

# Going for a run? Why not save the planet, too, and try a spot of plogging?

SPORT

## Fr Vlad Felzmann

You may have missed the glorious fact that Britain won the inaugural Litter Picking World Cup in Tokyo on Wednesday, 22nd November 2023. Their tally of 83 kg of litter in 45 minutes easily beat the runners-up, Japan.

Participants from 21 countries, including the United States, Australia and France, gathered in the Japanese capital to compete for the 'Spogomi World Cup' (SpoGomi, a combination of the Japanese words for sport and rubbish), whose aim is to raise awareness on environmental protection, and in particular reducing plastic waste flowing into the ocean.

More than 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic have been produced since the 1950s, and much of it has ended up decomposing into micro and nano-plastics, infiltrating water streams, soil, and eventually, our oceans.

A new sport has been born to help heal the planet. Initially, collecting abandoned waste while jogging did not have a proper name. However, it was already being played by many sport enthusiasts and environmental activists.

Then in 2016, thanks to the Swedish runner Erik Ahlström who, after moving to Stockholm from a small ski-community in northern Sweden, became frustrated with the amount of litter he saw while riding his bike to work every day, and invented the word 'plogging' - coming from the contraction of 'jogging' and 'plocka upp', 'to collect' in Swedish.

"I was shocked by the amount of junk there was in nature," Ahlström said. "The same debris could remain in the road for several weeks without anyone picking it up, so I started picking it up. It felt good in my heart to clean up even a small place."

Stopping to clean up rubbish became a habit, then a part of his exercise routine, as he incorporated the activity into his runs. Other people started to join, and plogging runs became one of the official events in Sweden.

Since then the movement has grown organically around the world, thanks in large part to social media. Initially used as a tool for organising events, plogging-related posts and hashtags have helped spread the activity from country to country, with most new participants inspired by what



Left, Vivek Gurav (middle-right) from the University of Bristol with a group of volunteers during his plogging tour of the UK. Photo: PA/University of Bristol

Below left, Vivek Gurav undertook a 30-day plogging challenge to 30 cities in the UK in 2023.

Below, the 'Father of Plogging', Swedish litter picker and runner Erik Ahlström

they've seen online.

This global reach has led to over 40 countries being represented in the official online Plogga group and major events have been organised in nearly all of them. While most of the initial growth was in Europe, plogging groups can now be found as far away as Ecuador and Thailand, a global reach that has far exceeded the initial expectations of the movement's founder.

Besides the obvious environmental benefits, the extra movements in plogging makes it healthier than if you simply ran past the rubbish. According to Ahlström, a half hour of plogging burns 288 calories, compared with the 235 calories burned during regular jogging.

Ahlström believes that the multiple benefits of plogging, combined with its accessibility, are what have helped make it so popular. He said: "It's a low-intensity exercise format, usually lasting about 60 minutes. But at the same time, it's smart, good for the body and mind, and of course good for the environment."

The beauty of plogging, Ahlström believes, is its simplicity. Unlike many other exercise trends, it doesn't require classes or expensive equipment—just a bag and a desire to make a positive difference. "Everyone is allowed to do it how they want to," he said. "Anything works. The most important thing is that waste is being taken out of nature."

The worldwide dissemination of plogging activities led to the first edition of the World Plogging Championship in 2021. Val Pellice, Piedmont, Italy, became the global capital of this movement. AICA – International Association for the Environmental Communication and E.R.I.C.A. soc. coop. were the



promoters of the Championship.

For the first time, all the participants to a world competition arrived to the finish line together, carrying heavy bags of litter, cheered by the supporters. The first World Plogging Championship made it clear that "when we run together for a common purpose, we are all winners."

This year, September 29th to October 1st, in Genoa, the town hall of Palazzo Tursi, hosted the third edition of the World Plogging Championship.

On September 30th, a hundred athletes, from fifteen nations – including, for the first time, the UK – ran on the paths of Parco delle Mura. Britain's representative was Luke Douglas-Home, a 52-year-old Chartered Environmentalist who

works for 'A Future without Rubbish CIC', and who had been plogging for years, unaware that there was a term for what he had been doing, until he was told about the sport.

During the 'Plogging 2023 – Walking and waste pick-up' event, teams collected rubbish along the route for 1.5 hours. Plastic waste was sorted into two categories: clean plastic (not contaminated, containing liquids and leftover food) and other plastic waste. The results were based on the total weight of collected plastic and the correct classification ratio between clean and contaminated plastic waste. Participants collected 364.6 kilograms of plastic waste, with 10 kilograms of it being clean plastic.

The organisers directed the clean



plastic waste to recycling facilities where it could be transformed into useful materials for making tables, chairs, bins, canopies, and even houses. Previously, when all types of plastic waste were collected together, and would be sent to landfills, taking at least 450 years and potentially thousands of years for disposable packaging, plastic cups, and single-use plastics to degrade.

Now you, dear reader also know about the sport. Why not get your neighbourhood - or parish - to organise a local event next year?

As Christmas is a good time for giving presents, why not get together with your running/jogging friends and decide to give our planet a fine New Year Present: your new local plogging group?

If you are a teacher, or indeed school governor, why not encourage the pupils - and staff - to form their own plogging team?

If you are a parish priest, a great way to help build a bigger and better parish community could be by starting your parish plogging group. How about an ecumenical plogging group with your clerical friends - perhaps with its motto, "Stay fit helping the planet stay beautiful"?