



## Yabusame: Keeping 800-Year-Old Traditions of Ancient Japanese Horseback Archery Alive in the Present Day

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 aims to build momentum for the upcoming Expo 2025 (World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai), to support renewed interest in inbound travel to Japan, and to encourage further demand for domestic tourism. It also features a focus on “The Beauty and The Spirit of Japan,” promoting Japanese cultural arts and spreading awareness of their diverse and universal charms within Japan and around the world. This is a large-scale project with Japanese cultural facilities, arts organizations, and many others hosting and participating in a diverse range of projects and events. In this article, from among these participants, we will focus on efforts of the Japan Equestrian Archery Association to maintain *yabusame*<sup>1</sup> practices as heir to traditions that have been passed down for around 800 years.

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A *yabusame ite* prepares to shoot an arrow while riding a galloping horse

Photo: The Japan Equestrian Archery Association

### Takeda School *Yabusame*: An 800-Year Tradition

In *yabusame*, archers shoot arrows at targets one after another while riding galloping horses. *Yabusame* has been dedicated to Shinto shrines throughout Japan as a ritual (*yabusame-shinji*) for *tenka taihei* (universal peace), *gokoku hojo* (abundant harvests), and *banmin sokusai* (good health for all people)<sup>2</sup>.

The Takeda School, which the Japan Equestrian Archery Association (hereinafter referred to as “the Association”) is working to promote, is one of the oldest schools of *yabusame*, with a history of around 800 years beginning in the late 12th century. The Takeda School is maintaining the tra-

dition by passing down the practical techniques and spirit that the Kamakura samurai<sup>3</sup> valued. These included mastering the art of riding galloping horses skillfully, which was considered a strength. Every year, the school presents events with brave demonstrations of *yabusame* and *kasagake*<sup>1</sup> at locations including Meiji Shrine (Shibuya City, Tokyo), Kamigamo Shrine (Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture), and Samukawa Shrine (Samukawa Town, Kanagawa Prefecture).

Horseback riders in *yabusame* are referred to as *ite*. These *ite* must learn a unique Japanese equestrian technique called *tachisukashi*. This is a technique for achieving unity of rider and horse in which the rider places their full body

weight on the stirrups (*abumi*)<sup>4</sup> and avoids pressing their legs against the horse’s torso (body) or resting their body on the saddle (*kura*)<sup>4</sup>, maintaining a slight distance between their hips and the saddle. This gives them greater accuracy hitting the targets by allowing them to maintain a proper posture without vertical motion. The Takeda School is one of the schools working most effectively to promote such ancient horseback archery traditions. It is also well known for the fact that a previous head of the school gave guidance on horsemanship in the making of films such as *Seven Samurai* and *The Hidden Fortress* by internationally acclaimed director Kurosawa Akira and also appeared in the films himself.



### Yabusame *ite* make their appearance

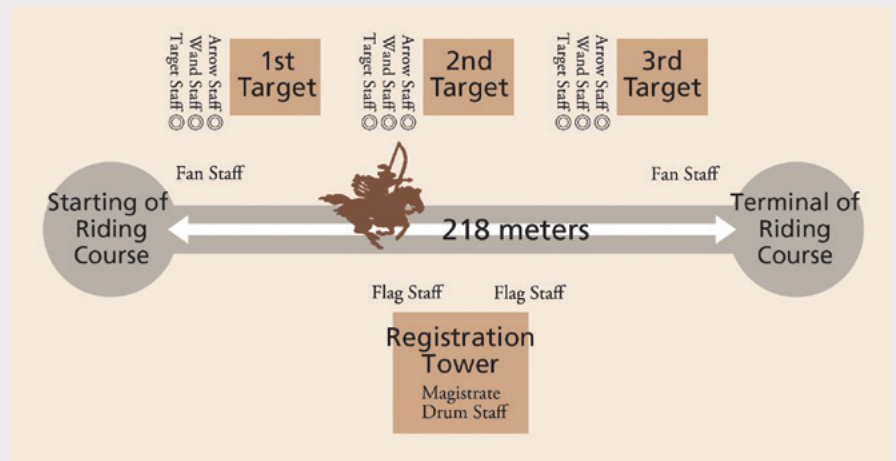
*Ite* make their way to the *yabusame* ground on horseback. They wear traditional *kasa* hats, *shozoku* kimono, and *igote* armguards embroidered with family crests and are armed with long swords, bows, and arrows – just as the Kamakura samurai of old might have appeared.

Photo: The Japan Equestrian Archery Association

## A Participant in Japan Cultural Expo since 2020

In recent years, more visitors from outside Japan have been viewing *yabusame*. In response, the Association has been providing commentaries at events in English to help visitors understand more about *yabusame*, such as its techniques, etiquette, and highlights. The Association has also been holding exhibitions in response to requests from the Government of Japan, foreign embassies, and others when overseas guests of honor visit Japan. For instance, former U.S. Presidents including Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have observed *yabusame* events while on official visits to Japan. Furthermore, the Association has also held events outside Japan in locations around the world to convey the special appeal of *yabusame*.

As part of such efforts to promote international goodwill, the Association has participated in the Japan Cultural Expo since 2020. This has included events held at the Kamakura



### Diagram of *yabusame* riding ground

Conceptual diagram of *yabusame* riding ground. The Japan Equestrian Archery Association claims to follow original traditions from the late 12th century concerning details such as the length of the straight track and the spacing of the targets.

Photo: The Japan Equestrian Archery Association

Ground, which the Association established especially for *yabusame*, and a live-streamed event at Meiji Shrine. In addition, the Association has produced videos to explain more about *yabusame* and streamed them on their website in both Japanese and English.

This year, in 2023, as a project selected for Japan Cultural Expo 2.0, the Association held events including a *kasagake* ritual at Kamigamo Shrine in October, which included a lecture explaining more about *kasagake* and a meet-and-greet with *ite* archers. It also presented an exhibition and talk show in collaboration with the Kamo Kurabeuma horse racing event held at the shrine, a ritual with a history of 930 years. In July and December, the Association held events at the Kamakura Ground as well. These included exhibitions of Nohgaku and Kamakura-bori lacquerware, demonstrations of horseback archery by riders dressed

in heavy Kamakura-period armor called *o-yoroi*, and meet-and-greet sessions with the archers. Scenes from the July event were streamed on the Association's website, including videos and explanations in English.

In order to cultivate the next generation of *ite*, the Association holds weekly training sessions at the Kamakura Ground on Sundays, and they are also open to visitors. The range of trainees is diverse, including many female trainees, and advanced learners from outside Japan, too. Trainees are diverse in age as well, ranging from their teens to those in their 60s. The youngest has even attained *ite* certification while still a high school student. Anyone interested in viewing a training session can apply through the Association's website. If you have the chance, even at a training session, you will surely enjoy impressive demonstrations of true *yabusame*.

#### The Japan Equestrian Archery Association website

<https://yabusame.or.jp/english/>

#### Video of a *kasagake* ritual held at Kamigamo Shrine as part of the Japan Cultural Expo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wZMTx9-CX8>

1. *Yabusame* is a type of horseback archery in which the target is shot from a galloping horse with a *kaburaya* arrow and is mainly conducted as a Shinto ritual. *Kasagake* is another type in which targets are set in positions that are difficult to aim at, such as the lower left and lower right of the archer. This was practiced by samurai primarily for training.
2. *Tenka taihei*: Peace throughout the land, with no conflict. *Gokoku hojo*: Abundant harvests of crops; particularly the "five grains," including rice and barley. *Banmin sokusai*: Safety and good health for all people.
3. Samurai warriors who held power in the samurai government that established the Kamakura shogunate in the second half of the 12th century. Greatly respecting the spirit of *shitsujitsu goken* (simplicity and vigorous strength), they devoted themselves to martial arts.
4. *Kura*: saddle; a piece of gear placed on the back of animals such as horses or cattle. *Abumi*: stirrups; pieces of horse-riding gear hung from both sides of the saddle for the rider to place their feet in. In *yabusame*, riders use unique Japanese forms of these called *Wa-gura* and *Wa-abumi*.