

Tsunotsuki: Traditional “Bull Sumo”

Two powerful bulls face off against each other in a circular arena. Foreheads touching, they push against each other, urged on by their handlers, in a display of strength and determination. Evocative of sumo, *tsunotsuki*, or “locking horns,” is a form of bullfighting believed to have originated in the mountains of Ojiya. The sport has a thousand-year history with roots in Shinto rituals. In this type of bullfighting, rigorous measures are taken to ensure that the bulls do not become injured or perish. Long, grueling matches are avoided and the judge calls the match.

Tsunotsuki heritage

In the ancient mountain communities of Ojiya, bulls were revered for their indispensable role in transporting goods over long distances and in tilling the terraced rice fields. It is believed that *tsunotsuki* began here as part of a sacred ritual dedicated to the deities. Like sumo wrestling, the origins of *tsunotsuki* can be traced back to ancient Shinto rituals.

Nambu shorthorn bulls from Iwate Prefecture have been favored in Ojiya throughout history due to their strong limbs and ability to withstand the region’s long, harsh winters.

Tsunotsuki, Shinto, and sumo

The first tournament of the year commences with purification rituals by a Shinto priest. Before every tournament, the handlers (*seko*) purify themselves by taking swigs of sacred sake. Sake is then poured over the bulls from tail to head, a gesture that symbolizes the desire for them to move forward instead of backward. In an act of purification, sake and salt are scattered around the arena before the games start.

Matches begin with handlers leading each bull around the arena clockwise. They then lead the bulls toward each other, clapping their hands together or slapping their bull’s rump for encouragement. Once the bulls are in position, the match begins. The bulls lock horns and “wrestle” each other until the judge declares the end of the match and the handlers separate them. Because the bulls are considered sacred animals, strict measures are taken to ensure that they are not injured. If an accident occurs during a match, salt is sprinkled around the arena to purify the site.

Similar to sumo, the highest-ranking bulls compete last during tournaments. The last three matches are known as the *shimai-sanban* (“last big three”). High-ranking bulls have decorative ropes (*omozuna*) colored red, white, and black hung around their necks. They symbolize strength, and evoke the ornamental silk aprons worn by sumo wrestlers.

Many aspects of *tsunotsuki* bullfighting have remained unchanged over the years, leading to its designation as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset of Japan in 1978. Tournaments take place once a month from May to November during which 15 to 20 matches are held in a day.