



Seriously Dedicated: The 2016 Nicol-Brown Invitational Weekend By Nick Hudson

At the annual Nicol-Brown Invitational, ten of the biggest fish in their respective ponds come together for what is quite possibly the best amateur contest in the world. A veritable treasure trove of prizes and silverware was to be earned by these young players, this year ranging in age from 15 to 34. Few pipers ever attain this level, and it was a privilege to hear these pipers on the brink of going pro ready for their moment.

I was thrilled to be asked to split judging duties with Willie McCallum. Seventy-five people attended the opening recital on Friday night in which I was to share a stage with one of, if not the most-successful piper of all time, the Willie McCallum. And there was a sizeable number of EUSPBA judges in the audience. Just a tad intimidating.

Willie played beautifully, as can be expected, and nobody ran away during my performance. After the recital, the competitors (our captive audience) received their tune selections for the next day's events.

Saturday morning's first event, the Donald MacLeod Memorial 6/8 Marches, started off at a pleasantly civilized 9:30 AM. It's not often we hear 6/8 March contests of this high standard and Willie and I both agreed it was the hardest event of the day to settle on a list; everyone had such a good run. In the end though, it was **Andrew Hutton** who was to go on to win the Silver Belt Buckle, perfectly fingering his way through a poised "Miss Ishabel T. MacDonald" and "An Eilean Ard" on a well-set, steady pipe. On another resonant pipe, **Christian Rhoads** hit





the ground running with a driving swing throughout his tunes. At a more relaxed pace, **Maeghan Bielski** set in to her tunes; all full of music. The two youngest competitors, **Michael McLeod** and **Gavin MacKay**, both acquitted themselves well, giving us difficult tunes delivered with confidence and swagger. All the prize winners displayed a high level of technical accuracy with consistent, rhythmic articulation throughout. A short break for the requisite judges' deliberation, a group photo, lunch, and it was back at it for the centerpiece contest: the Nicol-Brown Chalice for Piobaireachd.

Andrew Hutton again took the big prize for his confident and technically-refined portrayal of *MacLeod of Raasay's Salute*, keeping the pace suitable for a salute without losing the lyrical quality of the tune. **Gavin MacKay** impressed with his smooth approaches into cadences and his rippling A-Mach variation in *The Battle of Auldearn No. 1*. **Christian Rhoads** showed the audience an aggressive approach to the difficult 2016 Gold Medal set tune *I Got a Kiss of the King's Hand*, tackling the 180+ crunluaths in fine form. With her evocative Urlar and Variation 1, **Sarah Simpson** delivered a memorable *Maol Donn*. **Maeghan Bielski** set out on the long journey through *Siubhal Séamus*, displaying masterful subtle tempo control through the many variations with crisp technical work to back it up.

A short break in what was becoming a long but enjoyable day and it was on to the MSR portion of the contest. **Austin Diepenhorst**, on a world-class bagpipe, turned in a performance of *The Braes of Castle Grant*, *Inveraray Castle*, and *The Grey Bob* that would not be out of place at any pro contest. That is not hyperbole. **Andrew Hutton** laid out his tunes expressively at a relaxed, understated tempo with fine finger. With a more aggressive rendition of the same march as Andrew, **Tori Killoran** gave the audience one of the most musical performances of the day. **Michael McLeod** showed off great technical accuracy and a massive potential for the future. On last, **Maeghan Bielski** turned out a relaxed set of difficult tunes with precise fingerwork throughout. A special mention must go to **Ben Montross** who, by the judges' estimation, played the best march of the day, in a day of great march playing.

Sartorial adjudication fell to the rakish Donald Lindsay himself. **Tori Killoran** won a designer pipe case for her attention to detail, with a dress and deportment honorable mention to Maeghan Bielski and a tartan-bedecked Austin Diepenhorst. If there was an award for best kilt hose (and if

I happened to be the judge), Sarah Simpson with her hand knit socks would be going home with the glory!

After the long day, we all reconvened at the host hotel for a celebration dinner followed by a postprandial libation or two with great conversation extending well into the night. In the morning, Willie and I (with input from Donald) held a "debriefing" workshop with the competitors which was open for anyone to attend. I hope the competitors learned as much as I did.

Of course these events are only possible because of the countless hours of hard work put in by the many volunteers with a passion to see this event flourish. Special thanks to **Paula Glendinning, Donald Lindsay, Barb McCarthy, Eric Ouellette, Heather Scott-Wisheart, Kevin Wisheart, JoAnn Scott, Maureen Connor, Dan Cole**, all the stewards, and everyone else that I'm forgetting! In addition to all the volunteer hours, this event is made possible by a large number of donations. The top prizes were provided by the **New Hampshire Highland Games, McCallum Bagpipes, The Piper's Hut, The Piper's Dojo**, and **Walker Metalsmiths**. Thanks to all the many other donors, and please consider investing in North American piping excellence by giving even a small donation to this non-profit organization.

<http://nicol-brown.org/donations.html>

One of the pipers to whose memory this contest is dedicated, Bob Nicol, in recorded conversation with John MacFadyen, had some encouraging remarks for us:

[The top North American pipers] can shake up some of the Piobaireachd people in [Scotland.] They go deeper into it really than what they do in [Scotland,] where they're inclined to treat it just as a piece of music and that's it. **[North American pipers] take it very seriously. I found them very, very dedicated.**

Fortunately, 40+ years on from his remarks, things seem as healthy as ever here. On that note, the final word of thanks must go to all the teachers who have faithfully passed on the art and continued to inspire these next generations of pipers. Thank you.

Watch out for these names. The future of piping in North America is in good hands.

<http://nicol-brown.org/2016results.html>