

Snakes & Ladders

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Events and Festivals: A Midsummer's Dream

by Sharon Abe

Ah, summer in Japan... Do you think mosquitoes and humidity, summer homework and crowded beaches, sunburn and thunderstorms? Or do you dream of picnics and barbecues, swimming and baseball, camping and fireworks? For an escape from the former and to enjoy the latter, why don't you have a miniature golf tournament with your students and eat homemade hamburgers fresh off the grill afterward?

I have lived in Japan for many years, but still, around the Fourth of July, officially known as American Independence Day in my home country, I always want to go on a picnic, play outdoor games, and light fireworks at night, just like I did when I lived in the US. The more the merrier, I say, so for the last eight years I have been holding an event with my students in celebration of July 4th.

Miniature golf, or putter golf, was a natural choice, since other venues such as beaches, parks, or riverbanks are a logistical headache. A miniature golf course is enclosed, and you can easily control the tournament, the picnic, and cleanup afterwards. The venue I always use has a picnic shelter complete with rentable gas grill, sink, and tables and chairs, so I only need to bring my own food supplies.

To get the party started, I reserve the miniature golf course, which is about 20 minutes away, at least a month in advance. I don't need to say how many people will play until about a week before the event. Then, I hand out invitations to all my students about 3 or 4 weeks before the event. The students may invite friends and family members, too. I offer the chance for the younger students, kindergarten through third grade, to play in pairs with a parent, so the parent can help out especially when the



child becomes tired (or frustrated!). These children may play by themselves, though all kindergartners and most first-graders play in pairs. Parents who want to attend but not play are very welcome to come and cheer on their children. This event has always been well-attended, but this year will be the biggest ever, with 73 attendees!

The fees vary according to age of player and are based on the golf fee, food, snacks, and drinks, and prizes. The cheering parents only pay for the food, snacks, and drinks. Many come especially for my burgers! I try to keep the costs down so more people could attend.

Reservations must be turned in a week and a half before the actual event with the fee, so I have enough time to pass out confirmation sheets to attendees. The confirmation sheets have a map to the venue, and also a set of rules for the golf event, such as how many strokes a player can try (5, and then it's an automatic 6 on the scorecard so as not to keep the next group waiting). If I have not received an answer by the deadline, I will contact the parent for an answer. Late reservations are not allowed, but I will accept the reservation and fee if I have had confirmation by the deadline. It's a lot of trouble to rearrange groups and buy extra supplies at the last minute!



Also on the sheet is the explanation of an alternate event held in case of rain. Summer means the rainy season in Japan, and I've had to hold the alternate event three times so far. I used to hold the event as close to July 4th as I could, but now it's in the middle of June, hopefully to avoid the rain. Later in the summer would also reduce the chance of a rainy day. The alternative, in case of rain, is a Game Day held indoors at my local community center, but we still get to eat hamburgers (which I have to cook at home first, a very busy time for me).

Experience is a great teacher, so I now have a list of Things To Do and Buy which I can easily follow. For the golf, I make the 3- to 5-person groups and choose the scorekeeper, and then I make my own scorecards. I prepare prizes for all the children up through high school (parents who play alone or in pairs don't receive prizes; this is mentioned in the invitation). It's hard to run around the city and buy 50 or more prizes for ¥250 or less in a week, so all through the year I keep my eyes open for good buys and stockpile them. I also use prizes in my other 3 annual events, so this method is very convenient. I separate the players by age: kindergarten pairs, lower elementary pairs, lower elementary, upper elementary, jr. high school, and sr. high school. I print ranking labels and put them on the prizes before the event.

Then I have to do the food shopping. I order hamburger buns from a supermarket, to be picked up the day before the event. I buy the hamburger meat, 120g per person, at least the day before, if not earlier, and make the patties that day and then freeze them. I put them in my picnic cooler the morning of the event, and they thaw out at just the right time for grilling. The day before I buy the lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, and condiments, and prepare them the next morning. I also purchase pickles in large quantities from the FBC, Costco, or a restaurant-supply supermarket. At the event, I lay everything out on tables, and the attendees put their own burgers together with whatever they like. I have US flags on toothpicks for a jaunty finishing touch.

What's a picnic without snacks? I prepare bags of snacks for both children and adults, though slightly different in content. My supermarket has a 20% off snacks day once a month, so I try to get the snacks then. I also buy a non-soda drink for each person, as well as paper plates and napkins.

On the day of the event, I try to arrive about 45 minutes early so I can set up everything and decorate the shelter. In reality, I am usually running behind

schedule. The attendees have to come at least 15 minutes before the starting time, but they always start showing up very early. This gives me time to check them in, hand out scorecards, and go over the rules again, but when they come too early, my schedule is thrown off (this is one problem I still need to work out). Then each player gets a ball and a putter, and play starts! I assign a different starting hole for each group, so they are not all waiting at hole number one. I hand out the scorecards to the scorekeepers with a pen on a string (I lost several pencils the first year).

We used to play 18 holes, but even if it's not raining, it's unbearably hot and humid, and the players wilt halfway through especially since the venue changed from miniature golf to ground golf, which uses heavy wooden mallets and balls. Two years ago we switched to a half-course play, which is more suitable for the weather and smaller children. The course operator allows this, and of course we only pay half the fee.

As soon as play starts, I run around and take photos of the different groups and parents who are watching. Then I go back to the shelter and start grilling the hamburgers and finish setting up the rest of the food and the prizes. As the players come back after play and turn in their scorecards, which my husband and I will tally, the players wash their hands and get a snack bag and a drink, with name labels to put on them. I found that this prevents the loss of precious items and the sharing of germs. When all the players have finished and are ready to eat, I start lunch by showing how I put my hamburger together. Then it's everyone for themselves!

While they are eating, my husband and I tally the scores and rank them. After eating and cleanup, I announce the winners and hand out the prizes. The children are usually excited about their prizes, and if they are not, they are always welcome to trade for something else with another child. If there is any time left before the end, we play bingo, and the bingo prizes are little things I collect through the year such as prizes that come with drink bottles, sticker sheets from a doctor visit, free samples, or game arcade mascots. Sometimes these little items are squealed over more than the golf prizes!

In the case of rain, I have to prepare all the games for the Game Day. I do this as a matter of course the day before, since the weather is so changeable. I have games such as Ring Toss, Miniature Golf, Bowling, Beanbag Toss, Basketball Hoops, and Knock Down the Pins. If it rains,



I have to call the golf venue and all the attendees by 8:30 in the morning to let them know we will be having the Game Day, and then I set up the games in different areas of the community center room which I also reserved a month in advance with the stipulation that it would not be used unless it rained. I have to prepare the scorecards for this event, too, but the players are free to play any game in any order and with anyone or by themselves, and keep their own score. They play each game twice, and the scores are tallied and prizes given just as in the golf event. Then we have hamburgers, snacks, and drinks. All the parents are very helpful at this event, supervising their kids and helping things to run smoothly. I refund the unused golf fee to the students at their next class.

I always hope for sunny weather because the Game Day is a lot more work. The first two years I had alternate dates for golf, but that got complicated because some people could come on the first date and not the second, so I had to refund the whole fee and got stuck with a lot of hamburgers! Now I have just one date, and if golf is canceled, the golf venue people are very nice about it.

Even though I don't get to play at either event, I still enjoy watching the kids have a good time and talking with them and their parents outside of the classroom. When it's all over, I feel very happy and satisfied, and look forward to lighting my own fireworks after dark. Happy Birthday, America!

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