

Tsunotsuki Bullfighting Tournaments

Yamakoshi is one of nine places in Japan that still preserve the culture of traditional bullfighting competitions. The practice is believed to have started about one thousand years ago, when Yamakoshi farmers relied on cattle for farm work and bouts between bulls served as occasional entertainment. The pastime became more organized in the Edo period (1603–1867) and was particularly popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Yamakoshi, the tradition of pitting bulls against each other in the ring is called *tsunotsuki* (literally “horn thrusting”), 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

Yamakoshi *tsunotsuki* is differentiated from other types of bullfighting by the effort to prevent injury to the animals. Historically, the bulls who participated in the bouts in Yamakoshi were predominantly farm animals that performed field work and transported goods. If a bull were seriously injured, it would dramatically impact the owner’s livelihood. Furthermore, allowing clear winners and losers could cause negative feelings between villagers in the small community. For these reasons, it became tradition in Yamakoshi to declare every match a draw before either of the bulls got hurt. The handlers in the ring, called *seko*, closely watch each bout and call a draw when both bulls have displayed their strength or when it seems that one bull might overpower the other.

Tsunotsuki Tournaments

Several aspects of the *tsunotsuki* bullfighting tradition in Yamakoshi resemble sumo wrestling. Tournaments are scheduled from May through November, and each is comprised of ten to thirteen bouts. They begin with training matches between young bulls and work up to competitions between stronger and more experienced animals.

First, the bullring is ritually purified with salt and sake, and the *seko* handlers gather in a circle with organizers, raising their arms together in hope for a safe tournament. During the bouts, an announcer in the ring narrates the action in Japanese, providing information about the animals and passionate commentary. The early matches are held between bulls with ropes tied to their nose rings in case they need to be separated quickly, but bulls in later matches are sometimes released to compete more freely. When a draw is declared,

ropes are attached to the bulls' back legs to pull them apart, and the *seko* force themselves between the animals to separate their horns if necessary.

The Competing Bulls

In Yamakoshi, bulls debut in the spring *tsunotsuki* tournaments when they are three years old. In the past, the participating bulls were primarily farm animals, but today they are kept exclusively to take part in matches. Each bull is given a dramatic-sounding, masculine name, which is sometimes a reference to the name of their owner's business. At present, there are about 50 bulls participating in tournaments, hailing both from Yamakoshi and other places across the country that still preserve similar traditions.