**Impact of COVID-19 on Athletes and Coaches, and Their Values in Japan: Repercussions of Postponing the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games**

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**Abstract**

On 24 March 2020, an announcement was made that the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games would be postponed until 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Athletes and their coaches have experienced a wide spectrum of emotional and cognitive reactions such as disappointment, frustration, confusion, and relief, to name a few. The current article aimed to summarize the athletes’ and coaches’ reactions related to the repercussions triggered by the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Japan, and discuss how the values of sports and athletes have or are likely to be changed.

**Keywords:**

[Athletes](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Athletes)[coaches](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Coaches)[values](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Values)[Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Tokyo+2020+Olympic+And+Paralympic+Games)[COVID-19](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/COVID-19)[culture](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Culture)

On March 12th 2020, the Olympic flame was lit at the site of ancient Olympia in Greece to prepare for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The news also reported that, in Greece, people were unfortunately not allowed to attend the flame lighting ceremony because of the coronavirus outbreak, which we have seen spreading around the world. This happened a day after March 11th, the day that has a special meaning for Japanese people, since the triple disaster (i.e., earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plan meltdown) hit the northeast coast of Japan on March 11th 2011, where nearly 16,000 people lost their lives. The flame could have been the ideal symbol for recovery, reconstruction, and resilience for, at least some people in Japan, especially in the devastated communities, even though there are still more than 47,000 people that are displaced as of May 2020, nine years after the disaster.

Despite the concerns of the coronavirus pandemic, a plane left Tokyo to pick up the torch from Greece so the relay could start in the area where the most severe damage occurred by the tsunami in 2011. The flame in fact arrived in Japan on March 20th 2020. The flame was placed in a lantern while an increasing number of cases of coronavirus were being reported on the daily basis. On March 22nd, the media reported that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) would make an announcement in the “next four weeks” of the game status. While the IOC had not yet rendered their final decision on whether the games would proceed or not, Canada announced that they would not send any athletes to compete. On March 24th, the IOC and the Tokyo Organizing Committee announced that the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games would be postponed until 2021. It was only two days before the day that the relay was supposed to start. Approximately 10,000 runners ranging from 12 years old to 94 years old were supposed to relay the torch starting on March 26th to the day of opening ceremony, on July 24th.

This article aimed to keep the record of our observations related to the repercussions due to the postponement of Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games by focusing on its historical background, athletes and their coaches, and the values of athletes and sports in Japan.

**Background**

Japan previously experienced the cancelation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games that were scheduled to happen in 1940 due to World War II. Twenty-four years later, in 1964, Japan hosted the summer Olympic and Paralympic games and considered them as an opportunity to broadcast how the country, Japan, recovered and experienced economic growth after World War II. People who remembered the passion and excitement that the community created in the Tokyo 1964 Olympic and Paralympic Games in their childhood are now in their 50s, 60s, and older. One such person is Mr. Hiroshi Kondo, aged 72, who was selected to relay the torch in 1964 but canceled due to a typhoon, and this time, he was then selected again to relay the torch for the Olympic and Paralympic Games on May 25th 2020. Yet, we now know it will once again be canceled. Another person, aged 63, told us how happy and proud he was when he was selected to relay the torch for the 2020 Games. Since he is 63 years old, he knows this is most likely to be his last opportunity to participate in the Olympic and Paralympic games in Japan as a torch runner. Since he was assigned to relay the torch at the end of June in 2020, he had already started physical training so that he could hold the torch to a certain height, as well as purchased equipment, clothes, and shoes. He was therefore disappointed when the postponement was announced. Moreover, given that he was selected to relay the torch as a representative of his company, his employees were even more disappointed, as this could have been a great opportunity to advertise their company (Note: It is prohibited to wear a company shirt but allowed to announce on the company website, which increases public attention, leading to indirect advertising effect). Even though the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games cannot be guaranteed to take place in 2021 and he may not be selected as a torch runner, he said he is trying to maintain motivation.

Another symbolic person is the current Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, whose grandfather was also the prime minister at the time of the Tokyo 1964 Olympic and Paralympic Games. In 1964, the Olympic torch was carried and used to light the Olympic cauldron by a person who was born in Hiroshima on August 6th 1945, the day that the atomic bomb was dropped on the city during World War II. The Olympic and Paralympic Games have historically been considered as an opportunity to unite people, foster diversity, and demonstrate the glory of each country that sends athletes who represent their country. Perhaps because of these backgrounds, coupled with historical and religious characteristics that Japanese culture holds, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister, Taro Aso, remarked that it is the cursed Olympics. The postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games has shaken the expectations of the public and their values to the core.

**Athletes**

A direct impact was made on the athletes and players who have trained for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games for a long time. For some, the announcement of postponement automatically meant retirement and the eternal loss of opportunity. For instance, Tom Ransley, a double Olympic medalist on the British rowing team, announced his retirement. The Rio Olympic silver medalist, Eddie Dawkins, also announced his retirement from tack cycling. For others, however, the postponement merely indicates the temporal shift of timing and quick adjustment to optimize their peak so they can use it as an extended chance to further improve their performance or recover from injuries they might have endured. Overall, these players maintain optimistic and positive attitudes. And yet for others, it means an existential crisis. For instance, it used to be reasonable for athletes to focus on their own physical and mental condition while training, because they were able to assume that the schedule of official games, such as Olympic and Paralympic Games, will happen as they were scheduled. The athletes were able to allocate their energy and time for training, practice, or therapies, and control their motivation to adjust their peak, because again they were certain that the games would happen. However, this assumption has been disrupted. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the players’ cognitive assumptions in that they will no longer take these events and schedules for granted. From now on, it may be that, in the back of their minds, no matter how they prepare, the game may be postponed or canceled. In general, we heard that most players, whether they like it or not, accept the postponement but strongly hope that nothing will lead to cancelation of Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Another aspect that was lost is the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual routine, affecting the mental and physical status of players. When the triple disaster happened in 2011, many players lost their daily routine for training as well, and yet, the impact remained localized. The impact of the nuclear power plant accident was invisible, and yet, there were many parts of Japan that were far enough from Fukushima prefecture that allowed athletes to continue their training. The spread of COVID-19 has not only forced nearly every training location to shut down, but also forces players to stay home. Social distancing precautions enacted to slow the spread of COVID-19 have affected not only the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic games, but all other games as well, including the cancelation of qualification tournaments. These changes have increased a sense of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration, and made it difficult to set a series of concrete goals.

In addition, because of limited opportunities to leave the house and do intensive and systematic training, when the players were allowed to practice for a shorter period of time, they tend to overwork to maximize the impact, which could increase the likelihood of injuries, which in turn, could lead even more to a sense of doubt and frustration. Limited interactions with teammates, coaches, and others may make athletes even more anxious due to further uncertainty. Due to social distancing mandates, more players increase their use of social networking services (SNS) to connect with society. Although strong support from fans and the community could give the players a sense of connectedness, unity, and pride, it could make them feel more anxious and overwhelmed.

Furthermore, athletes who heavily rely on the Olympic and Paralympic games, especially those with less visible sports and para-athletes, often have side jobs to support their lives. Without knowing the exact schedules or the additional funding that may be allocated, some may need to increase their workload or, on the contrary, have already lost their job and/or sponsorship. Many players are concerned if the cost of their training and preparation for the Olympic and Paralympic Games could still be fully covered.

In addition, it has been pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased concerns for doping. Due to this pandemic, tests have been temporarily paused in many cases, giving some athletes the chances to consider trying performance-enhancing drugs, which in turn, increases the anxiety and doubt for the other competitive players who refrain from doping. Furthermore, some players are concerned how medications they may need to take if they get infected by COVID-19 will be detected and judged due to the lack of reliable information.

Overall, due to restricted and challenging training environments around the globe, it would be challenging for players to maintain their best conditions, follow special diets, and work on the individualized tasks to break records and achieve a high level of performance at the prospective Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, we also have observed athletes taking this as an opportunity to care for their wounds, strengthen themselves, and develop their creativity, such as using face masks to simulate high altitude physical training.

**Coaches**

Coaches and instructors were yet another group of people who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were, for example, some sports that had not yet selected their final members for Olympic and Paralympic Games. Several screening meetings and selection races/games were planned during the spring. There were short periods of time that these pre-selection games were postponed or canceled but the decisions for the actual Olympic and Paralympic Games were not made, therefore, trainers had a particular difficulty in coaching the players. Although the postponement of the Olympic and Paralympic Games were announced shortly after, the trainers needed to explore the most effective ways to coach the players under circumstances that they have never experienced. This pressure may also be associated with the collectivistic cultural characteristics of Japan, increasing a sense of responsibility. Since the Olympic and Paralympic Games will happen in their home country of Japan, it is more difficult to use defensive coping strategies like self-handicapping (e.g., situations will not allow them to make excuses such as “food was different,” “confused because of the language barrier,” “unable to show the best performance due to the jet lag,” “weather was unfamiliar”). Japanese coaches may feel more constant pressure to get as many medals as possible due to proximate social pressure of home advantage. As increasing attention has been paid to athletes for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, increasing opportunities to be on media, receive requests for interviews, connect with SNS (and the players are also more willing to do so). Similarly, as more companies sponsor athletes as a marketing strategy, the social impact of the way players communicate in public will ultimately affect whether the player will be selected as a member for Olympic and Paralympic Games. As these players receive financial support for their performance, the COVID-19 pandemic may prompt questions around guilt and fairness (e.g., “Without playing, do I deserve this?”). Coaches may now need to assist them to cope with these issues, help develop skills to use SNS or to appear in public, experiences which they themselves never experienced in their youth.

In addition, coaches are also affected by the pandemic directly. They may not be able to allocate enough time and energy to focus on their players’ conditions, since they need to take care of themselves as well as their families. Coaches who are not directly involved in the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games are also affected. For instance, the institutions such as All Japan High School Athletic Federation carefully arranged the games for youths outside of the weeks for the Olympic and Paralympic Games to avoid double-booking to make sure that the younger athletes will have an opportunity to watch the Olympic and Paralympic Games, which in turn made coaches of youth sports re-arrange their training schedules. Due to the current uncertain situation, coupled with continued cancelation or postponement of other local (e.g., city, prefectures) and national-level games, they too have faced difficulty in systematically scheduling their education and training their student athletes.

**Values of Athletes and Sports**

The COVID-19 crisis can be viewed from the perspective of trauma (Horesh & Brown, [2020](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762?scroll=top&needAccess=true)), and is likely to be a turning point in the values of sports and athletes. Values give a sense of purpose, for the reasons why athletes compete, which in turn helps them set short-term and long-term career goals. On one hand, the meaning of values that society places on sports (i.e., societal values) have been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the values each player holds (i.e., personal values) have also been shaken. These personal values may also be divided into terminal values and instrumental values, often measured by the Rokeach Value Survey (Johnston, [1995](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762?scroll=top&needAccess=true)). Terminal values are concerned with end states of existence (e.g., social recognition such as “my ultimate purpose for playing sports is to become famous and recognized”), whereas instrumental values are concerned with modes of conduct (e.g., honesty such as “one thing that guides my principles is to be fair and honest”).

These two values, that is, societal and the two aspects of personal values, may conflict with one another and there are players who struggle with between societal values (e.g., “athletes are supposed to make a full commitment for training and win for the country”) and personal values (e.g., “my priority is to enjoy each moment regardless of the consequences”). It is difficult to stay motivated when one’s values are shaken. Furthermore, players have developed and embraced these values because of how they construct their identity as an “athlete.” As time goes by without training or competing, the athlete’s sense of identity itself is also challenged. When it is difficult to hold a firm sense of identity as an athlete, they may seek for a rapid means of getting social support, such as SNS, as a psychological crutch. Due to social distancing, connecting with people around the globe on SNS may be helpful for an athlete, however, given that many athletes allow their SNS to be interactive, negative and harsh comments can also be directed toward them, which in turn, affects the values they hold in themselves and sports. In fact, sport fans are no longer passive receivers of value but rather can be active value co-creators, as pointed out by studies that focused on commercial values (e.g., Kolyperas et al., [2019](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762?scroll=top&needAccess=true); Woratschek et al., [2014](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762?scroll=top&needAccess=true)).

Perhaps the collectivistic characteristics of Japanese culture accelerates each members’ desires to “be needed” under conditions of uncertainty. One athlete told us that she wished she could be given some role she can play for a team so that she could lean on it without heavily ruminating the current situation.

**Conclusions**

Four years ago, there was a debate regarding how athletes and visitors would face risk of infection by the Zika virus during the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (e.g., Warnke & Paul, [2016](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762?scroll=top&needAccess=true)). Several players in fact chose not to attend the games due to the Zika virus. As many point out, we should have taken the impact more seriously and developed systems to cope with pandemic. The Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris in 2024 have been scheduled regardless. If the Tokyo 2020 games take place in 2021, then there will only be 3 years until the Paris 2024 games, which will have its own repercussions. Some athletes may be able to perform better because they can apply their experiences in Tokyo 2020 to Paris 2024. It may add more pressure on athletes due to a shorter period of time between the games and some may start a new training schedule without taking enough of a break after the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Furthermore, the Beijing Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games have been scheduled for February, 2022. Because the fiscal year in Japan starts on April 1and ends on March 31, there will be two Olympic and Paralympic games within the same fiscal year for Japanese people. This may affect the budgets that will be allocated to each athlete, team, sport, and game, which is also of great concern to the athletes and coaches.

Due to the uncertainty (i.e., Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games are currently postponed to 2021 and yet, it is not guaranteed to take place), it is plausible that most athletes will “wait” until the final decisions are made. The debates and decisions of many sport games around the world being canceled have questioned the values of sports, by sending a message that sports are not essential for human survival. We would like to conclude this article by encouraging all of us to actively engage in and focus on what we can do here and now instead of waiting for someone to make a decision.

**Additional information**

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