

Interview with Hiroki Nakamura, JOC Career Academy Program Manager, National Training Center, Japanese Olympic Committee

Legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 – the Prominence of Sport in the Nation’s Life

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

One of the legacies of the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 is likely to be that sports will become even more widely popular with people in Japan. Many Japanese, young and old, men and women, regardless of their profession, may take a greater enjoyment in sports after this memorable occasion. This will be good for Japan’s aging society, where it will be important to prolong human lifespans and good health so that elderly people can work longer – and thus help mitigate the labor shortage and maintain the nation’s economic vitality. Furthermore, with the increase in the number of working aged people, the government’s budgetary burden for pensions will decrease and this would contribute to a reduction of the fiscal debt.

In this regard, it is now an obligation for those aged over 60 to keep in good health by playing sports. How will the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 contribute to promoting this concept around the nation?

Japan SPOTLIGHT’s editor-in-chief Naoyuki Haraoka interviewed Hiroki Nakamura, JOC Career Academy Program manager of the JOC Sports Academy based at the Ajinomoto National Training Center (NTC). (Interviewed on Oct. 1, 2019)

Introduction of Ajinomoto National Training Center

JS: When I had a chance to see Olympic athletes practicing at the NTC early in 2019, I was deeply impressed by its excellent facilities. Compared with the old days, how do you think the top-level athletes’ practicing environment has changed today?



Hiroki Nakamura

Nakamura: I guess there are two elements to the sports practicing environment, namely, facilities and coaches. In terms of facilities, the NTC is the first training facility for top-level athletes in Japan and was opened in 2008. Consisting of training facilities indoors and outdoors and lodging facilities, the NTC is designed to meet the three basic principles for strengthening an athlete’s performance capacity – “training”, “nutrition” and “rest”. Also, with the Japan Institute of Sports Sciences (JISS) together with the NTC, an athlete can have a highly elaborated scientific training. On July 1, 2019, the NTC Indoor Training Center (East) for athletes was opened, with a barrier-free environment, and thus our practicing facilities expanded even further.

As for coaches for each sport, we have succeeded in attracting all kinds of top-level coaches. I believe that our current sports practice environment has reached its highest ever level. In addition, “Athnavi” – our supporting program for job searches for athletes organized and implemented by the JOC Career Academy Program – helps them achieve a secure foundation in life to enable them to concentrate on practicing sports without any concerns over their income. This is truly a necessity for athletes to achieve a good performance in their sports.

JS: How is the business environment at this moment surrounding top athletes searching for jobs?

Nakamura: In 1964 when the last Olympic Games were held in Tokyo, many athletes belonging to a sports team owned by a company were active participants. However, during the two decades of economic stagnation in Japan after the 1990s, many of those Japanese companies were not able to maintain their teams due to financial reasons and they were suspended or abolished. Against this background, the JOC Career Academy Program started “Athnavi” in

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2010 and since then, with the concept of one athlete for one company, we have been working to help athletes find companies where their sports activities can be supported and sponsored. This matching system between athletes and companies seems to have become socially accepted and is working well. In the past three years, we have achieved more than 50 matching cases each year.

JS: What do you think are the factors behind this success?

Nakamura: I think this matching system is increasingly acknowledged by society and the growing interest in the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 seems to have worked to raise awareness of this social acceptability.

JS: The Japanese economy is still stagnant and it would be difficult to expect Japanese business corporations to support athletes. In spite of this, your matching project is working well. Is this because the perception that business support for athletes would lead eventually to their contributing more to society is spreading?

Nakamura: Yes, there are a number of companies that believe recruiting athletes will help achieve a sense of cohesion in the company as well as raising their employees' motivation to work because of enhanced pride in working with top athletes as their colleagues. By highlighting such positive effects, we are promoting our matching system among companies and trying to find new ones prepared to employ athletes. One of the reasons that corporate sports teams have been abolished since the 1990s was the negative assessment of their contribution to a company's sense of cohesion or the employees' work motivation, which are intangible effects. Companies have traditionally been more interested in business profitability than in such effects. Thus the budgets for corporate sports teams were significantly cut. But now these intangible effects are considered more positively and a keen interest in having top athletes among employees seems to be coming back.

JS: Could you explain a little further about how top athletes can enhance employees' work motivation?

Nakamura: An athlete's colleagues in a company have the opportunity to observe at first hand how he or she practices and performs, and can be touched and stimulated by their everyday efforts. This encourages them also to work hard. We have perceived such a positive impact of one athlete inside a company upon the other employees.

JS: Are there any commonalities among the companies recruiting athletes?

Nakamura: Yes, in many cases their owners or executives have a

strong passion for sports. They used to be an athlete in their younger days and they employ athletes with an understanding of his or her character or personality. When we started the "Athnavi" program in 2010, we were organizing our presentation events for companies in cooperation with the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren). At that time it was large companies that were mostly recruiting athletes. Later, we began to collaborate with the Chamber of Commerce and then started to find SMEs wanting to recruit athletes. One example is Uchida Construction Co., Ltd. in Adachi Ward in Tokyo which recruited Mariko Morimoto, a triple jump athlete, in 2017. In my memory, the number of employees of Uchida Construction was then 15. She won first prize in the triple jump for women at the JAAF Athletics Championships (Japan National Championships) in 2019. I think it must have been a great joy for her colleagues to see her win the largest track and field competition in Japan. I heard that all the employees of the company joined her other supporters in the stadium on a company trip.

JS: In recent years, Paralympic athletes have attracted growing attention among the public. How do you support Paralympic athletes in their job searches?

Nakamura: We started supporting them in the "Athnavi" program in 2014. As in the case of the Olympic athletes, they can contribute to raising a sense of cohesion and motivation in a company. Companies in Japan now are obliged to employ a higher percentage of handicapped employees than the legally defined percentage by the Handicapped Persons Promotion Act. We have heard that companies would be interested in recruiting Paralympic athletes under this law requirement.

What Exactly Is "Athnavi"?

JS: Could you tell us how you started the "Athnavi" program?

Nakamura: The JOC Career Academy Program was founded in 2008 at the same time as the NTC was started. It was originally aimed at supporting retired athletes stepping into a second career through education or training. In starting our program, we had an occasion to hear about athletes' expectations and found many of them requesting support for their professional life as an athlete as well, since they believed it would be difficult to earn a sufficient salary to enable them to continue with their sports, though admitting the need for support in developing a second career after retirement. So we started "Athnavi" as a free job search support program, authorized by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. As of October 2019, there are 191 companies and 297 athletes who have benefitted from the program.

JS: How is the "Athnavi" program managed?



Nakamura: What we call the “Athnavi” team consists of me and temporarily transferred employees from the companies which recruit athletes. We are working not only to match athletes and companies but also to achieve win-win relations between the two, where companies can gain a sense of cohesion and enhanced work motivation among their employees and athletes can continue to do their sports and be qualified as a business person contributing to society.

Acquiring Business Skills

JS: Athletes have sports-oriented lives, but after they retire from their companies they may have to continue working in business, which could make them feel anxious. How do you help them acquire business skills?

Nakamura: Athletes today can continue to pursue their sports for longer than before. They retire on average at around 30-35. In order to survive subsequently in the business world they have to make preparations while still performing their sports. So we strongly recommend that companies let the athletes work on routine business for the company instead of treating them as special guests. We are also organizing meetings to exchange business information for companies that recruit athletes. This helps them share knowledge of management to enhance the business skills of those athletes. Meanwhile, for the athletes, we are conducting around 100 business training courses for career development each year, including communication skills or presentation skills, at the NTC.

Impact of “Athnavi” Athletes on a Company’s Business

JS: You mentioned that the number of athletes benefitting from “Athnavi” is increasing. How can we see more specifically its positive impact in terms of

achieving win-win relations between a company and an athlete?

Nakamura: You can see how cohesion is created in a company by an athlete by seeing how passionately the athlete’s colleagues are cheering for him or her in the stadium. We also ask companies that recruited athletes a year or two years ago to make a presentation on how those athletes are working in their companies in our meetings on “Athnavi” matching. We also see stadiums, even in minor sports, filled with these companies’ supporters for the “Athnavi” athletes. The athletes in these minor sports could attract much more attention by close communication with their supporters by greeting them and talking about the performance with them afterwards and also making a presentation on their sports’ rules or their experiences. This is an unexpected but very important positive effect, I believe.

JS: The legacy of the last Olympic Games in Tokyo was mainly infrastructure, such as highways or super express railways. But the coming Olympic and Paralympic Games will not have so great a legacy of hardware infrastructure. Instead, there may simply be more knowledge of sports among ourselves. Would this be the legacy of these Games?

Nakamura: Yes, exactly. For example, the Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan had a significant implication in this regard. With the Japanese national team’s success in having got through the group stage and reached the quarterfinals, many Japanese now have greater knowledge about rugby and its rules. It is amazing to see its popularity growing among the Japanese, though rugby was not well known in Japan before then.

What is “Athnavi NEXT”?

JS: While “Athnavi” is a support program for helping athletes search for a job while they continue to do sports, “Athnavi NEXT” is a support program for job searches for retired athletes. Could you tell us how this program works?

Nakamura: “Athnavi NEXT” supports the retired athletes in their transition after retirement. Some retired athletes cannot imagine what to do after retirement. In supporting them, we organize meetings about research on retired athletes’ views on their second careers, seminars on career design and start-up businesses, and various kinds of counselling on careers. We offer them not only job opportunities but also opportunities to learn or acquire professional qualifications and encourage them to examine a number of options for their future career.

JS: What are the main challenges for your supporting programs?

Nakamura: There are lots of challenges every day. The biggest challenge for us is how to continue with our programs after the passion for supporting athletes calms down after Tokyo 2020. Even if the number of our successful cases in our matching programs decreases, we would like to continue them as an institution for providing a public good.

JS: There will be many other Olympic and Paralympic Games after 2020, and your programs' impact and implications will not be lost.

Nakamura: Since 2018, we have been increasingly supporting young athletes who have just graduated from high-school. They will see their best time as athletes in Paris 2024 or even in Los Angeles 2028. We see their employer companies understand that they should continue to support these young athletes for those Olympic and Paralympic Games after Tokyo 2020.

Supporting Athletes' Maturity

JS: Athletes participating in the Olympic and Paralympic Games these days are getting younger and many of them are still early in their teens. There may be some who will not reach an appropriate age to begin a second career after retiring as an athlete.

Nakamura: Yes, there may be. The social impact an Olympic and Paralympic Games medal winner can have is greater than they think. If such winners are still very young, it would be necessary for us to support them in maturing as a person as well as helping them in job searches.

JS: This means that your program must be long-term support to meet each athlete's needs specifically.

Nakamura: At this moment, the Japan Sports Agency recommends athletes to have a "dual career" – meaning to have both "a life as a human being" and "a life as an athlete" in parallel. I used to work as a supporter for second careers for players in the J. League (Japan Professional Football League) before joining the JOC. From my longtime experience, I am sure that players with the capacity to understand well a manager's instructions or communicate well with the other players can continue to play longer in the professional league. Their progress as a human being leads to their high performance in football. Also, there must be many skills acquired in their athletic life which would be useful in life after retirement as well. If they are not aware of this, it would be important to remind them of it. For example, the PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle that an athlete practices can be applied to business as well, and thus it is an important basic competency as a working business person.

Social Impact

JS: With promotion of your program for matching athletes and business, there will be an increasing number of people interested in sports and a much wider range of people doing sports by themselves. Eventually all the nation will be paying greater attention to health, which would prolong the nation's lifespan. People will continue to work longer and this would lead to curbing their medical expenditures. This is a wonderful virtuous cycle.

Nakamura: I am not quite sure if we could have such a wide and in-depth impact upon our society. But I think at least those companies recruiting athletes through "Athnavi" are very positive about health promotion and physical exercise. We have an example of a company that has introduced physical exercise for all employees under the instruction of an employed athlete.

JS: Long lifespan and good health would have an impact of millions of yen upon public finances. The increase of "Athnavi" with the slogan of "One Company, One Athlete" will have a big impact on our country.

Nakamura: With the presence of Olympic and Paralympic athletes in a company, interest in sports will grow. A company today is expected to fulfill social responsibility by employing a wide diversity of people, including handicapped persons and athletes. We can say that with such diversity, those working for the company would be able to enjoy an affluent working life.

Future Ambitions

JS: Finally, could you tell us your future plans or ambitions on behalf of the JOC Career Academy?

Nakamura: We are lucky to have had positive remarks from the companies that have recruited our athletes. With such encouraging remarks, we are planning to continue our program and improve its functioning. As of October 2019, we have 1,393 athletes for the Summer Olympic Games and 425 for the Winter Olympic Games enrolled in special training programs designated by the JOC. For the Paralympic Games, we have around 200 such athletes. Among these numbers, we have so far had 297 athletes successfully matched with companies by our program. We would like to raise the ratio of our success cases as much as possible to expand our "win-win" relations.

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Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.