

VOLUNTEERING AS AN NOC/NPC OWN ASSISTANT AT THE TOKYO 2020 OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES - A COMPARATIVE RETROSPECTIVE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games were held after a one-year delay due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Although there was significant backlash from many people on still holding the games during these times, both games had finished without significant incident. This paper is a retrospective analysis on how the management of the games had changed in comparison to the PyeongChang 2018 winter games, and will predict and give suggestions for improvements for the Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024 games as well. From a volunteer perspective, going from a regular assistant to an own assistant for a specific NOC and NPC, reflections on the difference in responsibilities are detailed.

Key Words : Olympics, Paralympics, Tokyo 2020, Volunteering, COVID-19

1. BACKGROUND

The Tokyo Summer Olympic and Paralympics were initially scheduled to be held in the summer of 2020, but with the sudden global COVID-19 pandemic, the Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (OCOG) made the executive decision to hold the games one year later in the summer of 2021. Now that both games have finished, even with varying levels of support and lack thereof from the general international public, the athletes and international committees of sport are now switching their focus to the Beijing 2022 winter and Paris 2024 summer games.

As mentioned in previous research based on reflection as a volunteer at the PyeongChang 2018 winter games (Ziemba, 2018), volunteers desire to participate in a global super sports event and create once in a lifetime memories and experiences trumps most other desires, regardless of level of ability and field of placement as a volunteer.

Furthermore, there are multiple differences between the summer and winter games, not just in terms of temperature and climate. The scale of the games themselves, and it turns the sizes of delegations and number of volunteers is also almost double that of even the winter games. Especially for the home team of Japan, the delegation was comprised of over 600 participants, including athletes, coaches and officials.

(1) Variations of volunteers

One key point that was not detailed in the previous research was the existence and use of what is known as Own Assistants, which is when the National Olympic and Paralympic Committees (NOC/NPC) are allowed to choose up to 2 or 3 people they want to work with their teams as volunteers for various reasons – their familiarity with the sports teams, knowledge in their field, or existing connections or linguistic abilities as well. The Own Assistant program that gained attention during the 2016 Rio summer games, but has become a norm since then (Feng, 2017) to guarantee the team with a volunteer of their choice, and not someone based on the selection criteria of OCOG.

(3) Volunteering under extreme circumstances

One of the biggest concerning factors from the volunteer perspective of the Tokyo 2020 games is that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only volunteers that already resided in Japan were allowed to continue as volunteers. No overseas residents were allowed to enter Japan to volunteer, even if they were fully vaccinated as the border restrictions were kept very tight and limited to the NOC/NPC members exclusively to maintain the COVID bubble throughout the games and prevent another wave of infections during the event. The same will occur for the Beijing 2022 games as well.

2. CHANGING THE VOLUNTEER NORM



Fig.1 Posters of the Games in the Toyosu district of Tokyo

The Tokyo 2020 games were announced 8 years ago in September of 2013, and since then the entire country was head over heels for the revisiting of the games since 1964 – over 50 years ago. After the first Tokyo games, the entire world gained an interest in this post Second World War nation that had developed so much technologically since its end. Now with the games coming back in the 21st century, the key-phrase was ‘*omotenashi*’, or the Japanese sense of hospitality. Education systems changed to include mandatory English language education in elementary schools, and of course patriotism from nationals to help spread the good news of their country to the world was high, as noted in Lee et al. (2014). Even with public support being low just before the games started, with protests happening almost daily and very little media support, it was clear that volunteers for these games would be dealing with a very different situation than initially expected.

The first and biggest change came in only recruiting domestic volunteer hopefuls. It was expected given the state of the global pandemic, but fully vaccinated people from overseas were still disappointed. But this situation was just confirmed to be the same in the upcoming Beijing 2022 winter games as well, so this is first new norm. Due to this and the executive decision to allow no spectators at all events shattered the hopes of some volunteers, and even cancelled volunteer shifts completely. With the Rugby World Cup in Japan in 2019, most volunteers who had started with those games were worried if they could continue in their legacy, as detailed in Tomazos & Luke’s study on continuity in volunteering (2015).

Vaccination was encouraged and provided, but not all were able to be fully vaccinated before the start of the games. Still, over 90% of the staff within the athletes village were fully vaccinated and with

social distancing, regular temperature checks and PCR testing, positive case counts within the village were low – a sharp contrast to the explosive fourth wave that happened in Tokyo at the same time.

Koutrou et al. (2016) mentioned in their study on volunteer management at the London 2012 games that some volunteers were upset even after the life-changing experience because they were not used to their full potentials. It is safe to say the same for the volunteers for these games as well, as interviews with athletes village volunteers showed a majority of them disappointed with the communication and decision making of the NOC/NPC Assistant desk in particular. This branch is in charge of the assistants that work closes with the teams and their athletes, and is often considered one of the most difficult positions in games volunteering. However, recent studies have brought to light the excitement and growing popularity of the Own Assistant program (Feng, 2017), in which the NOC/NPCs are able to tell the OCOG which assistants they want and have them assigned regardless of the interview process, so long as they have applied to the volunteer program. The satisfaction rate was also very high and has seen many of these committees using this option recently.

3. OLYMPIC GAMES

Given that the scale of the summer games in comparison to the winter equivalent, the number of volunteers necessary is significantly larger. However, due to the lack of public support, many volunteers who had applied, been selected, got their accreditation, and even obtained their uniforms simply did not show up for their shifts without reason. It is assumed that public opinion was a big factor in this, but it is very difficult to verify these claims as almost all cancelled volunteers refuse to comment on their reasons, let alone respond to contact requests by those involved in this study.

Regardless, the NOCs had to push through with whatever people they had, Own Assistants or not. Recent years has seen some NOCs bring their own employees as Own Assistants due to the limitation in accreditation passes provided to each delegation, which can lead to even further confusion among regular volunteers, especially those who are new to this field of experience (Ziemba, 2018). Furthermore, some NOCs were not able to bring in their designated Own Assistants due to the strict border regulations. Some teams went as far as bringing these people in as part of the delegation in some anonymously confirmed cases.

Throughout the researcher's volunteering activities in the athletes village, despite the games being held in the host country of the team assigned, there were many opportunities to use linguistic knowledge during the duration of the games. From interpreting official visits to other delegations common spaces within the village, to translating confidential documents that needed urgent attention to international sporting bodies not located on the premises, it was a welcome surprise that despite the COVID bubble keeping everyone inside a tight-kept loop, there was the opportunity for genuine efforts in international exchange all in the same location. As stated in the work of Guntert et al (2014), volunteers are most motivated and satisfied with their participation when involved in their field of expertise, which was a surprising possibility for the researcher involved, as they did not initially foresee this being possible given the circumstances.



Fig.2 Inside the empty New National Stadium in Tokyo

4. PARALYMPIC GAMES

With the Olympic games complete, there was a short layover window for a smooth transition to the following Paralympic Games. Contrary to the lack of seriousness in transition efforts seen in the previous winter games (Ziemba, 2018), the replacement of the Olympic rings symbolism was quickly replaced with the Three Agitos, and furthermore the inclusion of the new #WeThe15 campaign to increase disability awareness even beyond the scope of the Paralympic Games.

This campaign aimed to give representation to the 15% of the world population that has some sort of disability, and to show that they are no different from anyone else and still deal with the same ups and downs of any able-bodied person. This also linked with the main theme of diversity and inclusion, detailed later in the paper, which is also a big topic of discussion in modern Japan as well.

The most important rule for volunteering in Paralympics is to not help without getting permission first. What was often seen in previous games and a common misconception by able-bodied people is to resist the natural urge to help those with a physical disability at first glance. It is always important to ask first and get permission, as jumping in and doing something for someone can be seen as condescending in some instances. If an athlete in a wheelchair is struggling going up a ramp, ask if they need help before pushing them from behind. If a visually impaired delegate seems lost within the village complex, as if they need help and offer an elbow or shoulder for direction before attempting to take their hand suddenly and make them panic. It is the lack of everyday exposure to these kinds of everyday situations that lead to a misunderstanding of working and living with disabled people, let alone the occasional media glorification of some of these stories for personal gain as well.

5. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

One of the biggest focal points by the OCOG to the volunteers was the promotion of diversity and inclusion at these games. Not simply within the participating delegations, but also among the volunteers themselves. The message would have been further implemented had there been international volunteers allowed, but foreign nationals residing in Japan did comprise a small fraction of the domestic volunteer body, and they were seen as a valuable resource to other volunteers.

As stated in Benson & Wise's guide to volunteering at international sporting events (2017), volunteer motivation is mostly for the participant interest and potential to grow and must be reminded that there is no financial remuneration whatsoever. So, despite the volunteers being limited to a domestic workforce in a largely homogenous society, just how diverse were the volunteers?

Most volunteers were older aged, most were retirees, in comparison to the majority student body of volunteers seen at the PyeongChang 2018 games (Ziemba, 2018). Regardless of this clear age gap in volunteer bodies, they all had the same motivations by wanting to use their skills to the best of their abilities and help promote the spirit of Japanese hospitality, despite a global pandemic. These are also seen in research by Ahn (2018) on PyeongChang 2018 volunteers and was still seen at these games as well.

Although there was not much other diversity seen in the volunteer body within the athlete's village, the reassurance of being part of a once in a lifetime experience was definitely seen and felt, similar to those previously detailed by Koutrou et al (2016). Although the diversity of the volunteer body was not necessarily seen on the outside, the sense of inclusion through hospitality efforts was made clear to the athletes and delegations within the village.

Noordegraaf & Celebi (2015) has said in previous research that motivation and disappointment occur when volunteers' intrinsic motivation goals are not met, so small gestures of hospitality seemed common – gifting handmade origami, friendly greetings throughout the complex, and much more. The spirit of *omotenashi* had come through.

6. CONCLUSION

With the games at an end and NOC/NPCs struggling to make the switch to Beijing 2022 with very little time, it was seen that it is possible to hold an international super sporting event safely with volunteers (albeit domestic only) during a global pandemic. Despite there being many known benefits and learning opportunities for international sporting event volunteering (Qi et al, 2018), the confirmation of only domestic staff for the next games severely limits the possibilities for volunteers to act to their fullest potentials. Regardless, having experienced the successes of Tokyo 2020 as a participant has the world hopeful for the same glimpse of hope in the middle of an ongoing global pandemic.

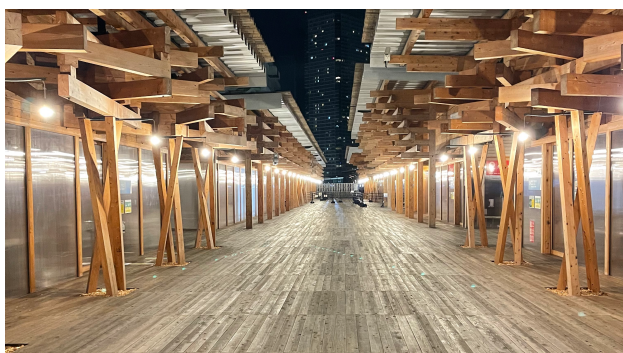


Fig.3 An empty Village Plaza at the end of the games

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: The author would like to acknowledge the understanding and cooperation of the NIT, Oita President Yamaguchi and Vice-president Takahashi for their permission to participate as a volunteer for the games' duration.

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(Received September 30, 2021)