

## 【Research Note】 Achievements and Issues of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics

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The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games (hereafter “the 2020 Games”) were held during the coronavirus pandemic, and the fact that they were actually able to take place was an indirect demonstration of the achievements of the united effort of Japanese citizens and measures against the coronavirus, and furthermore, had a global significance for the entire para sports community. In addition, although the Games were held without spectators at venues, holding the event has undoubtedly increased interest in para sports in Japan.

As for the achievements of Japanese athletes, they can be evaluated based on several indicators. The total number of athletes participating from Japan was 254, a record high, which might be expected from the host country. However, the medals won in ratio to the number of participating athletes was 20.1%, compared to 11.9% and 18.2% at the London and Rio de Janeiro Games respectively, and cannot be said to show a significant advantage from being the host country.<sup>1</sup>

The overall number of medals won was a satisfactory 51, compared to 16 at London and 24 at Rio de Janeiro.<sup>2</sup> However, the results were short of the target of 20 gold medals and 7th place or above in the country/region medal table<sup>3</sup> (the results from the 2020 Games were 13 gold medals and 11th place in the table), and here again it is difficult to say that being the host country had a large advantage.

In terms of a breakdown of results by sport, one that made great progress was the men’s wheelchair basketball (2nd place at the 2020 Games, compared to 9th place at the Rio Games), while judo was a sport that did not do as well (two bronzes at the 2020 Games) compared to London (one gold) and Rio (one silver, three bronzes).<sup>4</sup>

As for representation by gender, the male/female ratio was 66.4%/33.6% at the London Games and 65.2%/34.8% at the Rio de Janeiro Games, while at the 2020

Games, it was 58.3%/41.7%, marking a notable increase in female participation.<sup>5</sup>

The opening and closing ceremonies were generally a success, featuring many artists with disabilities as well as effectively showing the spirit of challenge within the gentle and heartwarming atmosphere that characterized the Paralympics. However, opinion was divided over the visual representation of disability using an airplane with one wing missing.

In terms of sponsorship, some sponsors refrained from advertising and publicizing their sponsorship, considering the increasingly negative public opinion in Japan about going ahead with the 2020 Games, and it will be necessary to observe how this phenomenon may influence sponsorship in the future.

From an international perspective, regarding the number of participating countries, only 163 out of the 182 member countries (as of November 2021) with national Paralympic committees (NPC) participated, showing no increase from the 164 countries that participated in the London Games.<sup>6,7</sup> However, this is likely the result of the Games taking place during the coronavirus pandemic.

Meanwhile, overall gender representation among athletes was 58.0% men to 42.0% women, and was by no means inferior to 64.6% to 35.4% at London and 61.4% to 38.6% at Rio.<sup>8</sup>

There was slightly less international disparity, with the top five countries winning 43.6% of all gold medals, compared to 45.5% and 51.8% in London and Rio de Janeiro, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

As for expressions of political messages by athletes, which has been a controversial issue in recent years, there was only one case, where the American rower Charley Nordin called attention to a racial discrimination issue related to an incident that had taken place in the past,<sup>10</sup> and no trend was observed of athletes using the Paralympics to express their political opinions.

Regarding the Japanese media's coverage of the 2020 Games, the following points are worth noting. The 2020 Games had substantial coverage both in volume and content, and despite taking place during the pandemic, the media coverage helped to deepen understanding of and increase interest in para sports. In addition, the general public's understanding of disabilities and of the process of adapting to disabilities seems to have increased, through for example, features on individual athletes and their life stories. Moreover, the commentary on individual sports and the strategies in

the game helped to garner enthusiastic fans.

However, this also highlighted some issues and future challenges. First, many para-athletes were turned into “celebrities” as a result of the medal-focused coverage, such as “The Gold of Dreams,” “The Silver that could have been Gold,” and “The Medal Rush” in sports sections, coupled with narratives of the human drama surrounding disabilities in human-interest stories and other coverage, which together had a synergistic effect. This resulted in a focus on personal resilience and ability, and a misleading impression that such personal efforts are most important for overcoming difficulties associated with disabilities. Consequently, it downplayed the fundamental and important element of social change for overcoming the difficulties associated with disabilities.

Second, there were hardly any critical comments on what led to the Japanese team’s failure to meet the target of 20 gold medals and ranking in the top 7 of the country/region medal table, with the exception of a few examples (on the poor performance in judo and table tennis, and comments on the lack of cooperation with able-bodied athletes’ associations). In conjunction with the very few critical stories in the Japanese media at the Rio Games about the national team failing to win a single gold medal, it brings up the question of whether there is an unspoken practice of “not being too outspoken” in covering para sports in the media.

Third, there was criticism that the rhetoric used to describe high-performing athletes, such as “pushing human abilities to the limit” and “superhuman achievement,” overshadowed the realistic problems faced by people with disabilities, such as difficulties in their day-to-day lives and hesitation related to sports activities.

Fourth, when an American rower staged a podium protest, displaying a t-shirt in protest against a ruling on the shooting of a black man by police officers in his hometown more than a decade ago, it did not attract any attention from the Japanese media. This implies that coverage of para sports in the Japanese media, unlike with the Olympics, has not included a political perspective.

Finally, there are the issues to do with the Paralympics which require more discussion, even though they were not necessarily apparent during the 2020 Games. They include the following.

The first is fairness in competitions. In the Paralympics, efforts are made to ensure fairness in competing conditions by classifying athletes by the type and severity of

their impairments. In the 2020 Games, partly due to the pandemic, some sports had to arrange classification events on site as the official international competitions which were necessary for classifying athletes had been canceled. Consequently, even just among the Japanese athletes, there were those who could not participate in the classification that they had trained for, for example track and field athlete Tomoya Ito. There is the concern that athletes, especially from developing countries, will face many more difficulties in participating in the Games in the future. Furthermore, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated regional disparities in the training environments for Paralympians. How to tackle these issues of “inequality” remains to be discussed.

Second, is the effect of technical innovations. Use of equipment that uses highly advanced technology has been controversial in recent years. For example, sprinter Oscar Pistorius’ highly-engineered prosthetic limbs were criticized as being more than “equipment” to restore or increase physical function, and being a “device” for enhancing physical abilities to an almost superhuman level. Using these equipment and devices itself requires special skills and techniques, on top of the possible risks to the human body. Thus, how to manage the relationship between the Paralympics and the increasingly enhanced equipment will be a remaining task in the future.

The third, which relates to the points just discussed, is the growing view that the Paralympics are in essence a competitive sports event based on setting specific, somewhat special conditions for competing. In other words, as in goalball and football 5-a-side which impose an equal “condition” of visual impairment on each competing athlete, if the Paralympics are considered at its basis a sports competition that sets special rules that take into account physical, visual, and intellectual impairments, the sense among spectators that they can enjoy competitive sports that have special rules may become stronger. This could turn the Paralympics away from the principles of overcoming disabilities and creating an inclusive society, and toward the appreciation of the events as “sports” or “entertainment.”

Finally, the issue of what is right and wrong with “inspiration porn” in relation to the Paralympics, other para sports, or artistic activities by people with disabilities, has also begun to be discussed in Japan. Inspiration porn is the idea that when people with disabilities “overcome” their disabilities, achieve results and are praised, it uses disability as “material” for able-bodied people to experience a moving story, in the

same way that nudity and sexual acts are used as material in pornography to induce arousal. The right and wrong of this viewpoint aside, it is a legitimate question to ask whether the Paralympics, which has become an extremely large-scale event, has become something that is for able-bodied people rather than for people with disabilities, given that the organization, those who manage it, spectators and those who cover it in the media are almost all able-bodied people. This is also a question that leaves issues for the future

#### References

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- 4 Japanese Paralympic Committee official website, "*Kako no Taikai* (Past Games)", <https://www.parasports.or.jp/paralympic/what/past.html> (17 December 2021).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 The Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2021, *Tokyo 2020 Taikai no Furikaeri ni tsuite* (48th Meeting of the Board of Directors: "Reflections on the Tokyo 2020 Games)," 11.
- 7 IPC Historical Results Archive, "Paralympic Games."
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The Mercury News, "Oakland Paralympic Medalist Uses Podium Protest to Seek Justice for Oscar Grant," September 9, 2021.