

About *Tsunotsuki*: Rules, Roles, and Participants

Tsunotsuki, literally “locking horns,” is a competition between two bulls that push each other in a show of strength and stamina. A judge calls the match, and the bulls are evaluated for their vigor and perseverance to determine pairings in future matches. Tournaments are held at the Ojiya arena from May to November.

The rules

Handlers (*seko*) lead the competing bulls into the arena. After being led clockwise around the ring, the bulls face off and lock horns, pushing each other until a judge declares the end of the match, and handlers jump in to separate them. A match is typically called just before one bull is about to overpower the other. Matches usually last about five minutes, and strict measures are taken to ensure that the bulls do not suffer injuries.

The seko handlers

At the start of a match, *seko* nudge and urge the bulls forward by slapping them on their rump, cajoling them with loud cries of “yoshitaaa!,” which means “come on!” in the local dialect. If the bulls start to become too aggressive, the match is called, and the *seko* handlers have the crucial job of prying the bulls apart. The role of the *seko* requires speed, intuition, and technical skill, including skill with rope and agility in chasing angry bulls to avoid collisions.

The bulls

Nambu shorthorn bulls from Iwate Prefecture are favored for their size and their resilience to Ojiya’s cold winters. These enormous animals make their debut around the age of three, when they normally weigh between 700 to 1,100 kilograms. Some bulls let out a series of throaty roars, called *dogoe*, as they enter the arena—a sign that they are ready to fight.

The matches

Around 15 to 20 matches per day take place during the tournaments, which are held once a month in Ojiya. The lineup is published a few days ahead of time. The last three games of the day are known as the *shimai-sanban* (“last big three”), and feature the strongest bulls from previous tournaments. At the last tournament of the year in

November, a grand champion is announced. The title is awarded to the bull deemed bravest and most persevering throughout the season.

The bull owners

Individuals, families, friend groups, and companies own the competing bulls. Owning a bull is a full-time commitment, and feeding, brushing, exercising, and cleaning them on a daily basis are all part of the owner's job. In pre-modern times, bulls often lived under the same roof as their owner, and were considered members of the family because of their role in tilling fields and transporting goods. Now, owners typically keep bulls in the shared barns near the *tsunotsuki* arena in Ojiya's Higashiyama district.

The arena

The arena is located in the mountainous Higashiyama area of Ojiya. Open-air seats and covered seats are provided. Outside the arena, stalls sell snacks, sake, and *tsunotsuki* merchandise. Near the venue, there is an enormous bull-shaped boulder that split into two during the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake in 2004. The rock now serves as a symbol of recovery and a memorial for the people who died in the earthquake.

Tournaments take place once a month from May to November. Check in advance for prices and availability. Live English commentary is available.