

# Young baseball players get memento filled with stadium dirt

By Yuri Kageyama  
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Japanese high school baseball players, heartbroken because their annual tournament was cancelled due to the pandemic, are getting a consolation prize: a spoonful of dirt.

It's not just any soil — it's from Koshien Stadium. Which means it holds special meaning to all who love the game in this baseball-mad country.

Every year, more than 3,000 teams go through competitive regional playoffs to advance to the finals at Koshien in Nishinomiya city, central Japan — the prized stage that's seen the likes of major leaguers Ichiro, Daisuke Matsuzaka, and Hideki Matsui.

And every year, after a team loses, the players, many weeping uncontrollably, scrape the dirt near the dugout to take home as a memento.

On a recent afternoon, it was the members of the professional club, the Hanshin Tigers, who were digging with their hands to collect dirt from Koshien, their home stadium.

The dirt will be placed in transparent balls hanging from key chains and sent to some 50,000 high school baseball players. Each ball has the words: "2020 102nd Koshien," for the 102nd tournament, and pictures of a ball, bats, and the stadium. They are to be delivered in August, when the tournament had been scheduled to start.

Hibiki Kawamoto, a centerfielder and slugger at Iwamichisuikan High School in Shimane Prefecture, western Japan, was thrilled. The Tigers are his favorite team, and he plans to put the key chain proudly on his bag.

The game means so much to him. "When I get a hit when the team really needs it, I get praised by everyone," he said. "I'm going to play



**DEAR DIRT.** Manager Akihiro Yano, center left, and players of the Hanshin Tigers, a Japanese professional baseball team, show dirt they collected from the grounds of Koshien Stadium in Nishinomiya, western Japan. The dirt will be placed in transparent balls hanging at the end of key chains, then sent to some 50,000 high school baseball players and team managers. The annual Japanese high school baseball tournament was cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic. Every year, after a team loses, the players, many weeping uncontrollably, scrape the dirt from foul territory near the dugout to take home as a memento. (Yohei Fukuyama/Kyodo News via AP)

baseball till I die."

Akihiko Tanimoto, a social studies teacher who works with the team, said the players were still working out hard, and the cancellation served as a lesson to not quit in the face of hardships.

"Koshien was our goal, but it is not the purpose of why we play high school baseball, which is about not giving up until it's over," he said in a telephone interview.

The school has made it to the Koshien summer tournament 10 times.

How the custom of bringing home Koshien dirt originated is unclear. But it's a tradition that dates back decades.

The winning team also gathers the dirt, but only after the final award ceremony, which is witnessed by fans from all over Japan. They fill Koshien's stands and cheer raucously, in much the same way American fans follow the National

Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournament.

The dirt is replenished regularly, to make sure there is enough.

The idea of the key chain originated from Tigers players, who understood the disappointment of having the Koshien dream shattered. Many played in the tournament as youngsters.

"We all pondered what we could do for them, and I think it holds special meaning that we did this for them together as a team," said outfielder Kosuke Fukudome, who took part in the Koshien tournament while at PL Gakuen high school.

"I want them all to stay optimistic," said Fukudome, formerly of the Chicago Cubs, Cleveland Indians, and the Chicago White Sox.

*While nonstop news about the effects of the coronavirus has become commonplace, so, too, have tales of kindness. "One Good Thing" is a series of AP stories focusing on glimmers of joy and benevolence in a dark time.*

## Father advocates for daughter, others abducted to North Korea dies

Continued from page 2

people to train agents in Japanese language and culture to spy on rival South Korea.

Five of the abductees were allowed to return home for a visit later that year and have since stayed. North Korea says eight others, including Megumi, had died and denies that the other four entered its territory. Their families and the Japanese government disagree.

North Korea sent samples of what it said were Megumi's ashes but DNA examination by the Japanese government showed they were not hers and were mixed with non-human remains.

In 2014, the Yokotas travelled to Mongolia to meet a daughter Megumi

gave birth to in North Korea, but Megumi was not there.

Japan and North Korea have no diplomatic ties, and efforts to resolve the abductions have since largely stalled. Many elderly relatives say they're running out of time to see their loved ones.

Yokota stepped down as the group's leader in 2007 due to declining health, though he continued to make public appearances but did not speak in public for the last four years.

"I'm filled with regret and sadness that we haven't been able to bring (Megumi) back," Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told reporters. He renewed his pledge to bring the abductees home.

*During these tough times, if you are able, please support local organizations, nonprofits, stores, shops, restaurants, and others by making donations or purchasing gift certificates!*



**CHARITABLE WINNER.** Two-time major champion So Yeon Ryu closed with an even-par 72 to win the Korea Women's Open in her first tournament in four months. (Steven Paston/PA via AP, File)

## Ryu wins Korea Women's Open in her return to competition

INCHEON, South Korea (AP) — Two-time major champion So Yeon Ryu closed with an even-par 72 to win the Korea Women's Open in her first tournament in four months because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ryu won for the first time since the Japan Women's Open in 2018, and it was her first victory on the Korea Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) since 2015.

Upon winning, Ryu offered her entire prize money of just over \$200,000 for coronavirus relief funds.

Ryu and Hyo Joo Kim, another regular on the LPGA Tour, matched pars on the entire back nine of Bears Best Cheongna Golf Club. Kim shot 70 to finish one shot behind.

Sei Young Kim, who won \$1.5 million for her victory at the LPGA Tour's finale last November in Florida, led by one going to the back nine until she was slowed by three bogeys. She had to settle for a 70 and tied for fourth.

Jin Young Ko, the No. 1 player in women's golf, shot 72 and finished sixth.

Several LPGA Tour players from Korea have been playing their home circuit since it returned five weeks ago. The LPGA Tour is not scheduled to resume until July 31 at Inverness in Ohio.

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