



Like in sumo, the top fighters go last

Late winter by the calendar is practically synonymous with early spring in Okinawa. It's during this time of year that Sundays in Ishikawa mean one thing -- bullfighting. The first main event of the year was held on Sunday, February 1. It was the first full moon of the Chinese New Year, an auspicious time in Okinawa for the "Lunar Calendar New Year Tournament". The weather this particular day was nothing short of fantastic. And notwithstanding that many were heading north to the cherry blossoms and the festival in Nago City, this yearly event attracted the attendance it was due, although it almost made it a shame to be indoors on such a day.

Since this period of the year is the peak time for bullfighting and with the fickleness and instability of the weather here, it only makes perfect sense for Okinawa to have such a magnificent facility like the Ishikawa Multipurpose Dome. Built into a small hillside, the building visible from the street is somewhat deceiving. Though it looks small from the outside, the dome is surprisingly spacious on the inside and can easily accommodate several thousand fans seated in relative comfort.

In a tournament, the matches start promptly at 1 p.m. after a short opening ceremony. In keeping with the local tradition of "Okinawa time", the facility doesn't reach it's full capacity till somewhere around the second or third match. For this annual event, ten pairs of bulls are matched on the schedule. Just as it is in sumo, the lesser-ranked bulls go first and the top ranked bulls go last. The ring surface is made of hard-packed



Often acting as MC during tournaments, Kuniharu Miyagi notes that "In a match bulls are controlling to avoid being punch or twisted over. Others know how to tire their opponents. These animals are really very clever!"



clay and covered with sand. There are earthen berms built up around the sides and thick steel railings surrounding it. All around the ring the concrete stands rise a full 360 degrees. Not one seat in this magnificent facility has an obstructed view of the ring.

Just prior to each pairing, the heavy-gauge steel gate opens and a man enters running and tossing handfuls of salt about the ring. He's followed shortly by the bulls, which are run in one at a time. Instinctively the beasts know what they are here for. As soon as they enter many begin to snort and kick up dust with their forelegs. Some get low to the ground and almost want to roll around in it like a dog in the wet grass on a hot summer's day. It's as if they relish what is about to take place. It's very reminiscent of the rituals that precede a sumo tournament.

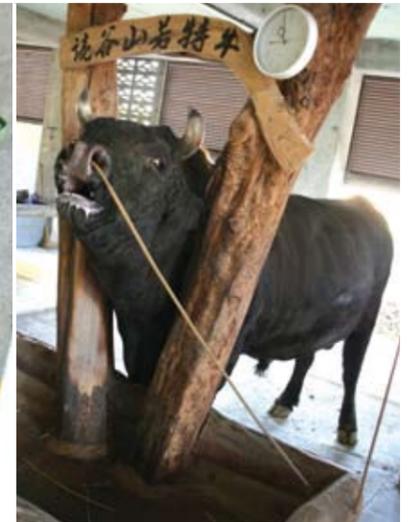
Many of the bulls will defecate or empty their bowels as they enter the ring. In a way it is similar to what horseracing fans look for prior to a big race. Some derby enthusiasts want to see if a horse urinates on his way out to the track. Some will even abstain from placing a bet if they don't

see this important signal before a race. With the animals it's like a signal to their masters that they are ready for the event. However, if this occurs in the middle of the bout it is also a sign that the bull is getting tired. Once the second bull enters the ring and goes through his routine the handlers - *togyushi* - quickly guide them into position.

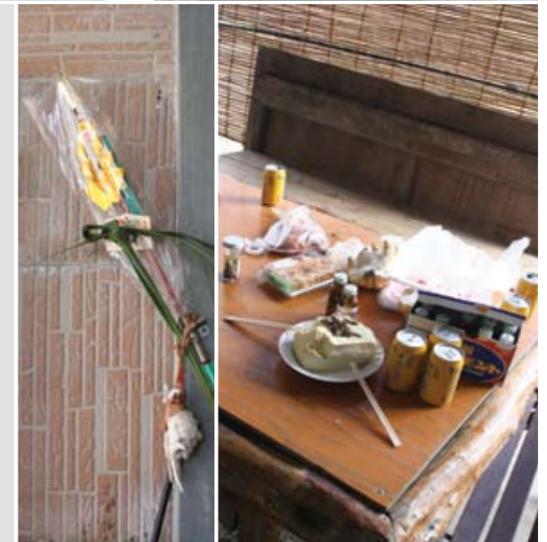
Many of the younger and less experienced bulls have to be lead into the ring and into fighting position with a heavy rope through their noses. Often this is left in during the duration of the fight. This gives the handler one more tool to separate them should the match get out of hand. According to expert Kuniharu Miyagi, a professor at Okinawa International University, "The ropes were used commonly in villages in the past to avoid problems in the ring, as they would reflect in the community." With the more experienced bulls the rope can be and is often removed as they are brought into position. Each bull has a handler who stations himself on the bull's left side. Their heads are brought together, they lock horns and the match begins. Two behemoths weighing from 750 kg up to 1000 kg each are locked head to head in primordial combat, pushing and twisting with all their might.

On tournament day

Furugen Motors is a car dealer located in Yomitan Village. The company president, Mr. Masahide Sakugawa is also the owner of the stable "Furugen Motors", a house of *Yokozuna* champions. On an early Sunday morning, he and his team reach one after one the stable, as today is fight day...



Although rather simple in terms of decoration, the stable is filled with Okinawan peculiar items. Purifying salt small heaps are found at each corners of the large building while salt will also be used on the bull's horns together with *awamori*, the local sake. At the entrance, a *sangwa* talisman made in *susuki*, a Japanese type of grass, is hooked on the wall to ward off evil spirits. For the men, such a day starts with *tofu* and *sukugurasu* - salt pickled marbled spinefoot fish - that everyone eats together. "This is also a tradition supposed to bring good luck..."



The bull is loaded into the truck and heads to the ring. After all is done and said, it is now up to the bull to go pick up a fight...