



THIS 256-  
MILE RACE  
IS HARD.  
EARNING  
A SPOT IS

**DOWNRIGHT  
BRUTAL.**

The yearlong qualification process for the **Trans Japan Alps Race** is merciless, but organizers say it ensures that all participants will reach the finish line alive.

by **SCOTT YORKO**  
photography by  
**MIWAZA JEMIMAH**

# "My life is getting shorter,"

says Naomasa Kimura over a fried pork cutlet rice bowl drizzled in a sweet and savory sauce. "It's too much. I promote my wife like this the last time I try. It's a touchy subject." The 41-year-old inventory manager at a tractor company in Osaka is sitting at a cramped table with five other men eating the same dish in the lush, wooded towns of Komagane in the valley splitting Japan's Southern and Central Alps.

It's a cool, damp June evening, and cherry garden grounds are perched on a windowsill holding tools and politely observing the conversation. Most of the men are rail-thin with muscular legs, and several are wearing T-shirts from 100-mile races. They've each run a sub-20 marathon in the past year (most sub-16:00), a feat that satisfies one of the many prerequisites to even be invited to tomorrow's Athlete Selection Event, a two-day qualifier for the biennial Trans Japan Alps Race (TJAR) in August. The encyclopedic rabbit hole of entry requirements and necessary physical achievements is so demanding and convoluted that qualifying for one of the 30 spots in the actual race might be more impressive, and dangerous, than finishing it.

Roughly 70 applicants submitted documentation of their attempts to meet the requirements, which among many other things, included camping at least 10 nights above 6,562 feet (2,000 meters) and completing a race with an event time cutoff of 25 hours or more in less than 40 percent of that time. With 60 available spots, 50 runners gained entry to the two-day trial and were informed one month in advance.

Those who qualify for the TJAR then get to race 256 miles from the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean, crossing up and down precariously and three mountain ranges with 48,600 feet of elevation gain and descent. That's the equivalent of running up and down 12,388-foot Mt. Fuji from sea level seven times within eight consecutive days, entirely self-supported, and in August—the soggiest time of year at the peak of Japan's typhoon season. Just to cross the finish line is considered a badge of honor, so no racers, even first-place winners, receive prize money or trophies. The reward is gaining entry into the exclusive club of finishers.

"This training is taking a toll on me physically," Kimura says as the others crammed in around him shake their heads and chuckle. One of them, Yawako Hayashida from Tokyo, pulls up Kimura's Strava profile on his phone and passes it around. Everone's e-cubis badge and they all let out different tones of "Oooooo" in exaggerated amazement. Since March, he's done a 100K training run every weekend, sometimes times queuing in a 50K before work and a marathon on

his lunch break. He's racked up nearly 230,000 miles of elevation gain in the first half of 2022 alone, which he says is low because he'd been training on flat land so much for marathons.

Someone suggests that perhaps Kimura has a shot at dethroning Shogo Mochizuki, known to all as the King for finishing the race five times and winning four consecutively while setting the course record in 2016 with a time of 4 days, 23 hours, 52 minutes. (To better challenge himself in 2018, he voluntarily carried all of his own food without resupplying in towns along the way and still finished seventh.)

"Nooooo," says Kimura, shocked and embarrassed that the question was even raised. "He is the King. He can't be beat. He is legend for us."



**THE ATHLETE SELECTION EVENT BEGINS THE NEXT MORNING—A DARK AND RAINY 2:30 a.m.—with the gear check. Officials in orange vests with clipboards inspect the contents of each runner's pack, splayed out across a labeled tarp like a game of Twister. The 27-item mandatory gear list includes two headlamps with spare batteries, a compass, a mountain insurance card, a tent shelter (can't be a bivy sack), a basic first aid kit, a gas stove and lighter with a minimum 300ml pot, rubber caps for trekking pole tips, an emergency locator beacon, and two wing bags (portable toilet kits). To reach this event, runners also presented evidence of their completion of an advanced life-saving course, a doctor's certificate of health including bloodwork, and a letter of consent from their spouse or a close relative, among other documents. Once they successfully complete the morning's gear and paperwork check, their cell phones are taped and stapled inside a plastic case, and the runners are given non-waterproof paper maps of the area, which they'll use to orient the 49-mile course by compass.**

The mood is somber and hushed. Most of the runners have been preparing for years and to blow this opportunity would be crushing. Roaming amongst the crowd is Paul Decker, a 42-year-old American expat from Oklahoma who established permanent residency in Japan after arriving in 2003 to teach English. "Preparing to enter this race is all I dream and think about," Decker told me from across a short table, sitting on the floor of a steamy Japanese barbecue in March of 2021.

Until recently, he worked for the tourism board in the ski resort town of Hakuba while pursuing his mountain guide certification and building a family with his wife, who is Japanese, and newborn son. Now with his certifications in hand, and Japan's borders reopened to tourists, Decker runs a guiding outfit, and also freelances for other tour operators. "I earn money on essentially trails," he says.

Since 2017, he's been poring over dictionary-thick books filled with past race reports including gear lists, training regimens, and detailed diaries of lessons learned by runners on each section of the course. Decker is sitting this year out with a herniated disc in his back after shoveling 5.5 feet of snow off the roof of his 140-year-old home in January. He is in attendance as a supporter and helper. He's visibly giddy to be in the presence of his hero work, and Decker has climbed Japan's 100 tallest peaks and won ultras, includ-

ing the Bunsaidai 80K—an unofficial TJAR feeder event that helps him follow the provided map. "Run on any road you want to, but please obey all traffic laws," he says. (In the 2018 race, one runner was cutting it very close to the 102-hour cutoff, but as he ran through the city of Shinjuku toward the finish line, he had to wait for every traffic light to turn green or he would be disqualified. "It was very stressful," he recalls. He made it with two minutes to spare.)

After the pre-race meeting, runners study the map like high school students cramming outside an exam room. The first day's 29-mile run leaves town to reach an uphill slog to a trailhead, rolls through dense, humid forest, then descends to a rocky campground. Amid the 11,500 feet of climbing and 7,770 feet of drop, the runners must find and record five checkpoints, including one with an emergency first aid simulation, en route to the campground where they'll spend the night. At the campground, runners present their maps to the race committee showing the exact location of the five official checkpoints marked within 4m on the map, or 100 meters in represented distance. Then, runners must go from standing upright with their full backpacks on to completely assembling their tent and zipping themselves inside in under four minutes, after which the shelter's structural integrity is tested with a force-resistance device. Several renowned Japanese runners have met all other requirements but failed this shaker test multiple times and never made it into the race.

The second day of the selection event follows with 20 miles of grueling mountain and road running (5,400 feet up and 9,100 down), immediately after which exhausted runners are given a written test—officially in Japanese—about weather and emergencies.

The King is hunched over a table, a white Casio watch on his wrist

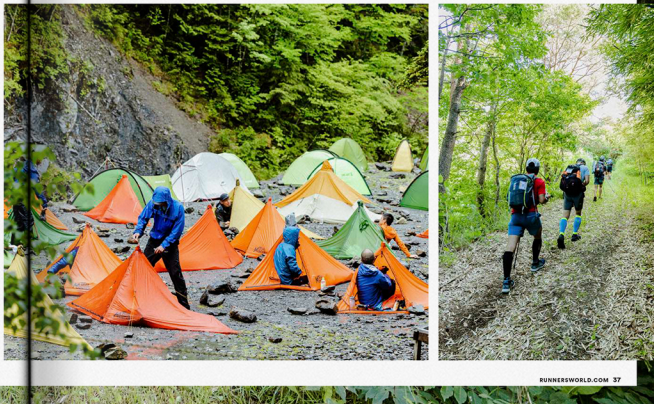
**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Athletes at the selection event study their maps before the first day's 29-mile run. **LEFT TO RIGHT:** An athlete traces the red line marking the course; runners relax and unwind for the second day of the selection event in the relative comfort of their tents; one of the many climbs from the first day that stressed athletes to a hike.

into a microphone about where runners can fill up water and how to follow the provided map. "Run on any road you want to, but please obey all traffic laws," he says. (In the 2018 race, one runner was cutting it very close to the 102-hour cutoff, but as he ran through the city of Shinjuku toward the finish line, he had to wait for every traffic light to turn green or he would be disqualified. "It was very stressful," he recalls. He made it with two minutes to spare.)

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## I ask why the process is so strict and the requirements so extensive. "I don't want them to die," Iijima says.

The fans clap and cheer and wave their hands with fervent encouragement. Almost all the runners bow back at every spectator, sometimes with both hands, and often with a wide smile.

"I'm very tired," says one runner in English, grinning big as he passes. Several throw what they call the "guts pose"—your classic knee flex-for-the-camera, before trudging up the incline.

As the paved road winds into the first mountain section, the challenge of an unmarked course becomes very real as runners try to follow their paper maps while determining their location based on landmarks and terrain features. Do overshoots a shrouded trailhead with the King and Yuichi Konno—the 2006, 2010, and 2014 runner-up—in tow. They run uphill for almost a quarter mile before doubling back, finding a faint path into the woods, and deploying their trekking poles for the ascent.

The next runners get an assist from a 68-year-old superfan with gold teeth named Tsuda following the event on his discusser. Tsuda's perma-grin sparkles as he stands at the turn, pointing it out to a few runners sweating in the 80-degree sun, until Deckerle solds him for breaking the no-support rule.

On the other side of Mt. Tokura, at a small table on the valley floor, 43-year-old Kosuke Kato is manning the first checkpoint that runners must mark on their maps. A furniture maker in the historic mountain city of Takayama, Kosuke won the race in 2018 when the King ran self-supported, and is sitting this year out as an orange-vested volunteer.

"You do it once and you turn into a junkie," he says. "Like a drug, you build tolerance and need more of that thrill that you get at the end of the competition."

The harder it is, the more high you get." At 6:55 a.m., Tsuda scoots up onto the sidewalk, disappearing just in time to honor each runner by clapping and shouting, "Hooray!" The King, having moved into first place, bows in appreciation and crosses another bridge to start the next climb up 9,049-foot Mt. Senjo under a shaded canopy of larch trees.



**DARK CLOUDS BEGIN BURSTING TOWARD THE 4,686-FOOT CHOEGOYA MT. WEST**, the event's campground, just before 3 p.m. Runners are expected soon, and the 30 committee members are discussing how many pulls on the force measurement device to give each direction in the tent set. The consensus is one firm tug in all four directions at 6.6 pounds (3 kg) of resistance.

Thunder cracks overhead right as the King strolls into camp, well ahead of the other runners. Several groups follow, their phones and

DSLRs trained on his every step. "I fell in love with him in the 2014 race," says 76-year-old Kozo Okashima, wearing a hat photographed by Mochizuki in that same year. "He gives his all and is a genuine, good person. No pretensions and always humble."

"It is time for Mochizuki to pass the torch!" I ask. "Never," he says, shaking his head with conviction. "Everyone looks up to him. It's important for him to be here. Many are here because of him."

The King checks in, struts over to the tent, and then a committee member reads the tent-assembly instructions before starting the stopwatch, and begins assembling his 170-gm, 7D nylon tent supported by two trekking poles held under tension from the guy lines. His movements are quick, decisive, and flawless, pulling the tent fabric tight, attaching the corners, and pinning them down with the biggest rocks in sight. Without rushing, he checks the tent's stability and crawls in with his backpack, slipping it on to 307. He gets out, laughs, and massages a cramp in his side while the committee pulls on his tent with the force resistance tool. "So many people are watching," he says. "It's been a while since I felt this much pressure."

His shutter holds up and he bows, thanking the committee, just as the rain starts to fall, as if the sky respectfully waited for the King to finish. "I'm not going for first place anymore," he tells a cameraman from Japanese public broadcaster NHK. "I'll let the young people lead the pack now that I'm 44 and everything hurts. But when I think about whether it's time to stop because it feels different, I then think I need to keep challenging myself, even after more than 10 years of this."

Thirty-four minutes after the King's arrival, a committee member tells NHK that he's glad the weather is bad to keep it challenging for the runners, Takashi Doi arrives. The North Face runner marks his checkpoints, and prepares for the shelter test in a heavy drizzle. Just before Doi starts, someone from the crowd points out that the surcum strap on his backpack is not fully buckled—another requirement—which he quickly fixes. Doi initially fumbles with his stakes and struggles to find soft ground to hammer them into with a rock, but he still manages to zip himself inside in 2:57 as the King watches.

Another half hour later, Konno limps into camp. His face is pained with defeat even though he's still in the top three. He's steady in the assembly of his tent, anchoring the corners with cord tied around the biggest rocks and no stakes. His time is a comfortable 3:30, but when the force gauge comes out, something is not right. One of Konno's trekking poles is set 10cm shorter than the other, throwing off the stability of the shelter, and when the committee member pulls against the shorter pole, it slides down as the sidewall of the tent collapses. Konno hangs his head. "I will try again in two years," he says.

Eventually, more runners begin to trickle in. Kimura, among them. Some smile but several are discouraged by their performance in the emergency first aid test. Required to tape their own ankle, many had trouble getting the wet tape to stick in the rain and ruminated on this potential failure for hours. Worse, it will be several more days before the committee confirms whether runners passed or failed the event.

The drizzle has turned to rain, the ground is getting soft, and a handful of runners have failed the tent test. Kimura starts pitching his shelter quickly, having practiced 30 or 40 times. When he pulls on a guy line to tension the long end, the tent webbing attaching it to the tent fabric suddenly rips and the tent falls flat.

"Grrrrrrrr!" he cries, horror washing over his pale face. "It snapped!" In a panic, he rushes to tie the torn webbing back with a minuscule knot and retreat the cord through the loop before gently pulling it tight again. This seems to hold and he still has enough time to give a few test pulls before crawling inside in 3:37 seconds. He looks like he's going to cry when he gets out and watches the committee member pull against his makeshift repair, but the knot and line hold and his shelter stays upright. The crowd around him breathes a sigh of relief. "The incident made me the most frustrated in my life," he

**TOP:** Shogo "the King" Mochizuki assembles his tent. **BOTTOM:** Takashi Doi limps on as a committee member tests his tent.

later. "I thought it was all over."

The rain and wind pick up as the day's 13-hour cutoff time looms. A few runners arrive minutes late, hanging their heads and shouting apologies to their families out into the gray skies.

Packed into a space the size of two tennis courts, the more than 60 brightly colored tents look like soggy plastic bags with runners wriggling in attempts to get comfortable for the night.

"Rain fills up in the bottom here and drops fall on your face all night," Yusaku Hayashida says with a laugh while cooking noodles from his wet tent. "It's not warm or relaxing and you don't really sleep. You just black out and lose consciousness."

The King tries to move his tent to a drier spot, but even the King must sleep in a puddle.



**AT THE NEXT MORNING'S 5 A.M. START, WIND THROES THE TREETOPS** above the swarm of headlamps. Race director Hiroshi Iijima lines everyone up in the order they finished the day before. Mochizuki at the front, followed by Takashi Doi, who slept in his rain gear. "You had



and tape over KT tape on both knees, tracing the route with his finger. Standing alone nearby is a small, teenage-looking man clad head-to-toe in The North Face gear. This is 40-year-old Takashi Doi, a sponsored runner who took second at the 103-mile Ultra-Trail Mt. Fuji in April and ran on pace to shatter the King's TAR course record the previous year when the race was canceled on day two due to more than 12 hours of sustained 56mph winds (the pandemic had postponed 2020's race to 2021). Both are firefighters who work in mountain rescue.

After a group photo at the starting line, the runners squint into the rising sun, and at 5:15 a.m. the gun sounds. They take off weaving through Komagane's main streets, their minimalist backpacks bulging with tightly configured accessories. Along the road out of town, green fields of rice paddies glow in the warm morning light. At 6:20 a.m. a handful of fervent fans gather on a bridge spanning the Tenryū River, the start of the long climb up to 5,528-foot Mt. Tokura. A strong wind is cutting across the valley and with it appears Takashi Doi, clutching his map in one hand, leading the front pack of eight.

**ABOVE:** Yusaku Hayashida (left) and Takashi Doi (right) across the Tenryū River on their way to the first checkpoint. The selection event's minimal gear is essential, but dropped from the TAR due to weather and unavailability.



## REQUIRED GEAR

### □ LIGHTS

Two headlamps or one plus a handheld. Full batteries plus spares.

### □ CELLPHONE

Waterproofed, with a spare battery, may be used for race navigation.

### □ GPS TRACKING UNIT

In waterproof case with a spare battery.

### □ MAPS FOR ENTIRE ROUTE

Printed, inside plastic bag.

### □ COMPASS

**NOTEPAD AND PEN**  
Waterproofed, with a spare battery, may be used for race plan and checkpoint times.

**MOUNTAINEERING REPORT**  
Waterproof report of where you plan to be.

### □ MOUNTAIN INSURANCE CARD

**HEALTH INSURANCE CARD**  
**DRIVER'S LICENSE**

### □ RACE BIBS

For the race, their bibpack, and tent.

### □ RAIN WEAR

Separate top and bottom with sealed seams.

### □ WARM CLOTHING

Covering wrists and ankles, in addition to rain suit.

### □ HAT AND GLOVES

**□ TENT**  
Shelter capable to be a bivvy.

### □ SLEEPING BAG

Or emergency blanket.

### □ BEAR BELT

For black bears.

### □ LITER OF WATER

At the start, in multiple containers.

### □ EMERGENCY RATIONS

**□ CLIMBING HELMET**  
Used for the 15 miles with falling hazards but carried whole time.

### □ RED FLASHING LIGHTS

For dark road sections without sidewalks.

### □ FIRST AID KIT

**□ COOKING SET**  
Gas, pot, and lighter.

### □ RUBBER CAPS

If trekking poles are used.

### □ COCOBOLL EMERGENCY LOCATOR BEACON

**□ FACE MASK**

### □ TWO PORTABLE TOILETS

some rain and wind last night," he says. "Doing that for five to eight days in the race wears on you. Try to train like that as much as you can." He cautions the runners on the day's required river and potential snow crossings, and warns them not to take dangerous shortcuts. No aid stations, pacers, or support of any kind are allowed. The runners all adjust their headlamps and proceed into the darkness with a 2.9-mile climb up a 450 feet, then back down to a road for a 12-mile descent on pavement.

"You can't make it through the race just by being fast," Iijima says, once the racers have departed. "This race is completely self-supported, so if you injure yourself, you have to have the gear on you to deal with that problem. Some try to shave weight by carrying less food, clothes, or first aid kit, and they have to know what risk they're taking in this environment."

I ask why the entry process is so strict and the requirements so extensive. "The first thing I don't want them to die," he says with a stoic face and steady, measured voice. "In the past, people have died training for this race from hypothermia and falling from cliffs while putting themselves in these harsh conditions. An athlete almost died in the race one year and someone from the mountain rescue team scolded me, so now I believe it's important that everyone is prepared." He even holds a training camp for runners aspiring to enter the selection event. And while the challenge is obviously attractive to some, I ask why someone who has finished or even won the race would keep coming back. Is the obsession to be part of this exclusive club?

"Definitely," he chuckles. "There are some who don't have friends outside of this."

On the committee members' bus ride down from the campsite, we pass several of the runners spread out along the course. A younger newcomer is surprising people, well ahead of the King. "Tajagi," says one of the members, meaning "strong."

"Must be so cool to have those guys saying that about you," Decret says.

We arrive at the finish line at 8 a.m. Takashi Doi is already there, sitting cross-legged on the hot asphalt, taking his three-page written test. The wind is blowing a pop-up tent, along with his shade, across the parking lot, but he's scribbling his head and concentrating: calculating wind-chill temperatures based on the wind speed, determining a difficult yep or no question on CPR, and answering what percentage of the human body is blood.

In post-event interviews, Doi, like his fellow competitors, dodges questions about rivalry, competition, glory, records, goals, winning, or anything that's not self-effacing. As a regular 100-mile racer, he didn't find the two-day event physically that hard, "however, there is the pressure that comes from knowing that you cannot make a mistake in tests like the tent setup and map reading," he says.

Even if a runner passes all the requirements—as Doi, Kimura, and the King do on day two—where more than 30 applicants succeed, they're all put in a convoluted lottery that favors those who previously lost the drawing. Kimura also qualified for the last race with shinning clothes, but lost out on the drawing and had to wait two more years. "I couldn't believe it, but I moved forward motivated to get better," he says.



**LESS THAN TWO MONTHS LATER, IN EARLY AUGUST, TAKASHI DOI TROPHIES the King, writing a new course record by six hours, despite heavy rains, in 4 days, 17 hours, and 33 minutes.** "I found the suit not useful due to the effects of sleep deprivation, and the greatest challenge was getting the highest-quality sleep in the shortest amount of time," he says. But his biggest struggle was nutrition management. "My calorie-dense, sports-specific foods spiked my blood sugar levels. That 'insulin shock' contributed to sluggishness. This was my one



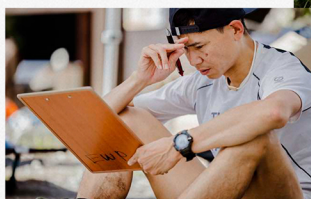
mistake." This fatigue hit Doi hardest on the climb to the summit of Mt. Senjo, where the terrain and gradient are relatively constant, with little change in scenery.

More than 24 hours behind Doi, the King takes fourth place in a still impressive 5 days, 19 hours, and 12 minutes. "I thought about quitting three or so times," he says. "In the past, I had goals to win and break the course record. This time I told myself excuses like, 'I'm older now so I don't have the same stamina,' or 'my body just doesn't move like it used to.' But that's missing the point. Trans Japan is and of itself is a sufficient challenge, and I'm happy to have crossed the finish line."

This year, the King says he made it a point to look up at the mountains and stars, appreciate sunrises and sunsets, talk with friends and hikers along the way, and allow himself to really enjoy the race. "Each [interaction] has the power to reset a mind and body on the verge of breaking," he says. At the beachfront finish line, under a stormy gray sky with waves pounding into the dark sand, he reflects to the crowd, nearly all of whom are filming. "I thought that I would be able to close this chapter in peace now, and wasn't considering running Trans Japan again, but crossing the goal line now, I almost feel like I might want to try again. If I do, please be there to cheer me on."

Ten of the 30 racers either dropped out or did not finish within the eight-day limit, but Naomasa Kimura wasn't among those 10. "It was the best experience in my life," he says a month later while seated at his office desk, speaking quietly into his headset over Zoom. "But it was really tough." After breaking a trekking pole early in the Northern Alps on Hayasuki Ridge, a trail with one of the largest elevation differences in Japan, he still dropped the main pack and found himself running alone by the time he reached the Southern Alps.

His body felt fine, but somewhere on Senjoko Ridge between Mt. Yokokura and Mt. Miho during day four, he began to experience a psychological breakdown. "Mentally, I could not handle this special



### THIS PAGE:

Officials watch a runner bid his 127 mandatory hours. Doi takes the written test following a 20-mile run. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Iijima breaks mountains before Mt. Senjo starts the second day of the selection event.

type of fatigue," he says. "In order to overcome it, I cheated my brain, believing that my brain was feeling the muscle pain, not me." Once he began to see more people and spectators, their cheers and encouragement were a boon to his spirits. On the final approach from Hatanagi Dam to Ohama Beach, Kimura was "able to run out of all of my remaining power, thinking that I would never be able to run again after the finish."

Kimura shocked the field with a second place finish in 5 days, 14 hours, and 7 minutes, four and a half hours ahead of the King.

Before the selection event, Kimura swore this was his last attempt at the Trans Japan Alps Race. "The TJAR was my everything the past three years, now my motivation is really low," he says. "I don't know what to do with myself all the time."

One thing that helped his newfound brotherhood. Since finishing, he has camped, hiked, and gone out drinking with his fellow TJAR racers. "It is like friends in arms," he says. And now that he's inside the club, he may never be able to leave. ☺