

Press Release

April 23, 2010

National success for Invercargill pipe band

A “canny wee initiative” has earned national recognition for the City of Invercargill Highland Pipe Band – and an offer to join New Zealand's elite ranks.

“The band has gone from extreme adversity to success we couldn't have even dreamed about,” President Allister Macgregor said.

“Everyone in the country is taking note of what we've achieved.”

Just two years ago, the skirl of the bagpipes was in danger of being silenced as the band's future hung in the balance, prompting the formation of the Southland Piping and Drumming Development Trust.

The trust's foresight to enlist world-class Scottish drummer Scott Birrell and piper Ali McKenzie to tutor in Southland has now been rewarded with the Invercargill Licensing Trust-sponsored band winning its grade two division at the Royal New Zealand Pipe Band Association New Zealand Championships staged in Masterton recently.

“We won grade three last year, grade two this year – that's unprecedented,” Mr Macgregor, who is also chairman of the development trust, said.

The victory means a recommendation has been made for the Invercargill outfit to now compete in grade one with the top four bands in the country – but it wants to decline the recommendation.

Vice-president Calder Gray said it was a decision based on the bigger picture.

“We could rush up to grade one but that would be silly – although it is nice to be asked,” he said.

“It would be a bit like the Southland Stags playing Super 14 ... before we go up we want to build up our members and have a strong base.”

Invercargill also had success in the lower ranks with its grade four and juvenile bands each placing a credible second in their respective divisions.

A \$35,000 grant from the ILT Foundation has ensured Birrell, 23, will continue to teach the ancient Scottish art throughout Southland, with a focus on inspiring youngsters.

“He's (Birrell) the best in New Zealand – that's a big statement but he clearly is and aspiring drummers, whatever their age or ability, have an opportunity of a lifetime to learn now,” Mr Macgregor said.

“He's got all the values of a Southlander – high work ethic and loyalty – but he's from Scotland and has an honours degree in Scottish music from the College of Scottish Music in Edinburgh.”

He paid tribute to the ILT and the ILT Foundation, who he deemed “absolutely outstanding”.

ILT Foundation and Invercargill Licensing Trust chairman Alan Dennis said Southland's proud Scottish ancestry dated back to the early settlers.

"It is part of our heritage and our culture and must be protected for future generations," he said.

"It's fantastic to once again see an Invercargill band at the forefront of New Zealand's piping scene and I applaud the initiatives which have contributed to making that happen."

Mr Gray believed the piping trust and its tutoring initiative had been instrumental in uniting bands around the province.

"Scott and Ali play in two of the best bands in the world and they're in our little patch helping us," he said.

"The partnership between the trust and all the pipe bands in Southland has been magic ... we were arch rivals but now there's a real closeness – it's brought us together as a Southland unit."

To celebrate its recent success, the ILT City of Invercargill Highland Pipe Band will perform a one-off concert featuring the drumming talents of Birrell at the Civic Theatre on May 23.

"It's an opportunity for the band to really showcase how they have developed .. it will be a sellout," Mr Macgregor said.

Ends

For further information, contact:

Allister Macgregor
Chairman
Southland Piping and Drumming Development Trust
027 558 4471

Ann Eustace
General Manager
ILT Foundation
03 211 3640