

Japan's Third Trail Running Boom

A Data-Driven Analysis of Japan's Mountain Running Market and Global Context

2024–2025 Research Report (1st Edition)

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1. What Is the "Third Trail Running Boom"?

1-1. Origins and Definition of the Term

The phrase "Third Trail Running Boom" originated in an 11-part series published in WWDJAPAN (issue dated June 9, 2025), written by journalist Satomi Hanami. The cover featured rapper GAKU-MC alongside the tagline: "Trail running and the mountains are the streets of the 2020s." The series was widely cited across industry media and social networks, cementing "Third Boom" as the prevailing descriptor for the current wave of growth.

However, Japan lacks any official statistics on domestic trail running participation (the most recent large-scale survey is from JMAR, 2014). As a result, the quantitative case for a "boom" rests on indirect indicators — race entry competition ratios, global market data, and testimony from retailers — and this limitation should be kept in mind throughout this report.

1-2. Historical Overview: First through Third Boom

	First Boom (Late 1990s – Early 2000s)	Second Boom (2009 – Mid 2010s)	Third Boom (2023–present)
Key trigger	Pioneering activities of Hiroki Ishikawa, Takeshi Kaburaki, and others	NHK broadcast of 'UTMB: The Race' (2010)	Post-COVID road runners shifting to trails + Gen Z entry
Estimated participants	A few thousand	25,000 (2009) → 198,000 (2014)	220,000+ (2025 est.)
Number of races	~20 events	~300 events (peak)	Flat to declining (see polarization, Section 4)
Core participants	Performance-oriented athletes	Men in their 40s with road marathon experience	Young adults in 20s–30s + women

	First Boom (Late 1990s – Early 2000s)	Second Boom (2009 – Mid 2010s)	Third Boom (2023–present)
Sport identity	Extreme niche sport	Demanding hobby / competitive sport	Nature-based lifestyle and fashion
Market size	Essentially unmeasured	~¥15 billion (2014 est.)	No domestic data (global market rapidly expanding)

2. The Boom in Numbers

2-1. Race Entry Competition Ratios

Demand for entry spots at Japan's major races now chronically outstrips capacity. This is the most direct evidence of the boom.

Race	Status	Competition / Notes
Mt.FUJI 100 (formerly UTMF)	Lottery entry with ITRA point requirement. From 2026: 3 main races (FUJI100mi, KAI70k, ASUMI40k) plus open race "SAKUYA" (12km / U20 6km)	Total capacity 4,000+. Runners from 34+ countries (2024)
Hasetsune CUP	First-come-first-served; sells out in 3–5 minutes	Capacity cut ~20% for environmental reasons; demand unchanged
Shin-Etsu Five Mountains Trail Race	Sold out the day after registration opens	Capacity ~2,000
TJAR (Trans Japan Alps Race)	Document screening + multi-stage selection	123 applicants, 30 spots = 4.1x oversubscription (2024)
Kaga Spa Trail Endurance 100 (UTMB World Series)	June 2025: Japan's first UTMB World Series Asia Pacific Major	~2,500 participants, including 800 from 42 countries

2-2. Global Market Scale

According to RunRepeat and World Athletics (15.6 million race results across 127 countries), trail race finisher counts have grown 231% over the past 10 years and 2,394% over 20 years. The global trail running population expanded from approximately 1.2 million in 2010 to around 8.5 million in 2022 — roughly 7x growth in 12 years.

A 2025 joint analysis by UTMB and Strava found that the global trail running population has doubled in just the past three years. Participants in UTMB Index Races (first half of 2025) reached 2.4x the 2022 figure, with more than 800,000 race starts recorded.

The global trail running footwear market is growing at a CAGR of 6.5–7.8%, meaning the market could roughly double in 10 years at this pace. The Asia-Pacific region is the fastest-growing segment at 8–10% annually, accounting for 35.7% of global market revenue in 2023.

Note: CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) assumes a constant annual growth rate compounded over time. At 7% CAGR, a market roughly doubles in 10 years.

2-3. Major Brand Performance

Brand	Parent Company	Performance (2024–2025)	Japan Strategy
HOKA	Deckers	Brand revenue \$2.2B (+24%). International +39%	Performance : Fashion = 5:5. Harajuku flagship store (Feb 2024)
Salomon	Amer Sports	Footwear revenue exceeded \$1B (2024)	Sports Style (lifestyle) = 35% of footwear. Takao concept store opened
On Running	Listed (SIX)	Total revenue CHF 2.32B (+29.4%). Asia-Pacific +84.5%	High design appeal serving as an entry point for women runners

3. Women's Participation: Japan vs. the World

3-1. The Participation Gap

According to ITRA data (2024), women account for 38% of trail race participants worldwide. In the UTMB World Series, the female share has risen from 25% in 2022 to 30% (44,563 runners) in 2025. Meanwhile, women represent only approximately 20% of domestic race participants in Japan — an 18-percentage-point gap versus the global average. Strava data shows that Gen Z women's trail running posts have increased 6.5x globally over the past three years, with a notable surge in women's runner activity in the Mt. Takao area of Japan.

Japan's 20% figure also represents considerable upside potential. Closing even half the gap to the global average of 38% would translate to tens of thousands of new women trail runners.

3-2. Five Structural Barriers to Women's Participation

① Course Design and Race Formats Skewed Toward Advanced Runners

Japan's flagship races — UTMF and Hasetsume — are centered around 100-mile and 71km formats, offering little in the way of beginner-friendly entry points. In contrast, European events typically offer a well-structured 10–20km introductory category. Mt.FUJI 100 is addressing this from 2026 with the new open race "SAKUYA" (12km, with a U20 6km division). Run under full mountain race regulations, SAKUYA opens a genuine first rung on the ladder for those without competitive experience, including high school students.

② Male-Dominated Communities Shaped by the Second Boom

The trail running community that formed during the Second Boom (roughly 2009–2015) was centered on men in their 40s with road marathon backgrounds. Social media trail content remained predominantly male-authored, making it difficult for women to see the sport as being "for them."

③ Travel Cost and Time Barriers

Many races require overnight travel, creating a difficult trade-off for those managing household or childcare responsibilities. Japanese women tend to have less discretionary time for sport relative to international comparisons. The logistics and cost of "going to the mountain" itself functions as a barrier to entry.

④ Safety and Isolation Concerns in Mountain Environments

Spending long hours alone in remote mountain terrain — often out of mobile range — presents greater psychological barriers in Japan than in European trail environments, which typically feature higher population density and more frequent aid stations. This concern about being "alone in the mountains for hours" is considered a meaningful deterrent to women's entry.

⑤ Lag in Fashion and Lifestyle Positioning

Internationally, Salomon's Sports Style line and On Running's design aesthetic have served as entry points for women. This kind of lifestyle-oriented positioning only began in earnest in Japan from around 2023, creating a notable time lag relative to global trends.

3-3. Cultural and Social Foundations: What the Data Shows

Beyond the five barriers above, public data reveals deeper structural forces shaping how Japanese women relate to sport — not as matters of individual motivation, but as culturally and institutionally embedded norms.

① **Gender Gap in School Club Sports: Evidence from Public Statistics**

According to the Sasakawa Sports Foundation's "Children and Youth Sports Life Data 2023," junior high school participation in sports clubs stands at 64.1% for boys versus 49.8% for girls — a gap of approximately 14 percentage points. By high school, the gap widens to roughly 18 points: 52.1% for boys versus around 33.5% for girls. This disparity has been consistent across all survey periods since 2015, indicating a structural rather than cyclical phenomenon.

The gap persists into adulthood. The Japan Sports Agency's 2023 survey found that the proportion of adults exercising at least once a week was 54.7% for men and 49.4% for women — a 5-point gap that widens particularly among working adults in their 20s–50s. The sense of distance from sport formed during school years appears to carry forward.

② **"Encouragement from Those Around You" as the Key Determinant — Lessons from a Japan-Australia Comparison**

The most notable finding comes from a 2024 international comparative study by the Sasakawa Sports Foundation and Sendai University comparing Japan and Australia. The study challenged the conventional explanation that marriage and childcare are the primary obstacles to women's sports participation — suggesting instead that the impact of life events is actually more limited than commonly assumed.

What emerged as the primary determinant was social support. When asked whether "family and friends encourage and support them in exercising and playing sport," 41.5% of Japanese respondents answered yes, compared to 70.5% of Australians — a gap of 29 percentage points. Additionally, while sports participation rates in Japan peak in junior high school and decline through high school and beyond, Australian rates hold at around 60% through high school and into adulthood.

The implication is significant: Japanese women's disengagement from sport may be driven less by individual constraints like time or fitness, and more by whether a cultural norm exists in which sport participation is naturally supported and expected by those around them. This structural norm, formed during school years through club activities, appears to influence women's engagement with trail running as well.

Data Sources: Sasakawa Sports Foundation: 'Children and Youth Sports Life Data 2023' / 'Social and Personal Factors Required for Women's Sports Participation and Continuation (Japan-Australia Comparison)' 2024 / Japan Sports Agency: 'Survey on Sports Participation Status' FY2023

③ Media and Content as Norm-Setters (Interpretive)

While publicly available data to establish quantitative causal relationships is limited, the connection between sports manga/anime and participation rates is widely noted by governing bodies and researchers alike. Mainstream sports manga protagonists — Captain Tsubasa, Slam Dunk, The Prince of Tennis — have been overwhelmingly male, establishing a cultural template in which "someone who excels at sport" defaults to male. The role of narrative in shaping identity ("I am the kind of person who does sport") likely intersects with the social norms documented in ②.

Recent trends show signs of change. Sports titles such as Haikyu!! and Yowamushi Pedal attracted large female fanbases, and their periods of popularity correlate with participation increases in volleyball and road cycling respectively. No mainstream manga or anime has yet placed trail running at its center — a gap that represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

Implication: Public data suggests that the primary barrier to women's sports participation in Japan is not "being too busy with childcare" but rather the absence of a cultural norm in which sport participation is naturally and collectively supported. Increasing women's trail running participation may require not only structural improvements (course design, safety infrastructure) but fundamentally the creation of communities where "running is what we do."

4. Race Polarization: Boom and Bust in the Same Market

4-1. The Hidden Side: Race Closures

Behind the headlines of packed lottery queues and international runners flooding into Japan, a quieter trend is playing out: grassroots community races are disappearing. This polarization — between a thriving top tier and a shrinking local base — is one of the defining features of the current moment.

The Kunigami Trail Running Race in Okinawa — celebrated as the island's first trail running event — announced it would conclude after its 10th edition in 2024. Despite drawing participants from outside the region, the organizing committee made the decision to wind down.

Many races launched in the early 2010s on the enthusiasm of local volunteers now face a successor crisis as their founders enter their 60s. Bear sightings (forcing cancellation of races near Kofu in 2025), typhoons, and extreme rain driven by climate change are also increasing the frequency of event cancellations — and for small-scale races with limited insurance and contingency resources, a single cancellation can become permanent closure.

4-2. Three Layers of Causes

Layer 1: Human Resource Depletion

Aging among volunteers and organizing committee members is the root cause. When a key person retires, the event often cannot survive. The "local people run local events" model is structurally tied to the broader demographic trends of aging and rural depopulation.

Layer 2: Permit and Administrative Complexity

Since the Ministry of the Environment issued guidelines for trail running events in national parks in 2015, obtaining event permits has become significantly more challenging. Requirements for coordination with the Forestry Agency and local municipalities, as well as environmental monitoring reports, are manageable for large, well-resourced events but represent a near-impossible burden for small community races.

Layer 3: External and Environmental Factors

Bear activity, extreme weather, and trail degradation are increasing in ways that organizers cannot control. Smaller races lack the insurance coverage and contingency frameworks that allow major events to recover from a single disruption, making a one-time cancellation more likely to become permanent.

4-3. The Other Side of Polarization: Emerging Regional Races

The polarization narrative, however, is not simply "major events win, grassroots events disappear." Alongside the closures, a separate movement is generating new races in regional settings with a different DNA.

HIROSHIMA TRAIL 2026 makes its debut in April 2026 in Hiroshima. The base venue is Hiroshima Stadium Park, adjacent to Edion Peace Wing Hiroshima. The course utilizes part of

the 293.8km long-distance trail "Hiroshima Bay Trail," offering an urban-adjacent design where runners transition from city center to mountain terrain within minutes. Three distances (100K, 50K, 20K) will accommodate approximately 2,000 participants. The combination of Hiroshima's distinctive brand identity as a city of peace with its natural landscape makes this a compelling sports tourism model.

Minami-Aso Caldera Trail in Kumamoto was established in January 2021 as a vehicle for recovery from both the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake. Set against the backdrop of one of the world's largest calderas, the race offers four distances (50km, 30km, 18km, 2km) and is held twice a year (winter and summer), with all categories consistently selling out. Now in its 11th edition, it has grown into one of Kyushu's most popular trail events, with memberships in Asia Trail Master (ATM) and a sister-race partnership with FormosaTrail in Taiwan reflecting its international reach. The organizer model — local NPO partnering with the Minami-Aso Tourism Bureau — demonstrates a sustainable template for community-rooted events.

What these new events share is an explicit integration of sport tourism and regional vitality, anchored in place-specific natural and cultural assets. As closures driven by aging organizers continue, a new generation of events is emerging around the concept of "running through a place's story."

5. Race Organization Capital Structures: International Comparison

5-1. Japan's Current Operating Model

Japan's trail running events are predominantly organized by local volunteer committees, community-led executive boards, or local government bodies. Specialist operators such as ACTREP Co., Ltd. (Osaka, Osaka Prefecture) and Power Sports Co., Ltd. (Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture) exist but operate at modest scale. There are virtually no private enterprises in Japan capable of independently producing a large-scale trail running event. Even Mt.FUJI 100, Japan's largest trail race, operates under an executive committee structure.

5-2. The UTMB Group (Europe): A Flywheel Capital Model

The UTMB Group traces its origins to a 2003 race founded by Michel and Catherine Poletti in Chamonix, France. In May 2021, IRONMAN Group — the world's largest triathlon organization

— acquired a 45% stake in UTMB Group, launching the "UTMB World Series." IRONMAN's parent is Advance, a major U.S. media investment firm whose portfolio includes Condé Nast and Reddit. IRONMAN itself was acquired for \$730 million, giving a sense of the capital behind this ecosystem.

UTMB Group revenues grew approximately 3x from €3.5 million in 2021 to €10.2 million in 2022, with total revenues including subsidiaries exceeding €14 million. The revenue mix is approximately 70% entry fees and 30% sponsorship, with projections suggesting potential growth to €50 million.

The business model is a flywheel. Through the "Running Stone" qualification system built into the World Series, runners around the world chase entry into the World Finals in Chamonix by completing qualifying events globally. More entrants generate more revenue; that revenue funds global expansion, marketing, and brand-building, which attracts still more runners — a self-reinforcing loop.

A shadow side of the UTMB model: As runners are drawn toward World Series events, entry migrates away from independent local races. Events that cannot offer Stones risk being perceived as second-tier, indirectly accelerating community race closures. Canada's Whistler Alpine Meadows (WAM) is frequently cited in international trail communities as a high-profile casualty of this dynamic.

5-3. China: The Government-Backed Model

China's ITRA-registered event count has grown from approximately 10 in 2013 to 505 in 2024 — more than a 50-fold increase. A key driver is active policy-level involvement by local governments. Pavel Tropov, an expert on China's running market, told the South China Morning Post: local governments are aggressively courting trail running events as a policy tool for boosting local GDP and tourism revenue, and are investing heavily in promotion given the potential for races to grow to several thousand participants (AMP Media / South China Morning Post, 2018).

The forms of government support are varied: priority permitting for courses, subsidies for venue development, joint promotion with tourism bureaus, and in some cases direct co-organization by local governments. However, this administrative involvement has a darker side. The 2021 Yellow River Stone Forest ultramarathon disaster in Gansu Province — in which 21 runners died of hypothermia following sudden severe weather — was reported to have been driven in part by

pressure from event administrators to proceed with the race despite safety concerns. The model carries both upside and inherent risks. Regardless, the ambiguity around public-private roles in a context of rapidly multiplying events presents challenges that differ substantively from Japan's situation.

Following the 2021 disaster, China implemented a review of safety standards and a consolidation of events. The sector is now in a transition from quantity to quality.

5-4. Asia: A Distributed Ecosystem of Mid-Sized Operators

Across Southeast Asia, South Korea, and Taiwan, trail running is largely organized by small-to-medium specialist operators and local communities — a structure similar to Japan's. However, the degree of government involvement varies considerably by country, and Thailand offers a striking contrast.

HOKA Chiang Mai Thailand by UTMB (formerly Doi Inthanon Thailand by UTMB) has been developed as an annual international program through a joint effort by the Sports Authority of Thailand and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Founded in 2020 under license from UTMB International, with the iconic Doi Inthanon National Park (Thailand's highest peak) as its setting, the event was held as the UTMB World Series Asia-Pacific Major at its 5th edition in 2024. It welcomed 6,900 runners from 77 countries and territories — a 25% increase over the prior year — generating more than 1 billion baht (approximately €28 million) in economic impact during its four-day duration. The three-way structure of local government, national tourism authority, and private sports brands working in concert offers a striking contrast to Japan's grassroots volunteer model.

5-5. Japan's Three Structural Absences

Operating Model	Europe	China	Thailand	Japan
Large private capital (UTMB-type)	✓ Present & functional	△ Partial	△ Partial	✗ Nearly absent
Active government backing	△ Limited	✓ Strong	✓ Strong	△ Passive
Community executive committee model	△ Declining	△ Weak	△ Limited	► Primary (but aging)
Major sponsor leverage	✓ Functional	✓ Functional	✓ Functional	△ Partial only

Local governments in Japan tend to be reluctant to engage with trail races due to accident liability risk on mountain terrain, the coordination burden with the Ministry of the Environment and Forestry Agency, and an institutional aversion to assuming administrative responsibility "if something goes wrong" — a stark contrast to Chinese local governments that are willing to absorb risk in pursuit of GDP targets.

The absence of large private operators is also connected to market invisibility. Because domestic participation statistics have not been updated in over a decade, it is essentially impossible for investors or venture capital to assess market scale. One reason IRONMAN was able to invest in UTMB is that European events made their financial data publicly available, enabling market visibility that Japan currently lacks.

6. Three Defining Changes Behind the Third Boom

Change ①: Japan as Part of a Global Wave, Not a Domestic Trend

The Third Boom is not a Japan-specific phenomenon — it is the local expression of a worldwide expansion in trail running. UTMB lottery applicants increased 47% between 2023 and 2025. RunRepeat data shows a 231% increase in participation over 10 years. Asia-Pacific market growth is running at 8–10% annually. These global data points underpin what is being observed domestically.

Change ②: Participant Diversification as the Defining Feature

The First Boom was led by elite athletes. The Second Boom was driven by men in their 40s with marathon experience. The Third Boom is defined by the entry of younger adults in their 20s–30s and women. Globally, women's participation has risen from 25% to 38% over five years. Gen Z women's Strava trail running posts have increased 6.5x over three years. Japan's current 20% figure is well below the global average — but that gap equally represents the scale of growth opportunity.

Change ③: From Sport to Culture

Salomon's Sports Style accounts for 35% of footwear revenue. HOKA's Japan market is split 50/50 between performance and fashion. In the Mt. Takao area, the trail running brand Answer4 obtained a liquor license to sell craft beer from a refrigerator inside its flagship store, deliberately cultivating a post-run social drinking culture. At KO52 TAKAO, a multi-use complex that opened

in 2024, the local Takao Beer microbrewery and multiple trail running brands share the same building — creating a physical space where running, drinking, and gathering are integrated. The redefinition of trail running from "extreme endurance sport" to "lifestyle in nature with friends" is the most fundamental change marking the Third Boom.

7. Challenges and Outlook: Toward a Sustainable Boom

7-1. Filling the Data Void

Japan has almost no comprehensive trail running statistics. The last large-scale survey (JMAR) was conducted in 2014 — more than a decade ago. Neither the Sasakawa Sports Foundation, the Japan Sports Agency, nor the Leisure White Paper maintains an independent category for trail running. Without official participation data, governments cannot justify budget allocations, investors cannot evaluate the market, and event organizers cannot make informed decisions about optimal event volumes. Data infrastructure is the first prerequisite for sustaining a boom.

7-2. Reforming the Organizational Capital Structure

One potential solution is cultivating a culture in which runners naturally volunteer at other races. In many international trail running communities, volunteering at events is understood as a standard obligation for participants — a norm that is still nascent in Japan. A mutual support model, in which participants sustain each other's events, could partially offset the organizer aging crisis.

Another direction is migration toward professional event operators. Strengthening the capital base of existing specialists such as ACTREP Co., Ltd. (Osaka, Osaka Prefecture) and Power Sports Co., Ltd. (Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture), or developing models in which local governments take on more active roles framed around sports tourism and regional revitalization, merit serious consideration. The trade-off, however, is that professionalizing management may dilute the distinctive character that makes locally rooted, community-run events worth attending in the first place.

7-3. Women's Participation as the Measure of the Third Boom's Depth

Raising Japan's domestic women's trail running share from 20% to 30% would represent a net addition of tens of thousands of participants in absolute terms. Building out beginner-friendly

race formats, cultivating women's trail communities, improving safety infrastructure, and communicating the sport as a lifestyle — these initiatives simultaneously increase women's participation, broaden the sport's base, and strengthen its long-term sustainability. Women's participation rate will likely prove to be the most meaningful single indicator of how deep this Third Boom truly runs.

Conclusion

The Third Trail Running Boom is real. But the data-poor narrative of "enthusiasm" tells only part of the story. On the bright side: lottery oversubscription at 4x, record international runner participation, and global brands integrating trail culture into their core identity. In the shadows: a decade-old community race quietly ending after its 10th edition, the 18-percentage-point gender gap pointing to deep cultural structures, and the persistent capital deficit in event organization that dates back to the Second Boom.

Whether the Third Boom becomes a lasting cultural fixture or fades as a moment of enthusiasm depends on whether three things can move forward in parallel: building the statistical infrastructure to make the market visible; reforming the organizational capital structure; and raising women's participation rates.

As trail running — the sport — is redefined as running through nature — the lifestyle — this is the right moment to look squarely at its structural challenges.

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* Participation figures include estimates. Values without explicit source attribution are derived from synthesis of multiple sources.