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TEACHING TUESDAY

KEMARI

NOVEMBER 15, 2016

Kemari (蹴鞠), often called the Japanese form of soccer, is a ball game that began over 1400 years ago when it was imported from China. However, the Japanese version of the game was far different from the Chinese version. While originally used for military training, in Japan, all competitiveness was shed, and rather than getting the ball into a goal, the objective of kemari was to keep a ball from touching the ground for as long as possible using various parts of the body apart from the hands.

Written records of kemari games can be seen in ancient texts dating back to the mid-Heian period. In fact, one of the earliest references to kemari is in the *Nihon Shoki*, the second oldest book of Japanese history. Enthusiastically adopted within the Imperial Palace, kemari is played on a flat ground, about 6–7 meters squared, in *kariginu* type clothing.

Kemari declined in popularity after the start of the Meiji Period, and in 1903, a society was started to preserve the ancient game. Kemari is kept alive through two special annual events, the *kemari hajime*, or first kick, on New Year's Day in Kyoto, and the kemari festival held every November in Nara.