

## Undokai: Japanese Sports Day

The Japan Society (2020)

### Background Notes

Sports Day, called '*undokai*' (運動会 *oon-dor-kai*) in Japanese, is a popular event in the school calendar and preparations begin well in advance of the day. Although sports days are traditionally held in the spring, hotter weather in some parts of Japan recently means they may also be held in the autumn term. They are always scheduled on a weekend so that family members can attend.



The key difference between sports days in Japan and the UK is that the whole school, including teaching staff, is usually divided into either the Red or White team (some schools may have more teams). This is because Japanese students normally have a reversible red/white sports cap as part of their P.E. kit which can be worn to easily identify their team. However, it is also common for students to wear '*hachimaki*' (headbands made of coloured cloth and tied around the forehead).

The emphasis of the day is on group work as much as individual attainment and students get to support and cheer for others who are not in their class or year group. Event winners gain points for their team and the winning team is announced at the end of the day.



### The Schedule and Popular Events

The day starts with an opening ceremony with music followed by a whole school warm-up of Radio Taiso. The events are fun and varied; standard ones that almost always appear are the 100m Race, Relay Race, Tug of War, and the Bean Bag Toss Game, as well as an event involving fancy dress. There is also at least one event that parents and teachers participate in.

Non-competitive elements are important too, so cheerleading, student dance performances and gymnastics also appear at some point. Spectators will bring a '*bento*' packed lunch and everyone will break for a picnic together during the lunch hour. Any litter or rubbish might be collected by students in a "clean up game" at the end of the day.

## Differences between Sports Day at Junior High School (Secondary) and Elementary School (Primary)

Sports day is similar at Junior High School and Elementary School, but there are some differences. Both will start practicing various elements of the day weeks in advance, however sports day is usually taken more seriously at Junior High School and students will therefore have more practices. Sports day at Junior High School is also more student-led with students taking on various roles to assist with the running of the day; each team will be appointed a student group leader who is in charge of assisting at practice sessions and boosting morale.



Junior High and Elementary students will both compete in a range of athletics and traditional events, as well as humorous games, but some events at Junior High School may be considered more dangerous and won't be performed at Elementary Schools. For example, gymnastic performances of human pyramids, or games involving piggy backs or shoulder rides, will only be played by older students.

### Supporters



All schools have 'oen-dan' (supporters groups). At high school these supporters are in addition to school cheerleaders. The supporters groups, particularly at high school, spend many hours after school preparing songs and dances. They usually prepare a dance routine which is accompanied by drums and whistles, and some of the songs allow them to insert people's names into the verse.

There are usually several supporters groups in each school which have students from all year groups in them. This is an optional activity but one which students are usually quite enthusiastic to participate in.