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# STARS AND STRIPES JAPAN

Community Publication

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## INSIDE INFO



ENJOY ICE SKATING  
NEAR CAMP ZAMA  
AND NAF ATSUGI  
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RARE TRIPLE EAGLE  
SCOUT CEREMONY  
AT YOKOTA AB  
PAGE 8

## Military children tell us your story!

Hey, all you kids in the military community need to read this. Seriously! So, please put down your iPad, iPhone or other digital device for the next couple of minutes. You'll survive, and I promise no one will take them.

Now that I have your attention, I want to give you a little job. No, wait! Don't stop reading! I'm not going to ask you to clean your room! I'm simply going to give you the opportunity to be heard by tens of thousands of people. Seriously! You see, April is the Month of the Military Child, and for the 15th straight year, the Stars and Stripes community publications are dedicating it to you, the children of our men and women in uniform.

Send your story to [Militarychild@stripes.com](mailto:Militarychild@stripes.com)

SEE MOMC ON PAGE 2

# EXAM CRAM

'Tis the season in Japan to study like crazy to 'make the cut'

**PAGE 5**

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# Handmade in the city

Discover Tokyo's hidden street of artisans and craftsmen

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
MARC CASTANEDA,  
STARS AND STRIPES  
Published: January 15, 2026

**B**eneath the elevated tracks between Akihabara and Okachimachi stations in Tokyo lies 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, a collection of specialty shops devoted to handmade crafts.

Insulated from the noisy streets nearby, the street is lined with storefronts showcasing the skills of artisans who care as much about process as they do about the final product.

Here is where you'll find a curated community of creators. Woodworkers, leather crafters, jewelers, textile artists offering something distinct and personal.

Blue Trick is a denim shop that specializes in "boro," a Japanese textile tradition that embraces the look of garments repaired, patched and worn over time. If you're a denim fan, this shop is definitely a must-visit.

The jeans are all dyed and sourced from Okayama. Blue Trick also offers in-store minor tailoring.

EXCLUSIVE NEWS FROM:  
**STARS AND STRIPES**  
www.stripes.com



Left: At Blue Trick inside 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, each pair of jeans and every jacket feels like its own canvas. Above: Hand-crafted combs at Ganma take three to four days to complete from raw material to finished product.

Each pair of jeans and every jacket feels like its own canvas. Various pieces of fabric in varying shades are stitched together in visible layers. No two items are alike, and the prices reflect the artistry, up to 45,000 yen, or about \$300, for a single pair of jeans.

A few steps down, you'll find Ganma, a woodcraft shop filled with hand-carved combs, charms and decorative pieces. The sales representative briefly walked me

through the creative process.

The craftsmanship is impressive, though the price reflects the time and effort; some combs were easily over \$200. I admired the artistry, even if I couldn't justify such a purchase.

Muzica Vita stands out for its soft leather bags, wallets and key holders. The colors range from subtle tans to bright jewel tones, and everything feels incredibly lightweight and flexible.

Wallets and small holders range from 4,000 yen to 8,000 yen, with larger handbags costing 40,000 yen,

a surprisingly reasonable price tag considering the quality. The leather is sourced from Chiang Mai, Thailand, and handcrafted in Japan.

The last stop of my visit was Zestis, a jewelry shop run by a skilled craftsman who's been designing and producing silver pieces for nearly a decade. The display cases are full of bold rings, pendants and charms, many of which feature rare stones.

The cheapest item, a simple women's bracelet, was priced at 9,950 yen, but most pieces carried a much higher value due to

the materials and labor involved. The owner explained parts of the process and showed how he sets stones, shapes silver and refines the final form.

I ended up customizing a ring from the showcase. The original piece featured onyx, but I requested a sleeker design with sapphire, my birthstone. The order was shipped in a few days, another convenience the shop offers.

Browse a handful of shops for a couple hours or spend the better part of a day exploring. And if hunger kicks in, grab a bite at the on-site ASAN Cafe, a trendy spot with hammock seating and soufflé pancakes.

castaneda.marc@stripes.com  
@markuscas2025

.....  
**2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan**  
**DIRECTIONS:** A 7-minute walk from Akihabara Station at 5-9 Ueno, Taito City, Tokyo 110-0005  
**TIMES:** Open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. except Wednesdays.  
**COSTS:** Free entry; merchandise costs anywhere from \$2 to more than \$300.  
**FOOD:** Grab a bite at the on-site ASAN Cafe.  
.....



WEBSITE



Photos courtesy of PR TIMES

## Can you survive Squid Game in Shibuya?

JAPAN TRAVEL

**N**etflix's global phenomenon Squid Game has arrived in Tokyo, with Netflix Shibuya Real Squid Game now open in Japan for the first time. The immersive attraction runs from Friday, January 16 to Monday, July 20, 2026, taking over the 3rd floor of Shibuya Fukuras inside Tokyu Plaza Shibuya and inviting fans to step directly into the tense world of the Emmy Award winning series.

Upon arrival, visitors register as players through a face scan before entering a meticulously recreated game environment inspired by the show. The experience features six survival style games from the series, including Red Light, Green Light, Tug of War, Marbles, Memory Steps (Glass Bridge), Round & Round, and the final challenge, The Last Supper. As in the drama, only one overall winner earns an invitation to the exclusive VIP



Room, faithfully recreated from the screen.

There is plenty to enjoy beyond the games themselves. A themed collaboration cafe serves visually striking menu items inspired by the show's symbols and color contrasts, while Yonghee's Playground, the official merchandise store, offers exclusive Squid Game items such as green player jerseys, apparel, and collectibles. Both the cafe and merchandise area can be accessed without an admission ticket.

Several ticket options are available, including VIP tickets that

grant access to the VIP Room with a drink, and bonus redemption tickets that allow participants to purchase the iconic green jersey at a special price. Private bookings are also available for groups. For more information, please check out the official website. (QR code below)

**Getting there**  
Shibuya Fukuras is located just two minutes on foot from Shibuya Station.

.....

**Things to know**

**DATES:** Through July 20 (Mon.)  
**TIME:** 11 a.m. - 9:30 p.m.  
**VENUE:** Shibuya Fukuras  
**ADDRESS:** 1-2-3 Dogenzaka, Shibuya, Tokyo



WEBSITE

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File photo

## Burning ceremony held at Nishiarai Daishi Temple

JAPAN TRAVEL

**D**aruma Kuyo is a traditional event that has been held at the Nishiarai Daishi Temple since 1954. It is held during Setsubun, on the day before the official start of Spring.

At the Daruma Kuyo event, people come with their Daruma dolls to dispose of them properly and buy new ones for the coming year. During the event, thousands of Daruma dolls are burned together in a ceremony set to the sounds of sutra read by Buddhist monks.

The Daruma doll is often used as a good luck symbol and used to pray for good health and business. They are unmistakable in

appearance, with a round, red body complete with large white eyes and stern facial expression. When you make a wish you paint the left pupil, only filling in the right pupil once the wish has been realised.

The event is a spectacle to watch, with an entrance of conch-shell horn-blowing Buddhist monks all dressed in traditional garments, before they proceed to the main ceremony.

.....

**Things to know**

**DATES:** Feb. 3 (Tue.)  
**TIME:** 9:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
**FEE:** Free entry  
**VENUE:** Nishiarai Daishi Temple  
**ADDRESS:** 1-15-1 Nishi Arai Adachi-ku, Tokyo  
**PHONE:** 03-3890-2345



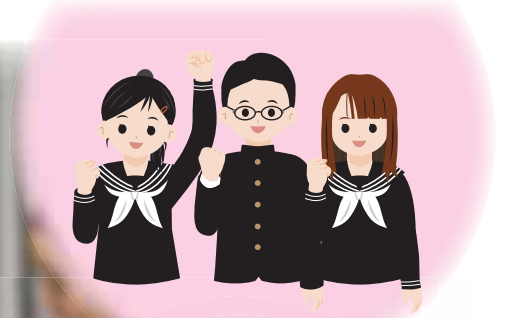
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The University of Kyoto



File photos

# Exam cram

‘Tis the season in Japan to study like crazy to ‘make the cut’

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,  
STRIPE JAPAN

On any given February morning, you might see hundreds of young students – some with parents, or even teachers, in tow – flocking to a nearby high school or university. Chances are they are on their way to take their entrance examinations.

Entrance exams – along with hours upon hours of cram-school study – are an annual rite of passage that takes place nationwide in Japan every year. Most people take these rigorous exams at least twice in a lifetime – for high school as well as college, but those trying for private schools might try three or more times.

## Taking exams

This year, 496,237 students signed up for the Common Test for University Admission, according to officials.

Some take more than one exam a year just to hedge their bets.

Unlike the United States, free compulsory education in Japan extends only through junior high or middle school.

High school and college exams typically cover three to five subjects, such as Japanese, English or another foreign language, math, science and social studies. They usually take the entire day with a break for lunch.

It is widely believed that graduation from a prestigious high school and university virtually guarantees preferential treatment from prospective universities or

employers after graduation. And since major universities receive four to eight times as many applicants as available slots, competition is stiff.

As a result, students study ... and study ... and study.

## Cram school craze

Many students don't make the cut and must decide whether to enter their second or third school of choice. The other option, primarily for university candidates, is to wait until the next year and try again.

Those who do opt to wait are called "ronin," literally masterless samurai.

To give their children an edge over the competition, many parents turn to "juku," or cram schools, which have been doing brisk business in Japan for decades. (Industry profits were at one time in the \$6 billion range according to Bloomberg Business Weekly.)

The Japan Juku Association estimates that there are 55,037 juku in Japan (2016) and that 50-70 percent of students who plan to take entrance exams use them.

These exams tend to focus on the quantity of knowledge rather than deeper comprehension or mastery. To put it simply, the more information from textbooks students can memorize, the better their test scores.

After regular school hours, students go to these cram schools two to five times a week to study for a

### A little luck of the 'ema' for exams

You may be familiar with bunches of small wooden plaques with drawings of horses and Japanese characters written on them that can be found hanging in Shinto Shrines. These "ema," or horse icons, are used as prayers or wishes for good luck in certain endeavors.

Japanese believe that their wish and prayers will come true if they write them on these plaques and hang them as offerings to the Shinto gods. Some of the common wishes for success include work, family peace, health and (yes, you guessed it) school entrance examinations.

As each shrine is dedicated to certain deities, different shrines are frequented for different types of fortune. Tenjin is the Shinto god of scholars, and his shrines are called "tenmangu."

Many students who are going to take entrance exams visit Futenmangu in Futenma, Okinawa; Dazaifu Tenmangu in Fukuoka Prefecture; and Yushima Tenjin in Tokyo to offer ema for success. There are many others elsewhere throughout the nation.

Ema are sold at these shrines for about 500 to 1,000 yen (\$3.25-\$6.50). Students write their name and wish on the blank side and hang it with all the others.

In February, you will likely see many students offering these ema at shrines near you.

- Takahiro Takiguchi, Stripes Japan

As part of the government's measures to address the country's declining birthrate, the gradual introduction of free high school education has been underway since 2025.

## Alternative attitudes

But things are changing and according to a Japan Juku Association official, so is the level of students' ambitions. Gone are the days when most students viewed Japan's entrance exam system as if it were a life-or-death matter.

"Many are not setting their goals very high for prestigious schools; instead they tend to be content with schools they can easily get accepted by," the official said.

To avoid of the competition altogether, some students turn to using recommendations from their existing schools to gain admittance.

So, for those who do opt for the traditional cram-and-exam method – with, perhaps, less fervor than their forefathers – how sweet is the taste of success?

Not very, according to a student who entered a private prestigious Tokyo university after cramming like crazy to make the cut.

"Once it's over, the pressure and motivation to study are gone," he says. "After having spent so many years studying just for exams, many of us have little sense of what comes next – or how to shape our futures."

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com

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## Enjoy ice skating near Camp Zama and NAF Atsugi at WakuWaku Ice World

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,  
STRIPES JAPAN

Since ice skating was the first winter sport introduced to Japan about 150 years ago, today numerous ice rinks (both outdoors and indoors) are located throughout the nation. Hit the ice at WakuWaku Ice World, an temporary ice rink near Camp Zama and NAF Atsugi. This fun winter spot runs until Feb. 15 and is conveniently located at the field of ViNAWALK mall at Ebina Central Park.

It's fun for families and perfect for a date night as the 240-square-meter wide rink is beautifully illuminated in the evening.

The rink is close to Odakyu Ebina Station, so don't miss out on the fun!

[takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com](mailto:takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com)



**View video**

### Things to know

**LOCATION:** Ebina Central Park in ViNAWALK, 1-4-1 Chuo, Ebina City, Kanagawa Prefecture

**HOURS:** 2 p.m.- 7 p.m., Mon. – Fri.; 11 a.m.-8 p.m., weekends and holidays.

**SKATING TIME:** Unlimited skating Mon.– Fri.; 45-minute timed entry on weekends and holidays.

**ADMISSION:** Middle school students or older 1,700 yen; from ages 4 to elementary school students 1,300 yen; Parent-child tickets 2,800 yen

**PHONE:** 0120-18-7801



**Website**





# Stripes Sports Trivia

Which all-time great is the NBA All-Star Game MVP trophy named after?

**Answer**  
Kobe Bryant

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STARS & STRIPES JAPAN

**DID YOU KNOW?**

“-san”, a simple honorific title equivalent to Mr. Mrs, Miss or Ms. can be very convenient. The title may be applied to most Japanese regardless of gender, age and social status. “Takanaka-san” can be either a senior gentleman or a young girl. So, when you need to write a letter or email to someone whom you have never met before, be sure to use this title.

**Kanji of the week**

怒

Oko(-ru)/do [angry]

**Language Lesson**

I'm hungry.

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## The Weekly Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

**ACROSS**

1 Comedy routine  
5 Grouchy Muppet  
10 Greenish-blue  
14 Colombian crop  
15 Woodworking tool  
16 Stare flirtatiously  
17 Out of the blue  
19 Romances  
20 Jon Hamm series  
21 Adds to, in a way  
23 Rush order?  
25 Far from wordy  
26 Crude dwellings  
30 FBI folks  
33 Young billy  
34 Branch of dentistry  
36 One to worship  
38 Ewe's mate  
39 Smoker's puff  
40 Dependability  
45 One of the Gershwins  
46 Stereo knob  
47 Ancient Italian  
49 Bird feeder fill  
51 Turbaned Punjabi  
52 In bad shape  
55 Band tour toter  
59 What comes to mind  
60 Breathing aid  
62 Let off steam  
63 Pull strings?  
64 Sea eagle  
65 A chip, maybe  
66 That and that  
67 Places for props

**DOWN**

1 Pond crud  
2 Hawaiian coffee  
3 Tended to a sprain  
4 IRS worker  
5 Alfresco

6 Utah airport initials  
7 "Black Bag" actress  
8 With regard to  
9 Lucille Ball, e.g.  
10 Charlie \_\_\_\_ of "Charlie's Angels"  
11 Self-absorbed  
12 Tissue additive  
13 More or \_\_\_\_  
18 Marinara alternative  
22 Jason's ship  
24 Dish in a lab  
26 Hula or hoop follower  
27 Playground quarry  
28 Young person  
29 Kind of oil  
31 Bejeweled headwear  
32 "Cosmos" creator

35 Strikes  
37 Set free  
41 Downwind  
42 Canopy support  
43 Ancient Greek ship  
44 Territory of NW Canada  
48 Humiliates  
50 Extra sense

52 Prima donna  
53 Tree of life locale  
54 Newbie  
56 Child's challenge  
57 Say it \_\_\_\_ so  
58 Barely gets by  
61 Director Van Sant

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**Answers to Previous Crossword:**

H	I	S	S	F	A	K	E	S	A	P	S	E
A	K	I	N	E	D	I	C	T	R	E	E	L
L	E	G	I	S	L	A	T	O	R	I	T	E
S	A	N	C	H	O	L	E	S	S	E	N	S
	K	I	N	G	F	I	S	H	E	R		
J	A	N	E	E	Y	R	E	S	E	N	S	E
U	S	E	R	S	E	R	R	E	D	B	E	E
I	L	E	S	H	E	R	E	S	S	U	R	E
C	A	R	A	I	K	E	N	A	C	R	I	D
E	N	D	I	N	G	L	E	A	K	A	G	E
	O	N	T	H	E	L	E	V	E	L		
S	A	W	M	I	L	L	E	R	L	A	N	G
A	R	E	A	I	M	P	E	R	S	O	N	A
G	A	L	T	F	E	E	L	S	P	E	S	O
A	B	L	E	E	R	N	I	E	S	W	A	P

## SUDOKU

Difficulty: Medium

Edited by Margie E. Burke

**HOW TO SOLVE:**  
Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

5	4	2	6	1	9	7	3	8
3	6	8	7	4	2	9	5	1
9	1	7	5	8	3	4	6	2
6	2	5	1	7	4	8	9	3
7	9	1	3	5	8	6	2	4
4	8	3	2	9	6	5	1	7
1	5	9	4	3	7	2	8	6
8	7	6	9	2	1	3	4	5
2	3	4	8	6	5	1	7	9

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# Rare triple Eagle Scout ceremony at Yokota highlights youth achievement

STORY AND PHOTO BY  
JEREMY STILLWAGNER,  
STARS AND STRIPES  
Published: January 15, 2026

YOKOTA AIR BASE — Scouting America Troop 45 in a rare event promoted three of its members to the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout on Jan. 14.

The three new Eagle Scouts — Julian Chuckrey, Evan Horne and Evan Okamoto — were promoted during an on-stage ceremony at Yokota Middle School in front of their families, friends and fellow Scouts.

“The Eagle rank is the top rank for Scouting America, and we’re really celebrating the path to get there,” the scoutmaster, Air Force Col. David McAlroy, director of operations for 5th Air Force, told Stars and Stripes at the event. “It takes most Eagle Scouts anywhere from three to six years to earn it, and it must be completed before their 18th birthday.”

Becoming an Eagle Scout is a



Julian Chuckrey, Evan Horne and Evan Okamoto recite the Eagle Scout pledge during a ceremony at Yokota Middle School on Yokota Air Base, Jan. 14.

prestigious and often surreal moment for Scouts.

“It doesn’t feel real,” Okamoto said in an interview at the event.

To earn the Eagle rank, Scouts must advance through six prior ranks, earn 21 merit badges and complete a service project that

benefits their community and demonstrates leadership and management skills, according to a Scouting America website.

Fewer than 10% of Scouts achieve the rank.

For his Eagle Scout project, Okamoto refurbished 13 benches outside the middle school, which took two years thanks to paperwork, approvals and other requirements, he said.

Most troops typically award only one Scout the Eagle rank each year, according to McAlroy.

“Another unique thing is two of them did their whole scouting career at Yokota,” he said.

Okamoto is the only one of the three from a military family; Chuckrey and Horne started at Yokota as Cub Scouts.

The ceremony came at a time of uncertainty regarding Scouting America’s support from the Pentagon.

National Public Radio in November reported that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth was planning to end support for Scouting America, according to a draft memo NPR said it obtained. The memo

was meant for Congress but had not yet been sent, according to the report.

Hegseth, in the memo, said Scouting America promoted diversity, equity and inclusion and had become an organization designed to “attack boy-friendly spaces,” according to NPR.

Scouting America’s precursor, Boy Scouts of America, emerged from an era of scandals and bankruptcy to become Scouts BSA in 2018, the year it admitted girls into the program, according to an Associated Press report in May 2024. The organization rebranded itself as Scouting America in February 2025.

Hegseth’s plan would eliminate medical and logistical support to the Scouts’ National Jamboree and would bar Scout troops from holding meetings on U.S. military installations, according to NPR.

“For more than a century, we’ve worked with every U.S. presidential administration — Republican and Democrat — focusing on our common goal of building future leaders grounded in integrity, responsibility, and service,” Scouting America President and CEO Roger Krone said in a

Nov. 25 news release following the NPR report. “We will continue our efforts to work with the Pentagon to address this critical issue.”

The Scouting America troops meet regularly on military bases in the United States and overseas and would have to make significant changes if the plan moves forward.

“The organization has been through a lot of

changes; it’s a pretty old organization, it’ll continue,” McAlroy said.

“I think it has sound principles, and I see a lot of application to preparing young men and women for potential life in the military, so I hope they continue to support it on DOD installations.”

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“ The Eagle rank is the top rank for Scouting America, and we’re really celebrating the path to get there. ”

– Col. David McAlroy,  
Scoutmaster

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