



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
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TEACHING TUESDAY

YABUSAME

Yabusame (流鏝馬) is a ceremony that combines the ancient Japanese sport of kyudo (弓道, way of the bow) with horseback riding. Archers must wear the hunting outfit of twelfth century warriors and shoot three targets while racing on horseback. The most famous yabusame event is the annual race on September 16 at Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura.

The skill of shooting arrows while riding a running horse used to be a very important skill for warriors. Originally started in the 4th century, the tradition quickly became a sign of skill and honor. In the 10th century, samurai often held archery duels on horseback. Shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199), was particularly interested in this art, and enthusiastically studied and promoted it. His leadership led to the creation of the ritual at Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine in 1187. This new ritual was designed as a way to please and entertain the Shinto kami.

Revived as a sport in the Edo Period (1600–1867), yabusame itself is not very complicated. Three archers compete against each other, one at a time, on a track about 835 feet long. The first archer starts at one end and gallops down the track at high speed, firing three arrows in quick succession at the wooden targets placed about 230 metres apart. The rider then must slow quickly to be able to stop before the end of the track, which is very difficult given the speed of the horse. The length of one ride lasts about 20 seconds, and the score is calculated on how many targets have been hit.