

TEACHING TUESDAY

SOMA NOMAOI

JULY 5, 2016

Although the samurai have not been around for many hundreds of years, some of their traditions still live on. At the end of July, one of those traditions, the 1000-year-old Soma-Nomaoi (相馬野馬追) festival, takes place in the Soma District of Fukushima prefecture. Occurring over three days, the Soma-Nomaoi's two highlighted events are the Koshiki Kacchu Keiba wild horse race, the Shinki Sodatsusen, a recreation of an ancient battle, and the Nomakake.

The Soma-Nomaoi began as a military exercise, when the head of the Soma Clan released wild horses as a challenge to his cavalry. They had to chase and catch the horses, which were then given to a nearby shrine. The exercise was repeated every year uninterrupted for more than 500 years.

Today, the festival is more celebratory in form, but still carries on the tradition of the samurai started so long ago. Traditional conch shell horns signal the start of the festival, which starts with a procession of each town in the Soma District, with representatives wearing their medieval samurai armor and riding horses. At noon on the second day, the Koshiki Kacchu Keiba begins, which ten races around a 1000-meter loop tracking using traditional Otsubo-school riding techniques. The race is followed by the Shinki Sodatsusen, where mounted samurai warriors compete for the 40 shrine flags that are shot into the air with fireworks – this is considered the battle itself. The final event is the Nomakake, where men compete to capture wild horses with only their bare hands. This ancient tradition is the perfect way to experience the spirit of the samurai in modern day Japan!