

Interview with Shigeru Hatta, Director of the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) Career Academy Program

How Will Business Work with Athletes to Make the 2020 Tokyo Olympics & Paralympics Successful?

By Japan SPOTLIGHT Editorial Section

Recent Trend of Japanese Business Support for Sports

Q: In aiming to make the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo a success, Japanese companies are strengthening their support for sports. What do you think about this recent trend in Japanese business activities?

Hatta: Since about 20 years ago many sports teams owned by companies have been abolished or have ceased to compete due to the difficult business and economic climate. It is certainly true that after the decision of the IOC to choose Tokyo as the host of the Olympics and Paralympics in 2020, Japanese companies have rapidly strengthened their support activities for sports. However, in the light of the long-term trend since the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s, business firms' support for sports has been on the decline.

The JOC has also been supported by two kinds of business sponsorship systems which have continued to survive, although the specific names of the corporate sponsors have been changing once every four years. This sponsorship has survived despite the demise of the sports teams owned by companies or the discontinuation of the contracts of the athletes working for such companies.

Our project called "athnavi" (athletes navigation) was started even before it was decided that the 2020 Olympics would be held in Tokyo. This athlete-supporting business activity to find jobs for athletes in companies was initiated to stop the downward trend of Japanese business support for athletes.

We at the JOC are greatly concerned about the future of Japanese sports and convinced that unless the JOC itself starts looking for companies for which athletes can continue to perform while they are working, it will be difficult to stop this downward trend. Thus, we



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decided to start this activity.

Will Tokyo 2020 Restore Japanese Business Support for Sports?

Q: It is certainly good news for Japan and the Japanese economy that Tokyo was chosen as host of the 2020 Olympics. Above all, it is good news for Japanese sports, having suffered from the sharp decline in business support and the demise of a number of club teams belonging to companies. Preparations for the Games will need a lot of hard work and be considered a high priority. But we will need more careful work to consolidate the legacy of the Games in the post-Olympic period. In the case of London in 2012, for example, a follow-up report is being issued even a couple of years after the event. Given such a great opportunity for Japanese sports, what legacy do you think should be aimed for and maintained after the event?

Hatta: Having worked on the "athnavi" project for five years, I believe one legacy should be that companies continue to employ the athletes whom we introduced in our matching project even after the event. Since our project aims to find the best match between an athlete and a company, if the athletes are happy to stay with their companies after the event or even after their retirement as athletes, that would be a good legacy. Since its foundation, "athnavi" has been successful in finding companies for more than 30 athletes. If they can achieve win-win relations with their companies and participate in the Olympics and Paralympics in 2020 in Tokyo with their companies' support, they will have happy memories afterwards, and can

continue to share these with other employees whether or not they continue to perform. This would be an important legacy, a happy memory involving cooperation between athletes and companies in achieving success in an event.

It is often pointed out that there would be a legacy in infrastructure, such as the sports stadiums constructed for the event. This would be a hardware legacy. But we would also have a software legacy, such as the working experience acquired by numerous volunteers participating in the event. Their experience could be utilized in organizing other big events with a significant international impact.

On behalf of the “athnavi” project, I would say our legacy would be in the continuing good relations between athletes and companies, and the shared memories of success, which would encourage further business support for sports.

Q: There would probably be many more sports events organized in Japan after the 2020 Olympics which might trigger other international sports events. This would encourage Japanese business firms' continuous support for sports, wouldn't it?

Hatta: We assume that the government budget for sports will rapidly decline after 2020, so to be well prepared for such a reverse reaction to the rapid budget increase for sports until 2020 we are now thinking about how to maintain the popularity of various sports. The JOC and every sports program association is expected to attract its own international convention to Japan and this momentum will be dependent upon the performance of each athlete committing to the association's activities and how they capture the spectators' imagination and affection. Yes, I suppose they will do their best to arrange venues for such events, at least until 2020.

Q: During our so-called high economic growth era, Japanese business firms could afford to support sports. But now they seem to need incentives to support sports. One such incentive could be to acquire a good reputation through their employee athlete's participating in an internationally well-known sports event.

Hatta: Yes. Winning a good reputation for a company that led to more corporate support for sports would be an ideal virtuous cycle, which I hope will happen. On the other hand, these past few years, even in the case of international competitions, only a limited number of sports, such as judo or table tennis, are shown on TV during peak viewing hours. As for many other sports competitions, they are not shown on TV and it would be difficult to expect minor individual sports programs to be broadcast. However, the fact that a company's



employee athlete is performing overseas as well as in Japan, even if in a minor competition, would be considered wonderful by his or her colleagues and the company employees. This could be another incentive to support such minor sports.

What Is “athnavi”?

Q: Could you briefly explain the history of the “athnavi” project and its outcome so far? “Athnavi” would be important in achieving business-sports collaboration.

Hatta: Our core activity is to be a matchmaker between athletes in need of support in job-hunting and the directors or executives of firms interested in recruiting them. Our first such meeting was organized in October 2010. Before then, we had a three-year preparatory stage. During those three years we had meetings with companies that had abolished their sports teams and the athletes whose contracts with such firms were discontinued to look into the situations of the athletes. We discovered in this process that it would be practically difficult for a business firm in Japan to own a team but would be worth consideration by many business executives to employ an individual athlete.

We have held such matchmaking meetings five or six times so far and 37 athletes have found jobs at 28 companies. Of this number, 17 are Summer Olympics athletes and 17 Winter Olympics, with three aiming for the Paralympics. The Summer Olympics athletes are training in such sports as swimming, canoeing, fencing, beach

volleyball, rifle shooting, modern pentathlon, trampoline, and wrestling. Of the Winter Olympics athletes, however, half of those recruited through “athnavi” were female ice hockey players who had only part-time jobs before being recruited through “athnavi”. So we should do more to help a wider range of athletes for the Winter Games find jobs.

Even in the case of athletes for the Summer Olympics, there are very few who can work full-time and in the case of athletes for the Winter Games, none of them would be in Japan during the winter and many of them would go to central Europe or Australia in search of snow even during the summer. That means they would be out of Japan for two-thirds of the year. For a business firm, this would mean ending up only in sponsoring the athletes’ sports activities, since they would not be working very long for the firm. As such, athletes for the Winter Games will find it difficult to get a job. They cannot contribute enough to increasing cohesion among their colleagues in a company or among their firms’ business partners.

Among those athletes who got jobs through “athnavi”, most are in their early twenties; half of them are permanent employees and half are on fixed-term contracts. They earn around the same fixed monthly salary as their colleagues at the same age. The burden of the cost of their trips to matches or events is largely borne by their companies, which is greatly appreciated by the athletes. In the case of athletes for the Winter Games, this amounts to almost 4 million yen per year.

If they are not winter athletes, their work schedule would be one or two half-days every week during their sports season, and three or four days work per week during their off-season. They mostly work as staff in the administration section of the headquarters office. The companies can promote their business at big sports events such as the Olympics or the World Cup, since their names will be displayed on athletes’ uniforms and they can also use their athletes for promotion on their websites or in leaflets.

We are not insisting that companies maintain their employment

contracts even after the athletes retire, though we sincerely hope they will if an athlete wishes it. We leave such decisions to the companies and the athletes.

There are two particular success stories in our case so far. Olympic freestyle swimmer Haruka Ueda and Olympic beach volleyball player Kentaro Asahi still continue to work for their companies even after their official retirement. Thus, so far I believe our “athnavi” project is working well. We currently have 15 athletes for the Summer Olympics and nine for the Winter Olympics on our waiting list. I hope they will get jobs soon.

Q: How many staff are working for “athnavi” and what do you think is the most challenging point in pursuing this project?

Hatta: Six people are working on this project, including myself. I used to work in the recruiting business and help students searching for work. In the case of helping athletes find a job, it is difficult to persuade those who want to maximize their training time and minimize their working time to spend more time working at their job place in order to meet their company’s need to create a sense of unity between the athletes and their colleagues and give it an incentive to support sports. It will take time and effort to coordinate these different interests between athletes and companies.

Initially, people in the JOC were concerned about the possible maladjustment of athletes to their companies, such as injuries forcing them to stop performing. Depending on the situation, the JOC would have to take some responsibility for this kind of risk, but as we truly hope to help the athletes continue to perform supported by their companies, we dared to take this risk.

Q: Do you think the 2020 Tokyo Olympics will consolidate a win-win situation for athletes and business created by “athnavi”?

Hatta: Yes. We hope we can move to the next stage on the basis of what we have achieved so far. For example, canoeing is a minor sport, but one company has recruited canoeist Yuriko Takeshita, who came fourth in the canoe/kayak slalom at the Beijing Olympics, and is helping her in many ways, such as delivering Japanese food to her training places in Europe.

The canoeing sports association has never really thought about such business support, since it is a minor pursuit. But having learned about the consequences of business sponsorship, this association may now think about how to acquire such invaluable support and promote the sport to the public as much as possible.

I think this possible creation of a business mindset among minor sports associations will be the next stage in the athletes-business win-win situation, and that would be a good legacy of the 2020



Tokyo Olympics.

I personally belong to the business world and hope to be a communicator between the sports world, represented by the JOC, and business associations. However, in general, the sports associations in Japan are run by the people in the sports world who know little about the business world. This is a clear difference from the case in Europe where many people originally coming from the business world are working as staff for sports associations. The labor mobility between them is very high. With the advent of the Tokyo Olympics, I hope Japanese sports associations will become more business friendly organizations, coming closer to the European ones.

This should be our legacy. There will be new athletic stadiums and venues for 2020, but the key question is how each sports association can use them with a more flexible business mind.

Possible Legacy of Tokyo 2020 — Introducing Business Thinking to Sports

Q: The Tokyo Olympics in 1964 created a variety of infrastructures to activate business and the economy, but in 2020 we should change our mindset to create further business-sports collaboration. This will be a kind of software reform?

Hatta: Yes. Above all, it will be crucial whether athletes in the minor sports or those sports associations can adopt more business-oriented thinking on the occasion of the 2020 Olympics. I hope our “athnavi” project can give them an incentive to do it. We should make it easier for business to get into the sports world.

Q: What about other aspects of sport? For example, health is important for the rapidly aging society in Japan, so sports should be considered a key to maintaining good health in an aging society. Companies employing athletes could be considered as contributing to health promotion and that would be another incentive for them to recruit athletes.

Hatta: Yes. Athletes employed by a company could inspire their colleagues to do more sports to maintain their health. They could go to a gym for training after work instead of going to a bar for a drink, or walk or swim at the weekends. More opportunities for top athletes to communicate with ordinary people who do not play sports regularly in their daily life could provide them with the incentive to do more sports, and this could increase the number of people engaged in sports regardless of their age.

Q: Striking a balance between intellectual and physical capacities might help create new leadership



qualities. For example, businessmen might make better decisions by developing their physical capacity to give them more courage, or athletes might contribute more fully to society by considering the social usefulness of sports, such as in encouraging residents of disaster-hit areas. They could learn from each other.

Hatta: That is certainly true. I joined the sports world for the first time in October 2001 from Recruit Corporation, having been invited by Saburo Kawabuchi, then the first chairman of the J-League, who asked me to create a section for career support for retiring football players. I founded a career support center for the J-League in April 2002 and I had been working there until last March as well as doing my job here at the JOC since 2008.

In the light of my experiences, I think athletes should think more about the plan-do-check-act cycle (PDCA) in business terms. Otherwise, they will not be able to increase their overall abilities. Leaders in sports should take note of this and teach athletes how to do PDCA in their training. If they master it, I think even after their retirement as athletes they could be successful in business as well as in sports, having the same PDCA abilities that improved their athletic skills.

To convince athletes of its usefulness in their growth and improvement is certainly an important goal for us, and it would be an important legacy of the 2020 Olympics.

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