

## THE KIRKWALL BA' GAME



A large scrum on Broad Street

Every Christmas and New Year's Day the "Ba" is contested in the streets of Kirkwall. The games are a very important part of the town's calendar to every keen player and spectator, but derided as barbaric and senseless by others. They are also very much a Kirkwall phenomenon, although there are a number of keen country players.

The game seems to have evolved to its present form since about 1800, or slightly earlier, but is in fact much older. "Old style football" was a very popular diversion in Orkney and elsewhere. Its origins are undoubtedly ancient as there are records from Greek and Roman times of ball games being played, and mass football seems to have been played in Roman-occupied Britain.

The French game of "soule" was very like the Kirkwall Ba', according to contemporary descriptions, but died out about the start of World War I due to official suppression.

The Norse also liked sport, including ball games, and it seems that each parish has a Leaquoy (ON *Leik-kvi*, games field). A loose form of football had occurred for a long time before 1800 on the "Ba' Lea" on Old Christmas Day and Old New Year's Day, as well as often after weddings and for other special occasions. It was not until the mid-1800s that the Gregorian calendar was universally adopted in Orkney.

Street football was popular in the past in Britain and France and was mostly



Eager hands at the throw-up

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played on Shrove Tuesday or *Fastern's E'en*. However it only now survives in a few towns in Scotland and England, such as Jedburgh, Duns, Ancrum, Sedgfield, Alnwick, Ashbourne and Workington. Where it has survived the game has become like the Kirkwall one in most cases, with fixed goals and more hand than foot play. In each case the tradition has had to be defended against petty officialdom.

In Kirkwall, the two sides are the Uppies and the Doonies, or more correctly, "Up the Gates" and "Doon the Gates" (ON *Gata*, path or road). Originally the side any individual played on was decided by whether he (or she) was born up or doon the gate, or in modern parlance, street, but with recent housing developments and with most births being in hospital, this tends to be decided by family loyalties nowadays. Which side *fer-ryloupers* (incomers) and people from the isles or rural areas take is either determined by the route taken on their first arrival in



A good throw by Billy Jolly watched by Duncan Currie and Bobby Leslie

Kirkwall, by family influence, or by the side their friends play on.

Originally the New Year's Day Ba' was the only game played. Although the Christmas Day game

became established sometime before 1850, it was only in the 1870s that it became really popular, partly because this was a normal working day for many people. The Boys' Ba' also became "official" about the



The Ba' streaks down into the pack at 1pm on 1 January 2000

A typical Men's Ba'



A rare appearance during the game



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*The Uppies struggle to push up past Tankerness House*



*Once in Victoria Street the Doonies have a hard time fighting back*



*The Ba' makes an appearance at the bottom of Union Street*

*Heading towards the Uppie goal, but the Doonies keep up the fight*



same time.

The Men's Ba' is thrown up at 13:00 at the Market Cross on the Kirk Green opposite the Cathedral, usually by an older Ba' stalwart, but very occasionally by some public figure, with up to 200 players eagerly awaiting the chime of the bells. The Ba' disappears into the scrum, which may spend some considerable time on Broad Street. Much exciting surging and turning play often occurs on this wider part of the street, which can frequently determine the final outcome.

Large numbers of spectators line the Kirk Green and crowd around the scrum as it moves. Apart from the action of the game it is a great social occasion. Occasionally the Ba' appears out of the scrum and someone makes a dash through the crowds of onlookers. To the casual observer this can happen at any moment, but the seasoned Ba'-watcher can often see what is happening long before the Ba' suddenly erupts. Breaks sometimes occur on Broad Street, but can occur anywhere where one side gains sufficient control of part of the scrum.

The Doonies have the benefit of a flat push to Albert Street, while the Uppies have a hard push up an incline to the top of Tankerness Lane. The game

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may also go down St Magnus Lane, or Castle Street onto the open Junction Road. Once there either side may gain the upper hand by means of a smuggle and run, or the scrum may become immobile in one of the many closes and yards.

However if the Uppies manage to enter Victoria Street, or the Doonies Albert Street, the opposition have a much harder time, due to the narrowness and the press of often many hundreds of keen spectators. All the same the Ba' may be restricted for several hours in any of the many lanes and neither side never gives up the struggle until the end is reached. Indeed breaks and smuggles can occur at any time, including very near the opposing goal.

The Doonies goal is the sea, normally within the Basin of the Harbour, but so long as it is immersed in the salt water of Kirkwall Bay, the Ba' has gone doon. The Uppies must round Mackinson's Corner and touch the Ba' to the wall at the junction of Main Street with New Scapa Road, opposite the Catholic Church (also known as Sandison's Corner, the Long Corner or The Old Castle). Once Up or Doon, lengthy argument often ensues before a popular winner is acclaimed. Tradition says that an Uppie win means a good harvest, while a



*The Doonies have a flatter push down Broad Street*



*Once in Albert Street there is little the Uppies can do*



*An Uppie rally at the "Big Tree"*

*But the Doonies push on down the street*



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*The Uppies are well in control and about to engineer a break*



*Mackieson's Corner is the Uppie goal*



*The Ba' must touch the wall at the corner to be "Up"*

*A triumphant Uppie winner*



Doonie success will bring good fishing.

When the winner is finally decided, many players of both sides repair to their house, where much needed refreshment rapidly appears and enemies during the game revert to being the best of friends. To Ba' enthusiasts the ultimate honour is to have the trophy of the game, the Ba itself, hanging in the living room window.

The Boys' Ba' is thrown up at 10.30 and is open to boys under 16. It can last for a few minutes, or several hours and often has not been resolved when the Men's Ba' is thrown up. Indeed on a few rare occasions the boys' game has continued for some time after the men's game has finished. The boys too elect the winner after each game. Many boys gain their apprenticeship to the adult game and go on to become Men's Ba' winners in the future.

In Christmas 1945 and New Year 1946 the spirit of equality prevailing after the Second World War encouraged Women's Ba's to be held for the first and only times so far. Apparently the menfolk did not like their ladies to be taking part in such a violent kind of game and the experiment has to date not been repeated. All the same many women take a strong part in the game, mostly with their voices, but

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quite often by pushing. Girls frequently appear in the boys' Ba' as well.

The town takes on an appearance of siege during the period of the Ba', with shutters and barricades on all the shops and houses on possible Ba' routes. Cars come near at their very real peril, while young children and elderly people are well advised to keep clear. However, due to the great sense of the camaraderie of the game, very few players get hurt badly so that if the scrum collapses, or someone is hurt, or passes out, the game stops to allow them to be extricated.

At one time there was concern that the Ba' might die out and it certainly has peaks and troughs of enthusiasm. At present the tradition is in no danger of dying out and seems to go from strength to strength. In the past various authorities such as Town Councils, sheriffs and others have tried to ban it or relocate it from the street. It seems that any all such attempts are doomed to total failure for the foreseeable future. Although it may seem slight an anachronism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Ba' is in fact a very important. The tradition is very well supported and apart from the game itself, it is a great social occasion for all who participate, whether as players or spectators.



*Steam often rises from the scrum*



*A very large pack nears The Bridge - Doonie territory*



*The Doonies must get the ball in the sea - usually the Harbour Basin*

*Triumphant Doonies celebrate another win*

