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Special Thanks to:

Aquamarine Fukushima for the photos on page 2.
Iwaki City Creation and Promotion Division for the photo on page 3.
Iwaki Sports Club - Iwaki FC for the information on pages 4-5.
Iwaki City Sports Promotion Division for the photos on pages 6-7.

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Winter Festivals in Iwaki

Iwaki, just like many other places throughout Japan, has many local festivals occurring throughout all four seasons each year. Although an overwhelmingly large amount of events are held over the summer, Iwaki's winter is also known for some unique and interesting festivals. Two of these annual winter events are featured on the front and back covers of this edition of Iwaki Vision: the Kotohira Shrine Festival (back cover photo) and the Numanouchi Water Pouring Ritual (front cover photo).

The **Kotohira Shrine** or Konpira-sama Festival is held annually on 10 January. Stalls extend from the shrine all the way to Yumoto Station, drawing massive crowds in the hundreds of thousands – many of whom are making their first shrine visit of the year (which is why the festival is also colloquially referred to by locals as *hatsu-konpira*). The large crowds and food stalls offer a typical summer festival atmosphere, despite the chilling temperatures at this time of year. What also distinguishes this festival from a summer one are the stalls offering *amazake* (sweet sake) and displays of ornamental rakes known as *kumate* which serve as talismans for business prosperity and good health.

Meanwhile, the **Numanouchi Water Pouring Ritual** is perhaps one of the most intriguing winter traditions of Iwaki. This 400 year-old ritual known as *mizushugi* takes place in the Numanouchi district of Iwaki, usually on the Coming of Age Day public holiday. As the name suggests, the *mizushugi* is a ceremony in which newlywed men from the local community have cold water poured on them as a prayer for good health, safety, bountiful catches of fish and a rich harvest. It should be noted that the water pourers are extremely clumsy when carrying the water pails and tend to “accidentally” spill water on innocent spectators. But apart from the possibility of getting a bit wet, this strange ritual provides some warm entertainment during this bitterly cold time of year.

