

Togyu Bull Sumo on Tokunoshima Island

What is *togyu*?

Togyu is the popular sport of bull sumo native to Tokunoshima and other Ryukyu islands. Unlike bullfighting in Spain, the bulls are bred and trained to fight each other. It is so popular that some 400 bulls on the island are in training to take part in *togyu* tournaments in front of avid supporters and spectators.

What are the rules?

The matches take place in earthen-floored enclosed bullrings approximately 20 meters in diameter. The bulls are accompanied by men called *seko*, who spur them on with gestures, slaps, and shouts. The rules are simple: the bulls can butt with their heads and use their horns, which are sharpened before matches. The first bull who turns away or retreats from the encounter loses the match. Matches can end in seconds or go on for much longer. With the consent of the audience, the match can be called a draw after 30 minutes. There are a number of complex techniques, from stabbing to knocking the other bull off balance.

When did this tradition start?

No one knows exactly when the first bullfights took place, but *togyu* is believed to date as far back as the sixteenth century, when the matches began as a form of entertainment for the islanders to celebrate the joy of completing the harvest. Originally, the bulls were the same ones used in the paddies for rice cultivation, but they later began to be bred specifically for *togyu*. After World War II, the system became more organized, and matches began to be held as regular entertainment events. There are seven bullfighting rings on the island; the largest ones have dome roofs and tiered spectator seating.

How often are matches held?

Three title tournaments are held each year in January, May, and October to decide the strongest bulls on the island. The matches are organized by weight categories. These range from the open category, which includes bulls over one ton, to a lightweight class for those under 700 kilograms. The open category determines the *yokozuna* grand champion (from the sumo term for the top-ranked wrestler). Other matches are held throughout the year at various rings around the island. Owners sometimes hold informal matches as practice for their bulls.

How are the bulls treated?

Today, *togyu* bulls are not used for agricultural purposes, but are bred purely for their fighting skills. They are intelligent animals with distinct personalities; the best of them learn quickly and can even get depressed after a disappointing defeat. They are treated with great attention, kept in special stables, and are often treated as a member of the family by their handlers.

They are fed large quantities of grasses and sugar cane twice a day, and receive other special supplements depending on their needs and stage of development. They are brushed daily and given frequent walks for exercise. It is common to see their handlers leading them across sandy beaches or in shallow reef waters to build up the muscles in their hindquarters. Other regimens target the equally important muscles in their necks. The bulls' horns are shaped as they grow to match their fighting techniques, and are sharpened prior to matches.

Who are the spectators?

People of Tokunoshima of all ages are proud and enthusiastic supporters of their favorite bull(s), and flock to the tournaments to cheer them on. The larger tournaments are social highlights of the island, and the atmosphere at the ring is electric—the cheers of the crowd are accompanied by drums, trumpets, flag-waving, and whistling. The bulls wear versions of the decorative loincloths worn by sumo wrestlers prior to their fights, and their supporters keep the mood in the arena at a high level of excitement throughout match day.

Is it dangerous?

Not really. The bulls occasionally get injured during matches, although surprisingly little damage is done considering their sharpness of the horns and the size of the animals. Though the *seko* work closely with the bulls, sometimes standing centimeters away as they cajole and command them forward, they know what they're doing and stay out of harm's way. It is not at all dangerous for spectators; in fact, supporters clamor to pose with their favorites, even posing with their infants sitting on the bulls' broad backs.

Who owns the bulls?

A bull can be owned by an individual, a family, a group of friends, or a company. Raising, training, and especially feeding an animal this size can be costly. As they generally make their debut at four or five years old, and reach their full size at seven, it takes a considerable commitment of funds, time, and energy to raise and train a *togyu*

bull. Unlike bulls kept for agricultural work, they need regular exercise and lots of attention.

When and where do the matches take place?

Check with the tourist office for dates and locations.

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