

Tsunotsuki Bullfighting Tournaments in Yamakoshi

Yamakoshi is one of nine places in Japan still holding traditional contests of strength between bulls. The practice is thought to have started in this rural, mountainous area in southeastern Nagaoka about a thousand years ago, when villagers relied on cattle for farm work and transportation. Bouts between bulls served as entertainment when the animals were not involved in planting or harvesting crops. The pastime became more organized in the Edo period (1603–1867) and was particularly popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Activities were briefly suspended in 2004, after an earthquake caused extensive damage in the area, but the tradition was revived through efforts of the Yamakoshi residents and support received from other bullfighting communities across the country.

Competitions between bulls in the ring are called *tsunotsuki* (literally “horn thrusting”) in Yamakoshi, while people in other regions use the words for “bullfighting” or “bull sumo.” It is a nationally designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.

No Winners or Losers

Tsunotsuki in Yamakoshi is differentiated from other types of bullfighting by the effort to prevent injury to the bulls. In Yamakoshi, they were primarily farm animals that performed important tasks, such as field work and transporting goods on steep mountain roads unsuitable for horses. The bulls were raised and kept in the owner’s home and were often considered members of the family. If a bull were seriously injured in a fight, it would be unable to work, dramatically impacting the livelihood of its owner. In addition, allowing clear winners and losers in the bouts could lead to negative feelings among villagers in the small community.

For these reasons, it became tradition in Yamakoshi to declare a draw before either of the bulls got hurt. The bull handlers in the ring, called *seko*, closely watch each bout to decide when it is best to separate the animals. The draw is announced at the climax of the match, after both bulls have displayed their strength and entertained the spectators, or when it seems that one bull might overpower or hurt the other.

Tsunotsuki Tournaments

Several aspects of the *tsunotsuki* bullfighting tradition in Yamakoshi resemble sumo wrestling. Tournaments are held from May through November, taking place on weekends

once or twice a month at the Yamakoshi Bullring. They are comprised of ten to thirteen bouts, beginning with training matches for young bulls and followed by competitions between stronger and more experienced animals that are expected to clash more dramatically.

At the beginning, the bullring is ritually purified with salt and sake, and the *seko* handlers gather in a circle with organizers to clap and raise their arms in hope for a safe tournament. During the bouts, an announcer in the ring narrates the action, providing information about the animals and passionate commentary. The early matches are held between bulls with ropes tied to their nose rings in case the *seko* need to guide or separate them quickly. The bulls in later matches are sometimes released to compete more freely. When the draw is declared, ropes are swiftly attached to the bulls' back legs to pull them apart, and the *seko* force themselves between the animals to separate their horns if needed.

The Competing Bulls

The bulls who take part in the Yamakoshi *tsunotsuki* tournaments debut in the spring when they are three years old. There is no set retirement age, and bulls as old as nineteen have competed in the ring. Although the bulls that historically participated in *tsunotsuki* were primarily farm animals, now they are kept exclusively for the matches. Each bull is given a masculine, dramatic-sounding name in keeping with traditions found in sumo wrestling. The names may also contain references to the bull owners' businesses. Currently, there are approximately 50 bulls taking part in tournaments.

The Yamakoshi Bullring

The bullring is located on the top of a hill surrounded by rice fields. A bus is available to take spectators from Nagaoka Station to the bullring on tournament days, but most people travel by car. A low wall on one side of the path to the ring displays information about the history of Yamakoshi *tsunotsuki*, including Edo-period illustrations and black-and-white photographs portraying life with the bulls and scenes of airlifting them to safety after the 2004 earthquake. The ring can accommodate around 1,500 people, and thin cushions for the seats are provided at the venue. Several stalls set up on tournament days sell food, drinks, and handmade goods. Admission costs 2,500 yen for adults and is free for children under 16.