

# Women Flock to Racetracks

By Ato Ekusa

There is a remarkable increase in the number of young women going to horse races in Japan these days, so much so that a new expression has been coined to describe them—*keiba gyaru*, meaning horse race gals.

Japan has two types of horse race—national races, which are held in Tokyo and other major cities, and local races, which take place in provincial cities around the country, such as Kawasaki in Kanagawa Prefecture. *Keiba gyaru* attend both national and local races, clutching their betting tickets and cheering on the horse of their choice.

Horse racing is probably the most common form of gambling in Japan. In the past, when Japan was still picking itself up from the ruins of the war, race courses had a rather gloomy, cutthroat atmosphere, being the place where men would often squander their earnings in a do-or-die effort to make a little more on the side. Unlike Europe and the United States, there was little enjoyment of horse racing itself.

Over the last two or three years, however, race courses have become much more cheerful places as female fans flock there, rush around the stadium, occupy the seats closest to the rails, and cling to the netting as they shout for the horse on which they have placed a bet. Race courses are becoming more like leisure facilities.

According to the Japan Racing Association, the number of women entering the 10 race courses in Japan in 1989 reached 785,000, which accounted for 8.6% of the total admissions. This represents a considerable leap forward from five years earlier, when the corresponding figures were 579,000 and 7.2%.

Young women, sporting colorful blouses and sweaters, are now enthusiastic visitors at any race course. Mingling with the regular male fans dressed in their dark suits and jumpers, the young women chew on their red pencils as they



*Keiba gyaru* reveling in the race course atmosphere.

listen to portable radios through ear-phones, then mark their tip sheets and dash off to the nearest betting booth.

In most cases these young women become hooked on horse racing after being introduced to the sport by a boyfriend. After Japan's economy had taken off in the 1960s and 1970s, more well-to-do men began to visit the races for fun and eventually to take their girlfriends along with them.

Another reason for the horse racing craze among women has been the emergence of Yutaka Take, a 21-year-old jockey whose good looks have won him the hearts of many female fans. Take, whose father was a famous jockey, made his debut four years ago. He became the youngest jockey ever to win the prestigious Emperor's Cup, and his earnings in 1989 reached ¥120 million. With his boyish face, which clearly tickles the maternal instinct in the opposite sex, Take has played an important role in attracting women to horse racing.

Aware that earnings from male fans have reached a peak, the Japan Racing Association has taken steps to make the sport more attractive for women. It has designated the opening day of the Oaks race for fillies as "ladies' day," admitting women into the stadium at half-price and giving away gifts to early arrivals.

As the number of female fans has increased, race courses have responded by improving their facilities. Hanshin Race



The boyish looks of 21-year-old jockey Yutaka Take attracted many female fans to paddocks.

Course, for example, has installed tiled lavatories specially for women and glassed-in seats from which spectators can watch the races while enjoying a cup of coffee.

As a result of these efforts to improve service, women now account for almost 10% of the spectators at any race course in Japan. Said one female office worker, 23, from Sumida Ward in Tokyo, "My boyfriend brought me along the first time, then I got hooked. I really like to see the horses galloping along, their manes blowing in the wind."

One female high-school student from Sugunami, Tokyo, was accompanying her father to the races. "You can't bet if you're under 20, so I get my father to place the bets for me," she explained. Another female office worker, 28, from Katsushika, Tokyo, remarked on a somewhat surprising advantage of going to the races. "Now I have something to talk about with the older men at work," she said.

One of the new expressions that came into vogue between 1989 and 1990 was *ojin gyaru*, which refers to young women who take after their middle-aged male colleagues—going drinking after work and doing nothing but complain about their bosses and enjoying such hobbies as golf and *pachinko* (Japanese pinball). Now *keiba gyaru* can be added to the list. ■

Ato Ekusa is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.