

(Promotional content)

# Domestic horses look to continue home dominance

No foreign entrant has won prestigious race since Alkaased in '05

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It's the weekend of the Group 1 Japan Cup in association with Longines, when one of the most prestigious horse races in Japan, if not the world, will be run at Tokyo Racecourse on Sunday. Having grown in stature over the past 40 years or so, the race has made a real name for itself over that time in the global horse-racing fraternity.

First run in 1981 as a slightly tentative attempt to see how Japanese horses would measure up against their overseas counterparts, the race that was also introduced to further enhance the quality of bloodstock in Japan has never looked back.

In its early days, Japanese runners were certainly put in their place, but the country didn't have to wait too long before success came along. It was Katsuragi Ace who was a surprise winner in 1984, when the Japan Cup was recognized as an official international Group 1 race. He beat home a couple of Japan's top horses of the era, namely Mr C B and Symboli Rudolf, to open the

scoring for the home team. Even then, Japan could win only two of the first 10 editions of the Cup, but further success has slowly but surely come its way.

Victories have been achieved by Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, but as of last year, Japan had recorded 28 wins to the rest of the world's 14, and we have to look all the way back to 2005 for the last foreign winner of the race, namely Alkaased. The last foreign horse to even make the top three was Ouija Board in 2006, who finished a gallant third to one of Japan's greatest horses ever, Deep Impact.

In the meantime, many of Japan's top horses have left an indelible mark on the race. These include Gentildonna, who won in 2012 and 2013, the stunning mare Almond Eye in 2018 and 2020, and more recently the Triple Crown winner Contrail, who added the Japan Cup to his impressive list of wins in 2021. Thankfully, their names continue to live on as they play their part in the breeding of other thoroughbreds, and they could easily find themselves as the dam or sire of future winners.

The current big names on the Japanese racing scene are big indeed, and two of them are set to clash in this year's Japan Cup. Three-year-old filly Liberty Island has seemingly improved in every race she's had this year and even won the Triple Tiara, a

series of races including the Oka Sho (Japanese 1000 Guineas) and the Yushun Himba (Japanese Oaks).

Liberty Island's jockey, Yuga Kawada, said he was pleased with the win and happy to claim all three top filly races with her, noting that she has great potential.

Her trainer, Mitsumasa Nakauchida, likewise believes there's more to come from his stable star.

"I still think she has more to give," he said.

Taking her on is the world's highest-rated racehorse in Equinox, recent winner of the Autumn Tenno Sho (Emperor's Cup) in October and holder of five consecutive Group 1 victories. It was as if he put on a special display that day, with Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako in attendance at Tokyo Racecourse.

Equinox's jockey, Christophe Lemaire, was similarly upbeat after the pair combined to win the Tenno Sho in some style. "I was pleased to show that he deserves his title of 'the world's best racehorse,'" Lemaire said. "He might not have incredible speed, but he's a versatile horse that stays calm and can run from any position in a race."

The Tenno Sho was run in record time, so the horse would seem to possess enough of whatever it takes to click up the speed when it counts.

And so, the mouth-watering clash of generations (Equinox is a 4-year-old) looks set to happen on Sunday, but let's not forget the challenge coming from overseas.

This year's English St. Leger winner, Continuous, was set to be the one to spearhead the foreign challenge, but a setback in training has ruled him out for the race. He managed to finish fifth in the Group 1 Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe in Paris on his latest run in October. Trained by record-breaking Irish trainer Aidan O'Brien, the horse would have been an interesting opponent and perhaps had a chance to lower the colors of Japan's top two runners.

O'Brien has sent horses to the Japan



Liberty Island claims victory in the Shuka Sho race at Kyoto Racecourse on Oct. 15, completing Japan's Triple Tiara of top races for fillies. KYODO

Cup on five previous occasions, and his best finish in the race so far was in 2017, when Idaho finished fifth. English St. Leger winners have tackled the race three times before, and the best result for them has been Conduit's fourth place finish in 2009.

The so-called speed *keiba* (horse racing) of Japan seems to make life difficult for visiting horses, and just recently the results have pretty much proved that. Perhaps what might have given a helping hand to Continuous is the fact that he was bred at

Paca Paca Farm in the lush green pastures of Hokkaido, and that his sire Heart's Cry won two Group 1 races and finished second in the 2005 Japan Cup – but it's all just not meant to be now.

One other runner from overseas is Iresine, a 6-year-old gelding trained in France and a two-time Group 1 winner. He'll be looking to give France its first win in the race since Le Glorieux won in 1987.

So the scene is set for Sunday's big race, which is the last of the day at Tokyo Race-

course and will get underway at 3:40 p.m. local time. The winner will receive a staggering ¥500 million (just under \$4 million) this year.

As a word of warning, all tickets, whether reserved seats or general admission, will need to be booked online via the JRA website prior to the race, and there will be no admission on the day without a reservation. Please enjoy one of the great horse races in Japan wherever you are able to watch it.

# New technology enhances fan experience

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A jockey camera and a tracking system introduced by the Japan Racing Association this past spring have proven popular with horse-racing fans.

Intended for use in Grade 1 and other major races, the jockey cam was introduced in the Oka Sho race, also known as the Japanese 1000 Guineas, on April 9, while the tracking system debuted at Kyoto Racecourse on April 22, the day the facility in western Japan reopened after a period of renovation.

These new technologies had already been introduced in Europe and the United States and have been welcomed by many horse-racing fans.

The jockey cam allows fans to experience the race from the rider's viewpoint. The French-made cameras, each weighing just 48 grams, give fans a completely new

view of racing. Video shot from the jockey's helmet is posted on YouTube on the day of the race.

The sounds of the horse galloping at 60 kph, the air rushing by, the breathing of both rider and steed, and the jockey praising the horse afterward all enhance the viewing experience. The video conveys the excitement of close races through the screen.

The video of three-time champion filly Liberty Island winning the Oka Sho race for the first time had drawn more than 2.17 million views as of Nov. 2. In fact, each jockey cam video posted has received at least 100,000 views. The video of the recent autumn Tenno Sho, which was held with the emperor and empress in attendance, captured a scene in which jockey Christophe Lemaire bowed deeply to the imperial couple from atop top-rated Equinox, which earned its fifth consecutive Grade 1 victory that day.

In Japan, the idea of introducing the jockey cam began to be discussed around 2018 at the suggestion of none other than Yuga Kawada, one of the country's top jockeys, and others.

"Many fans have said they liked the service as it allows them to see the video from the jockey's viewpoint, an experience that wasn't available before," Fumitaka Tsuruoka, senior manager of JRA's management planning division, said.

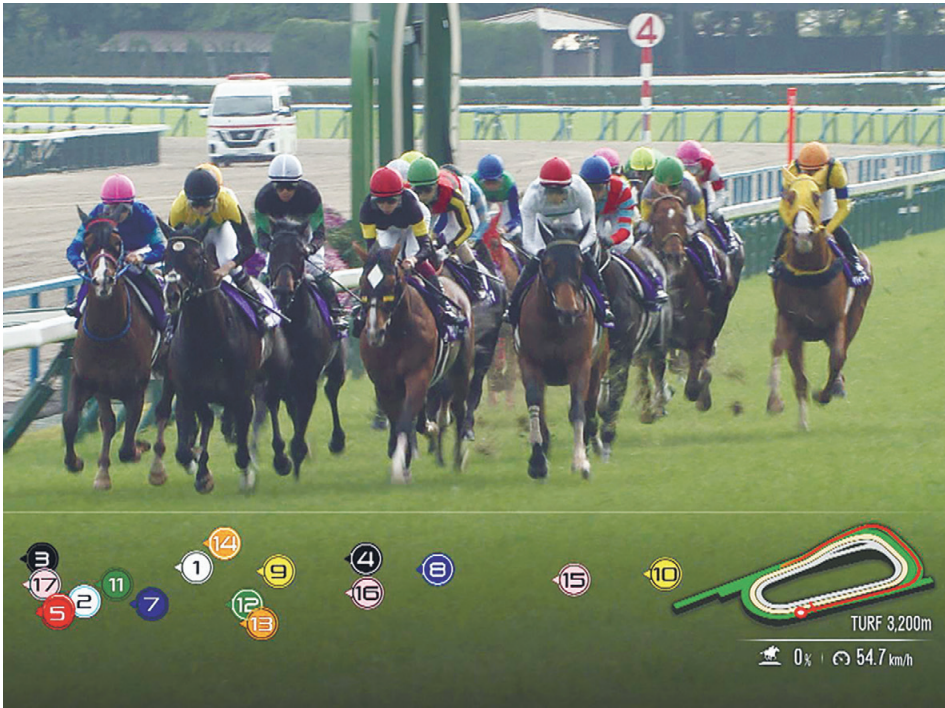
It is visually interesting and fun even for casual fans, and the helpful way information is provided augments the fun of watching horse races.

The same goes for the tracking system. The system precisely tracks the positions of all horses in a race using a sensor attached to the saddle cloth of each, which broadcasts their latitude and longitude every tenth of a second. During live broadcasts, the order of the horses is reflected in real time. The experience resembles watching a video game screen. Talks on introducing the system, which uses LTE mobile technology, now mainstream in Europe, began around 2020.

Before this system was introduced, only data from the horses in the top three positions in a race was visible, although this is still the case in most races. Moreover, the work to determine their positions was done manually. Whereas it was difficult to identify horses merely by their racing colors and the colors of jockey helmets, the new system has made it easier for casual fans to follow their favorite horses during races. It is seen as a breakthrough development.

"Since a few years ago, the latest technologies have diversified the ways fans enjoy games in many sports," Tsuruoka said. "So we want to use new technologies to enhance our services for customers so that the appeal of horse racing can be felt by a wider audience, although we do intend to ensure horse-racing traditions are maintained."

Racecourse visitors in their 20s, who represented about 4.7% of all visitors in 2019, before the pandemic struck, rose to about 12% in the fall 2022 survey, according to JRA. The increase in new younger fans was made possible thanks presumably to horse-racing



A recently implemented tracking system shows the real-time position of all horses during the live broadcast of the spring Tenno Sho on April 30. JRA

events continuing when other entertainment was restricted during the pandemic.

Features that make sports more visually entertaining can help retain fans, hopefully adding to and further expanding the

base. The appeal of the jockeys and the horses is of course a main factor supporting the popularity of horse racing, but enhanced services no doubt enhance the sport's appeal.

Chart guide

Horse

Trainer  
Sire (father)  
Dam (mother)

Jockey

Weight (adjusted)

JRA PHOTOS

For our Japan Cup coverage, please visit: <https://sports.japantimes.co.jp/horse-racing/2023-special/japan-cup.html>

Bracket number	Horse number	Horse	Jockey	Bracket number	Horse number	Horse	Jockey	Bracket number	Horse number	Horse	Jockey
1	1	Liberty Island Mitsumasa Nakauchida Duramente Yankee Rose	 Yuga Kawada 54 kg	4	7	Iresine J-P Gauvin Manduro Inanga	 Marie Velon 58 kg	7	13	Kurino Megami Ace Mitsuru Ishibashi Espoir City Kurino Bandaisan	 Tomohiro Yoshimura 56 kg
	2	Equinox Tetsuya Kimura Kitasan Black Chateau Blanche	 Christophe Lemaire 58 kg		8	Panthallassa Yoshito Yahagi Lord Kanaloa Miss Pemberley	 Yutaka Yoshida 58 kg		14	Deep Bond Ryuji Okubo Kizuna Zephyranthes	 Ryuji Wada 58 kg
2	3	Titleholder Toru Kurita Duramente Mowen	 Kazuo Yokoyama 58 kg	5	9	Vela Azul Kunihiko Watanabe Eishin Flash Vela Blanca	 Hollie Doyle 58 kg		15	Shonan Bashitto Naosuke Sugai Silver State Guillem	 Mirco Demuro 56 kg
	4	Studley Yutaka Okumura Harbinger Win Floraison	 Tom Marquand 58 kg		10	Danon Beluga Noriyuki Hori Heart's Cry Coasted	 Joao Moreira 58 kg	8	16	Impress Shozo Sasaki Kizuna Beatrice	 Kosei Miura 58 kg
3	5	Do Deuce Yasuo Tomomichi Heart's Cry Dust and Diamonds	 Keita Tosaki 58 kg	6	11	Trust Kenshin Fumimasa Takahashi Heart's Cry Aphelandra	 Kiwamu Ogino 58 kg		17	Stars on Earth Mizuki Takayanagi Duramente Southern Stars	 William Buick 56 kg
	6	Forward Again Eiji Nakano Rose Kingdom A Shin Shiner	 Hiroto Mayuzumi 58 kg		12	Chestnut Coat Ikko Tanaka Heart's Cry White Veil	 Manabu Tanaka 58 kg		18	Win Erfolg Yasuhiro Nemoto Gold Ship Success Strain	 Nanako Fujita 58 kg