16 Outdoor sports in the periphery

Far from the compact games

Daniel Kremers

In their bid for the 32nd Olympiad the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG) promised to hold “compact Games in the heart of the city.”¹ With 28 of the 33 competition venues within eight kilometers of the Olympic and Paralympic Village, Tokyo 2020 aimed at becoming one of the most compact Games ever held. After Tokyo won the bid in the final round against Madrid and Istanbul, however, it became clear that not all that was promised could be delivered. While most of the events are still concentrated within the 23 districts of Tokyo, venues for several disciplines were relocated, while sites for sports that will have their Olympic debut in 2020 had to be sought outside of Tokyo, making the 2020 Games actually the most regionally dispersed in Olympic history, and rural municipalities suddenly find themselves hosting the Olympic and Paralympic mega-events.

Rural municipalities in Japan are faced with economic decline, aging, and shrinking populations – much more than urban centers like Tokyo or Osaka. In 2015, a government study identified 15,568 rural hamlets with over 50% of the population above the age of 65. Far from being a cure for all, hosting sport events and promoting athletic activities in general is a common strategy to increase the attractiveness of a locality for residents and employers, and a small but increasing number of local communities are focusing on outdoor and adventure sports to attract young people. The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games thus offer a chance to look closer at urban-rural relations in Japan.

Finding suitable locations

Tokyo is one of the most densely populated places on earth. This makes it extremely challenging to find available space suitable for building sport infrastructures of Olympic dimensions, especially when it comes to outdoor sports. Tokyo’s bid introduced two combined concepts. Renovating and

reusing 1964 facilities in a so-called “Heritage Zone” and building new facilities on reclaimed land in the “Tokyo Bay Zone.” However, together with the dismantling and rebuilding of the national stadium in central Tokyo, building new and mostly temporary facilities blew cost calculations out of proportion, and was hard to reconcile with Tokyo’s other goal of creating social and environmental sustainability legacies.

With the aim of saving \$1 billion, the two Inner City Zones were stretched from a circle of eight kilometers to two ovals of more than 50 kilometers in length, spanning from Musashino Forest Sport Plaza in the west to Makuhari Messe in Chiba Prefecture to the east. Additionally, several sports and disciplines were moved further away – ten venues in the Olympics and 19 venues in the Paralympics. Basketball was moved to Saitama Super Arena, Fencing, Taekwondo, and Wrestling were moved from their central location next to the Olympic Village out to Makuhari in Chiba prefecture, and sailing was moved from Tokyo Bay to Enoshima Yacht Harbor in Kanagawa prefecture, 60 kilometers to the south of central Tokyo.

The greatest changes affected cycling. In April 2015 plans surfaced to move track cycling, mountain biking and BMX from Ariake and Sea Forest Park in Tokyo Bay to the Japan Cycle Sports Center (CSC), a theme park in the city of Izu, 130 kilometers from Tokyo. The CSC had been established in 1965, one year after the 1964 Olympics, with the aim to promote cycling in Japan. Since 2011 it features Japan’s only wooden indoor velodrome. After lengthy negotiations with the International Cycling Union (UCI), the final agreement allowed only BMX to stay in the Tokyo Bay Zone. Road races start in Western Tokyo, pass through Yamanashi Prefecture and end in Shizuoka Prefecture, while mountain biking and track cycling were moved to the CSC. With all but one of the four cycling disciplines having been moved to two separate locations in Shizuoka Prefecture, it makes them the most distant events of any Olympic and Paralympic Games in history.

Another outdoor sport, surfing will make its Olympic debut in 2020. Japan has an abundance of surfing beaches, but with none within the Tokyo metropolis, a rural solution had to be found as well. The organizers opted for Ichinomiya in Chiba prefecture, roughly 90 kilometers to the East of central Tokyo, whose beaches are a popular destination for surfers from all over Japan.

Turf and Surf in Izu and Ichinomiya

Izu City is used to international cycling events at the CSC, but nothing like the Olympic Games. The town hall’s business bureau has set up a team to

prepare for the event. The major concern is accommodation capacity for media personnel and spectators, who will compete for rooms and beds with ordinary summer season visitors. A local NPO has set up bike rental stations and bike racks at points of interest, to boost cycling tourism before and after the Games. While Izu Velodrome is a popular destination for track cyclists, and the local mountain bike course hosts the annual CSC-Classic cross-country race, the CSC was not overly successful in its mission to promote cycling.

CSC is doing little in terms of destination management. Its website is old, with links to “Izu-Cycle-Mecca” not working at all. The CSC and track cycling in Japan in general are dominated by *keirin*, a race format popular for sport betting, and the CSC’s contribution to other disciplines is rather small. BMX is very popular in Japan, but mostly due to its fashionable urban image mainly transported through US popular culture, while road cycling owes much of its popularity to the Tour de France and manga comics like *Yowamushi Pedal*. Copying the French original, the rural city of Iida in Nagano prefecture attracts visitors by annually hosting the Tour de Japon. Sales of mountain bikes boomed in the 1990s, but the sport did not gain wider acceptance. Though abundant in forests and mountains, Japan lacks courses and trails due to a fine-grained and complicated ownership of land without right-of-way rules, an extreme concern for safety, and too little free time to spend building trails, among other challenges.² Opaque traffic rules, a lack of bicycle lanes and the ban of bicycles from public transport discourage many Japanese from cycling, even on paved roads. This corresponds to recent findings of a Chiba University study revealing that 70% of Japan’s elementary school children do not even play outside, both in urban as well as rural areas.³ Against these odds it is doubtful that the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic events at CSC can do much to promote cycling in all its variety in Japan, and if the CSC does not change its focus on *keirin*, it will also do little to promote the rural region of Izu through cycling as an outdoor activity.

Ichinomiya in Chiba prefecture came into the spotlight of the 2020 Games for hosting the Olympic debut of surfing. Already now the town is benefitting from the sport. Though Ichinomiya is small with a population of only 12,000, well below the Japanese average of 77,000, each year 600,000 surfers visit the local beaches. Families and young adults moved here to be close to the surf. The local elementary school is cramped with surfer kids. The town even built housing with facilities specially catering to surfers such as outside showers.⁴ Hosting the Olympics will thus build on and expand a strategy that has already proved successful. The chances that the 2020 Games will leave a sustainable legacy in Ichinomiya are thus very high.

Beyond 2020: outdoor sports as drivers for rural revitalization in Japan

With approximately 3,000 kilometers of coastline facing the Pacific Ocean, Japan has an abundance of beaches that are frequented by surfers. Closest to Tokyo are the beaches of Kamakura and Enoshima to the south, and Chiba's Katsu'ura and Ichinomiya to the east. Local hotels and lodges especially cater to surfers, surfing schools make the sport attractive and accessible for beginners, and boards can be rented at many places. Another reason that surfing is so popular in Japan is certainly the positive image of Hawai'i as one of the most popular tourist destinations among Japanese. A major Japanese car manufacturer recently launched an edition of a popular minivan that is especially trimmed to the needs of surfers. Thus, surfing is a major outdoor sport in Japan and already contributing to the attractiveness of coastal areas. I talked with my neighbors in suburban Tokyo, a couple with a young daughter, who are avid surfers. Though they regularly drive their pick-up truck to Kamakura for surfing, they consider the distance to Ichinomiya quite far. Nonetheless, they have applied for tickets to see the Olympic competitions there.

Mountain biking on the other hand has had it more difficult than surfing, mainly due to access to forests and mountains in Japan. During the first wave of the sport's popularity in the early 1990s conflicts quickly ensued with hikers and landowners, as mountain bikers used to flock in large groups at popular hiking spots such as Mount Takao in the west of Tokyo, where mountain bikes have been banned as a result. A couple of ski-resorts operate bike parks in summer, such as Fujimi Panorama, Fujiten, and Iwatake in Hakuba that hosted the 1998 Nagano Winter Games. More recently, local voluntary associations are utilizing mountain biking as a tool of rural revitalization, thereby improving the sport's image. Following the example of the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA), a US-Canadian organization, these groups focus more on trail-building than athletic competition. But they are also engaged in typical Japanese community activities such as garbage collection, disaster prevention, and festival (*matsuri*) preparations. Thus, through mountain biking, they actively provide assets to the local community. The most active clubs are based in Nishitama, Minami Alps, Sanjo, Mino, Tottori, and Saga. Especially the group in Minami Alps puts a strong emphasis on motivating young people to migrate from the urban centers to the rural peripheries, so-called U- and I-turners.⁵

While some members of these groups are enthusiastic about the attention given to their sport, such as in a recent campaign by the job agency Recruit that portrayed "trail builder" as a job "helping Tokyo 2020,"⁶ they

are nonetheless realistic about future prospects. They will have to continue to negotiate with local governments, land owners, and other stakeholders for every meter of trail. Making the benefits of outdoor sports visible and changing the hearts and minds of the elderly population in rural Japan is not an easy task. Nonetheless, outdoor sports such as surfing and mountain biking have demonstrated tremendous potential for rural areas outside Japan. As they cannot be practiced in urban conglomerations, rural areas can foster them to attract visitors and migrants on the one hand, while making the region more attractive for residents, improving public health and well-being as well as raising the utility and value of otherwise unused land. Without locals actively promoting sports and outdoor activities, however, there will be no long-lasting positive effects of rurally hosted mega-events.

Originally, the main argument for having compact Games was that the Olympic and Paralympics Games are an event for athletes, not for spectators. Bringing athletes from all over the world together in one Olympic Village is considered a core element of the Games. Having competitions away from the Village thus runs the risk of excluding groups from the Olympic experience. Furthermore, as Tokyo won the bid on the promise of compact Games, spreading out could be seen as cheating, which might encourage other cities to come up with unrealistic plans in the future. But having less compact Games may not necessarily be a bad thing. Hosting events outside of Tokyo might help bring rural areas into the spotlight, while the variety of disciplines of 2020 might help to increase the popularity of outdoor sports that carry great potential in economic and social terms but have so far been underappreciated in Japan.

Notes

- 1 Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG). 2012. *Discover Tomorrow Tokyo 2020*. <http://tokyo2020.org/en/games/plan/data/candidate1-intro-ENFR.pdf>.
- 2 Hirano, Yuichiro. 2016. "Mauntenbaikā ni yoru arata shinrin riyō kokoromi to kanōsei" [New challenges and possibilities of forest use by mountain bikers]. *Nichirinshi* 98: 1–10.
- 3 The Mainichi. May 31, 2019. "More than 70% of kids in urban, rural Japan not playing outside." <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190530/p2a/00m/0na/032000c>.
- 4 NHK World. December 5, 2018. "Town hopes to ride the Tokyo 2020 wave." www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/nhknewsline/backstories/tokyo2020wave/index.html.
- 5 Minami Arupusu Mauntenbaiku Aikōkai. www.minamialpsmtb.com/.
- 6 Recruit. 2019. *Sasaeru 2020 no shigoto* [Jobs that support 2020]. <https://recruit-2020.tokyo/>.