

# 'The brain is wired to do cleaning': Why Japanese fans tidy up stadiums

From elementary school classrooms to Toyota showrooms to AT&T Stadium in Dallas — for Japan's World Cup supporters, the blue bags were never a gesture. They were always inevitable.

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For the people of Japan, cleanliness is not a habit. It is infrastructure. (AP)

It extends to businesses, too. White and blue-collar workers clean the area outside their company premises as a matter of course. "Every shop, company, business will do the cleaning. There is a Toyota showroom in my area," Rakwal said. "They will be in their official dress, cleaning the surroundings."

Even a toffee wrapper is not carelessly discarded. In train stations, where bins are rare, the wrapper goes back into the pocket and home. "It is the same concept that has moved to the sporting world," Rakwal said.

Rakwal traces the roots of this national discipline and cleanliness to a single moment. When Tokyo became the first Asian city to host the Olympics in 1964, the capital was transformed as a symbol of post-war Japan: gleaming buildings, cleaned waterways, and the first Shinkansen unveiled ten days before the opening ceremony. Omotenashi, selfless hospitality, became non-negotiable.

"Cleanliness started with the 1964 Olympics," he said. "It was a directive that foreigners were coming, so Japan must be clean. Before the Olympics, Japan had a garbage problem. Tokyo Bay was contaminated. You couldn't even fish. Then they cleaned up everything."

In Dallas on Sunday night, the blue bags were doing the same work, in a different country, for the same reason.

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spotless at France 1998, Japan's maiden World Cup appearance. For those in Japan, it was no surprise. Cleanliness is not just a habit ingrained in their culture.

"In the Japanese system, cleaning begins at elementary school when the kids are six to seven years old. They will clean the classroom and the lobbies with brooms and wipes. They will serve food. Cleaning is linked to discipline and responsibility. When these kids go to university, this culture continues. This is what you are seeing at the World Cup. The brain is wired to do the cleaning," said Dr. Randeep Rakwal, a professor at the Tsukuba International Academy of Sport Studies (TIAS), who was brought up in Daryaganj in [Delhi](#) and has lived in Japan for over three decades.

Tokyo University's official curriculum includes cleaning activities that fall within the non-cognitive category, skills considered as important as academic ones.

Haruka Takeda, a social scientist studying mental health in para athletes, points to a philosophy the Japanese carry even when they leave their shores. Kita toki yorimo kirei ni suru, or leave the place cleaner than when you arrived. "Many Japanese people are familiar with this idea from a young age. Children are taught to clean classrooms and public spaces themselves, so cleaning is not seen as someone else's responsibility but as something everyone contributes to. For many Japanese football fans, cleaning the stadium after a match is a way of showing respect for the venue, appreciation to the host country, and consideration for the people who will use the space next," said Takeda, a student at TIAS.

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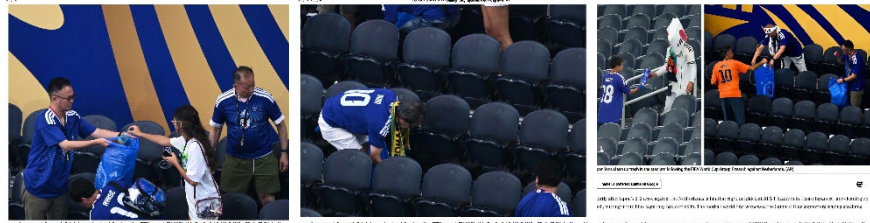
The practice extends well beyond schools. In the community where Rakwal has lived for 25 years in Yatabe, residents gather once every two months to clean. "It is 'Soji Shimasu' or I will clean. To clear the lanes of overgrown grass, fallen leaves, the odd cigarette stub," Rakwal said.

Japan is an aging society, and for elderly residents who can no longer participate, neighbours clean on their behalf. "If my wife says I have

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to join the cleaning if she is not there, I will plan my schedule and give the community cleaning priority," he said.



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