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OVERCOMING HARDSHIP AND INTO THE FIELDS





Kumiko Takanishi after the parade. She practices weekly at a riding club in Minami Soma City

**SERIES
FUKUSHIMA**

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI

FUKUSHIMA, Japan - Before sunrise, a horse races along the coastline in Minami-Soma, Fukushima. The beach is still littered with debris and chunks of the destroyed embankment, constant reminders of the devastation brought upon by the March 2011 tsunami. The jockeys have been practicing every morning in preparation for the traditional "Soma Noma-Oi" or Soma Wild Horse Chase scheduled to take place in a few days.

The festival which is a shinto ritual as well, is said to have continued in the Soma region of Fukushima for over a thousand years, making the three day festivities the biggest event in the area. Originating from military exercises, horseback participants clad in samurai armor pay their respects to the local shrines, stage races and compete in flag capturing tournaments.

Participants come from five "go"s or districts according to the former administrative sectors of the Soma *han* domain. The *han* centered around present day Minami Soma City and reaches into Soma, and parts of Futaba county such as Namie.

The five "go"s make offerings to three shrines in the area. Uda-go (Soma City) and Kita-go (Minami Soma City) to the Soma Nakamura shrine, Nakano-go (Minami Soma City) to the Soma Ota shrine, and the Odaka-go (Minami Soma City) and the Shineha-go (Futaba County) to the Soma Odaka shrine.

All areas were affected by the tsunami, many lives lost, armor and equipment swept away. The accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station made matters worse, especially for residents of Minami Soma's Odaka and Futaba's Shineha which were within the 20km radius of the plant and had to be totally evacuated. Though

many doubted the festival could even be held, not once canceled through its long history no matter dire circumstances, a watered down event took place in 2011. The scale of the festival recovered by 2012, but even this year, the fourth event after the accident, things are still not the same as before. All the horse warriors took to the field, each with their own story.

Yasuhisa Kitahara, 38, had come to the beach straight from his night shift. Slowly making his way to the water, he gently tested his horse. After the accident at the nuclear plant, unfounded rumors about radioactive contamination led to the closure of the local factory, forcing him to move to a neighboring prefecture for work. This kept him from participating in the festival, but finally in December 2012, after returning to his former workplace, he was able to come back. Work is tough and he has not received any

form of compensation, so nothing is taken for granted after the accident. But Noma-Oi is just one of the things he can't live without. After returning from the beach, Kitahara carefully washes his horse and tries on the saddle he will be using for the festival. Then he collapses into a deep sleep, still naked.

The night before the Noma-Oi, another lone samurai, Kohei Inamoto, 22, is still busy building a makeshift stable. Inamoto bought a second hand house in Minami Soma so he could participate in the Noma-Oi, but work has kept him from preparations. He was forced to leave his hometown of Namie, frequently moving around Fukushima prefecture, then to his uncle's house in Chiba, and eventually to a rented house in the same city.

Before the first ever Noma-Oi following the nuclear accident, Inamoto was able to return home temporarily

The Fourth Soma Wild Horse Chase Soma Fukushima



Kanno (center) pays his respects to his lost family members before heading to the fields. His comrades stand by him and blow on conch shell horns

where he gathered the traditional *jin-baori* clothing used in the event. The former participants from his Shineha-go had all been forced to leave and were now scattered all over the place.

But despite the situation and also not entirely sure what to expect, Inamoto went to the festival grounds anyway where he found that twenty or so of his comrades had shown up too. No one had their horse so they marched on foot. After that, Inamoto has been coming to the festival from Chiba. His passion for the Noma-Oi consumes most of his income on related expenses including the house he bought in Minami Soma where he could set up the stable. By the time he led his horse into its new home from the shack covering the back of his truck, also self-built, it was well past midnight.

On the opening day of the Noma-Oi, Chohachi Kanno, 64, declares "We are able to head to the fields today thanks to the support from everyone. I am grateful for this". Kanno was born during times when horses were still used for farming. His father, who rode the same farm horse at the Noma-Oi, passed away when he was twenty-two. That led Kanno to return back to Minami-Soma from outside Fukushima where he worked, and participate in

Kanno leaves for battle from the temporary housing complex



the Noma-Oi in place of his father. He has been taking part every year since. Participating in the Noma-Oi would be impossible without the help of family members, the reason it is regarded as an "all hands on deck" event. Kanno's wife, Machiko, was the one who fed the horses, organized the banquets and went along with preparations for the Noma-Oi without complaining the least bit. She was a natural when it came to looking after others, so the younger ones were attached to her more than himself. But Kanno lost her and three other family members to the tsunami. That summer, he agonized whether to join the Noma-Oi during such times, but concluded that "My family would rather be upset if I didn't". Borrowing armor and a horse from friends, he joined the festival, and later, through connections of his younger brother living in Kawasaki who practices *yabusame*, a form of traditional mounted archery, was able to procure the necessary equipment.

Now he participates along with his brother and his brother's sons while the many people who supported him

during the tough times watch. On the morning of battle, it is customary for all the warriors from the area to gather at the residence of Kanno, who happens to be the samurai leader of Kita-go, and hold a ceremony to greet him. Kanno's former house was swept away by the tsunami, so this will be the third time the warriors leave from the temporary housing he currently lives in. By next year's festival, he plans to have his new home finished, and looks forward to starting from there.

For 7th grader Kumiko Takanishi, this was the first time she participated in the Noma-Oi along with her twenty year old brother Takuya, and she looks relieved when the parade is over. Both of them evacuated after the nuclear accident and have been living in temporary housing in Soma City. The *jin-baori* costume draped over her brother used to be worn by his uncle before the disaster. Most everything from the uncle's house in Minami Soma's Odaka district was lost to the tsunami, but the costume and armor stashed in a closet miraculously survived. Takuya had been

preparing to join the Noma-Oi for a long time, working behind the scenes as a helping hand since junior high and this was his long awaited debut. For Kumiko, watching her big brother and other female warriors has been inspirational and just "really cool". She also learned that the number of participants was falling because of the nuclear accident and decided that by joining herself, she too could be an inspiration and give strength to her elementary school friends who were now scattered away from home.

When the festivities were over, she was thrilled to have the samurai leader of Shineha-go come to her and personally thank her, "I appreciate you joining us when less people are". There are rules for the Noma-Oi forbidding the participation of women over twenty. So Kumiko will participate every year until that day comes, and on her final year plans to film and record the entire spectacle through her own eyes. The Noma-Oi has given her another something to look forward to. (Reported in 2014)

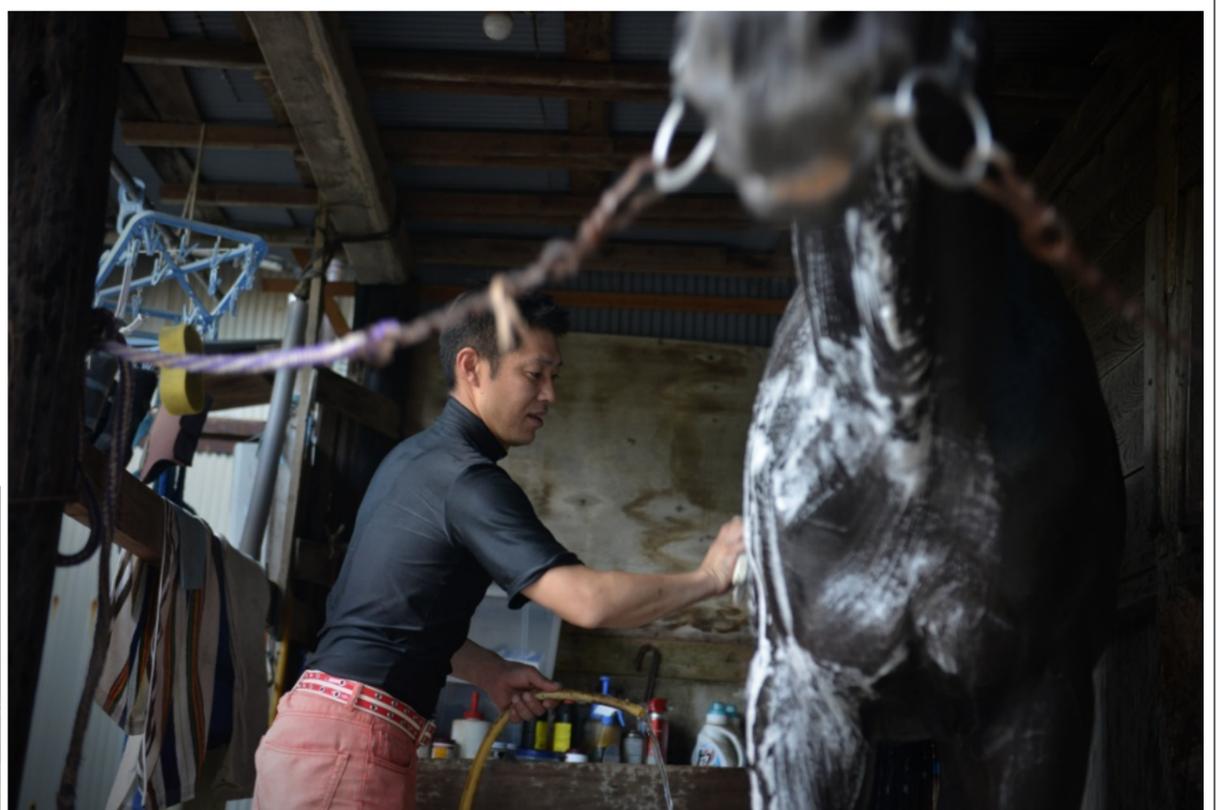
Translation by Taro Konishi



Kitahara exchanges cups of sake with family and friends before leaving his house. Spirits are high with the glorious day ahead



With the help from family and friends, Inamoto finishes the makeshift stable he built from pipes



Kitahara tends to his horse after morning practice. Many people keep and look after their horse solely for the Noma-Oi held once an year



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