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It's dog fight dog in japan's dying sport

The fighting dogs of Shikoku.

Ben Hills, Herald Correspondent

KATSURA BEACH, SHIKOKU, Sunday: It is the smell that hits you first as you climb the stairs to the arena - a nauseating cocktail of wet dog, toilets, cheap disinfectant ... and something else you can't quite identify.

Holidaymakers in jeans and T-shirts take their seats around a raised arena, a three-metre circle of dirty sacking surrounded by a cage of thick iron bars

Two tough-looking types lead two huge, scary-looking dogs into the ring, unleash them, and leap for metal stools out of the reach of danger as the dogs hurl themselves at each other in a riot of snarling and bared fangs.

Within a few minutes, one of the dogs has been wrestled onto its back, the other dog's teeth buried in its neck, lying there as still as death. Then the penny drops - that elusive smell is blood.

Welcome to dog-fighting Japanese-style - to its promoters, a sport with 200 years of honourable tradition dating back to the days of the samurai; to police and welfare organisations trying to outlaw it, a carnival of cruelty run by criminals that is a national embarrassment.

Mr Yasuhiko Aida, general manager of the Japan Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, believes dog-fighting is barbaric and has been campaigning for years to have it banned in those parts of Japan, like Shikoku Island, where it is still allowed.

Local governments in large areas of the country outlawed dog-fighting up to 40 years ago. As well as the cruelty, officials were concerned that the gambling on the fighting had fallen into the hands of criminals connected with the Yamaguchi-gumi yakuza mob.

But here in Shikoku, where Japan's last organised dog-fighting arena packs in the crowds, there are no such compunctions.

Tens of thousands travel here every year from as far away as Tokyo to see the bloody spectacle.

These are no ordinary dogs. The Tosa combines the smartness of the traditional Shikoku dog which was used for boar-hunting, interbred with imported breeds - the massive bulk of a mastiff, and the aggression of a bulldog and a boxer.

They have jaws that could take your leg off, and they weigh up to 105 kilos. The favoured colour is a dark rusty brown. White is out, says the manager of the fighting ring, Mr Takashi Tama Hirose: "It shows up the blood too much."

At its peak, 80 years ago, there were thousands of these fighting dogs all over Japan. The Kochi district of Shikoku Island - where they were first bred - had 10,000 dogs, three fighting rings, and matches practically every week.

Now, there are just 220 Tosa dogs left in Kochi - barely enough to support the last fighting ring. Mr Hirose worries that the sport, and the breed, may become extinct within a decade.

If appearances are any guide, many of the tourists have no idea what they will get for their \$A13. The sport is promoted as a sort of cutesy dog sumo wrestling, complete with grand champion yokozunas paraded around the ring dressed in traditional robes and huge gilt collars.

But the fight which follows is not for the squeamish. The dogs, quite literally, tear each other to pieces. The audience sits there silently, with their small children stiff-faced and staring at the bloody, snarling spectacle.

One or two dogs a year are killed in the ring, in front of the crowd - and others so badly mauled they have to be put down later.

Mr Hirose, 29, the son of the founder of the centre, denies that this is cruel. "These are fighting dogs - they are bred to fight, and they get tense if they can't release their aggression. It is more cruel to stop them," he said.

Ben Hills

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Caption: A spectacle that is not for the squeamish ... a Tosa dog fight at Katsura Beach in Kochi Prefecture. Dog fights in the prefecture attract tens of thousands of tourists each year.

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