

# Japan's Warriors of the Wind

Photographs by  
DAVID ALAN HARVEY

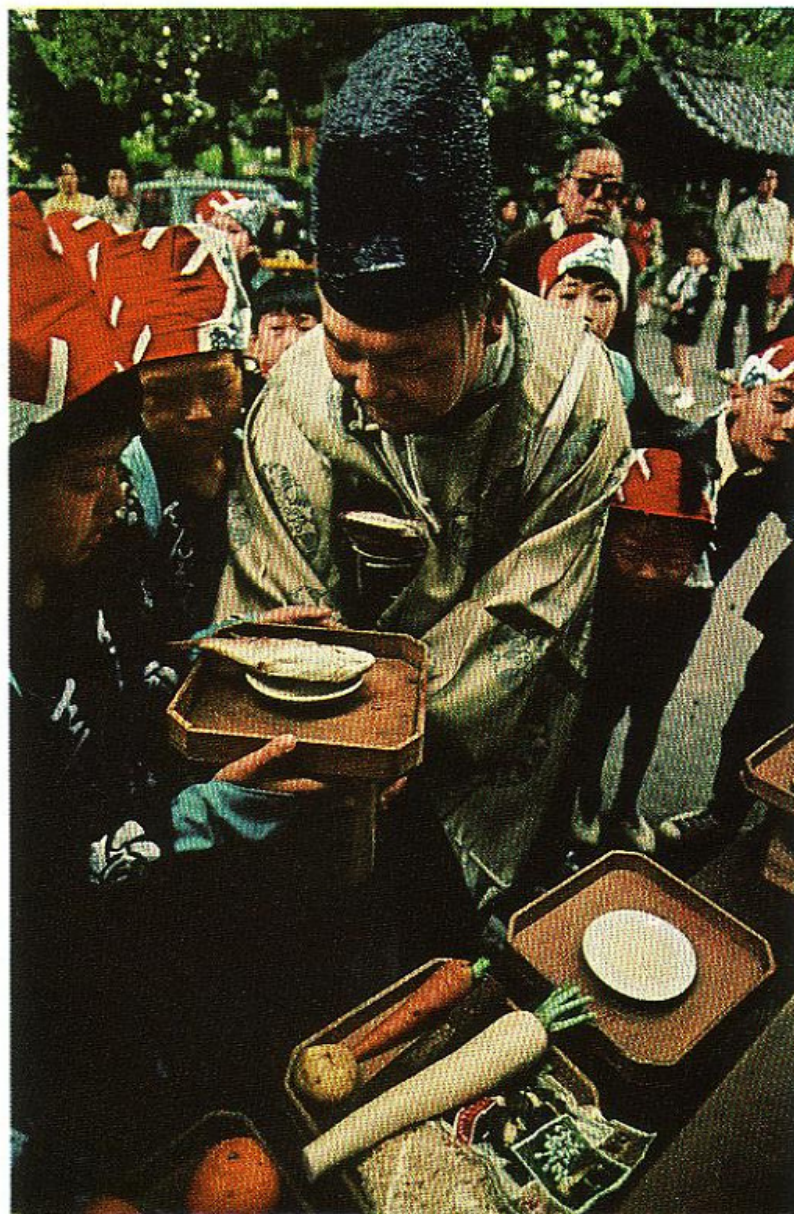
**F**IGHTING BLOOD AFIRE, Japanese team members wait tensely atop a windswept dune in the city of Hamamatsu, about 130 miles southwest of Tokyo. A gallery of spectators surrounds them, eyes fixed on a vividly colored kite straining against its tether. A quarter of a mile away, a teammate at the end of the line flashes a signal—and the kite sails free (left). Battle cries of *Wasshoi! Wasshoi!*—“Forward! Forward!” erupt. The symbol of a new generation soars skyward.

This emotion-charged scene takes place hundreds of times in early May during the city's annual three-day tribute to its first-born sons. About sixty neighborhoods sponsor the huge kites, some bearing the boys' names, and turn the sky into an aerial battlefield as teams try to down rival kites.

The people of Hamamatsu believe the festival dates from the 1500's, when a kite was flown to honor the birth of a prince. Another legend suggests that the sport began when a ruler told his people to fight with kites instead of with one another.

Today the spectacle draws nearly two million people, as the city praises its progeny and renews the unity of its neighborhoods.





**G**LITTERING WAVE of color flows along a city street (right) as neighborhood teams pull floats bearing young musicians. The floats—made of intricately carved wood and often lacquered or coated with gold leaf—resemble Shinto shrines.

Parades and parties fill all three festival nights, with revellers singing, drinking beer and sake, and dancing in streets lit by paper lanterns. For once, the people mingle in common camaraderie; normally most of their social life is spent with fellow workers.

In a serious moment a boy offers food to a Shinto priest (left), hoping for good luck for his neighborhood's entries in the competition. The fighting, however, is done only by men, such as the three businessmen (upper left) demonstrating tactics in the attic of a shoe store.

A neighborhood's contribution: as many as 20 kites, including one for each of that year's firstborn sons. Such dedicated industry reflects Hamamatsu's role as a major manufacturing center that has made names like Yamaha, Suzuki, and Honda known around the world.



# 店ビル

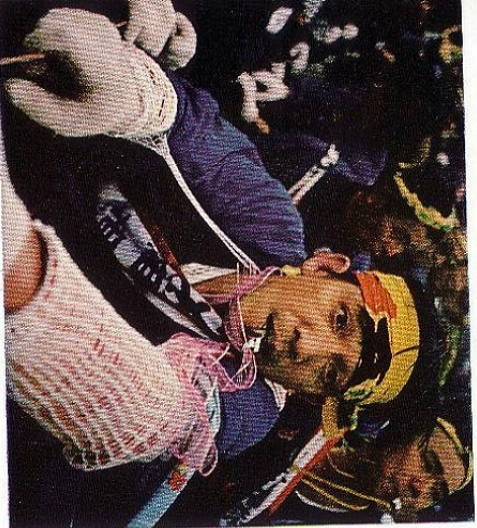
営業時間  
8時00分迄

新開地

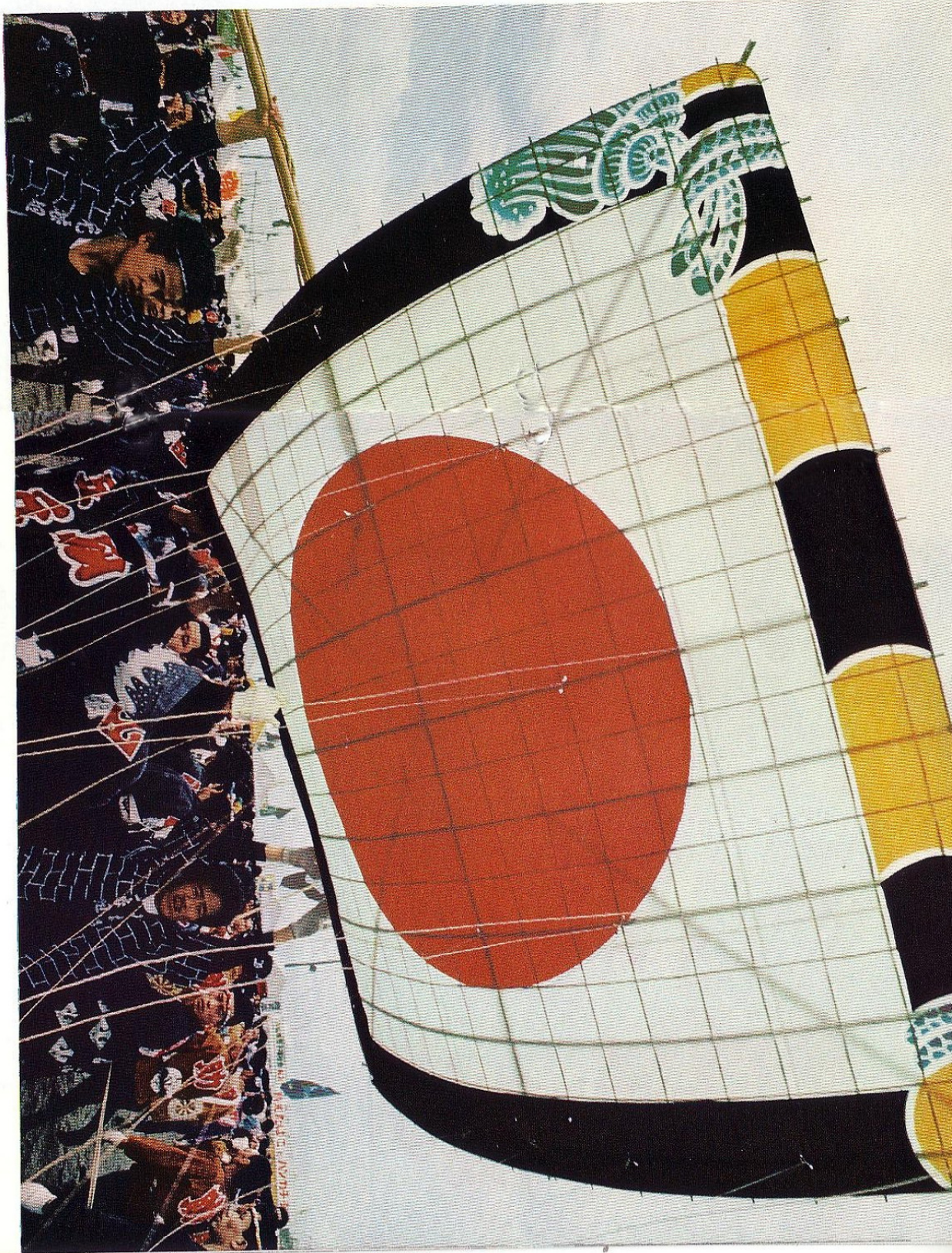
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**F**INE-TUNED and ready for battle, a ten-foot-square kite emblazoned with the neighborhood insignia is raised by team members (above right). To make the kite, craftsmen split bamboo for struts that form the frame. Then a cover of lightweight rice paper



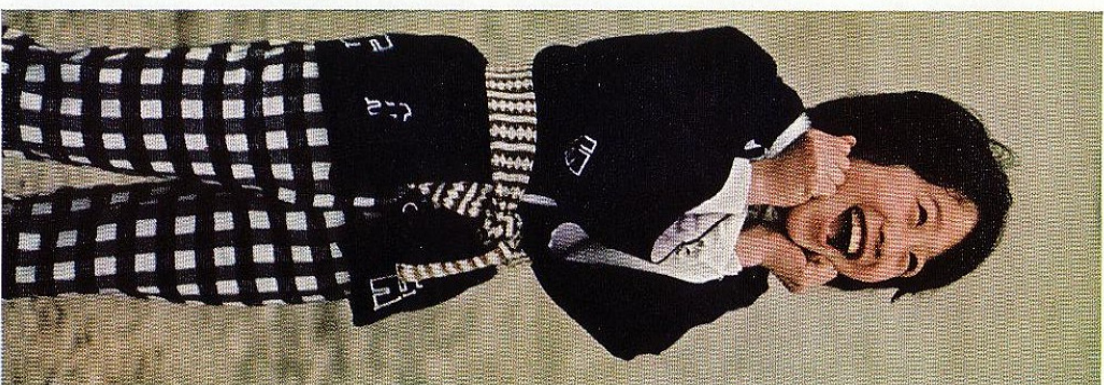
is stretched and pasted drum tight over the bamboo lattice. Hemp fiber is twisted for the kite's lines, including 20 to 40 "bridle lines" that are tied to the flying line. The secret of a kite's success, fliers say, is the skilled adjustment of these bridles.

Such construction often becomes a lifelong craft passed from generation to generation. Says one man, at the age of 74, "I am still fascinated by the fresh greenness of bamboo and feel challenged to make a gallant kite."

With furious blasts of his whistle a

captain (upper left) keeps his team in cadence as they haul on a line during a fight. Arm protectors guard against rope burns. An important job is taken on by the rear guard (lower left) behind the team, as he pays out or reels in line from a portable winch.





**C**ASTING HIS FATE to the wind, a mother touches the hand of her firstborn son to the line of the kite bearing his name (above), as the neighborhood's team prepares to enter the fray. She hopes the gesture will bring success for the kite and a long, happy life for the boy. Other parents—those who are fearful of ill fortune should their son see his kite

downed—leave the child at home and even try to avoid combat.

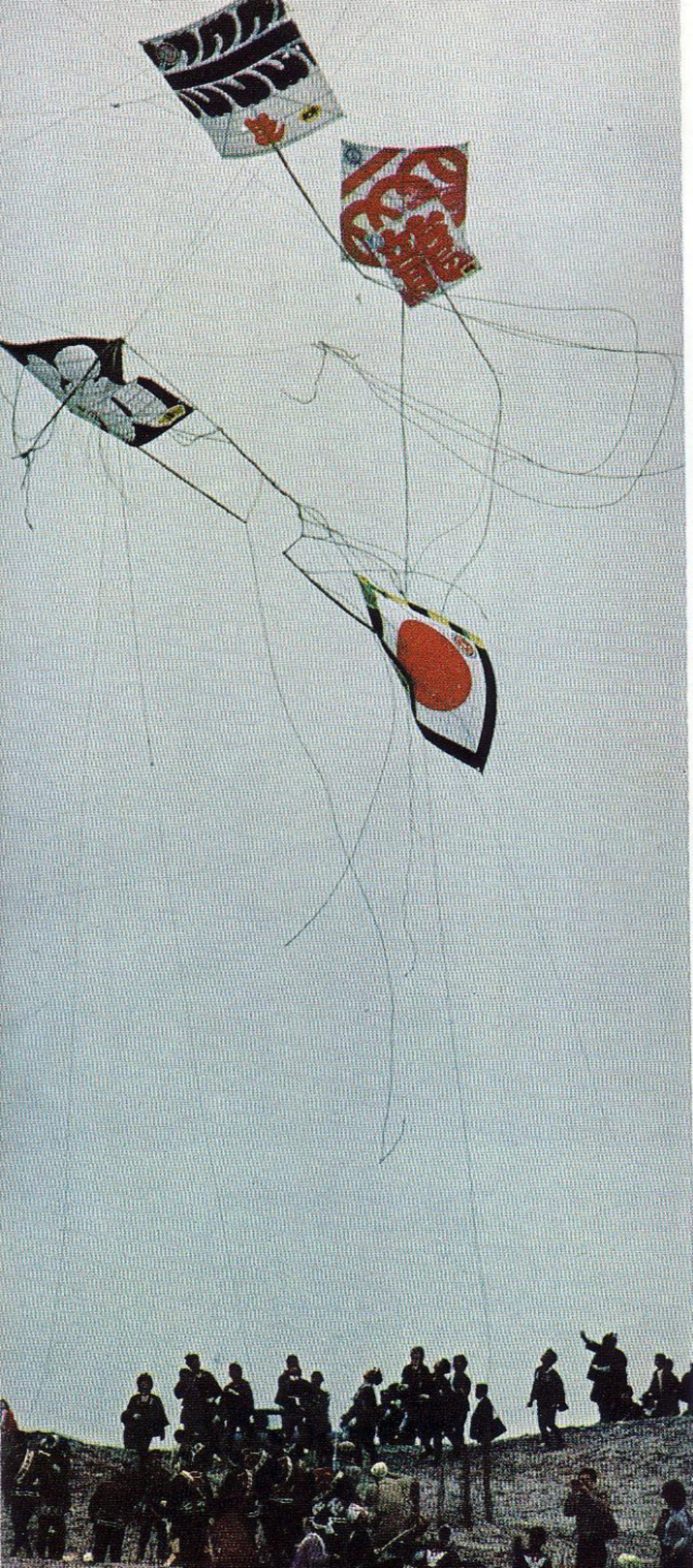
The role of a firstborn son remains the backbone of Japanese social structure. When a man dies, his eldest son usually inherits all his wealth—and responsibility for keeping the family unified. Such strong ties extend to the neighborhoods, where local associations help keep the community's identity strong.

Each son's family must pay for the kite and the refreshments, as much as \$500. Some families must wait, saving money for years after their son is born. To beef up the arsenal each year, neighborhood dues usually pay for additional kites. In times past, the kites became so large and lavish that the expense threatened the local economy. Rulers had to impose restrictions. Even today, says

one flier, "some people make great sacrifices for this event, even if they can't really afford to."

Aglow with delight, a girl watches dueling kites (above). Japanese girls have a separate holiday of their own, celebrated on March 3. The occasion features displays of exquisitely made dolls that represent members of the royal court.





**L**IKE SPIDERS in their webs, kites grapple in battle (**left**). Usually several become entangled; as teams keep their lines taut and haul violently on them, the lines saw on one another. Soon they start to fray (**below**) and finally snap.

Pandemonium reigns as competing teams of as many as a hundred men try to cut down each other's entries (**right**). Flags flutter overhead and a deafening roar rises from the running, stomping combatants. Trumpets blare and kite lines buzz above like angry bees. Special officials move in to quell fistfights and keep people from being trampled.











**V**ANQUISHED gladiator grimaces at the sight of his once beautiful kite, tattered and soaked by rain. But his anguish is fleeting, for there are no winners or losers in this monumental contest. After the kite took its dive, a special rescue squad rushed to it and recovered every shredded scrap. Although many badly damaged kites are simply burned, those that represent firstborn sons are presented to their families to be kept as mementos. Others, more successful in battle, are carefully stored to fight again the following year.

As they bore this crippled kite back to its team, the fliers cheered as if they had won.

"Winning isn't important," says one contestant. "Flying is not done just for the competition—but once the lines start tangling, it is in our blood to fight." □

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