

The Secrets of Cleaning Up the City

Spogomi turns picking up trash into a festive competition that helps clean up Tokyo and the city's rivers and waterside.

by **Rosie Ball**

On a clear Saturday morning a crowd of people assemble in Tama Center in Tokyo's western suburbs for a very special kind of sports tournament. The people of all ages and many different nationalities are gathered together for Spogomi, a coined word combining sport and *gomi* (trash), a program that turns picking up litter around Tokyo into an exhilarating team game that involves strategy, action, and fair play. More than just a fun and friendly source of entertainment, the tournament raises awareness about the



effects of littering in a hands-on, constructive way.

The rules of the contest are simple: teams of up to five people have one hour to pick up as much trash as possible, and then return to the starting point where they sort and weigh their findings. Each team's litter is graded on a valued scoring system, with different types of trash earning different amounts of points. The fun lies in the challenge of choosing which trash to prioritize while factoring in time constraints. It is a system easy enough for children to grasp, and for adults to enjoy the challenge.

"Sports are fun," explains Spogomi founder and organizer Mamitsuka Kenichi, "so I thought I could turn something like this, which is good for society, into a pleasurable and rewarding game." Mamitsuka held his first tournament in 2008, and since then 930 events have been held nationwide with a total of over 88,000 participants.



Adults and children alike enjoy the fun challenges of the Spogomi held recently at the Tama Center.

"The sports aspect is an attractive point to people, and kids are especially serious about competing with someone," he says. However, the most important part is shifting people's perception of waste. "Before participating you never think about the trash around you, but on your way home you're more aware of it."

As today's game draws to a close, one male participant in his twenties reflects on his own shift in outlook. "I usually don't litter but I never thought about actually picking up trash myself," he says. "I didn't think it could be a sport, but once you take part you realize it is actually

fun." Another young woman expresses similar sentiments. "Thanks to being involved, I think I will become more conscious of garbage," she says.

Becoming more aware about trash is a step in the right direction towards making Tokyo a more environmentally friendly city. Today's Spogomi competition was held around the station, but they are also held along riverbanks and at beaches. Until recently, about half of Tokyo residents did not know the term "marine litter." The Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) has bolstered its efforts to curb generation of marine litter as well as to smoothly gather and process it. Collection and disposal programs are being carried out around the Port of Tokyo, the Izu Islands located in the sea south of mainland Tokyo, and the Ogasawara Islands located even further south. Educational materials, including a short film about marine litter, have also been adopted in elementary schools, encouraging children to reflect on these issues in class.

Community-based activities such as Spogomi and the environmental education measures implemented by the TMG are at the forefront of raising awareness about trash. By encouraging people to reconnect with their own surroundings, these initiatives are paving the way for real environmental improvement. Tokyo is famous as one of the cleanest cities in the world. To keep the city and its waterside beautiful, it is important to keep building a sense of community and respect for nature in each individual. This is the secret to cleaning Tokyo.

