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Basque Museum & Cultural Center



Basque festival sports called *herri kirolak* originate from the physical hardship of agrarian life. Pictured: Benedicto "Benny" Goitiandia, shouldering 250 pounds in a *harrijasotzaileak* (stone-lifting) competition

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# 5 Work Hard, PLAY HARD

by Heidi Coon and John Ysursa

**T**wo large monuments that carry symbolic importance to the preservation of Basque ethnic heritage frame the west entryway to the Basque Block on Grove Street. These monuments are large representations of the traditional Basque farm implement called the *laia*. In earlier times before mechanized farming, this tool was used to prepare the soil for seeding the crops. Usually, several people joined together for this task because it was hard work digging into and turning the soil. The *laia* therefore symbolizes what the Basque Block is about for Boise Basques: every generation of Basques has to join together to symbolically turn the soil and prepare it for a new “crop” or generation of Basque youth. Basques are not many, and in a society with powerful forces that can erode ethnic identity, the job of transmitting Basque identity across generations is not an easy one. It requires a commitment to join with others to find effective ways to keep alive the process of “becoming Basque.” Thus, the *laia* illustrates a

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defining cultural trait that helps to explain why Basques are still around: "Work hard, play hard."

Today's Basques participate in a wide assortment of sports. Some of these sports are recent in origin, relatively speaking, in relation to Basque history.

The current popularity of soccer in the Basque Country, for example, dates to the late 19th century when it was first introduced there by British groups playing the sport. Golf, basketball, cycling and other such recent introductions are also omnipresent, but when we speak of "Basque" sports, the scope narrows to a handful of contests. In Basque they are known as *herri kirolak* (traditional Basque sports), which conjures up images of wood chopping and stone lifting.

Related contests include *sokataira* (tug-of-war), *probak* (stone dragging) and a Basque version of rowing, among others. With the exception of Basque handball and its variants, all of these contests emerged from a more distant past; most traditional Basque sports originated from a form of work that evolved into a contest of strength, with wagers on the outcome.

Two defining characteristics of traditional Basque society include strength and



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*Sokatira* (tug-of-war) competition at Jaialdi, 2005. Opposite: sheepherders alone against the elements connected with solitary boxers fighting for masculine pride. Pictured: heavyweight Paulino Uzcudun, nicknamed "The Basque Woodchopper," about 1933.

perseverance. Both were highly valued for the direct utility to one's livelihood and preservation of tradition. These sports evolved from an earlier world where most everyone lived by their hands, working on the farm or gripping a fishing net. Hunger was a constant, with the threat of a bad crop or poor fishing at sea being the difference between eating well or going hungry. But even in good times, there was much hard work to do.

To appreciate the origins of these sports, still seen today at many Basque-American festivals and on the Basque Block, is to have a window into traditional Basque society, which has undergone two key transformations: the shift from the countryside to the city (from agrarian to urban) and the move from animate to inanimate power with the mechanization of agriculture. Similarly, today only about one of ten Americans is involved in food production and tractors speedily tend to the crops and motors propel boats at

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*Aizkolaritza* (wood chopping) ranks high in the pantheon of rural festival sports. Pictured: competing at Jaialdi, 2005.

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Competitors use the traditional two-pronged *laia* in a race to see which team can bust the most acreage of soil.

sea. But these are quite recent changes. Before these innovations, power had to be marshaled from animate sources; people and animals had to pull the plow through the field.

Strong animals like oxen were highly prized for their ability to move large, heavy loads on the farm, and from this emerged the contest of *idi probak* (oxen tests). It was quite straightforward: which team of oxen could pull a large stone weight the greatest distance in a fixed amount of time. While animal rights activists might cringe at this test of strength, if it is any consolation, the Basques also subjected men to the same contest. In this version, known as *gizon probak* (man's test), one man was harnessed to the stone to see how far he could drag the heavy weight. Another human variation on this test of strength includes *txinga probak*, which makes use of two weights, each as heavy as 104 pounds in each hand; contestants carry them until they can go no farther and drop the weights to the ground. This contest is still a popular staple at many a Basque festival, including Boise's annual San Inazio Festival weekend at the end of July.

Another popular test of strength still seen at some Basque festivals—only some because these contests require a degree of training and thus the pool of competitors remains limited—are the variations of *harrijasotzalea* (stone lifting). For many years through the 1950-70s, Boise's Benedicto "Ben" Goitiandia and Jose Luis "Joe" Arrieta traveled extensively across the

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A public lecture on folk traditions, sponsored by Boise State Basque Studies, packed the Egyptian during Jaialdi, 2010. Opposite: commemorative stamps.

American West to put on exhibitions at Basque festivals. These and other men thus successfully transplanted this traditional Basque sport, and kept it going for many years. More recently Joe Arrieta's son Jon kept that tradition alive with periodic exhibitions.

In this Basque version of weightlifting, in place of bars with dumbbell weights at the end

Basques substitute *zilandroa* (cylindrical), *laukizuzena* (rectangular), *kuboa* (cubical) or *biribila* (round or circular) weights that range anywhere from 100 to 500 pounds. This contest can vary—sometimes it is a head-to-head competition as to who can lift the greater weight or the greatest number of lifts in a fixed

time period. Or it can be an attempt to break a weightlifting record. The rules are straightforward: the stone has to be handled so it ends up on the competitor's shoulder, at which point it can be dropped onto a pad in front of the *harrijasotzaile* (stone lifter).

Almost all of these contests are tests of strength and perseverance, and not all have been transplanted to Idaho. The coastal towns in the Basque Country still carry on the tradition of the *estropadak* (rowing). Originally this form of work entailed a group of men rowing out to sea to harvest the day's catch of anchovies and sardines and bringing it back to market—before the other boats—to fetch a better price. Today, this has evolved into a popular competition with boats of 13 rowers. There has been no *estropadak* contest in Boise—yet! But there have been many tug-of-war matches where again strength and perseverance are put to the test.

But probably one of the most spectacular displays of Basque sports at festivals in the West is that of the *aizkolari* (wood chopper). The Basque Country remains significantly forested, and before mechanized saws, the job of felling trees and sizing lumber relied on men wielding axes and handsaws. Honing their skills working through the timber, Basque woodchoppers challenged one another to see who could chop the fastest, and once again this early form of work transformed into a competition. Between two men or



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Jaialdi invites visitors to “eat, drink and be Basque.” Organizers expect more than 40,000 visitors in 2015. Next: Basquing near Sun Valley.

teams, it is a race to see who could cut through an allotted number of logs on both sides. When two or more aizkolari form a team, they take turns relieving each other because this contest puts a premium on stamina. Competitions can last well beyond half an hour, and some Basque Country events have gone beyond four hours! Tellingly, the contest does not end when one chopper or team cuts through its last log; it is not over until the second teams finishes what it started, cutting through its last log. You finish what you start, and you’re not done until you’re done—in a word, perseverance.

Basque festival organizers make a special effort to bring groups of competitors from the Basque Country to put on spectacular exhibitions of herri kirolak. The largest exhibition in Boise occurs at the Jaialdi Festival, where two teams square off in a race to see who can cut through their logs, lift their weight a given amount of times, run relays, hoist bales of hay, etc. Again, the competition does not end until the second-place team finishes. Thus, this and the other traditional Basque sports reflect the cultural emphasis not only on strength, but also on perseverance.

### Jaialdi International Basque Cultural Festival

Once every five years, the annual San Inazio Festival in July morphs into something quite distinctive, bringing together literally tens of thousands to gather for a series of cultural events that are staged with mostly volunteer



Jaialdi International Basque Cultural Festival

help. A festival of this scope requires an incredible amount of work, with preparations beginning two years beforehand. And when it all comes together, it makes for one of the largest Basque gatherings anywhere in the diaspora. Known as *Jaialdi* (festival time), it has become a defining element not just for Basques, but also for the greater Boise area and state of Idaho.

The idea for Jaialdi started in a car coming back to Boise from a 1986 North American Basque Organization meeting held in Salt Lake City, Utah. Jokin Intxausti, minister of culture for the Basque government, happened to be along for the ride back and the conversation shifted to big dreams for Boise Basques. Al Erquiaga told the minister of his hopes for a large Basque festival in Boise. Intxausti's response: "Let's do it." So in 1986 they formed a planning board consisting of Dave Navarro, Gerri Achurra, Miren Artiach, Jeanne Eiguren, Megan Overgaard, Delphina Arnold, Patty Miller, Albert Erquiaga, Dave Eiguren, John Bieter, Dan Ansotequi, Dave Baumann, Hank Achurra, Patxi Lostra and Jerry Aldape. The Euzkaldunak board approved of the idea and Boise's first Jaialdi was underway.

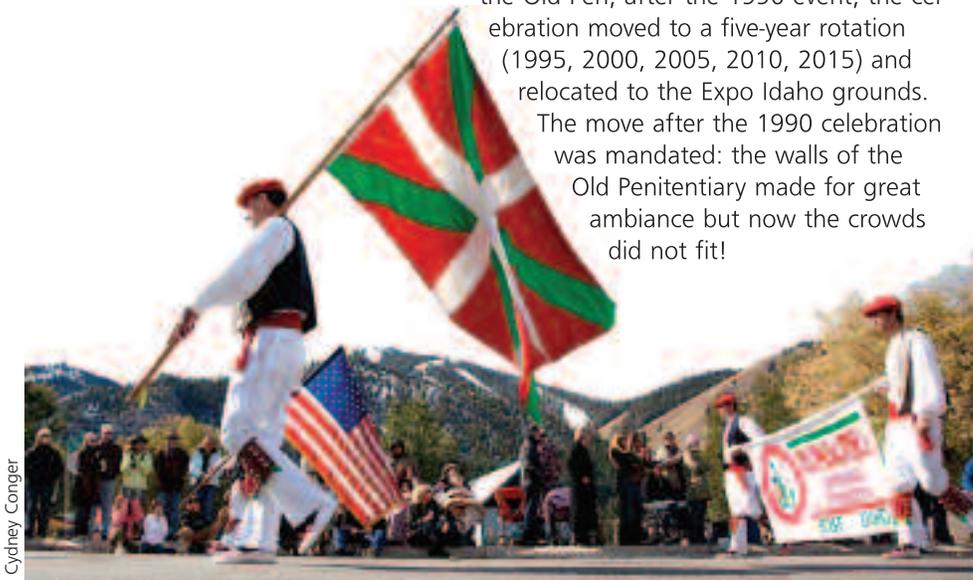
There was a precursor of sorts back in 1972 called the Basque Holiday Festival. It was successful, but there was no follow-up event, so when Jaialdi started it was almost from scratch again. Jaialdi in its present form began June 19–21, 1987, on the grounds of the Old Idaho Penitentiary at the end of Boise's Warm Springs Avenue. The inaugural event included local, national and international Basque dancing groups, music, sports and of course, good food. Buildings and roads around the Old Pen took on Basque names for the festival. Months and months of preparation went into the event, but organizers could not really be sure of its appeal and draw until the date arrived. The celebration began with the dedication and grand opening of the Basque

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Museum in downtown Boise near the Basque Center. At the close of the first day, musicians, dancers and Basque athletes performed to a sold-out crowd at the Boise High School Auditorium. Festivities moved to the penitentiary grounds for the weekend, attracting huge crowds and drawing thousands of Basques from all around the country, and internationally as well. But it wasn't just the Basques who came: Jaialdi became a moment for many fellow Idahoans to meet their Basque neighbors.

The Boise Basque community, with many committees and hundreds of volunteers, had done it again. Back in 1949, the Basques of Boise introduced themselves to their neighbors at the popular "Song of the Basque" performance during Boise's Music Week. It was a coming out event for that generation and a true turning point for the Boise Basque community. And now Jaialdi repeated something similar for another generation. It instilled a stronger sense of pride for the Basque community as well as inspiring a new generation to "work hard, play hard." Its impact in the larger community resonated, as Idaho's state government asked the Basques to stage a second Jaialdi three years later to help commemorate the state's centennial in 1990. The challenge was accepted and Jaialdi '90 was set in motion, generally following the model of the first one. This time, however, the Friday night show was held at the Morrison Center, and again it was a sellout; other events for the second edition were at the Old Pen. However, this was the last Jaialdi at the Old Pen; after the 1990 event, the celebration moved to a five-year rotation (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015) and relocated to the Expo Idaho grounds.

The move after the 1990 celebration was mandated: the walls of the Old Penitentiary made for great ambiance but now the crowds did not fit!



Cydney Conger

As with any large endeavor of this kind, there was a need for seed money and volunteers. The Boise Basque Center hosts the festival with support from other Basque organizations, advertisers and sponsors. When considering all the hours of planning and implementation, “Jaialdi is not a money maker,” said Dave and Jeannie Eiguren, who have been involved with the celebration from the beginning. Volunteers like the Eigurens work extra hard to produce this opportunity for others to play hard because they know how important an event like this can be for the promotion of Basque culture. Jaialdi is a success because of its volunteers, but only about half of them are Basque; non-Basque families and friends also pitch in to make Jaialdi work. A total of 880 volunteers from Jaialdi 2010 were thanked with an appreciation party the Monday after the event. What profit is made from Jaialdi goes back into the Basque Center to help pay for its facilities and cultural events.

Jaialdi is another example of the Basque ethos of “work hard, play hard.” The large scope of the festival makes it one of the largest “play” opportunities in the Pacific Northwest. The crowds are immense, and as they arrive it seems like a “Basque tsunami” of sorts, one reveler noted. Local hotels and restaurants look forward to “getting wet” as all these visitors have to eat and sleep somewhere. And the larger local community has adopted Jaialdi as its own as well. The *Idaho Statesman* and TV news outlets run various features; there are events at the State Capitol and City Hall. So “becoming Basque” isn’t just for Basques anymore—Jaialdi has succeeded in making Basque culture more readily accessible to many more. But it’s still a core of Boise Basques and friends who band together to do the necessary work to make Jaialdi the international phenomena that it has become.

## The Oinkari Chorizo Booth

One of the crown jewels of the Boise Basque community is the Oinkari Basque Dancers. From its inception in 1960, the group has regularly performed locally, but it has also traveled extensively to dance at various World’s Fairs and numerous folk festivals beyond Idaho. The Oinkaris have performed internationally as far away as China and Argentina, as well as in the Basque Country itself on several occasions. But all this travel and the opportunity to “play” requires money to sustain the group. Dating back for many years, the group’s largest annual fundraiser is its food booth at the Western Idaho Fair at the end of August. Originally, the group sold just *chorizo* (Basque-style pork sausage), but since then the menu offerings have expanded.

Overseeing this over the last several decades is volunteer coordinator Gerri Achurra. When people ask Gerri if she is Basque, she responds, “No, I

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Fundraising with chorizos has been a five-decade Oinkari tradition at the Western Idaho Fair. Opposite: creamy chicken-broth croquetas, a Basque staple on Grove Street.

was just smart enough to marry one.” She married Henry Achurra in 1953. They have three daughters, all of whom have been members of the Oinkari Basque Dancers. Initially she started volunteering at the “chorizo booth” in 1973 and in 1975 accepted the challenge to manage it. The booth is now one of the longest running at the Fair, moving its location along the food midway twice in a 40-year span.

Each Oinkari dancer has a certain number of shifts he or

she must cover. The dancers are responsible for arranging the work schedule as well as helping with preparations, set up, take down, cleaning and assisting customers. Gerri says she is convinced that dancers who get involved in Oinkari fundraising learn how to go on in life to a high level. “If you were to follow the history of this group, think how many of them went on to be professional people, how many went on to complete college,” she said. She has observed that the “kids are friendly and relate to the public, and the public likes seeing them work.” So while the dancers themselves cover many of the tasks, Gerri’s role is to work behind the scenes, taking on tasks like ordering food, ice, soda and arranging for their delivery, plus securing a spot for their booth, tracking finances, training volunteers and overseeing the booth.

Asked if she is going to retire, Gerri responds that she will be “retiring from the hard stuff ... it’s easy as long as you have those kids.” Gerri noted that two of the satisfactions about running the chorizo booth are seeing non-Basques getting involved in selling Basque items and the dynamic of working together on a communal project. “There is a lot of satisfaction working on a team—working on something and trying to make it a reality.”

Mark Kurlansky, author of *The Basque History of the World*, poses a riddle of sorts with this statement: "The singular remarkable fact about the Basques is that they still exist." What explains this? A group and a culture numerically as small as the Basques don't usually endure. A part of the answer to this historical anomaly lies in the Basque ethos of "work hard, play hard" as illustrated in traditional Basque sports that manifest the cultural traits of strength and perseverance, in the Jaialdi Festival that has become one of the world's largest Basque "play" opportunities and in the hard work of the Oinkari Basque Dancers, who represent Basques and the state of Idaho near and far. As the laiak on the Basque Block symbolize, every generation of Basques has to join together to symbolically turn the soil. It is hard work, but many dedicated folks are affording others the possibility of "becoming Basque."



Anne Marie/Hella Basque

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**Heidi Coon** graduated from Boise State in fall 2013 with a BA in social science with emphases in criminal justice and sociology. She plans to attend graduate school at Boise State in a year or two.

**John Yursa** is a native Boisean and a Boise State graduate who was able to return and become part of Basque Studies at Boise State University as an instructor and director of the Basque Studies Consortium.