

History of Horseracing in Japan



Horseracing event at Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto (Edo Period)

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The history of horseracing in Japan can be traced to the beginning of the eighth century. Originally held as a religious ceremony for the Imperial Court, horseracing flourished and spread throughout the country, to the point where races were held at nearly all major shrines and temples.

These events between the samurai of that time attracted countless fans among the commoners and began to appear frequently in the historical journals and literature of that era. Every year since then, horseracing has been held each May at the Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto. Its style and tradition have remained nearly intact since the 11th century, lasting through the aristocratic and feudal eras of Japan, for more than 900 years.

In 1862, when Japan was about to move from the feudal system into the era of the Meiji Restoration, foreign residents

living in Yokohama, predominantly British, introduced the first Western-style horseracing by establishing the Yokohama Race Club in Japan.

Western style horseracing was held in foreign enclaves, and hence, unfortunately, very little is known or recorded about the initial era in Japan's modern horseracing history. At about the same time that the name of the Japanese central city was changed from Edo to Tokyo, Western-style horseracing began to be found in the major metropolitan areas across the country.

In 1906, the government embarked on a policy which tacitly allowed people to bet. This led to the introduction of modern horseracing with betting in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and other metropolitan areas, from which most racing operations benefited.

However, this profitable system was short lived; two years later, the government prohibited betting and instituted a system of paying direct subsidies for prize money and other horseracing expenses.



Samurai horseracing at Yokohama Racecourse in 1865



The first Japanese Derby held at Meguro Racecourse (Tokyo) in 1932

During this subsequent period of government-subsidized horseracing, prominent legislators, businessmen, as well as breeders, began active efforts to introduce a horseracing law. Eventually the government began to take a proactive position to promote horseracing in order to expand breeding in Japan and to improve the quality of Japanese horses. In 1923, horseracing legislation, so greatly desired by the horseracing industry, was enacted and led to the formation of 11 racing clubs. Horseracing accompanied by legal betting was thus established. Shortly thereafter, the Imperial Racing Society was established as a horseracing authority of 11 racing clubs, and was responsible for the rules of racing, which served as a model for the rules of the individual racing clubs.

The Imperial Racing Society defined the registration of racing colors and the licensing of trainers and jockeys, among its other horseracing functions.

The Horseracing Law underwent a major revision in 1936, which saw the formation of the Japan Racing Society, which legally merged the 11 racing clubs and the Imperial Racing Society in their entirety, including their facilities and horseracing functions.

This reform brought about dramatic changes and improvements to horse racing in Japan, such as the establishment of JRA classic races like the Japanese Derby. There were also dramatic increases in turnover as well as attendance, marking the birth of modern horseracing in Japan as it exists today.



Saint Lite became the first Triple Crown winner in 1941.

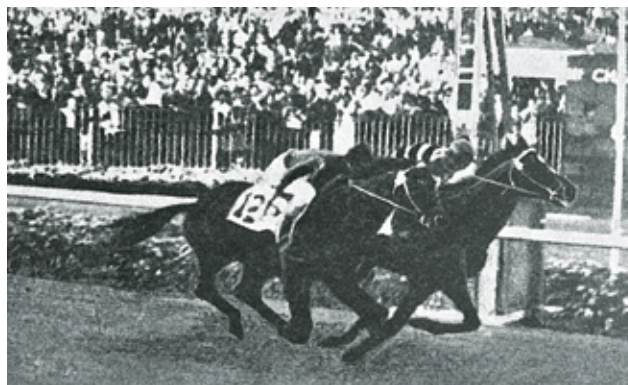
However, during the latter part of World War II, the racecourses were forced to suspend operations and the most historic of the modern racecourses, Yokohama, was commanded by the government for military use.

The termination of hostilities saw an immediate resumption of horseracing, when in 1946, Tokyo and Kyoto began holding race meetings. Also, 1947 brought a new type of betting, Quinella for the first time in Japan. In 1948, a new Horseracing Law was introduced, whereby the Japan Racing Society was abolished and under the new law, the government (the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries) took total control



The JRA was established in 1954, the same year as the running of 21st Japanese Derby which Golden Wave won.

of horseracing. Although this “government horseracing” continued much the same as before, the turnover did not increase throughout this extremely difficult period. In 1954, the Horseracing Law was amended again, to enact the Japan Racing Association Law. This established the Japan Racing Association (JRA), which took over all horseracing functions and operations of government horseracing. These laws not only provided for “national racing” in Japan, but also for the legalization and operation of regional public racing as a separate system to that of national racing.



Hakuchikara won Washington’s Birthday Handicap at Santa Anita, USA in 1959



The first Japan Cup was held in 1981. Mairzy Doates (USA), with C. Asmussen on board, took the crown.