

From Sporting Event to Pop Culture Phenomenon: The Hakone Ekiden and Its Media Exposure

スポーツイベントからポップカルチャー現象へ：箱根駅伝とそのメディア露出

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Abstract

This article explores the Hakone Ekiden, a two-day college relay race, not only as a sporting event but also its manyfold media exposure. It traces the race's historical development and its deep, early connection to mass media, particularly newspapers and later television. The study discusses the race's "mediagenic" qualities, focusing on the drama inherent in its rules as well as the dramaturgy of *Nihon Terebi's* (NTV) broadcasts. Using examples from non-fiction media and fictional adaptations, the article argues that the Hakone Ekiden has transcended a singular sporting event to become an integral part of Japanese pop culture.

Keywords: Hakone Ekiden, Mass Media, Japanese Pop Culture

1. Introduction

In an era where linear television is increasingly losing viewers in Japan, there is still one live sporting event that consistently achieves high ratings year after year. It is the traditional live broadcast of the *Tōkyō Hakone-kan ōfuku daigaku ekiden kyōsō* (The Tōkyō-Hakone Round-Trip College Ekiden Race), better known in its abbreviated form as the Hakone Ekiden, held annually on January 2nd and 3rd. With a running distance of over 100 km per day and a broadcast time of more than six hours each, it is quite easy to lose track of the action. However, the Japanese mass media do their best to ensure that viewers maintain their interest, not only during the event but also through extensive pre- and post-event coverage.

This article aims to provide insight into the attractivity of the Hakone Ekiden and its coverage by the media and show that it has gone far beyond being merely a singular sporting event to become an integral part of Japanese pop culture.

2. The Hakone Ekiden in the Media Landscape Transformation

The origin of the *ekiden* can be dated back to the seventh century, where it referred to a communication and transport system established during the Taika Reform. It encompassed official post stations (*ekika*) and designated horses (*tenma*), which were used to rapidly transmit

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messages and goods via a relay system (Nogami 2016:44f).

The origin of *ekiden* as a long-distance relay race and the direct forerunner of the Hakone Ekiden is a race initiated by the newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 1917, which was also the first to bear this designation. Officially named *Teito gojūshūnen kinen dai hakurankai 'Tōkaidō ekiden tohō kyōsō'* (The Imperial Capital 50th Anniversary Grand Exposition "Tōkaidō Ekiden Foot Race"), this relay race was an event held as part of the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the capital's relocation from Kyōto to Tōkyō (Kudō 2023:20f). From April 27th to 29th, an East and a West team, each composed of young runners, competed against each other over 508 km and 23 stations along the traditional Tōkaidō route from Kyōto to Tōkyō.

The *Yomiuri Shimbun* utilized this relay race as a strategic newspaper project to boost its circulation, publishing detailed reports on the race's progress in its morning editions (Ebizuka 2016:28f, *Yomiuri Shimbun 100nen-shi hemshū iinnkai* 1976:261f). This first *ekiden* thus represents an early example of the active cultural, and specifically sports sponsorship, by the media in Japan. These sponsoring activities greatly increased throughout history.

The first Hakone Ekiden, then called *Shidaikō ekiden kyōsō* (Four Major Schools Ekiden Race), was also largely a product of the media, as it was organized by the Tōkyō-based newspaper *Hōchi Shimbun*. Significantly, the start and finish lines of the race were directly in front of the publishing house (Nogami 2016:142). The idea for this two-day relay race from Tōkyō to Hakone and back, which began on February 14th, 1920, is attributed to Kanakuri Shisō, a participant in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics Marathon, the final runner for the East team in the first *ekiden* in 1917, and later known in Japan as the "Father of the Marathon" (NHK Ākaibusu(a) HP). Kanakuri had originally conceived the race, involving four university teams, as a national qualifier for a transcontinental relay across America. Since this project involved crossing the Rocky Mountains, the route from Tōkyō into the mountains of Hakone was deliberately chosen (Nogami 2016:46-49, Takiguchi 2016:51-53). However, the project was never realized, unlike the Hakone Ekiden, which has been held as the *Tōkyō Hakone-kan ōfuku daigaku ekiden kyōsō* up to the present day. A newspaper has always been a co-organizer since the beginning. Initially the *Hōchi Shimbun*, and from 1948, following the acquisition of the newspaper, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. [1] The starting and finishing points of the race also changed with the relocation of the publishing houses, each time moving to the current location of the respective building (Nogami 2016:142f, 172f). Nogami calls the close connection between the sporting event and the newspapers a "win-win" relationship (Nogami 2016:173).

In the early years, reporting on this essentially local sporting event - participation being limited to members of the organizing association *Kantō gakusei rikujō kyōgi renmei* (The Inter-University Athletic Union of Kantō) - was dominated by the press. Although sports events had been broadcast on the radio since 1927 - just two years after the start of radio in Japan - it was not until 1953 that the public broadcaster *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* (NHK) transmitted the Hakone Ekiden nationwide with a mix of recorded segments and live reports (Sugiyama 2016:19f). This

was the first time the dynamism of this competition was captured and conveyed to listeners across the country. A key event for the growing attractiveness of the radio broadcast is the 1954 race, which ended in a dead heat finish, the excitement of which could be partly conveyed live (Kudō 2016:93f). According to Nogami, the radio broadcasts also stirred the interest of young people from all over the country who had learned about the Hakone Ekiden and wanted to participate themselves to enter participating universities from the Kantō region. Even today, radio broadcasts, nationwide by *NHK*, as well as *Bunka Hōsō* (since 1994) and *RF Rajio Nihon* (since 1995) together with affiliated stations, enjoy great popularity. It has become customary for spectators along the course to use the radio to check the status of the race and find out when the runners are approaching them (Nogami 2016:174f). [2]

In 1979, *Tōkyō 12 Channeru* (now *Terebi Tōkyō*) had already begun broadcasting a summary of the race and transmission of the final stage (Sugiyama 2016:16, Nogami 2016:176f), but the "game changer" that made the Hakone Ekiden a national event is unanimously considered to be the first live broadcast of the entire race on both days by *Nihon Terebi (NTV)* and its nationwide network in 1987. Until then, it was considered technically impossible to broadcast the entire race live, mainly due to the course running through the mountains of Hakone. Initially, stages 3-4 and 7-9 of the total distance of 213.6 km the time could not be broadcast live. The complete live broadcast of all ten stages was first realized in 1989 and continues to be carried out this way today (Kudō 2023:138f, Nogami 2016:176f). Thus, *NTV* annually broadcasts a total of more than 12 hours live, not including pre- and post-race reports (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Viewership Ratings and TV-Broadcast Times Since 1987

Year	Route	Broadcast time (min.)	Household viewership rating	Year	Route	Broadcast time (min.)	Household viewership rating	Year	Route	Broadcast time (min.)	Household viewership rating
1987	Outward	150/115	18.0/18.7	2000	Outward	380	26.8	2013	Outward	375	29.1
	Return	90/115	14.1/21.2		Return	395	29.0		Return	388	27.9
1988	Outward	150/183	22.1/19.2	2001	Outward	380	24.5	2014	Outward	375	26.8
	Return	155/175	19.4/20.3		Return	395	27.5		Return	388	27.0
1989	Outward	166/212	20.8/18.7	2002	Outward	380	27.5	2015	Outward	375	28.2
	Return	188/188	19.9/21.7		Return	395	27.0		Return	388	28.3
1990	Outward	169/208	19.4/20.3	2003	Outward	380	29.3	2016	Outward	375	28.0
	Return	178/198	20.3/22.3		Return	395	26.6		Return	388	27.8
1991	Outward	380	19.7	2004	Outward	380	25.2	2017	Outward	375	27.2
	Return	380	22.7		Return	380	29.3		Return	388	28.4
1992	Outward	395	23.2	2005	Outward	380	23.7	2018	Outward	375	29.4
	Return	380	26.1		Return	395	29.9		Return	388	29.7
1993	Outward	395	26.1	2006	Outward	375	27.6	2019	Outward	388	32.1
	Return	380	27.8		Return	390	29.1		Return	375	30.7
1994	Outward	395	24.9	2007	Outward	375	27.3	2020	Outward	375	27.3
	Return	380	27.3		Return	390	28.8		Return	388	28.6
1995	Outward	395	27.1	2008	Outward	375	25.4	2021	Outward	375	31.0
	Return	380	28.8		Return	388	27.7		Return	388	33.2
1996	Outward	395	29.2	2009	Outward	375	26.3	2022	Outward	375	26.2
	Return	380	28.2		Return	388	27.5		Return	388	28.4
1997	Outward	395	26.8	2010	Outward	375	27.2	2023	Outward	375	27.5
	Return	380	25.4		Return	388	27.9		Return	388	29.6
1998	Outward	395	25.7	2011	Outward	375	25.1	2024	Outward	375	26.1
	Return	380	26.1		Return	388	29.3		Return	388	28.3
1999	Outward	395	25.3	2012	Outward	375	27.9	2025	Outward	375	27.9
	Return	380	28.3		Return	388	28.5		Return	388	28.8

(Video Research(a) HP)

3. The Drama of the Hakone Ekiden and the Dramaturgy of the Live Reporting

3.1. The Qualifying Race and its Coverage

The Hakone Ekiden essentially begins before the actual race in January, as only the top ten teams from the previous year are automatically seeded for the upcoming race. Ten additional teams, which complete the field, are determined in a team qualifying race over the half-

marathon distance (21.0975 km) held every October. This qualification is broadcast live by *Nihon Terebi* on its terrestrial channel only in certain regions (primarily the Kantō region), but simultaneously on the online platform *TVer* (TVer HP). Together with the broadcast of a recording of the race on the same evening on the broadcaster's satellite channel, *BS Nitte*, the qualifying race can be followed nationwide. [3]

This qualifying race is not a relay but a mass race in which teams can field up to 12 runners each. The times of the first ten runners are then added together to determine the team's total time, which is decisive for the ranking (Nogami 2016:66). This format is by no means as telegenic as the Hakone Ekiden itself, but *Nihon Terebi* stages it impressively. During the race, the viewer is interspersed with background information about the teams and updates on the current ranking and the overall time gaps to the trailing teams. However, the last display of the ranking is from the timing at 17.4 km. During the broadcast of the leading runner's finish, this information is faded out and replaced at the finish line by a display of the number of runners who have already finished for each team. Thus, the viewer can anticipate which teams have secured the top places, but not necessarily what the final ranking will look like, and especially which team has secured the final qualification spot (10th place) or missed it. [4]

This certainty is finally provided by the announcement of the official results, which is performed on a stage in front of the teams. The ranking is announced in descending order using a board and revealing the university name and total time one after the other. The suspense builds as the announcement approaches 10th place. The announcement of this rank constitutes the dramatic climax of both the event and the reporting, with a focus on the celebration of the tenth-placed team and the disappointment of the lower-ranked teams, especially the eleventh-placed one.

3.2. The Live Broadcast of the Hakone Ekiden on TV

For many Japanese people, it is a New Year's tradition to follow the Hakone Ekiden on television. The consistently high ratings since the start of the *NTV* broadcast (see Table 1) confirm this. The ratings are comparable to those of the Super Bowl (Ekstrand 2022:88), possibly making the race the most-watched road race in the world (Parke 2015 HP).

The reasons for the great popularity of the Hakone Ekiden are found, on the one hand, in the various moments of tension and the drama of the race, which arise from the rules and execution, and on the other hand, the dramaturgy with which these elements are conveyed to viewers at home by *NTV* in the broadcast.

3.2.1. The Appeal of the Race

• The Dynamics of the Ekiden as both a Solo and Team Sport

Long-distance running is fundamentally an individual sport, and a long-distance relay lives from the summation of the runners' results. However, in the *ekiden* in Japan, and especially the

long Hakone Ekiden, success is often presented as the result of the team's collective effort rather than the mere addition of individual runners' results. "Ekidens appear to exist within the contradictory realm of togetherness while still apart" (Ekstrand 2022:89). The long-time observer of the Japanese long-distance running scene, Brett Larner, sees a cultural peculiarity of Japan in this phenomenon:

"[...] the popularity of the Ekiden is partially from the way it emphasises how the contributions of every individual involved are critical to the success of the group. [...] In an Ekiden, every single member is important, and if anyone fails then everyone fails. Likewise, they share in the success equally. This reflects the dominant cultural mythology" (Denneh 2021 HP).

• The Course

The race nowadays covers 217.1 km. The course, with a total of ten stages, is considered demanding and varied. [5] Stage 5, which leads to the halfway finish, occupies a special position. The 20.8 km long stage, with its steep inclines, is regarded as the most challenging stage. It stands out due to the dramatic duels between the teams' mountain specialists. Although the team factor in the Hakone Ekiden is emphasized, the individual performance of the runners takes precedence in this stage. This culminates in the heroization of outstanding athletes who have set records on this stage as *yama no kami* (Mountain God), an expression that became common in the country after being used by a TV reporter in 2007 (Nogami 2016:18f).

• A Small Field of Runners

Although a total of 210 runners from 20 university teams from the Kantō region and the mixed, non-competitive *Kantō gakusei rikujō kyōgi renmei* team are on the move over the two race days, there are only 21 runners on the course per stage at any time. This contributes to the fact that there is enough time during the reporting to introduce every single runner,

• Three Races in One and the Runner's Records

Even though the overall victory is most important, the victories in the outward and return legs also receive due attention. In addition, further focus is placed on individual athletes, with the fastest runner on each stage and stage records in historical comparison being parameters that garner attention.

• The Automatic Qualification of the Top Ten Teams (Seed System)

The top ten teams qualify directly for the Hakone Ekiden in the following year and thus do not have to go through the described qualification process. This leads to spectator interest also focusing on the rear field around 10th place, ensuring its own drama until the finish.

• The Early Start due to a Large Time Deficit

One of the greatest dramas occurs during the handover of the sash (*tasuki*) to the next runner of a team. For traffic reasons, efforts are made to keep the field of runners within a compact time difference. Therefore, the regulations stipulate an early start (*kuriage sutāto*) for a team trailing the leader by 10 or 20 minutes, depending on the stage. In this event, the university's

own sash is replaced by a yellow-and-white striped sash, which means the team cannot bring its own sash to the finish (Nogami 2016:60f).

"The *tasuki* is often presented in a polite bowing manner from one team member to another. It is said that it serves as a symbolic reminder of one's responsibility to something greater than oneself – the team. [...] This object, which represents a history of It transmits with it an unseen communal responsibility, resulting in a sense of drama in the process of carrying and passing." (Ekstand 2022:90).

In this context, the early start signifies a failure for the team, which spectators always comment on with loud sighs at the sight of the forced early start.

3.2.2. The Appeal of the TV Broadcast

Spectators along the course see the runners only for a short time, whereas those in front of the television can be present live for the entire race. *NTV* ensures that the diverse appeal of the race is captured and transmitted. The high average ratings are proof that the broadcaster succeeds in keeping viewers engaged over the long duration. With a mix of live reports on the state of the race and constantly changing scenarios within the field, inserted background reports on runners and teams, expert commentary as well as visually arranged data, the broadcast gives the Hakone Ekiden its own, dramaturgically staged narrative. Larner states:

"The TV coverage is brilliant; I've often ranted about how terrible coverage of marathons in the UK and US is, cutting away at the wrong time, but in Japan all the stats are all over the screen. It's so well produced that you can really follow it. A lot of people who watch are not running fans, but they cater for a wide audience." (Denneh 2021 HP).

With the small field, there is enough time to introduce every single runner. The name of the high school the runner comes from is always displayed. Precisely this feature transforms the race with its locally restricted participation into a national event, fostering regional identification among viewers and contributing to its nationwide popularity.

4. The Immersion of the Hakone Ekiden in Other Media Sectors

The race and its live broadcast, however, represent only one side of the coin. What makes the Hakone Ekiden so unique, and a piece of Japanese pop culture is its treatment in large parts of the mass media, both non-fiction and fiction. Below, we will look at some of the most striking media products in these areas that underline this observation.

4.1. Non-Fiction Media

In the magazine market, we naturally find various sports magazines that dedicate issues to the Hakone Ekiden close to its annual staging, such as the *Rikujō kyōgi magajini* (Track-and-Field Magazine). [6]

Titles related to the Hakone Ekiden are also found in the *mook* [7] genre, such as *Amari ni*

komakasugiru Hakone Ekiden gaido + Nyūiyā Ekiden! (The Too Detailed Hakone Ekiden Guide + New Year Ekiden!), which provides concise information and background details on the course, participating teams, and prominent runners of the individual teams (Ekiden News 2024).

The Japanese book market also features numerous publications on the Hakone Ekiden by journalists and prominent coaches, as well as former participants, covering the race's history and characteristics, training strategies and personal experience reports.

Particular attention must be paid to the media presence of the *Aoyama Gakuin University* track and field club (*rikujō kyōgibu*), and especially its coach, Hara Susumu. Under coach Hara, a former employee of an energy company who took over the team' in 2004, it qualified for the first time in 33 years in 2009 and has since won the race a total of eight times (2015-2018, 2020, 2022, 2024, and 2025) (Tōyō Keizai Online 2022 HP, Yomiuri Shimbun Online HP). This success story makes him the undisputed star of the university *ekiden* community. As a guest commentator, he is present on various TV entertainment shows throughout the year. On his homepage, Hara lists 14 book titles and publishes upcoming TV appearances (Hara Susumu HP). Members of the university's track and field club are also encouraged to appear in the media. A current example of this, shortly after the victory in the 2025 Hakone Ekiden, is a relay race involving team members against a train on *NTV's* TV show "*Urutoraman DASH*" (Nittere Topics HP). Hara consciously uses his media presence, describing it as a "nutrient" (*ei-yōzai*) and sees himself rightly placed in entertainment shows (Hara 2015:194-199). Even his wife, Miho, who came into the spotlight as the manager of the runners' dormitory (*ryōbō*), shares her success story and philosophy in TV shows and publications (see Hara 2017).

4.2. Fiction Media

4.2.1. The Multimedia Adaptation of the Novel *Kaze ga tsuyoku fuiteiru*

The best example of the adaptation of a Hakone Ekiden theme across different media is the novel *Kaze ga tsuyoku fuiteiru* (The Wind is Blowing Strong) by Miura Shion (2006). It tells the story of the intense efforts of a university student team to participate in the Hakone Ekiden. Most members are initially completely incapable and unmotivated but are ultimately led to participate in the race by the protagonist, an experienced runner, after overcoming various difficulties. In 2008/2009, the material was published as a manga (6 volumes) (Akizuki 2008/2009). Around the same time, a film with the same title was released in cinemas (*Kaze ga tsuyoku fuiteiru* (Movie) 2009), and the material was finally adapted as a TV anime series with 23 episodes, originally broadcast on *NTV* 2018-2019 (*Kaze ga tsuyoku fuiteiru* HP).

4.2.2. Not Every Media Project is Successful

In the world of manga, sports manga are a thriving genre. However, the manga *Trust! - Aozora no tasuki* (Trust!-The Sash of the Blue Sky) shows that not everything that uses

the Hakone Ekiden as a motif is necessarily successful. The story of a young athlete who joins a university running club to realize his goal of participating in the Hakone Ekiden is ended after just three volumes - before he can even participate in the race (Inoue 2014).

Television is no exception, either. In 2019, then still assuming the Tōkyō Olympics would take place the following year, *NHK* aired the TV series *Idaten - Tōkyō orinpikku banashi* (Idaten - The Tale of the Tōkyō Olympics). In 47 episodes, the series depicted the journey of the already mentioned Kanaguri Shisō and Tabata Masaji, who brought the 1964 Tōkyō Olympics to Japan, from the 1912 Stockholm Olympics to the Tōkyō Olympics. In episode 19, the focus is on the genesis of the Hakone Ekiden and especially Kanakuri's efforts regarding it (NHK Ākaibusu(b) HP). However, the series only recorded an average household viewership rating of 8.2% (Video Research (b) HP). As the only *Taiga dorama* under 10%, this was considered a failure (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* HP). Nevertheless, both attempts to process the Hakone Ekiden motif fictionally show how deeply the race has penetrated Japanese society.

5. Conclusion

In the scope of this article only the surface of the Hakone Ekiden as a Japanese cultural phenomenon could be explored. An in-depth analysis of individual media products and internet content had to be excluded. Even if only a very rough overview of the elements that so deeply integrate the Hakone Ekiden into Japanese culture could be given here, the historical development and media exploitation of the race show that the Hakone Ekiden is no longer simply a single race but has evolved with its modern tradition into a piece of pop culture.

Notes

- [1] The publishing house *Hōchi Shimbunsha*, publisher of the sports newspaper *Supōtsu Hōchi* within the *Yomiuri Shimbun* group, is still involved as a co-sponsor (*kōen*) of the Hakone Ekiden (Hakone Ekiden HP).
- [2] With the launch of the internet radio portal *radiko* in 2010, terrestrial broadcasters are even easier to receive (radiko.jp... HP).
- [3] The race starts at the *Rikujō jieitai Tachikawa chūtonchi* (Japan Ground Self-Defense Force Tachikawa Camp) and ends at *Shōwa kōen* (Shōwa Park) in Tachikawa City. In 2025, the race was held and broadcast on October 18th (Kantō Rikujō Kyōgi Renmei HP, NTV HP).
- [4] In the 2024 qualifying race, only one second separated the teams in 10th and 11th place.
- [5] For a detailed description of the special features of all ten stages see Ekiden News 2024.
- [6] See *Hakone Ekiden kanzen gaido 2025*.
- [7] *Mooks*, a portmanteau of *magazine* and *book*, are not periodic publications, but they resemble magazines in format and presentation and are usually placed on the magazine shelf in bookstores, where they are exposed longer than magazines, which are frequently exchanged for the latest issue (Löhr 2014:311f).

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