21 The Paralympic Games

Enabling sports and empowering disability

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The parallel Games

Many people associate the term *para* in Paralympic to mean paraplegic. Indeed, the history of the Paralympic movement is grounded in the experience of injured World War II veterans with lower limb impairments that used sports as a form of physical rehabilitation. The current and accurate meaning of the term, however, hails from the Greek term meaning parallel, or equal to. This is to highlight the equal status of the Olympic and Paralympic Games: they are hosted by the same city, use the same venues, and are played side by side. Most importantly, they are to be seen as equal in importance, status, and athletic excellence.

The 2020 Paralympic Games, held for 12 days after the Olympic closing ceremony (August 25 through September 6) will come closest to this parallel ideal since the first Paralympics in 1960. Tokyo's Olympic Village is expecting a record number of athletes (4,400) from a record number of countries and regions (160) to compete in a record number of sports (22) and medal events (540). Some of the Games' most popular events are spread throughout the 12 days of competition: on August 26, the day after the Paralympic opening ceremony, competition in seven sports will begin: cycling (track), goalball, swimming, table tennis, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair fencing, and wheelchair rugby. Athletics (track and field), one of the most popular sports, will be held in the Olympic Stadium each day from August 28 to September 5. Wheelchair rugby is usually scheduled to highlight the end of the Paralympics, but this year the popular event is scheduled in the middle of the Games. The Japanese wheelchair rugby team won gold at the Rio Games in 2016, so excitement is expected as they defend their title.

Paralympic classifications and categories: who gets to compete?

Athletes compete in the Paralympics via a complex classification system that is representative of a “Paralympic paradox,” which is a tension created between the focus on athletic excellence and physical impairment. Paralympians may see themselves as “athletes first” but must also qualify as impaired enough to compete in the Games. Accordingly, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Paralympic movement’s governing body, has developed a classification system designed to ensure “fair and equal competition” among athletes of similar types and degrees of impairment. For example, the popular goalball is played by athletes with visual impairments who wear black eye masks to even out even small differences of impairment among athletes.

To qualify, athletes must meet a variety of criteria: first, they must have an eligible impairment for their sport. Here the IPC has created ten classification categories: impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of motion, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, visual impairment, and three distinct types of muscle impairments that result from neurological conditions such as cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis. The final category is intellectual impairment, which is most commonly represented in the Special Olympics, but also recognized in the Paralympics. Noticeably absent are deaf athletes: they compete in an entirely separate Olympic event, the Deaflympics, held every four years at a time and location independent of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.¹

Once athletes demonstrate that they have an eligible impairment, they must also meet the minimum disability criteria of their sport. The minimum disability criteria ensure that the impairment causes an activity limitation in that particular sport or discipline. In addition, each Paralympic sport defines for which impairment groups they provide sporting opportunities. While some sports include athletes of all impairment types, such as swimming, others are specific to one impairment type.

The third and final step assigns athletes into a sport class, which groups athletes with similar activity limitations together for competition. Sport classes differ by sport, and they can also include athletes with different impairments if these impairments cause similar activity limitations. Some sports, like powerlifting, have only one sport class, while others, like para athletics, end up with 52 classes across different disciplines that include athletes from all of the ten recognized impairments.

The ultimate goal behind this elaborate sorting and qualification process is to minimize the impact of impairment classifications on athletic performance and competition. The assumption is that if athletes are

sufficiently similar in terms of the type and level of their impairment, the competition will be able to measure actual athletic ability, training, and talent, rather than giving advantages to specific impairments. As a result, the IPC is walking a fine line between creating categories that are narrow enough so that individual impairments are not the deciding factor in outcome, while also keeping categories broad enough to create competitions with enough contestants that meet Olympic goals of sustainable competition. This tension has increased as the IPC works towards strengthening the Paralympic brand by attracting corporate sponsors, developing merchandising, and selling TV coverage. Broadcasters are increasingly pushing for a streamlining of competition categories to increase ticket sales and improve spectator experiences, which may result in future reforms to this elaborate classification system.

“We’re the Superhumans”: Paralympic athletes as inspirational and bionic heroes

The 2016 Games in Rio marked a highlight for the Paralympic movement by producing an award-winning media campaign (“We’re the Superhumans”) that promoted images of Paralympic athletes as inspirational and superhuman heroes. In many cases Paralympians transcend human potential with their assistive devices that can cross the line from therapeutic to performance-enhancing. Nobody is better known for this phenomenon than South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius whose “cheetah” prosthetic legs generated controversy when he qualified to compete as the first double amputee runner for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012. It is this distinction that maintains the boundary between the Olympic and Paralympic movements. Paralympic athletes are expected to display extraordinary athletic skills, but not outperform their nondisabled peers with bionic devices.

The policing of boundaries between impairment and non-impairment is a central role of the IPC, as it underscores the very purpose of having a separate, or parallel set of Games. And yet, the distinction between “disabled” and “nondisabled” bodies is becoming increasingly blurred and complicated. Don’t we all, at some point in our lives, rely on technologies or medical interventions that will assist our hearing, vision, heart function, or emotional well-being? The insistence on these separate categories is reminiscent of similar boundary-making by the International Athletics Federation making distinctions between male and female athletes. South African Olympian Caster Semenya was recently ordered to take testosterone-suppressing hormones if she wanted to continue competing in the women’s track event. Her naturally high levels of testosterone were ruled an unfair advantage over

other female athletes – much like a set of bionic legs would always outperform “human” ones. The international outrage following the ruling should give pause to reflect on the fluid categories we all inhabit. Will the Paralympians ever transcend their impairment categories?

Paralympic legacies: “to inspire and excite the world”

Olympic legacies are often considered by numbers of world records, ticket sales, or the volume of media coverage. When it comes to Paralympic legacies, however, organizers focus on social change: the ways that the Games can challenge stereotypes and transform attitudes, raise awareness about para sports, break down social barriers, and generally promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of social life. After all, the Paralympic movement’s central mission does not only focus on sporting excellence, but also on para athletes’ ability to “inspire and excite the world” towards a “more equitable society.”

There is some evidence that Paralympic Games may have a positive effect on disability awareness in the host country. In Tokyo, several hands-on events have been held in the lead-up to the Games to raise excitement about Paralympic sports (see Figure 21.1). Surveys of previous Paralympic Games in London (2012) and Beijing (2008) have revealed a positive change in attitudes about disability.² Most of the studies done on Paralympic legacies find that this effect is temporary and limited to more highly educated and urban viewers, however. The happy exception are children, who take to the Paralympic movement with gusto and will rank Paralympians higher than Olympic athletes in their ability to “inspire and excite.” It is more difficult to measure long-lasting effects of this disability awareness, especially regarding improved infrastructure, job opportunities, and equal education rights.

This is especially crucial in a host country with a long and complex history of disability stigma and discrimination. Japanese culture has traditionally viewed certain disabilities as a form of impurity (*kegare*) that resulted in the mandatory segregation into residential facilities and, until the modern era, kept people with certain disabilities out of the public sphere. Families were expected to hide their disabled family members like a shameful secret. The 1970s saw a growing disability rights movement affirming disability pride and the right to live independent lives in the community with the help of personal attendants. Japanese disability activists joined a global movement for disability education rights, equal employment opportunities, and an accessible public sphere. They point to the promise of full inclusion and the fact that international comparisons have Japan lagging behind in integration efforts.

Figure 21.1 Hands-on experience of wheelchair basketball at “2 Years to Go” promotional event, 2018.

Source: © Barbara Holthus.

When the 1964 Paralympic Games were held in Tokyo, Japan’s disability community flourished in the “hope, courage, and self-confidence” of the Games.³ The 1964 Games brought international awareness to all Japanese athletes, but especially to Paralympians who were surprised and inspired by fellow athletes from around the world who held jobs, went shopping, liked to have a drink, and lived in their communities. In the words of Watanabe Fujio and Igari Yasunori, the first Japanese medalists in doubles table tennis, “they were like everyone else.”

If the possibility of equal status was the legacy of the 1964 Games, the 2020 Paralympic legacy might lead to true inclusion. To that end, the Japanese government has spelled out concrete goals for its 2020 Paralympic legacy. One has to do with using the healthcare support systems developed for Paralympians as models for improving the country’s public health system. Another has to do with accessible transportation in anticipation of

having an estimated 1,800 wheelchair athletes move around the city. In preparation for the Paralympics, Japan also revised its “barrier-free” public accommodations access plan to increase the number of wheelchair accessible hotels and inns. When it comes to improving access to event sites, Tokyo has launched a Robot Project to assist wheelchair users with navigating the event sites, demonstrating its future in human service robots.⁴

Despite these comprehensive accessibility plans, many disability organizations are increasingly skeptical of the government’s promise of the 2020 legacy. Restaurants, especially Japanese-style pubs (*izakaya*) and cafes, as well as shops and hotels are notoriously inaccessible, and guide dogs are routinely barred from public places. Japanese law already mandates the accessibility of public spaces, and while the world attention on Tokyo might prompt some initial attention to these promises, there is a fear of the “2021 problem;” of life after the Olympics. A large part of the 2020 Paralympic legacy might be the strength with which the Japanese disability movement can hold the government to its promise of a “barrier-free” society.

What will Tokyo 2020 tell us about disability in Japan?

The Paralympics reveal a dual picture of disability in Japan. On the one hand, Japanese technology regarding access and assistive devices is highly advanced and increasingly used not only by Japanese people with disabilities but also by the growing aging population. In addition, Japan was one of the first countries to sign the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a comprehensive human rights treaty that prohibits all forms of discrimination, mandates disability accommodation as a form of equality, and spells out the path for full inclusion into all aspects of society.⁵ It took more than six years for the Japanese government to ratify the treaty in 2014: comprehensive legal reforms had to be passed to lay the groundwork for ratification. In that process, Japan passed antidiscrimination laws, provided for disability protection in education and employment, strengthened its commitment to Universal Design, and removed barriers from voting rights.

These formal guarantees, along with the increased disability awareness raised by the Paralympic Games provide important opportunities for Japanese disability activists who continue to battle powerful social and cultural barriers towards inclusion. Disability is still treated with either ignorance, indifference, or even aversion by many Japanese who have little everyday contact with disabled people. The 2016 murder of 19 people with developmental disabilities living in a Kanagawa care home highlights the continuing stigma associated with disability. It was Japan’s second

deadliest mass killing since World War II, but none of the names of the victims were released to protect families from having to reveal the stigma of having a relative with a cognitive disability. Japan's experience with disability stigma is not unique: it is a shared history that only slowly emerges from decades of institutionalization and segregation. Like the first generation of Paralympians who were inspired by fellow athletes claiming their rightful place in the world, so will today's athletes carry the hopes – if not to say the torch – of social change towards disability in Japan.

Notes

- 1 The Summer Deaflympics were last hosted by Turkey in 2017; the 2021 Games will be held in either Los Angeles or Dubai.
- 2 Pappous, Athanasios Sakis, Christopher Brown. 2018. "Paralympic legacies: A critical perspective." In Brittain, Ian, Aaron Beacom (eds). *The Palgrave handbook of Paralympic studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 647–664.
- 3 Frost, Dennis. 2012. "Tokyo's other games: The origins and impact of the 1964 Paralympics." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29(4): 619–637.
- 4 www.paralympic.org/news/tokyo-2020-games-robots-unveiled.
- 5 Heyer, Katharina. 2015. *Rights enabled: The disability revolution, from the US, to Germany and Japan, to the United Nations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.