

TATAMI MATS

Japan's Most Famous Flooring

By David "Sensei" Stainko, prof. | *mag. of kinesiology*

The first association for many people when they hear the word "tatami" is judo or some other martial arts sport which is practiced on this type of surface. But, in short, tatami is much more than that!

Throughout history, tatami mats have been a key part of Japanese culture, design, and even sports. The woven rush grass of tatami mats creates a comforting, relaxing space that can be enjoyed by all. Tatami is a style of flooring that is ubiquitous throughout Japan.



Tatami mats date back to at least the Nara period, in the 8th century. They were originally used primarily for sleeping, and only for nobility and upper-class citizens. Around the 16th century, tatami mats began to be used as flooring to cover entire rooms, rather than only for sleeping or sitting.

At this time, they were still primarily for the upper classes, and Japanese architecture was developing into the style we now associate with traditional Japanese homes. By the 17th century, tatami mats were common among all levels of society, and it became normal for most houses to predominantly have tatami mat floors.

Due to extensive use of tatami mats as the flooring of choice throughout Japanese history they came to be the standard unit for measuring room size. Rather than meters or feet, tatami is used to calculate room size by referring to how many tatami mats will fit in a room. This measurement system is commonly used by realtors and architects including for rooms that are not intended to have tatami flooring. However, tatami mat sizes are not standardized across the country, and vary between regions.

One of the most well-known uses of tatami mats is as flooring for Japanese martial arts. Traditionally, normal tatami mats are used for their firm yet yielding quality, along with their ability to withstand impact. Judo, karate and aikido all use tatami, and stepping onto the tatami mat is considered a sacred entering of the martial arts zone.

It all began with judo. In February 1882, Kano founded a school and dōjō at the Eisho-ji (昌寺), a Buddhist temple in what was then the Shitaya ward of Tokyo (now the Higashi Ueno district of Taitō ward). Eisho-ji dojo was relatively small and was formed out of 12 mats inside the training area. Only after 2 years had passed, the dojo could be called a Kodokan (講道館, Kōdōkan, a place to reveal a path) and this is thought to be the founding moment of the Kodokan Institute.

Traditionally, rush grass (IGUSA) was woven around a rice straw core to keep the tatami mat firm. However, now the rice straw core is often replaced with more modern materials, such as wood chips or polystyrene foam. In modern times, the tatami mats used for martial arts are regularly made of a thick foam, similar to that used for gymnastics. It is made to imitate the texture and qualities of tatami mats while being more durable and flexible. These foam mats are often still referred to as tatami in the martial arts world and are still treated with the same respect as real tatami mats.

Over time, tatami spread its meaning and function and became a mat used in many martial arts because it secured a firm support to trainees and, in comparison to other materi-



als, maximally reduces traction and slipping. It is also specific by its non-slippery characteristics so, apart being suitable for certain martial arts (judo, karate, jiu jitsu, aikido, kick boxing, wrestling, tae kwon do, MMA, sanda kung fu, boxing etc.) it is also convenient for pilates, dancing, fitness and well as crossfit. So, such a surface is suitable for all types of training which is need of a soft mat.

Today, in many martial arts, various gymnastic elements are performed with a lot of acrobatics. Tatami mats are needed for the training of such technically demanding elements for the safety of the trainees. Tatami mats are also extremely useful in any contact sport where the opponent is knocked to the ground with a blow.

Apart from that, the thickness and elasticity of the tatami lowers the risk of injury because it absorbs all types of physical stress which can case joint, knee, neck or spine injuries. Besides being soft, the tatami is very easy to assemble and disassemble, it is flexible, easy to maintain non-slip surface.

Tatami mats play an important role in the training method as an important element for preparation and learning (methodology of fall down techniques) for mastering many throwing techniques in judo, aikido, jiu jitsu, wrestling, but also in karate, tae kwon do, hapkido, kung fu, MMA, and many other martial arts.

Tatami surfaces and usually called tatami mats, tatami pads or tatami puzzles and the only differences among them are their thickness and the fact that the puzzles, as their name suggests, are assembled like a jigsaw which is convenient because it lowers the possibility of their parting. When can surely say that tatami mats are a precursor ro all other mats which are used in today's martial arts.

Tatami mats are most often produced in three colors; blue,red and black.Sometimes they can be found in gray and even yellow or green colors. Reversible, two-tone for easier stacking and better functionality. When the mats are placed by color, it is easy to determine the arena with one color and the edge of the arena with another. Today,tatami mats are a frequent floor covering of all modern martial arts centers.

Besides being used in martial arts halls, tatami is a surface which is more and more being used in other sports and fitness centres because its thickness is excellent in absorbing hits and falls. This is why they are very popular and are a favorite in various sorts of trainings. Trainings become more safe because they absorb the effects of hits and reduce the pressure on all joints.

Tatami mats are inevitably used in the training methodology for all jumping kick techniques for example: many techniques of jumping kicks that are performed in tae kwon do, karate, kick boxing as wellas in many other styles that were previously performed on the parquet floor are now performed on tatami mats.

Tatami mats are not only used for hops or jump in martial arts or some judo technique on the ground, nor for falls or throwing techniques, their application is much greater. Nowadays, tatami mats are increasingly used when practicing many so- called soft or internal styles of kung fu as well as when practicing various other techniques.

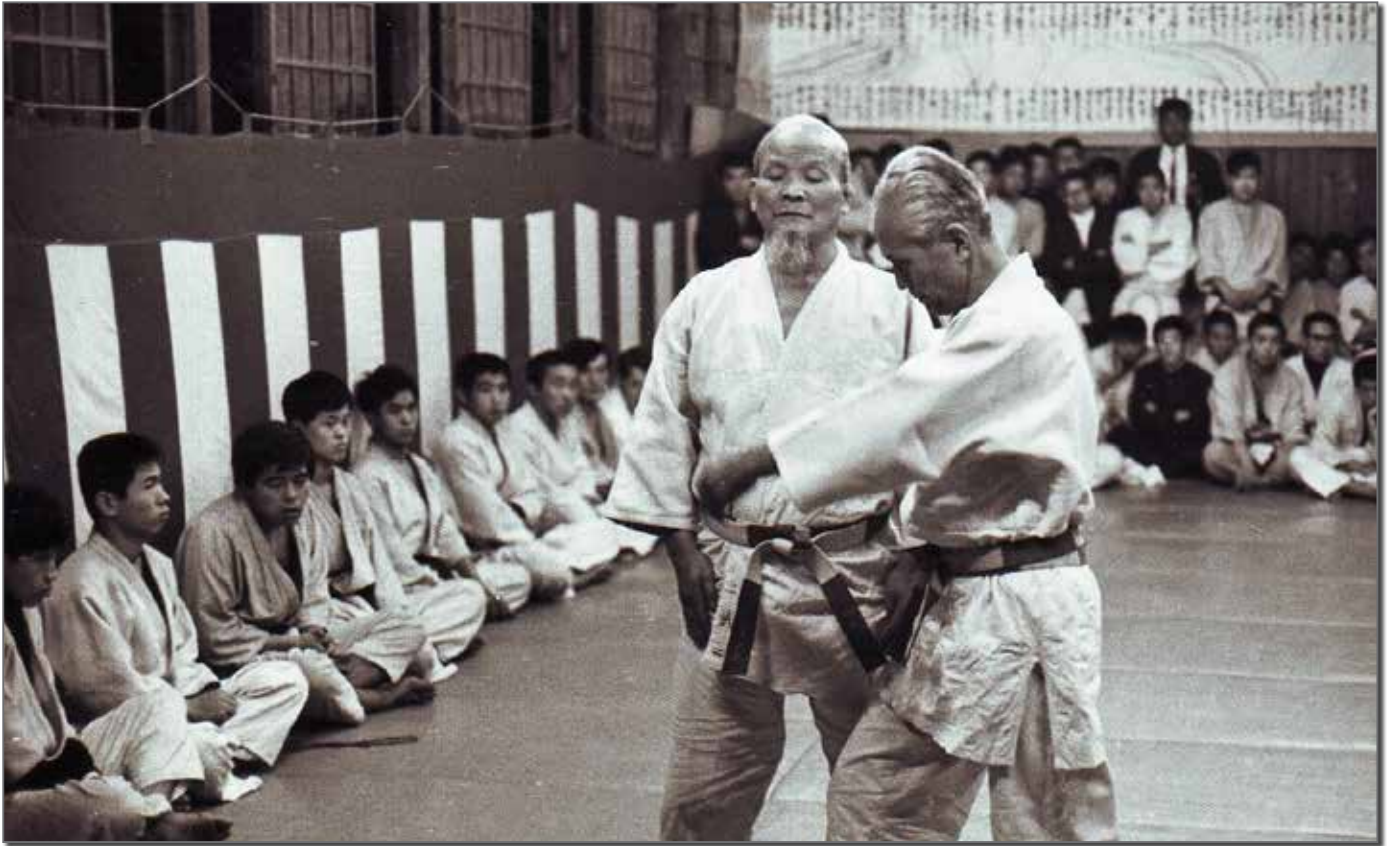
They are an ideal surface for performing different katas (forms) as well as for weapon practice (sai, kama, nunchaku, bo—staff, tonfa, bokken, katana, naginata etc.) Basically, if the weapon accidentally is dropped out of one's hand, it won't get damaged (the weapon nor the surface).



Many fitness centres place such surfaces under their fitness machines and other equipment so as to protect the floor from any kind of damage. Tatami secures the floor from scrapes, it reduced the amount of noise during training with dumbbells, as well as vibrations made during training and it provides a comfortable support. It can be used as padding for different pieces of fitness equipment, such as benches, exercise bikes, dumbbells etc.

Tatami mats are used not just in martial arts, but also in children's playrooms, rehabilitation centres, clubs, kindergartens (as a playmat), schools, yoga centres, fitness, crossfit, pilates, dancing halls, and it is also an excellent mat to used for

Japan's Most Famous Flooring



play at home. By using a tatami mat in your exercise space, there should be no fear from injuries, severe falls or scratches during training.

Tatami is a perfect surface for rooms where children often reside in so, apart from sports centres, we often see it in kindergartens as well as children's dormitories, among all ages. Apart from being a safe surface when it comes to falls, hits and injuries, it is much warmer in comparison to any other classic surface because it has a thermally processed layer which keeps warmth in.

In the beginning, tatami was made from rice straws, but today its main material is rubber or some other type of synthetic material. The tatami mat is made out of a high-quality material which is immune to flexing and hitting. Tatami mats are usually made out of EVA (Ethylene-vinyl acetate) which is very durable and absorbs hits.

The upper side has an embossed surface which is comfortable and safe during contact with one's foot, whereas the lower side is a spongy surface which safely adheres to the floor. Official tatami mats which are assembled together are ideal for

judo, karate, taekwondo and kickboxing arenas for competition (and dojos) and are used as surfaces in rings as well as in other halls, schools etc.

Tatami mats can be easily transported and do not require a larger vehicle. For this reason, tatami mats can be placed very quickly on any surface in the environment. As an example; on the grass in nearby park, on the sand, somewhere in a parking lot, in the yard, on outdoor tiles or on parquet floors in halls and many other places.

It is especially easy to maintain the tatami's cleanliness and hygiene; it is enough to wipe it with a wet cloth on a regular basis and you will be safe from any kind of dirt.

From its beginnings as a sleeping area for nobility, to its use in martial arts, and its common use today across houses, tea rooms, restaurants, and more, tatami mats have kept their place as an important aspect of Japanese culture. 🐼