

# Autumn in Hokkaido

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**T**he Icelandic proverb *each country has its own customs* is just as relevant to horsemanship as other aspects of human society. This autumn the author of this article was fortunate enough to go on a few days' trip around the northern island of Japan, Hokkaido, and get to experience a few aspects of horsemanship there. What follows is a short missive of some of what was to be seen and heard.

## The Ban'ei Races

The first stop was in the city of Obihiro, on the Ban'ei race track, the only one of its kind today. The races there are quite unlike most races, as there massive draught horses race, rather than lean coursers. The horses involved are descended from Percherons, Bretons and Belgian Draughts, and they weigh between 800-1200 kg, with mature horses normally weighing a ton or more.

The origin of the competition was in forestry in the mid 1800s, when men had their horses compete in a tug-of-war to gauge their strength. This friendly rivalry then evolved into racing where the horses drew sleds laden with people or sacks of rice.

Nowadays the horses haul weighted sleds along a 200 m long gravel covered race track, with up to nine horses racing at a time. The track has two cants, the first smaller and the second, the Ban'ei point, taller and steeper. The sled has to be hauled from the start and over the first cant without stopping, but stopping is permitted after that. As the effort involved can be considerable, the drivers often halt the horses for a short while to gather for a burst of energy before heading up and over the Ban'ei point. Unlike most races, the Ban'ei is not won nose-first, but rather

when the entire sled has crossed the finishing line, and that can lead to tense last moments.

Races are held three days a week the year round, both in summer and deep frozen winter. Each racing day sports a number of races, 11 on the day I observed. The difficulty is variable, as the sleds are differentially weighted depending on the age and quality of the horse. This day, the sleds weighed between 480-710 kg.

The racing high-point of the year is the Ban'ei Kinen, where the sleds weigh a ton, and the winning purse is 5 million Yen. The record holder in recent years for this most difficult race is named Nishiki Daijin. He finished the 200 m race in 2:34 minutes in 2012. He also won in the year 2010, but then in 4:24.8 minutes, which gives a good impression of how variable the races can be.

The race was excellent entertainment, even for those not betting. It was interesting to see the horses presented before the race. The mental image of draught horses as stoic and calmly collected gentle giants in most situations was trod underfoot. Many pranced around in the care of the grooms, rearing and showing off. A notable change came over most when the drivers showed up and swung atop the colossal beasts, the horses quickly calmed down, but still showed some pre-race spirit.

The skill and technique of the driver was obviously no less important in determining the outcome of the race than the strength and stamina of the horse. The start of the race was in an explosive gallop, but getting over the first cant slowed the horses down. The struggle with the Ban'ei point was at times intense enough that the occasional horse went to their knees. Yet, every horse hauled its load to the end of the track.

The beautiful environment of the racehorse training facility in Hidaka sub-prefecture



## Headed for the hills

The next stop was at a farm by the mountains not far from the city of Obihiro, where an youthful and vital 77 year old farmer lives with a sizeable herd of Hokkaido horses, complemented by a few crossbred Hokkaidos.

The Hokkaido horse is rather similar to the classical Icelandic horse of centuries past, not so different from their wild Mongolian ancestors. It can certainly be said that the Icelandic spirit is lifted by the sight of such a familiar sight as a herd of variably coloured horses of all ages ranging together in expansive pastures. Still, many differences are to be seen, for instance the mane and tail of the Hokkaido horse are much finer, and they carry their tails high, flagging them when showing off

Of the native Japanese horses the Hokkaido horse is the most common, even if there are only 1200 registered individuals left. They were, like the Icelandic horse, used for any and all work, for riding, draft and as a beast of burden. Also, like the Icelandic horse, they are gaited. Pace is highly valued, and whilst all pace is now considered one gait, named *sokutaiho*, previously it was classified as two different gaits, *aibi* and *jimichi*, but that division is now little used. It seems that *aibi* corresponds to flying pace, and *jimichi* to slow pace, or piggy-pace, and are both variants considered traits of a good horse, as long as it can also trot at high speeds.

I was told that natural pacers had been considered good mounts for the samurai, as mounted archery was an important skill, as it was easier to aim when riding pace than when riding gallop or trot. Mounted archery is today a competition event,



The Hokkaido juveniles were more than willing to show a bit off.

named *yabusame*, although few Hokkaido horses feature there, due to their rarity. But there on the farm is an archery field, several targets mounted along a straight track, where a horse would be ridden on a loose rein in flying pace or gallop, depending on their gait preference, whilst the rider aims and shoots at as many targets as possible.

After visiting the herds, we tacked up and headed up into the mountains. The saddles used in Hokkaido were quite different from what is most commonly seen in Icelandic horsemanship. Some were western saddles, either simple or ornate, but others were clearly a Japanese design, made to enable a rider to do battle with ease.

I was given a Hokkaido-Halflinger crossbred gelding to ride, named Lightning. Also ridden were another gelding, Cherry Blossom, and the mare Little Leaf, with her unnamed foal tottering along. The farmer led the ride on his seven year old stallion White Wind, which was recently started for training, this being his second ride. Even with such a green horse, the ride went without a hitch.

Our path took us up a mountainside, through a fairly dense forest of conifers and deciduous trees in autumn foliage, where green pigeons fluttered between the trees. The first autumn snow had mostly melted, but it left many trees bent and broken from the wet weight. The tracks we rode were trod by Sika deer, and also fre-







A herd of Hokkaido horses runs off playfully.



In spite of running and frolicking, the Hokkaido horses are tame. It is also interesting to see that as was traditional in Iceland, some farmers trim their horses' manes and tails short.



A Hokkaido mare waits patiently for being put down.



For a Thoroughbred life takes a serious turn early, usually at 18 months of age.



The skeleton of the Thoroughbred stallion Warning, who was the top-rated two-year old colt in Europe in 1987, and the top-rated European horse of 1988.





The Thoroughbred stallion Empire Maker, who won nearly 2 million US dollars, and won over Funny Cide at the Belmont Stakes in 2003. Funny Cide had already won both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness Stakes, the first two races of The US Triple Crown.



The Thoroughbred stallion Boston Harbor, who also won nearly 2 million US dollars, but did so in one year as a two-year old in 1996, setting a new record, which still stands.



It seemed to me that those who have an interest in the Hokkaido horse have rather similar views to those found amongst Icelanders, see the benefit a horse reaps from being shaped and strengthened by freedom.

quented by Ussuri bears. The trek peaked on a slope close to the top of the mountain, with a view over the forested hills and mountain peaks.

### The world of Thoroughbred Racing

So the journey continued, and the next destination was the Hidaka sub-prefecture, the breeding grounds of Thoroughbreds, the most common breed of horse in Japan. There are around 250 stallions, 9500 broodmares which throw around 7000 foals a year, with 80% of breeders found around Hidaka. The revenue of the Thoroughbred industry is high, and the surroundings of the horsemanship are wildly different to what is seen around the Hokkaido horses.

A stop was made at a training and research centre, where about 50 people are involved in the education and training of about 60 horses, and where horse owners in the area can make use of the extensive facilities. There are plenty of roofed round pens with viewing platforms, several riding halls, 800 m long roofed oval race course, 1 km long roofed straight course, and a similar roofed course built up a slope, with the aim of improving strength and stamina. Additionally there are more open air courses and tracks, although their use is limited in the wintertime.

Horses are a cornerstone of society in Hidaka sub-prefecture, and each and every light pole was in some way or another beautifully decorated on a horse theme, in a variety of designs. There is also a mu-

seum dedicated to horses and horsemanship, mostly Thoroughbreds, but also other aspects. For instance there is a collection of horse stamps from all over the world, although unfortunately an Icelandic horse was not to be seen.

A stop was also made at a stallion station, where top Thoroughbred sires are available to breeders. Some of the horses there had earned purses of nearly two million US dollars in only a year or two, as 2- and 3-year olds. Even though they are only raced as colts, and retired to stud before fully mature, they are not entirely idle, as foals are only allowed in the studbook if they were conceived during a witnessed and documented live cover. As these stal-

lions can sire hundreds of foals a year, their dance cards are quite full.

### Hokkaido University

Lastly a visit was paid to a research farm of Hokkaido University, where growth, feeding and development of domestic animals is investigated, with a focus on horses and cattle. Most of the horses there are Hokkaido horses, and were we allowed to observe as geldings, colts, fillies and broodmares with foals were herded from pastures home to the farm, where they were weighed and had their measures taken.

As is the equestrian's wont, the nature of both man and horse were deeply discussed. It seemed to me that those who



A Ban'ei racing horse shows its strength hauling itself over the Ban'ei point



As owners of large herds may be familiar with, it is not always easy when the foals are in the chute. Yet, each and every foal stood still on the scales at the end of the chute.



This picture was on exhibition at the horse history museum, showing a samurai aiming a bow.

have an interest in the Hokkaido horse have rather similar views to those found amongst Icelanders, see the benefit a horse reaps from being shaped and strengthened by freedom. Their view seemed not unlike that described by Einar Benediktsson in his poem *Fákar*. Everything indicated that Icelandic equestrians would get along splendidly with those Japanese people who have discovered the Hokkaido horse

To conclude the journey, another ride was arranged, and this time I was given a purebred Hokkaido gelding to ride. He had prepared well for the upcoming winter, and carried a generous belly. Before heading out, I could not help but wonder whether he would not have to make an effort to keep up with the sleeker Thoroughbreds which came along for the ride. He proved himself to be more than equal to the task, if anything he seemed more footsure and limber than they in jumping over creeks and charging up steep and slippery slopes amongst the abundant bamboo grass.

The description I was given of my mount was that he favoured trot, and that he rarely

showed pace. To begin with I rode him as modelled by my Japanese colleagues, on a loose rein and with few cues. But when we came to a clearing, where a herd of Sika deer fled before us, I shortened the reins, prompting the horse to give me both flying pace, and some variant of amble not unlike tölt. Considering that this horse was supposed to be towards trot, it seems clear that there is no lack of ambling gaits in the Hokkaido horse.

#### At journey's end

It was evident that the Hokkaido horse generally has a very solid temperament, the disposition calm and collected, without them being a lazy ride. What I was told indicated that most horses would be suitable for most riders. That brought to mind some aspects of the breeding discussion in Iceland, whether it is a wise choice to focus so much on horses for competition and shows, at the cost of not actively breeding for the versatile and well loved family horse. Whether we should not refocus on increasing the number of horses which can be ridden by nearly anyone, due to the fact

that they adjust to the rider. Volatile and fiery horses are beautiful to behold, they can be fantastic mounts for the right person, and it would be a shame if they were not there to delight us. But the truth is that the majority of riders have more use for, and derive greater enjoyment from, horses which can be ridden by anyone.

At journey's end, I have to say that this trip sowed several seeds in my mind, although only time will tell if and how they germinate. It would be entirely possible to find room for pursuits derived from Japanese horsemanship within the world of the Icelandic horse, such as draught races and mounted archery on gaited horses. It would also be highly satisfying to see a bond form between Iceland and Japan based on horses. It could be a good idea for skilled riders and trainers of Icelandic horses to venture to Hokkaido and discuss our approach to training and riding gaited horses, see if that could not inspire renewed interest in this impressively strong and hardy breed of horse, which has an uphill battle to fight for survival.