

## WINTER SPORTS

Seasonal recreation enjoyed by millions



**Nagano Winter Olympic Games**

The opening ceremony of these games, which were held in February 1998.

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### Introduction

The popularity of winter sports in Japan is substantiated by the country's distinction of being the first Asian country to host the Winter Olympics (1972). Further proof can be found in its role as host to both the first and second Winter Asian Games (1986 and 1990). To these, of course, the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano can now be added.

Japan's climate, above all, permits a thriving winter sports season. Winters are governed by the coldest air mass in the world, the Siberian air mass. The frequent approach of cold fronts from the Asian

mainland causes Japan to experience much lower temperatures than European regions at the same latitude. Tokyo, at 35° north latitude, has an average January temperature of 4.7°C, as opposed to the similar 4.2°C January average in London, located at 51° north latitude.

As the Siberian air mass approaches Japan, it picks up moisture from the Sea of Japan. As a result, regions facing the Asian continent often receive heavy snowfall. Joetsu City in Niigata Prefecture recorded 232 centimeters of snow in one day during 1986—enough to bury a one-story building. This presents a startling contrast with the

Pacific Ocean side of the archipelago, which tends to be quite dry and receives much less snow during the winter.

Another factor that enhances the winter sports environment is that four-fifths of Japan's land area is composed of mountains. The Japan Alps—a range that is divided into Northern, Central, and Southern sectors—runs down the central part of Honshu, the largest of the four Japanese islands. Many peaks in the Japan Alps are over 2,500 meters high and are covered with snow during the winter. Since these areas can be reached easily by the rail and highway network from the three major population centers in Kanto, Chubu, and Kinki (with Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka, respectively, at their centers), it is natural that these areas are among the most popular for winter sports. A skier, for example, can board a Joetsu Shinkansen (bullet train) on a brisk and sunny day in Tokyo, and in just over one hour be at a resort in Niigata Prefecture or Nagano Prefecture where there are two to four meters of snow. Depending on the region and prevailing weather conditions, it is usually possible to ski from December through the beginning of April.

## Sports Competition

Participation in a variety of international competitive events has raised interest and helped to improve athletes' techniques. The first international winter tournament to be held in Japan after World War II was the World Men's Speed Skating Tournament. Japan has been an eager participant in the Winter Olympics since the second games, held at St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1928. With the exception of Oslo in 1948, Japanese teams have taken part in all subsequent Winter Games.

The Eleventh Winter Olympic Games in February 1972, held in Sapporo, Hokkaido, attracted 1,128 athletes from 35 countries and marked the first time a Japanese earned a gold medal, in the 70-meter ski jump event. The Japanese team obtained better scores in most events than at previous



Olympic Games.

## Resorts and Other Facilities

Most of the major winter sports areas on the island of Honshu are easily accessible by railway and are outfitted with chairlifts and night illumination. A large number of ski grounds are located along the Joetsu line, which terminates in Tokyo. These include Tsuchitaru, Nakazato, Iwappara, Yuzawa, Ishiuchi, Shiozawa, Urasa, Koide, and Ojiya.

Sugadaira Ski Grounds is a ski resort located along the Shinetsu line, between Mt. Azumaya and Mt. Neko.

Zao, a resort on the border of Miyagi and Yamagata prefectures, has the reputation of being the largest and best equipped ski area in the Tohoku region. It is also famous for its "snow monsters," ice-covered pine trees that make for stunning winter scenery.

Hokkaido's northern latitudes permit skiing from early December to late April. Most of the ski grounds provide a variety



## Nordic combined

In the Nordic combined team event at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games, the Japanese team, which included brothers Ogiwara Kenji (left) and Ogiwara Tsuguharu (right), placed fifth.

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of slopes that offer not only challenges to experts, but safe skiing for beginners. Many of these ski facilities are located close to Hokkaido's major cities.

Skating can be enjoyed at many lakes and outdoor rinks, and also in some urban areas. Hakone, a recreational area near Mount Fuji, offers good skating facilities. It can easily be reached from Tokyo by train in less than two hours.

## Catering to Modern Lifestyles

A winter vacation to a domestic resort area means more than just sports. Many of the *ryokan* (Japanese-style inns), *minshuku* (pensions), and ski lodges at winter resort areas also offer beautiful scenery, hot-spring bathing, and other means of relaxing. Like so many other aspects of modern-day living, the pace of recreation in Japan has accelerated and the ways in which people enjoy winter sports have changed. The availability of domestic package tours that include transportation, hotel, meals, ski lift usage, and so on, has made the business aspect of winter sports much more competitive. Another factor promoting change is the higher percentage of private-car ownership, which



### Speed skating

Japanese skater Shimizu Hiroyasu on his way to the gold medal in the 500-meter speed skating event at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games.

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has led to the increase in day-trips. Thanks to the completion of toll roads such as the Kan'etsu and Tohoku expressways, ski areas are accessible in just a few hours' drive from major urban centers.

Domestic ski facilities enjoyed sharp growth between 1987 and 1992. In recent years, snowfall has declined in many areas due to warm winters, forcing people to travel longer distances to find slopes with the best conditions. To kindle consumer interest, resorts have responded by promoting discount packages and offering new styles of skiing, such as freestyle and Telemark skiing. The popularity of snowboards has grown so rapidly that more than 60% of ski areas now permit snowboarding. This has required the adoption of additional safety measures.

### Winter fun

Skiers and snowboarders are shown here enjoying an early season run at the Naeba ski area in Niigata Prefecture.

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