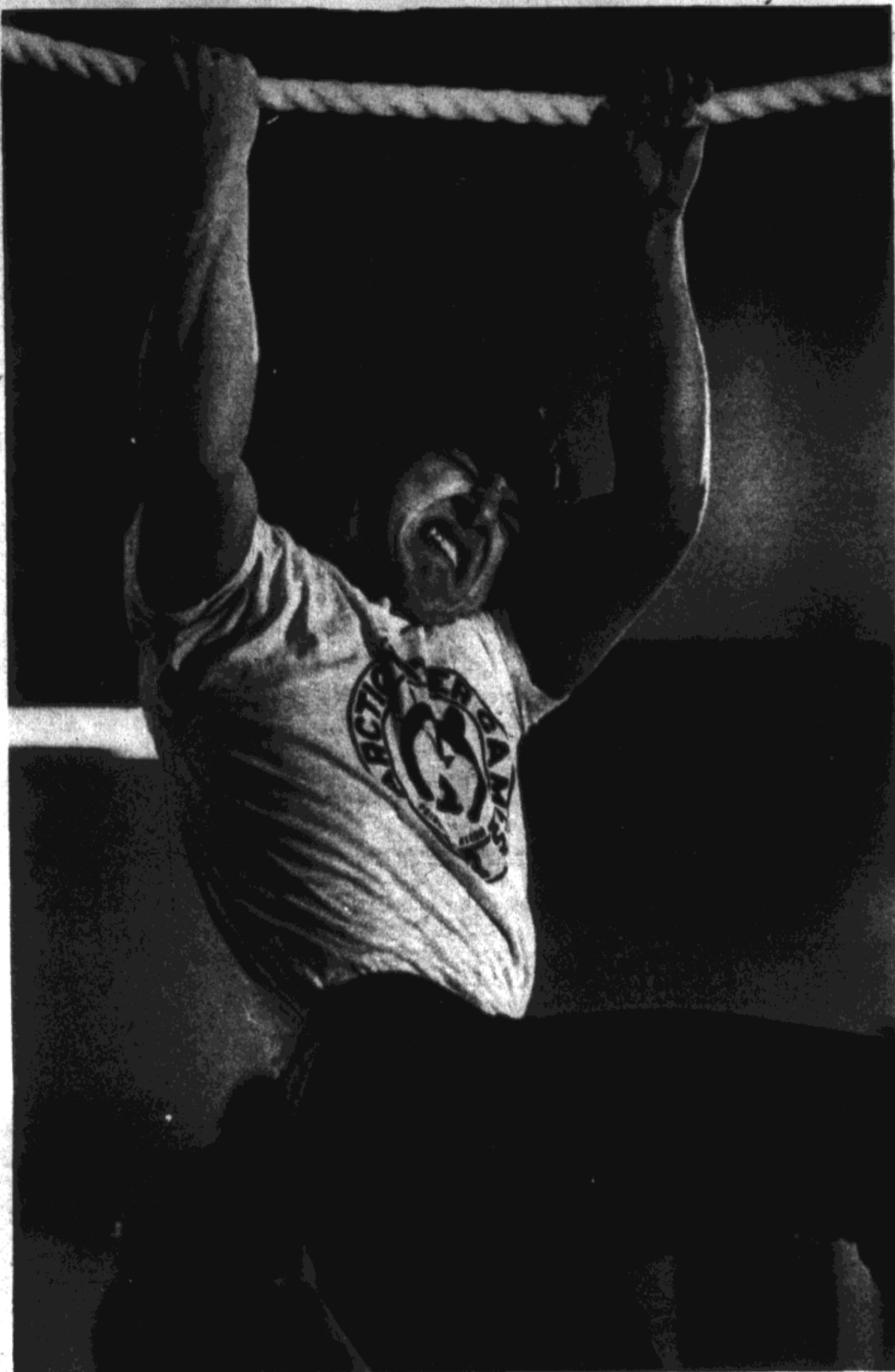
"As always, I got a great feeling of satisfaction," Joule says of this year's events. "Although our team didn't win a hell of a lot, where we did win, we won big!" Joule referred primarily to records in the one and two-foot high kicks which were tied and broken by Alaskan athletes like Towarak of Unalakleet and Lady Laroux of Bethel. Canadian athletes from the Northwest Territories took home the greatest number of medals of the three teams participating.

"Even our kids like Gene Peltola, William Roland, Dinky Walter, Forest Ahkivina; all of them, for some it was their first time in competition. A lot may not have done well in terms of gaining ulus (the gold, silver and bronze medals awarded the top three athletes in each event were cast in the form of ulus) but they gained experience. All of them are talking now about working harder, and learning more sports. Some of them will be back, earning medals."

Although Laroux and Towarak both broke records, Joule expects to see them both go much higher. "If an athlete can make that little seal fly, you know they got room to go higher," Joule explains. "When Lady broke Carol Pickett's record on the two foot high kick (Laroux went five foot 11 inches) that little seal flew. I know she could get six-foot-two or even six-foot-three!"

Towarak broke the record in the mens' one-foot high kick at the games. He reached a height of eight foot, 10 inches. "That young man's got a tremendous amount of potential yet," says Joule. "He'll be kicking the rim of a basketball hoop (10 feet) soon!"

Joule was most pleased by the amount of press coverage given to the Native



Reggie Joule may be all grimaces and determination as a competitor but he and others channel their determination into the overall success of all competitors at the Arctic Winter Games. Joule feels that there are no losers among the people who compete at the traditional games.

games this year, and by the crowds which showed up to watch the competition. Joule himself appeared on a Canadian Broadcast Company interview which was expected to get world-wide distribution. "This kind of coverage can do nothing but help our sport," he predicts.

Native games already have come a long way in the Arctic games. Before 1980, there were no women athletes participating in the Native games. "I gambled, and brought Lady along as a member of our team," Joule remembers the competition held in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. "The result was that a lot of doors were opened for future participation of women in the games. I may have got her in, but Lady did the rest on her own."

This year, teams participating in Native sports were allowed to bring 11 participants; eight men and three women. A good step, Joule feels, yet much more needs to be done. More women

athletes need to be allowed, and there need to be more types of games included. In addition, separate categories need to be set up for senior and junior age groups, so that young, green athletes who now compete against older, more seasoned competitors also will have a chance to bring home a few medals. Most of the other sports recognized at the games, from table tennis to hockey, already have such divisions.

Joule also would like to see the participants of Native sports have more input into what traditional games are played. This year, Joule and many other athletes were surprised to arrive at the games and to find that two events, the knuckle hop and the ear pull, had been eliminated by the games board without any consultation with Native participants.

"I had brought people who could do those games," Joule explained. "It would have made a difference in my se-

lection. The corporation people, the board, someone along the way, voiced concern; these games were too bloody, gory, barbaric! Because of that, these games were pulled out. It upset those of us who actually do the sports. We weren't asked. We had absolutely no say in the decision.

"You take hockey, basketball. I've played enough basketball to know that sometimes someone sticks an elbow into someone when it's not necessary. A lot of times it's on purpose. These sports get bloody, too."

"It was important, and it's still important in our culture to know how much an individual can take, how much pain he can endure. For some, this might mean a few stitches in the ear, or a band-aid on the hands. It's a lot like father, like son. If my father can do it, so can I!"

"One point in the knuckle hop, after so much pain, the knuckles become numb. Then the event is in the arms. It's

the strength of the arms. So you have two types of competition going on; endurance and strength, plus the discipline of the mind to endure pain."

Joule anticipates using the popularity of the Native sports as a leverage point in convincing the Arctic Winter Games Board to expand the teams and add more sports. "The Native games are the heart of the games," he explains. "The true Arctic sports. Take them out, and you yank the heart out of the entire event."

Joule also looks for the day when Native sports can receive funding to help athletes participate in competition of all kinds. Joule, who works for Wien Airlines out of Kotzebue, has in the past taken much time without leave and used his pass privileges to get around the state, promote the games, and put teams together. This year, Wien sponsored his time and travel as he went about the state selecting the athletes who would serve on Team Alaska.

The Canadian teams have long received financial aid through their government, Joule notes, and that is one reason they are so well organized and able to do so well in the competition.

"One of these days, some organization will say, 'Okay, you don't have to worry anymore. Tell us what you need. That may be in the future, but that day will come,' Joule dreams. "I know it! We'll have teams in all the high schools, more Native games, including Indian games, will be added, and we'll have the recognition we deserve all across the state."

Joule recalls two recent events which he believes are steps on the path to greater recognition of Native sports. One occurred in February of last year, when he performed the blanket toss for Pope John Paul II during his visit to Alaska. "What a powerful credit as an audience, the Pope! I was so close to him, I could hear him blessing us as I was going up. When he did that, I'm not a religious fanatic, but it made everything really worth it!"

Then there was the time he tried to get his young daughter, Louisa, now eight, to do the blanket toss, but she was frightened. "I didn't want to make her afraid, so I just left her alone after that. I'd asked her when she was around and I was doing the toss, but she said 'no,' and that was good enough. Then at Fur Rendezvous, I was just about ready to put down the blanket, and she said she wanted to try. That was really a high for me!"

Joule's wife Linda, deserves much of the credit for his efforts, Joule says, in her support of him when he has spent so many days away from home and work in promoting the game. "She feels the same way I do," Joule chimes. "I couldn't do it without her."

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