

An Interview with Shunichiro Okano, Honorary Member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

# What Can We Expect from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics & Paralympics?

By Japan SPOTLIGHT Editorial Section

## Involvement in IOC Activities

**JS:** You have been working for the IOC for a long time. Firstly, could you please tell us your personal history and how you became involved with the IOC?

**Okano:** I was born in 1931, and I have loved sports since my childhood. I liked baseball and started swimming and skiing when I was four. When I was a senior at junior high school, I began playing football, which was then a very minor sport in Japan. I joined the Football Club at the University of Tokyo which was one of the strongest teams. We won the Japan University Tournament and I was the top goal scorer in the Tournament, and then I was chosen as a member of the Japanese National team. In 1963, I was asked to be a coach of the National Football team for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. In 1968, the Japanese Football team won the Bronze Medal at the Mexico Olympics. I was a coach then, too. So I have been watching and playing football in Japan throughout the postwar period.

Then in 1975 I was appointed an executive director of the Japan Sports Association (JSA) and also an executive member of the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC), a subordinate organization of the JSA at the time. Two years later I was appointed Secretary General of the JOC. I was the youngest member at that time, having been recommended by a group of people who thought that we should have young representatives. Since then, I have been working both for Japanese football and the JOC.

The biggest difficulty that I faced as secretary general of the JOC was the boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980. After hot discussions between the JOC and JSA, we finally decided to boycott this Olympics. It was a painful and difficult decision. About nine years later, in 1989, we young leaders of the JOC made it independent from the JSA in thinking about the future of the JOC's



*Shunichiro Okano, an Honorary Member of IOC (International Olympic Committee)*

possible greater contribution to the Olympic Movement.

The IOC seemed to acknowledge my efforts to achieve independence for the JOC from the JSA, as they co-opted me as a member of the IOC in 1990. I worked for the IOC until I retired at the age of 80 in 2011, and at the IOC Session held right after the Olympics in London in 2012 I was awarded the Olympic Order Silver and then became an honorary member of the IOC.

When I was a member of the IOC, I worked for the Programme Commission for a long time, mainly engaged in recommending the sports for the Summer Olympics and Winter Olympics to the Executive Board of the IOC, though I was partly involved in the Environment Commission as well. In the selection process, when the Summer Olympics or Winter Olympics ended next year, we carefully studied the detailed data of all the

sports and the candidates for the next Summer or Winter Olympics. The data covered how many countries participated in the sports, what international competition they organize, what sponsors they have, what TV audience ratings, and so forth. We studied all the candidate sports and finally made our original draft proposal for the sports to be staged at the next Olympics and passed it to the Executive Board of the IOC for their final approval. We also had discussions with media people and other experts on sports in deciding on which ones to include in the Olympics.

I have a story to tell you. I once invited IOC President Samaranch for dinner at my home in 1982. He was President from 1980 to 2001 and visited Japan two years after his inauguration. After dinner, he asked me if he could watch a sports program on TV, and that was when he saw a baseball game for the first time in his life, since he was Spanish and in Europe baseball was not popular at that time. He told me he found it very interesting. Immediately after that, in 1984, baseball was chosen for the first time as a demonstration sport at the Los Angeles Olympics, and fortunately the Japanese team won

the Gold Medal. I also did my best for the selection of Softball as an Olympic sport, for which I received a Gold Medal from the International Softball Federation.

Baseball and Softball are both important sports for Japan, which is competitive enough to win medals in them. Another important one for Japan would be Karate. The Republic of Korea was successful in getting Taekwondo into the Olympic Programme, but in the case of Karate there were two international associations and it would be difficult to choose either one. It is also extremely difficult to judge who wins in the case of Karate, since a Karate athlete is prohibited to hit an opponent. This is very different from the case of Judo in which all the athletes have common rules under a single authority. So this is an example of a sport that we cannot choose for the Olympics Games due to such difficult problems.

Today, unfortunately, Baseball and Softball are not part of the Olympic Programme. The reason for this is mainly low TV audience ratings on a global basis. Softball has not spread very well around the world, and Baseball lacks a clear international organization to promote it worldwide. In both cases, expanding these sports might be costly since the players have to pay much for their equipment, such as gloves, spike shoes or balls. That is not good for developing countries. Their rules are also too complicated to understand easily and it is difficult to find good umpires. More importantly, it would be difficult to find other uses for the stadiums because neither sport is as popular in the rest of the world as in Japan or the United States. Whether or not you can make good use of the legacy left by the Olympics is a crucial question today.

Another criterion for choosing a sport is whether or not people in the younger generation would play it in the future. Mountain biking, snowboarding or golf -- will these sports be popular among young people in developing countries in the future?

In my personal view, President Samaranch made two important reforms as IOC President. One was to allow the use of Olympic properties for marketing, which enabled the IOC to collect revenues and use them to invite representatives of small, developing countries to join the Olympics. Because of this we now have as many as 204 countries participating in the Olympics.

The other one was that he tried to have as many World Championships as possible for each sport at the Olympics. Even in the case of Football where we have the World Cup every four years, separate from the Olympics, he effectively made the Olympic Football Tournament into an Under-23 World Cup.

## Olympics & Politics

**JS: The Olympics has been considered an event for promoting peace in the world. How to deal with political issues, such as the boycott of the Moscow**

Photo: AP/AFLO



*Wearing Japanese happi coats, then IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch (center) helps break the cover of a sake barrel with Nagano Prefecture Governor Goro Yoshimura (left) & IOC Press Commission Chairman Kevan Gosper during the opening ceremony for the Main Press Center in Nagano on Jan. 29, 1998.*

**Olympics or potential terrorism, is obviously very important. Can you tell us how the IOC handles such political issues?**

**Okano:** The IOC certainly defines the Olympics as a movement for promoting peace. In aiming to achieve its mission, the athletes' village at the Olympics is expected to play a key role. During the event all the athletes coming from all over the world stay together and share the routine of daily life in the village, which works as a venue for promoting mutual understanding and friendships among the participants, and thus eventually contributing to global peace.

However, since President Samaranch made the Olympics into World Championships for each sport, winning the event has become the supreme goal for athletes. So many athletes continue to practice in their home countries until the last moment and then come to the Olympics only for their event, staying briefly in a hotel instead of spending the whole time at the athletes' village. This reduces the chances of making friendships among the athletes, so this may have been a miscalculation by President Samaranch.

In addition to this, in the case of the Winter Olympics in particular, skiers have to stay in areas with good quality snow for practice that are mostly concentrated in the high mountains and thus skiers cannot stay with skaters, for example.

Regarding the boycott of the Moscow Olympics, we should avoid such political intervention in the Olympics as much as possible. At the Sochi Winter Olympics, no US political leader showed up and that was regrettable. We should take advantage of the Olympics to promote peace.

## Olympics & Commercialism

**JS: Concerning the introduction of commercialism at the Olympics, one of Samaranch's legacies, is it helpful in promoting sports globally?**

**Okano:** All Olympic Games had suffered from tremendous deficits until Los Angeles in 1984. Peter Ueberroth, then President of the Olympics Organizing Committee in Los Angeles, was successful in collecting sufficient sponsors and allowed them to use the Olympics emblems for marketing, and won a great surplus. Having seen Los Angeles earn lots of revenues, many other cities subsequently applied to host the Games in order to acquire revenues and a chance to achieve urban development by local governments. Only the big cities in the big countries can afford to be candidates for hosting in this regard, because they can finance their urban development, though I believe the spirit of the Olympics could be better achieved by organizing a compact event in any city in any country. Seoul and Beijing followed in Los Angeles' footsteps and achieved big transformations into highly modernized cities by developing transportation and other infrastructure. The Tokyo Olympics in 1964 was another example of big city reform on the occasion of the Games.

## Expectations of Tokyo 2020

**JS: What do you think we should expect from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics?**

**Okano:** Firstly, of course, it is important to keep the Olympics as a movement for peace. Further reform of Tokyo will be difficult in 2020. In the light of the excessive concentration of many civic functions in Tokyo, I think we should take advantage of this

opportunity to decentralize some of the functions of this big city into local places such as Saitama.

Only Japan and the Republic of Korea have ever jointly staged a major sports event, when they hosted the 2002 Football World Cup. I am saying this case should be a model. In many cases, these big events are hosted by big countries, but if two or three countries can jointly host them, any two small countries in Eastern Europe, for example, could stage the World Cup or whatever. Though the Olympic Games have to be held officially in one city, there have been some exceptions, such as at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 when the equestrian events were held in Stockholm, since quarantine for horses was very strict in Australia at that time.

The Winter Olympics could also be well staged by two countries if the construction cost of the courses for Bobsleigh and Luge would be too high, or if construction would cause damage to the natural environment in one country and its neighbor already had the facilities in place. Even at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Equestrian events were held in Karuizawa, Nagano Prefecture, and Sailing in Enoshima, Kanagawa Prefecture.

So we do not necessarily have to stick to the idea that all the Olympic Sports should be held only in Tokyo, as some could be held in other places in Japan. What is important is the increased availability of sports facilities for ordinary citizens as a legacy of the 2020 Olympics.

I was once interested in achieving a big reform of the National Stadium in Tokyo before its reconstruction was decided. That would have been a reform into a large multi-function sports facility with hotels for the athletes coming from overseas, restaurants, physical exercise, swimming pools, gymnasium, and so on. It should be a sports venue not just for top athletes but also for ordinary citizens. You can often see such large sports facilities overseas. However, I found that strict regulations prohibit us from undertaking such reform in Japan. Since the National Stadium is located in a National Park, such reform inside the park would be legally impossible because of the Urban Parks Act. Also, there are many other regulations regarding construction of a stadium subsidized by the government. I believe the 2020 Tokyo Olympics will be a good occasion to think about the costs and benefits of such regulations and the possibility of deregulation to achieve reforms that would make sports more accessible to the citizens. However, I know it is impossible, to my regret!

**JS: As the aging of Japanese society progresses, sports should become more accessible to ordinary citizens to promote the concept of good health. Should we take advantage of the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 to achieve this?**

**Okano:** Yes, I think so. I would like to stress that sport is a part of





culture and not merely for leisure and education. The concept of physical discipline was introduced in the process of the Meiji Restoration in Japan in the 19th century. Since the government then was pursuing a “wealthy nation and strong army”, it decided to introduce physical discipline in an obligatory education system to make all young Japanese men as physically strong as possible for military purposes. Sport was considered a pastime or an individual hobby that was done voluntarily, while physical discipline was aimed at making the Japanese physically and mentally tough. Even now, such a distinction still exists.

However, sport is an important part of culture in the following two senses. First, it helps gives us a physical balance that can enable us to be active until we die. Secondly, it can create opportunities for human communication. One of the results of modern technological communication, such as through e-mails, is a decline in face-to-face human communication. Sports can create such communication spontaneously. Sharing the pleasures of sports with our friends can be an important part of culture and provide us with happiness during a long life. There are many hobbies that may provide the same but some of them do not offer the kind of physical exercise that is good for your health. This is particularly important in an aging society. Sports can also enhance our concern and sympathy for other people when playing together.

So I think the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 will be a good opportunity to change our perception of sports from “pastime” to “culture”.

### **JS: Are sports considered a part of culture in Western civilization?**

**Okano:** Yes. The biggest disadvantage of Japan in this regard is the limited space in our mountainous land. Some 120 million people are living in a land which is 70% mountainous. In most European nations they have enough space for sports facilities, which makes sports much more accessible to the citizens than in Japan. As a matter of fact, there are many traditional sports clubs in Europe which are organized and managed by local inhabitants.

### **JS: What do you think about the internationalization of Japanese sports? As the Olympics is an international event promoting global peace, communication in mainly French, English and Spanish among athletes all over the world is a key to its success. Do you think there are increasing numbers of English-speaking athletes in Japan today?**

**Okano:** In short, nothing is more international than sports. In the old days, the Yokohama Football Association was the busiest of all the Football Associations in Japan because each foreign ship coming

into port at Yokohama had its own Football team and asked the Association to arrange a match. This is how Football worked as a venue for international socialization. I am always saying that Football is a common international language.

As you know, we have the J-League in Japan in which players from all over the world now play. This is something we had never previously achieved. With increasing internationalization in sport, Japanese players will naturally look for an opportunity to play sport at a higher level, and then go overseas to learn more about their sport. They will have to speak the language of the country where they are based and after a while they will be able to communicate internationally with players and coaches from other countries. This is how sports can produce athletes with the capacity to communicate more widely. Sports may be fun for them even without conversation between the athletes and coaches, but it would be even more fun if they could enjoy talking among themselves. Through spontaneous conversation during competitions rather than a knowledge of grammar, athletes can master languages. If we create an opportunity where such spontaneous conversations in foreign languages play a key role, such as in the J-League or in any other Football League in other countries, players and coaches can learn languages very quickly and at international meetings could give their opinions articulately.

Japanese Football has made remarkable progress by inviting a number of players from overseas to join the J-League. Such openness to the world was key to the success of the J-League. Today, not only in Football but also in other sports in Japan, there are many athletes who can express themselves very well in English, thanks to such openness. Openness to the world is also key to the professional success of athletes, since they need to find the best coaches worldwide.

### **JS: It would probably be best for Japan to have more international contacts in amateur sports as well, not just professional. That way Japan would become even more open to the world.**

**Okano:** Certainly. In this light, the activities of volunteers helping to organize the Olympics will be very important, because they will have more contact with people coming to the Games from all over the world. Such spontaneous international contacts can help to reform our country. So Tokyo 2020 will provide a big opportunity for Japan to change in this regard.

**JS**