



This picture shows shogi piece is pictured at Japan Shogi Association headquarters in Tokyo.



Shogi pieces are placed on a shogi board at Japan Shogi Association headquarters in Tokyo.



This picture shows shogi player Taichi Nakamura placing a shogi piece during an interview with AFP at Japan Shogi Association headquarters in Tokyo.

## Gawky teen star wins new fans for Japan's 'game of generals'

Shogi, the Japanese chess variant known as the "game of generals", is enjoying a wave of popularity in its homeland thanks to a gawky teenage prodigy with a rock-star following. Sota Fujii's incredible success and quirky charm have made him a household name in Japan, dusting off the traditional board game's musty image and taking it to a new audience. The 19-year-old became the youngest player ever to reach shogi's highest rank of ninth dan this summer and last month became the youngest to hold three of the sport's eight major titles.

Fujii launched his bid to capture a fourth in the best-of-seven "Ryuo" championship series earlier this month, and his fellow professionals credit him with breathing new life into the chess-like game. "It used to be only shogi fans who would follow it, but now general news programs have shogi stories and that has attracted new fans," professional shogi player Taichi Nakamura told AFP. "There never used to be many female shogi fans. But since Sota Fujii came along, a lot of women have taken an interest." With his unruly mop of hair, goofy grin and high-pitched, lilting voice, Fujii may appear an unlikely pin-up.

But his face beams out from magazines, billboards and TV screens all over Japan, and his favorite cakes sell out at convenience stores within hours of him eating them during games. His pronouncements to the media are typically



This picture shows Japan's professional shogi player Sota Fujii posing for a photo call during a press conference of a competition between Masayuki Toyoshima, in Tokyo.

understated. "I don't pay so much attention to the titles themselves," Fujii said after his latest victory. "The most important thing for me is how strong I can become."

### Ancient mercenaries

Shogi is played on a plain wooden board with pieces distinguished by painted Chinese characters. It has existed in its current form for about 400 years. The rules are similar to chess, with the main difference that captured pieces can switch

sides and return to the board—a practice said to stem from the mercenaries of 15th century Japan. "I've been playing shogi for more than 50 years now and I've never got bored of it," said retired professional Kazuo Ishida, ranked ninth dan. "That's because it's a game with infinite variety. You never get the same game twice."

Shogi apprentices must reach first dan by the age of 21 and fourth dan by 26 if they want to turn professional. There are currently around 160 active professional players in Japan. Professionals receive a salary from the association and can earn extra from prize money and commenting on matches. Pro player Nakamura says Fujii's high profile has attracted casual fans who are less interested in the intricacies of the game and more in the players themselves.

"There has been a marked increase in the number of people who don't play shogi but watch professional matches," he said. "People have started enjoying contests in terms of the personal storyline between the two players."

### 'Everyone knows him'

Popular shogi-themed manga and anime have also helped stoke interest, but Fujii is not the first superstar the sport has produced. Yoshiharu Habu was the original shogi prodigy, winning his first major title as a 19-year-old in 1989 before going on to hold them all at the same time—a feat yet to be repeated. Habu was lauded with



This picture shows shogi teacher Kazuo Ishida (right) teaching a student during a shogi class at a shogi Center in Kashiwa. — AFP photos

Japan's People's Honour Award in 2018 and has won 99 titles over the course of his career. The retired player Ishida believes Fujii is stronger than Habu was in his prime, but says it remains to be seen if he can match his sustained success.

He thinks there has been a "dramatic" change in the way people enjoy shogi. "I think there were probably more people playing in Habu's era, but there are now a lot more fans who watch matches," he said. "'Habu fever' was something to behold, but I think everyone in the whole country knows who Fujii is." Fujii's influ-

ence can certainly be seen in the Sunday morning kids class that Ishida teaches in Kashiwa, near Tokyo. He says more children have taken up the sport since Fujii's rise to prominence—and there is no doubt who their favorite player is. "Sota Fujii is really cool," said seven-year-old Soichi Ishikawa, struggling to make himself heard over the clack of pieces. "I want to become a professional shogi player when I'm older." — AFP



Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, (left) and Britain's Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, (right) arrive on the green carpet to attend the inaugural Earthshot Prize awards ceremony at Alexandra Palace in London. — AFP photos



British actress Emma Watson arrives on the green carpet.



British actress Emma Thompson arrives on the green carpet.

## Hilton's Alice in Wonderland themed bridal shower

Paris Hilton had an 'Alice in Wonderland'-themed bridal shower over the weekend. After the 40-year-old heiress and her fiancé, Carter Reum, enjoyed a lavish joint bachelor and bachelorette party in Las Vegas last weekend, Paris was joined by her mom, Kathy Hilton, and sister, Nicky Hilton Rothschild, plus Kris Jenner, Kyle Richards, and Lisa Rinna, at the 'Paris in Wonderland' extravaganza. The lavish party featured a number of sweet treats, including cakes and cookies themed around the fantasy tale. Guests could grab a mini bottle of Moët & Chandon champagne from a vending machine, and on arrival, they were greeted by The Mad Hatter himself.



'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills' star Kyle - who was joined by several of her fellow cast members - captioned a carousel of snaps from the bash: "Celebrating @parishilton bridal shower today #parisinlove." Paris has dressed up as Alice a number of times for Halloween. And, in 2012, the socialite and her then-boyfriend, River Viiperi, dressed as Alice and The Mad Hatter. The bridal shower comes after the former 'Simple Life' star and the 40-year-old author - who got engaged in February - jetted to Sin City from Los Angeles to celebrate their forthcoming nuptials in style. The couple hit up a number of nightlife spots after flying in on a private jet, including ResortsWorld Las Vegas, where the couple stayed, and Paris took to her Instagram Story to show off the decorations, including a balloon and floral arch and a "Paris Carter" sign by the pool, which the soon-to-be husband and wife posed for pictures next to. — Bang Showbiz

## AS COP LOOMS, PRINCE WILLIAM AWARDS DEBUT EARTHSHOT PRIZE

Queen Elizabeth II's grandson Prince William presented the inaugural Earthshot prizes at a ceremony in London on Sunday, with projects from Costa Rica, Italy, the Bahamas and India picking up prizes. The new annual awards were created by Prince William to reward efforts to save the planet in the face of climate change and global warming. Five winners were announced, each receiving a million pounds (\$1.4 million). The build-up to the televised event - featuring the renowned naturalist David Attenborough and performances by Coldplay, Ed Sheeran and others - was marked by royal displeasure at world leaders' inaction on climate change.

William hopes it will help propel the fight against climate change leading up to the COP26 summit, which opens in Scotland at the end of the month, calling those on the shortlist "innovators, leaders and visionaries". In a short film recorded for the ceremony in the London Eye and released ahead of the event on Sunday, William warns that the "actions we choose or choose not to take in the next 10 years will determine the fate of the planet for the next thousand". "A decade doesn't seem long, but humankind has an outstanding record of being able to solve the unsolvable," he says. "The future is ours to

determine. And if we set our minds to it, nothing is impossible."

### Winning initiatives

The Republic of Costa Rica was one of the winners on Sunday picking up the "Protect and Restore Nature" award for its efforts to protect forests, plant trees and restore ecosystems. "We receive this recognition with pride but humility, what we have achieved in this small country in Central America can be done anywhere," said Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado.

Indian company Takachar won the "Clean our Air" prize for the creation of a portable machine which turns agricultural waste into fertiliser so that farmers do not burn the waste and cause air pollution



Liverpool's Egyptian football player Mo Salah arrives on the green carpet to attend the inaugural Earthshot Prize awards ceremony.

The other winners included Coral Vita, from the Bahamas, for a project to grow coral in tanks, 50 times quicker than coral normally grows. The northern Italian city of Milan won the "Food Waste Hubs" award for collecting unused food and giving it to people who need it most.

The "Fix our Climate" laureate went to a joint Thai-German-Italian team for the AEM Electrolyzer, which uses renewable energy to make clean hydrogen by splitting water into its constituent elements. Each of the finalists—chosen by experts from more than 750 nominations—will be given help from companies to develop their projects. Prince William announced that the 2022 edition of the Earthshot Prize will be held in the United States. In a BBC interview this week, William took a potshot at wealthy space tourists, for neglecting problems closer to Earth, while his father and grandmother have also weighed in this week on climate change.

Opening the Welsh legislature in Cardiff on Thursday, the 95-year-old monarch was overheard upbraiding world leaders who "talk" but "don't do" enough about the planetary crisis. The queen complained that not enough leaders had confirmed their attendance at COP26, with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

among the key players in doubt.

### Royal double standards?

William's father, long-time environmentalist Prince Charles, meanwhile told the BBC that he worried the leaders coming would "just talk", rather than implement "action on the ground". However, campaigners alleged climate hypocrisy from the royal family, which is Britain's biggest landowner, including large tracts of Scotland given over to hunting and farming. Last weekend, TV presenter and environmentalist Chris Packham led a children's march to Buckingham Palace in London to deliver a petition with more than 100,000 signatures asking the queen to rewind royal lands.

"If they were to do so it would be a very powerful message that would resonate with people all over the world," he said. The Earthshot Prize, launched in October last year, was inspired by US president John F. Kennedy's "Moonshot" project in the 1960s to put a man on the moon. It covers five areas: how to protect and restore nature; clean our air; revive our oceans; build a waste-free world; and fix our climate. — AFP