

Dear friends in Scottish country dance,

As you may know, I attended the first North American Festival of Scottish Country Dance, held on April 4th, 2026, in Philadelphia. It was put together and hosted by... well, I think by a handful of energetic people from the TAC Youth Committee. TAC (pronounced “tack”) is the SCD Teacher’s Association (Canada), a sort of regional organizing body that played a critical role when all SCD resources emanated from Scotland and were either prohibitively expensive or difficult to come by. Shoes, tartan stuff, brooches and kilt pins, music recordings, books of dance descriptions, workshop teachers, teacher candidate mentors and examiners, and even live musicians were once imported by TAC.

Obviously, the group has had to redefine itself over time as distribution channels changed and resources became less scarce. Progress is glacial but detectable.

I was about to use the acronym NAF to refer to the April 4th event, but, um, no. Let’s call it the Fest.

The Fest is modeled on an SCD competition event held in Newcastle, UK, since a long time ago. Passing references suggest it began about 40 years ago, which would place the first one in the in the mid-80s. Not the mid-60s. And that’s 1980s, for you comedians in the back, not 1880s. In any case, the general idea is to dance two RSCDS dances, one strathspey and one jig or reel, to a high degree of excellence, and watch other sets of dancers do the same. Presumably everyone has practiced extensively; each team certainly coordinated their outfits to create a “team look.” Below are my key observations, in no particular order.

1. There was one (1) team in the Improvers class, featuring dancers who have been doing SCD for less than two years. They were very good.

2. There were no (zero) teams in the 12-and-Under and 18-and-Under classes. A few people in those age categories danced as part of other teams.

3. In between the actual performances and the announcement of the winners of each class, all were invited to do a social dance. Those dances were invariably NOT suited to cold, stiff legs and distracted minds. However, doing The White Heather Jig in a set that knew how it *ought* to go proved once again the truth of Kate’s Principle: The simplest way to signal competence in a group of unfamiliar dancers is to do excellent corner-partner-corner-partner turns. People who can’t do them well are relieved to have the support and people who can are ecstatic to meet someone who does them properly.

4. The program for the Evening Social Dance was totally banana-pants hard. Lots of people left early after, you know, competing all day? And most competitors were in multiple classes? So they didn’t want to do 18 tricky, physically-demanding dances starting at 8 pm, less than 2 hours after the finals results announcement?

5. Nobody seemed to have any idea what the criteria were for judging each class. Team captains got an Adjudication Sheet after the fact but I didn’t get a look at one

(alas).

6. Despite the lack of clear criteria, there is no question that San Francisco deserved to win High Impact Technique. Of course, one of their dances was devised by someone *who was dancing in the set* so we all had high expectations.

7. Hundreds of RSCDS dances have been published. Competitors could choose any of them. Five (5) dances were duplicated across different groups. What...? How... how does that even happen?! Except for Braes of Breadalbane - everyone knows that is a great dance for showing off. That still leaves four (4) duplications.

8. The Open Technique class will have a different theme each year. This year featured dances collected/arranged/choreographed by Mary Isdale MacNab. To borrow the words from Galinda in *Wicked*, the MacNab dances are “unusually and exceedingly peculiar and altogether quite impossible to describe.” But rather fun to watch.

9. The Display class dances were so creative and different from each other, I would have a hard time choosing my favorite. The winning team did a fantasia of *The Royal Deeside Railway*, *S-Locomotion*, and *The Flying Scotsman*. They started with no music, but instead danced to a spoken-word recitation of Emily Dickinson’s poem “I like to see it lap the miles.” Music came in partway through. It was splendid and funny and well-danced. So were all the other displays. See #5 above.

10. Our level of social dancing on a regular Sunday evening, without extra practice, is about what was happening in the Social Demonstration class. I didn’t walk around bragging, but I was very proud of you all in my heart!