More Than Medals

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Every autumn a group of the top athletes from around the world gather in Ōita, a pleasant but peripheral city in southwest Japan generally absent from most people’s must-see lists. When it comes to wheelchair marathons, however, Ōita has become a destination on par with Tokyo, London, or New York. At its founding in 1981, the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon was the first event of its kind—an international, wheelchair-only, long-distance road race—and one of only a handful of long-distance races around the world open to athletes with physical disabilities. Since that time, the number of wheelchair marathons has increased dramatically, with several gaining international prestige, yet the annual event in Ōita has remained the world’s largest, featuring both an IPC-sanctioned, multi-division full marathon and a multi-division half-marathon. Together the two races attract 250 or more competitors each year. With the fortieth annual marathon slated for autumn of 2020, Ōita’s race boasts an unusually long and rich history. Having already welcomed more than 10,000 racers from more than seventy-five countries, witnessed several world-record performances, and played a prominent role in marathon-related research, Ōita’s marathon is, as fourteen-time winner and current world-record holder Heinz Frei put it, “more than a normal marathon.”¹ It has become an unparalleled annual celebration of the sport and a highlight of the region’s yearly calendar.² This chapter explores how Ōita’s seemingly anomalous prominence in the world of wheel-

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If I were to go to Tokyo, my efforts would surely be crushed. I have been able to do these types of things because I am in Kyushu.
Nakamura Yutaka, 1988
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Chapter 3

Japan’s “Cradle of Disability Sports”

Ōita and the International Wheelchair Marathon, 1981–
chair marathons came about and what it has meant to Ōita, its people, and athletes with disabilities.

Even before the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon began in 1981, Ōita Prefecture had become known as Japan’s “cradle of disability sports,” a reputation attained in no small part through Dr. Nakamura Yutaka’s work with the Paralympics and FESPIC, as discussed in the previous chapters. Nakamura played an equally important role in the establishment of Ōita’s marathon; thus, any account of the race’s history must once again consider his motivations and methods for launching yet another international sports event for those with disabilities. Much like FESPIC, the marathon was established in response to intersecting international, local, and personal forces, and here, too, Nakamura’s factory Taiyō no Ie and its affiliates have proven central to the race and its continued existence.

As an annual event, the marathon has benefited from sustained local government support, making it an ideal site for exploring how and why disability sports have been leveraged for local gains in Ōita. Indeed, as suggested by Nakamura’s remarks quoted in the chapter’s epigraph—an alleged response to a comment from a member of Japan’s imperial family that Nakamura’s talents were being wasted in Ōita—it is essential to understand the regional context within which he was pursuing his work. Brief overviews of both Ōita Prefecture’s extended history as a hot springs rehabilitation site and the region’s connections to military rehabilitation facilities before and during World War II serve as useful reminders that Ōita was not a blank slate when Nakamura began his efforts to promote disability sports in the 1960s. Even if his approach seemed dramatically different, he was building on existing practices and operating in a region that was accustomed to various types of rehabilitation; yet Ōita was still marginal enough to remain open to pushing the boundaries of the status quo. Once Nakamura had proven the value of his approach and helped turn Ōita into “Japan’s cradle of disability sports,” success beget success, and it became ever easier for him to sell others on his future plans, especially if they might bring additional attention—and money—to the region.

An investigation of Ōita’s race over time also points to a number of transformations in sports for those with disabilities. Like other events, the marathon began as a rehabilitation-focused race aiming for broad-based participation. The medically oriented nature of the early years has largely disappeared, but thanks in part to the half-marathon, Ōita’s event has remained accessible and appealing for a remarkable range of athletes. At the same time, Ōita’s full marathon has trended toward elite-level competition, a development that has raised the potential for growing inequality in Ōita, much as it has elsewhere.
Using the annual marathon to situate such issues in a wider historical context offers a clearer picture not only of how far the race and disability sports have come but also the challenges they face moving forward.

“Japan’s Number One *Onsen* Prefecture”: Hot Springs Healing

Located on the eastern coast of the island of Kyushu, Ōita Prefecture was established in 1871 as part of the dramatic changes shaping Japan after the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868) a few years earlier. Before then the area that makes up Ōita today was part of two provinces, Bungo and Bunzen, dominated by the powerful Ōtomo family for centuries. During the intense military struggles occurring in Japan in the late sixteenth century, the Ōtomo family lost its grip on the region, and under the Tokugawa Shogunate, the area was subdivided into multiple, smaller feudal domains. After the collapse of the shogunate in 1868, several of these domains were merged to form Ōita Prefecture, with the new prefectural government based in what would quickly become the prefecture’s largest city, Ōita. At present, Ōita Prefecture consists of fourteen cities, three townships, and one village, with a total population of just under 1.2 million people. Like many of Japan’s outlying regions, Ōita’s last several decades have witnessed significant declines in population and growing income disparity when compared with other prefectures in Japan. Although the prefecture is home to a number of industries and generates a range of specialty products, when people in Japan think of Ōita, they tend to think of *onsen* and for good reason.4

Given its location in the “Ring of Fire,” Japan has no shortage of *onsen*, or natural hot springs, scattered throughout its many islands. Ōita has been uniquely blessed in this sense. The official 2015 figures from Japan’s Ministry of Environment put the total number of hot springs in the prefecture at 4,342, far more than any other prefecture and constituting roughly 16 percent of all such springs in Japan. Ōita also leads the nation in total hot spring output at 279,462 liters of water per minute, and two of Ōita’s cities, Beppu and Yufu, regularly rank among Japan’s top five *onsen* destinations.5 The prefecture’s *onsen* have long been celebrated for their purported healing powers and for their wide range of temperature and mineral content. In other words, Ōita’s current claim to be “Japan’s Number One *Onsen* Prefecture” is more than a recent example of boastful tourism rhetoric. For centuries before Ōita became a destination for wheelchair marathoners and even long before the prefecture...
itself existed, people had been making their way to this region to partake of its plentiful and famous waters.

According to legend, hot springs in present-day Ōita have been used to treat illness since at least the sixth century, and some accounts cite such uses as far back as the age of Japan’s founding deities.6 The earliest written references from the region, which appear in the surviving portions of the eighth-century regional gazetteer *Bungo no Kuni fudoki*, depict a plethora of geothermal activity, including geysers, boiling mud pits, steam vents, malodorous springs, and hot rivers, with at least one site linked to a cure for skin conditions.7 Later legends describe ailing emperors who sought relief in Beppu’s waters during the ninth and eleventh centuries, and they also tell of an itinerant Buddhist preacher from the thirteenth century who used the region’s springs to develop sites for healing (and probably converting) the people. Around the same time, Ōtomo Yoriyasu, who controlled the region, is said to have established several facilities for treating soldiers wounded while defending Japan from the Mongol invasions.8 It is clear that the region developed a local reputation as a hot springs healing site early on.

During the Tokugawa Shogunate, the region’s reputation and use as a site for *tōji*—or hot water cure—would continue to grow. Although Tokugawa-era Japan was rightly known for its territorial and status-oriented restrictions on travel and nearly every other aspect of life, the period’s peace, stability, urbanization, and improved transportation and communication networks made possible the frequent and often mandatory movement of people, goods, and ideas among Japan’s many cities and towns. In this context, places like the coastal town of Beppu, with easy access to sea routes and a marketable “product,” gained increased access, exposure, and importance, as demonstrated by the fact that the shogunate, which tended to claim the best resources as its own, eventually assumed direct control over significant portions of the region’s hot spring sites.9 Even though the shogunate carefully regulated the use of their *onsen* for leisure and curative purposes, existing sources suggest that the region, and Beppu in particular, became a popular destination for those seeking to cure their ills. For instance, *Toyonokuni kiko*, a late seventeenth-century travelogue by the Neo-Confucian scholar and botanist Kaibara Ekken included several references to hot spring sites in what is present-day Beppu, making particular note of those frequented by “sick people.”10 A number of other sources indicated that people often spent extended time at the springs for *tōji* treatment, so it is not altogether surprising that by the early 1800s the shogunate had authorized the establishment of eighteen hot spring lodges in Beppu, including three new facilities opened in the first two decades of the nineteenth
century. Although Ōita’s onsen business might not have been booming in the Tokugawa era, it was far from fading away.

Under the rapidly modernizing state that replaced the Tokugawa regime in 1868, onsen, like much else in Japan, became subject to dramatic changes. In clear recognition of the earlier medicinal use of hot springs, Japan’s new national leaders moved quickly to investigate and regulate onsen as part of their broader effort to create a modern public health system in Japan. As historian Nobuko Toyosawa has observed, a key part of this process was a shift in both official and popular discourses on the medical efficacy of hot springs. During earlier periods, the cures produced by tōji tended to be explained in terms of the springs’ magico-religious qualities. The new approach shifted attention to scientific evaluations of differing mineral content and temperature as keys to understanding and documenting why particular springs would be effective for treating particular ailments. Armed with this new information, popular guides continued marketing hot springs as famous local attractions, but now pointed out that their miraculous healing powers were certified by science and the government’s own experts. These experts themselves adopted a different tack, advocating for the establishment of modern, hygienic onsen facilities that could provide comprehensive medical treatment for specific conditions.

In Ōita’s case, the end of Tokugawa-era restrictions, the development of improved transportation networks, and the combined popular and official attention to onsen led to unprecedented growth. The number of lodging facilities in Beppu, for example, increased from 18 in the late Tokugawa era to 140 in the mid-1880s; by 1901 there were 286, with 402 in 1935. Although most of these facilities were intended to accommodate hot springs tourists, the detailed, two-page advertisement for a sanatorium specializing in the treatment of tuberculosis, printed in the 1914 popular guidebook Beppu onsenshi, clearly indicates that the region had also become known for several medically oriented facilities, as envisioned by earlier experts. The facility in the ad was linked to one of Beppu’s oldest private medical clinics, dating from the late 1890s. A slightly later guide from 1920 dedicated more than 10 of its 144 pages to instructions for those who might be seeking medical treatment in Beppu and included a list of thirty-nine clinics or treatment facilities in the area, many of which were featured in ads as well. Ōita’s standing as a leader in modern medical onsen treatment received a significant boost in 1931 when Kyushu Imperial University (present-day Kyushu University) opened Japan’s first research facility specializing in onsen treatment in Beppu. In addition to its multiple laboratories for scientific testing, the research center had medical examination rooms with cutting-edge equipment, spa-like inpatient quarters, and, of course, multiple types of therapeutic baths. It targeted a wide variety
of ailments for treatment, including internal disorders, skin diseases, nervous conditions, and unspecified physical impairments. Of particular interest in light of Ōita’s later role in disability sports, the new research center also housed a swimming pool, an exercise room, and calisthenics facilities for use by recovering patients, though it remains unclear how these resources were incorporated into treatments.16 Kyushu University’s Onsen Treatment Research Center continued to serve as a leading research and treatment site well into the postwar era, eventually becoming the present-day Kyushu University Beppu Hospital.

After an understandable dip in tourism in the late wartime and immediate postwar years, Ōita’s growth as an onsen destination once again took off. In 1960, just as Nakamura was launching his initial efforts to promote disability sports, Beppu welcomed a record 4.5 million tourists and was home to 964 lodging facilities, including 78 sanatoriums.17 Among the latter was a brand-new site opened in February 1960 as the nation’s first facility specializing in onsen treatment for survivors of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Initially established and funded largely through voluntary donations, the Beppu Atomic Bomb Survivor Onsen Treatment Center later benefited from significant prefectural support, including an 840,000-yen subsidy provided to upgrade the center in the early 1970s.18 As the establishment and ongoing support of this new facility suggested, postwar Ōita was continuing a long tradition of pioneering and developing new approaches to and venues for healing, and in this sense, the region would provide fertile ground for those interested in using sports as a rehabilitation technique.

The Military Connection

Considering Ōita’s prominence as an area for treating a wide variety of ailments, as well as stories dating from the medieval era about the benefits of onsen for recovering warriors, it is almost predictable that the region’s hot springs would prove attractive to Japan’s modern military. A full examination of the military’s involvement in Ōita is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is little question that Ōita served as host for several sites used to treat Japan’s wounded soldiers and sailors. This history merits closer attention here, because these military facilities were directly linked to the region’s postwar emergence as a rehabilitation center for those with disabilities.

Ōita’s first military treatment facility had its roots in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) when a group of battle-injured soldiers were accommodated in several of Beppu’s inns. The reported benefits that trauma patients received
from the area’s springs sparked the army’s interest in establishing a permanent convalescence facility in the region. A temporary army sanatorium was established in 1908 in a local home, followed by another at an inn in 1910. Construction on a permanent site began in 1910, with the new Beppu Branch of the Kokura Army Hospital opening in February 1912 in the Tano yu neighborhood of Beppu City. Sources indicate that the facility had spacious rooms, great views, and, of course, excellent baths, all ideally suited to the recuperation of army trauma patients. In 1925, the Imperial Japanese Navy followed suit and opened its own hospital in Kamegawa Village, which later became part of Beppu City. Given that there were no naval bases in the immediate area at the time, Ōita’s draw was almost certainly its growing reputation as a site for onsen treatment and its easy access by sea. As Japan entered into full-scale war with China in 1937 followed by war with the Allied Powers in 1941, the number of ill or wounded increased dramatically, resulting in the need for even more treatment and long-term rehabilitation facilities throughout Japan. With the war escalating, a second Imperial Japanese Army branch hospital was opened at Ishigakihara in Beppu City in 1938. A year later the Welfare Ministry established one of its ten nationwide onsen sanatoriums for wounded soldiers in Beppu, and by 1940 Ōita Prefecture had opened a National Tuberculosis Sanatorium and been designated as a regional site for retraining wounded military personnel as elementary school teachers.”

Although it remains difficult to determine specific details on the types of ailments these facilities in Ōita addressed or the forms of treatment they pursued, available sources give some sense of the scale of their efforts. By 1933, several years before Japan’s military conflicts escalated to their most devastating levels, the original army branch hospital in Beppu had already accommodated more than 10,000 patients in its first twenty years. As the fighting became more intense, Beppu, according to the Ōita prefectural history, was “completely transformed into a ‘medical base.’” Hospital boats arrived in port at least once a month to unload wounded or ill military personnel whose numbers eventually exceeded the space available at the local military facilities, necessitating the use of private inns or clinics as impromptu military hospitals. In response to widespread shortages in supplies, the region produced serums and medical equipment locally, including knives and tweezers made from the area’s abundant bamboo.

We know little for sure about the treatments administered, but the region’s history makes it safe to assume that onsen were central to much of the medical activity in Ōita. Historian Lee Pennington’s recent work on wartime reha-
bilitation practices for disabled veterans at military treatment facilities in Tokyo offers hints about other possible techniques, most notably physical exercise and sports. Imperial Japanese Army physicians in Tokyo emphasized the importance of exercise for war-wounded patients early on, as exemplified by a published essay from October 1938 that appealed to Japan’s various sports organizations “to develop ‘sports for the sick’ . . . sports that physically impaired veterans could participate in after they returned to civilian life.” Written by the chief of surgery at Provisional Tokyo Number One Army Hospital, the 1938 essay indicated that exercise was already a key part of the military’s treatment regimen that “helped men ‘return again to their former bodies.’” Pennington’s study documents a wide variety of physical activities used in Tokyo’s army hospitals: group and specialized calisthenics, marching, kenjutsu (swordsmanship) and other traditional martial arts, and such sports as sumo, swimming, baseball, ping-pong, tennis, and track. All of these activities were expressly linked to specific rehabilitative objectives, but the Tokyo military hospitals also clearly recognized the potential benefits of athletic competition for promoting camaraderie, inspiration, and mental well-being for wounded veterans. Ranging from interhospital baseball games to track-and-field meets, sporting events involving patients were held at several Tokyo hospitals, and a number of such events generated popular notice in wartime media.

The relationship between the Paralympics and efforts to provide rehabilitation for war-wounded veterans in other national contexts has been well documented; indeed, the Imperial Japanese Army’s interest in the rehabilitative potential of sports would be far from unique. Yet the connections between the military and postwar disability sports in Japan have remained largely unexplored, in no small part because of the country’s complex relationship with war memory. In June 2017, for instance, archivists from the Prince Chichibu Memorial Sports Museum and Library discovered a pamphlet from a sports festival for wounded soldiers held in Tokyo in 1939. Even leading Japanese scholars of disability sports greeted the archival find with surprise and excitement, acknowledging that this aspect of Japan’s wartime past was largely unknown. Given such recent discoveries, a fuller study of Japan’s wartime engagement with disability sports will likely be forthcoming and prove revealing in several respects, but for the purposes of this chapter, it is necessary to turn attention to what all of this might have meant for Ōita, given its role as a wartime “medical base.”

Because most sources describing the origins of disability sports in Japan make no mention of sports at military hospitals, the current lack of information describing similar activities in wartime Ōita is not in itself conclusive. On
its surface, the fact that Nakamura’s later approach to sports for those with disabilities struck many as revolutionary would suggest that the region lacked exposure to these ideas. But there appear to be other factors at play. Many of the sources from Pennington’s work on Tokyo address sports and events for amputees in residence at the military’s hospitals during the earlier phase of the war. Nakamura, following Guttmann, was promoting competitive sports especially for those with spinal cord injuries more than two decades later. Considering Japan’s struggles to provide adequate food and shelter for its people in the later war years and the immediate postwar period, it is difficult to imagine that Japanese sports organizations made much progress toward the goal of promoting “sports for the sick” outside military hospital settings during the 1940s. In the anti-military environment of Allied-occupied Japan (1945–52), it also seems doubtful that wartime sporting events for disabled veterans would have continued into the postwar period, especially because a civilian-oriented system did not emerge to replace the previous military-based approach. In other words, it is likely that awareness of these past military practices became limited to those who had directly experienced them during the war and who may not have wanted to share their wartime experiences in postwar Japan. Combined with the passage of more than fifteen years without the active promotion of disability sports in postwar Japan, the significant differences in forms of impairment that Nakamura was seeking to address in the early 1960s might explain why he faced an uphill battle in his initial efforts, even if Ōita had previously been home to some form of sports activities for veterans with disabilities. Unfortunately, until further details are uncovered, we can only speculate about the relationship between wartime treatment practices and Ōita’s later emergence as a disability sports center. At the very least, military physicians in the region were likely aware of such sport-based techniques, and it is possible—even probable—that some of these approaches were being pursued in Ōita during the war years, which might help explain why the region was among the earliest to embrace similar methods in the postwar era.

If the connection between wartime and postwar treatment practices remains unclear in Ōita, the links between the treatment facilities themselves are readily apparent. As part of the broader demilitarization efforts in Allied-occupied Japan, military medical facilities were rapidly converted to civilian use and placed under the aegis of the Welfare Ministry. For Ōita Prefecture, this transition meant that a region with a population of less than 1.25 million that had previously struggled to keep its prefectural hospital open became home to several national hospitals and sanatoriums almost overnight. As a former “medical base,” Beppu hosted a disproportionate share of these “new” national facilities. The city’s promise as a potential postwar destination for
rehabilitation was clear to the Welfare Ministry, which designated Beppu and three other cities as sites for National Rehabilitation Centers for the Physically Disabled in 1948. Ultimately, only one such center was opened during the occupation years, at the former Provisional Tokyo Number Three Army Hospital.\textsuperscript{31}

Even without this formal rehabilitation center, many of Beppu’s former military venues emerged as postwar sites specializing in treatment and rehabilitation for those with disabilities. The Army Hospital Branch at Ishigakihara became a national sanatorium in December 1945, and after merging with several other local tuberculosis clinics in 1971, it eventually became the present-day Nishi-Beppu National Hospital, which includes late-stage treatment of severe disabilities among its multiple specializations.\textsuperscript{32} The naval hospital became Kamegawa National Hospital in December 1945; in 1950 it merged with Beppu’s oldest army hospital at Tano-yu (which had also been converted to a national hospital in December 1945) to become Beppu National Hospital.\textsuperscript{33} The National Onsen Sanatorium for wounded soldiers established in 1938 was initially converted to a national hospital that was incorporated as a branch of Beppu National Hospital in 1950, but after the end of the Allied occupation, it was once again reconstituted as a national sanatorium, one of only two such centers established in 1952 by the Welfare Ministry to provide institutionalized long-term care for veterans with severe disabilities. In 1954, this facility was made available to nonveterans as well, and only a few months before the Paralympics in 1964, it was transformed into a rehabilitation-oriented site and renamed the Beppu National Center for Persons with Severe Disabilities.\textsuperscript{34}

Even though we know little about the specifics of their treatment practices, it is not difficult to see how the sheer concentration of military medical facilities in Beppu laid the groundwork for the region to become a center of disability-related treatment in postwar Japan. Working within that context, a newly minted physician with a budding interest in cutting-edge rehabilitation techniques began his formal medical career as chief of orthopedic surgery in 1958 at Beppu National Hospital. Over the next several years Nakamura Yutaka’s efforts helped turn Ōita into “Japan’s cradle of disability sports,” the home of a world-famous marathon, and more.

More than Just the Hobby of a Quirky, Back-Country Doctor

Writing not long after the 2006 dissolution of FESPIC, former president Dr. Hatada Kazuo offered the following observation on the movement’s roots
in southwest Japan: “Some might wonder why we had the FESPIC Games in Ōita, but there was a simple reason. Dr. Yutaka Nakamura was there.” Even given Ōita’s long history of involvement with various forms of healing sites and rehabilitative practices, as Hatada pointed out, the region’s unlikely emergence as a center for disability sports owed much to Nakamura. Limitations of space preclude a full biographical treatment here, but focused examinations of Nakamura’s background and his work in the region offer insights on how he repeatedly managed to mobilize diverse interests to achieve local, national, and even international results, as seen in particular with one of his last endeavors: the establishment of Ōita’s Wheelchair Marathon.

Nakamura’s initial relationship with both Ōita and medicine were rooted in his family history. Soon after he was born in Beppu in 1927, his father, who had recently completed medical training in the field of urology, opened a private clinic in central Beppu at the site of a former onsen lodge. Having spent almost his entire childhood in Beppu or nearby Ōita City where he attended Ōita Prefectural Middle School (comparable to present-day junior and senior high school), young Nakamura had personal experience with Beppu’s transformation into a wartime “medical base”: his father’s clinic was requisitioned for military medical use in the early 1940s. After graduating from middle school in March 1945, Nakamura had hoped to pursue studies in engineering, but acceding to his father’s demands, he entered a premedical training school instead and eventually became a scholarship student in Kyushu University’s medical program. In 1952, Nakamura decided to specialize in orthopedics.

Nakamura claimed that his initial interest in his field stemmed from his long-standing fascination with machines; orthopedic surgery, as he pointed out, simply used more high-tech equipment than any other medical specialty. Whatever the case may be, Japan’s recent wartime needs had brought increased attention to the field, and Nakamura’s choice of specialty at Kyushu University meant that he would be training under Dr. Amako Tamikazu, whose already distinguished career included several years at Imperial Japanese Army hospitals in Osaka and later Tokyo; there he became known for treating patients with lower-limb paralysis and for pioneering vocational training programs for wounded veterans. In 1953 Amako urged Nakamura to focus his attention on Euro-American approaches to rehabilitation, a suggestion that would ultimately have far greater impact than anyone could have guessed. Although a number of health-care professionals were traveling to Europe and the United States to observe their practices at the time, contemporary foreign approaches to rehabilitation remained unfamiliar in Japan; Nakamura’s work over the next several years would play a key role in changing that.
After completing his medical training in 1957 and assuming his first position at Beppu National Hospital the following year, Nakamura published the first of his several books in January 1960. This study of new rehabilitation techniques, coauthored with his mentor Amako, was a basic instructional text filled with photographs, but given the lack of such resources in Japan at the time, it went through multiple printings and quickly established Nakamura’s reputation as an emerging leader in the field. The work was particularly well received by the Health and Welfare Ministry, which encouraged Nakamura to offer lectures at its national treatment facilities throughout Japan. Nakamura’s involvement in the preparation and publication of the text helps explain why the Health and Welfare Ministry sent him abroad for six months in early 1960 to continue studying European and American rehabilitation practices. As noted in chapter 1, that trip served as Nakamura’s firsthand introduction to Guttmann’s approach to rehabilitation through sports, an encounter that would inspire much of Nakamura’s future work in Ōita and beyond.

In many respects, Nakamura’s initial efforts to promote sports-based rehabilitation in Ōita and his early work with Japan’s emerging Paralympic Movement foreshadowed the ways in which he would pursue his goals throughout his career. After pitching an idea and encountering hesitancy or even outright resistance, he would not only persist but would also begin actively campaigning to build support for it. Starting with those linked directly to him—and here it is worth recalling that Japan’s first participants at the International Stoke Mandeville Games were his patients from Beppu—he then sought outside allies with overlapping interests, such as Hirata Atsushi, the head of Ōita’s Social Welfare Department with roots in the physical education field, and Kashiwa Kameo, a leader in Ōita’s local disabled veterans group. Having secured increased backing, Nakamura continued reaching out, visiting schools, talking to PE instructors and medical specialists, and connecting with anyone who might have an interest in his project, actions that led to the establishment of supporting groups and organizations in which he assumed roles that allowed him to lead from behind. Once he managed to achieve a particular goal—the hosting of Japan’s first disability sports meet or formal participation in the Stoke Mandeville Games in England, for instance—he shifted his focus and energies to some new project. In doing so, he followed a similar pattern, but with each successive undertaking he benefited from an ever-increasing network of allies and was able to point to his previous against-the-odds successes as one more reason to trust this “quirky, back-country doctor.”

Nakamura’s establishment of Taiyō no Ie in Ōita offers a case in point. As the Tokyo Paralympics came to a close, Nakamura became convinced of
the need for facilities that could help people with disabilities in Japan achieve the degree of self-sufficiency that he had witnessed among foreign athletes at the Games. He launched his first effort to create something along those lines in early 1965. Modeled on Goodwill Industries, Nakamura’s so-called Goodwill Factory was envisioned as processing, repairing, and reselling donated goods. He quickly abandoned this approach, however, when the first load of donations proved to be little more than unrepairable, unsellable junk. Despite repeated suggestions that he should stick with what he knew—that is, being a medical doctor—he immediately began formulating a plan to establish a factory that could provide employment for those with disabilities by producing something of its own. With the backing of the well-known writer, Minakami Tsutomu, whose daughter was one of Nakamura’s patients, Nakamura worked tirelessly to make this new vision a reality as quickly as possible, securing additional support and funding from many of the same individuals and organizations involved in organizing the recent Paralympic Games. Taiyō no Ie opened in October 1965, providing accommodations and working space for fifteen employees with a variety of physical impairments.

As a hastily organized establishment, the first “factory” was more like a handicraft or cottage-industry workshop, and it faced countless obstacles early on; however, by its first anniversary in October 1966, Taiyō no Ie had already expanded and even welcomed the emperor and empress and the crown prince and princess for tours of its newly constructed facilities. Over the course of the next several years, Taiyō no Ie continued to expand and entered partnerships that allowed the new complex to manufacture products and components for larger companies. Using this approach as a model, the Health and Welfare Ministry officially launched a belated effort in 1971 to create so-called social welfare factories for the disabled at three locations in Japan. For Taiyō no Ie, which was, of course, designated as one of the first potential sites, this process culminated in the establishment of a joint venture with electronics manufacturer Omron in December 1971, a formal partnership that proved to be only the first of many. In 1973, Taiyō no Ie demonstrated its long-term viability by making a profit for the first time, and a year later Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry named the company as home for a new model social welfare machining factory. By its tenth anniversary in 1975, Taiyō no Ie could boast that it had become the largest factory in Beppu, with more than 400 employees and a complex of factories, housing, and other accommodations that facilitated independent living and social integration for those with a variety of disabilities. Plans were already in motion to expand to additional cities within and possibly beyond Ōita Prefecture.
Like his earlier and ongoing efforts to promote disability sports in Japan, much of Nakamura’s work in relation to Taiyō no Ie was inspired by his observations of practices abroad, as evidenced by his use of Goodwill Industries and later the New York-based manufacturing company, Abilities, Inc., as models for his factory in Ōita. Nakamura’s goal was to implement such practices as quickly as possible in Japan, but doing so meant that he could not wait for the national or even local governments to take the lead. He needed to launch these efforts himself close to home, create a network of nongovernmental backers, and establish something that the government could then support or at least sanction. As the company was founded and began to produce results, Nakamura’s circle of supporters grew, coming to include national celebrities like Akiyama Chieko, business leaders like Sony cofounder Ibuka Masaru, and Omron founder Tateishi Kazuma, as well as politicians of all stripes. For example, then-secretary general of the majority Liberal Democratic Party, Hashimoto Tomisaburō, first visited Taiyō no Ie in 1971 and later backed fundraising efforts in Tokyo and played a behind-the-scenes role in securing transportation for the first FESPIC Games. In its first decade, Taiyō no Ie also received notable attention from members of the imperial family, including multiple visits by different family members and a donation from the emperor himself in 1971. Nakamura both generated and built on these various connections with his constant promotion of Taiyō no Ie through personal meetings, regular speaking engagements, international conference presentations, and interviews and articles published in a wide range of media outlets.

Given his very deep level of commitment to Taiyō no Ie during its early years, it is all the more impressive that, throughout this period, Nakamura launched several other successful undertakings and remained heavily engaged in the promotion of disability sports locally, nationally, and internationally. In 1966, for example, he founded a new facility, Ōita Nakamura Hospital, only a few blocks from the prefectural offices in Ōita City. Taking full advantage of his political connections at the local and national levels, he also initiated the successful campaign to have Beppu named as a Social Welfare Model City in 1973. Among the first six cities to receive such a designation from the Health and Welfare Ministry, Beppu was the only one with a population below the requisite 200,000 people, a fact that did not prevent Nakamura from pursuing the recognition and the disability-friendly infrastructural developments that it made possible.44

In light of Nakamura’s early commitment to disability sports, it is not surprising that Taiyō no Ie placed particular emphasis on developing accessible athletic facilities and increasing participation in sports for those with
disabilities; from its early years, its facilities and sporting activities were opened to the broader community as a means of fostering access and social inclusion. As noted in previous chapters, Nakamura himself continued his involvement with the Paralympics, especially through repeated service as captain of the Japanese team. His success in founding and developing the FESPI\C Movement stemmed in no small part from his reputation in the field of disability sports, but it also owed a great deal to his local standing as a figure who had already repeatedly proven the naysayers wrong, bringing increased attention to his home town and prefecture in the process. In that sense, the first FESPI\C Games, Ōita’s first-ever international sports event, were simply another such example, and over the next few years, Nakamura’s undertakings with FESPI\C and Taiyō no Ie would continue to bear fruit.

In 1960 when Nakamura published his book and began his work in the realm of disability sports, he would have been a relatively unknown quantity locally, nationally, and internationally. During the next twenty years, he established a track record that would have been difficult to ignore at any level. Nakamura’s efforts had repeatedly proven far more than far-fetched dreams or wishful thinking, so when he arrived at the prefectural governor’s office with a plan to launch a wheelchair marathon—something that had never been done before in Japan—local leaders were already primed to take him seriously.

**Ōita’s First Wheelchair Marathon**

The roots of Ōita’s wheelchair marathon, like so many of Nakamura’s undertakings, lay abroad. Inspired in particular by the formal inclusion of wheelchair racers in the Boston Marathon beginning in the mid-1970s and by expressions of interest from Taiyō no Ie employees, Nakamura was easily convinced that Japan should do something similar. Even though Japan—and most of the world for that matter—had no precedents for incorporating wheelchair participants in existing marathons, Nakamura’s enthusiasm was not without merit. In December 1977, Nakamura had organized a 5.4-kilometer wheelchair road race as part of the Eleventh Annual Beppu City Road Race. This shorter competition with its twenty-five participants would be the first of many such 3- or 5-kilometer races that became open to wheelchair participants in local communities throughout Japan over the next several years. Japanese athletes were also beginning to participate in the newly available wheelchair marathons abroad, with four athletes racing for the first time in the Honolulu Marathon in 1977. The initial proposal to host a wheelchair marathon in Ōita came from
JAPAN’S “CRADLE OF DISABILITY SPORTS”

Pitching the idea of hosting Japan’s first wheelchair marathon as a particularly apt way for Ōita to commemorate the upcoming United Nation’s International Year of Disabled Persons, Nakamura approached prefectural governor Hiramatsu Morihiko late in 1980 with a plan for incorporating wheelchair athletes in the next Beppu-Ōita Mainichi Marathon. Hiramatsu was a ready convert. Having been elected as governor only two years earlier and calling for increased regional and local self-reliance, Hiramatsu was an Ōita native who spent several years as a high-ranking Ministry of International Trade and Industry bureaucrat before returning to Ōita to assume a role as vice governor in 1975. He would go on to serve as governor until 2003 and achieve national and international fame as founder of the “One Village, One Product” movement that he pioneered in Ōita. In 1980 the then-new governor and his staff were in the process of planning special events for the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons when Nakamura allegedly “burst into the Governor’s office,” eager to share his seemingly simple plan for yet another opportunity to demonstrate Ōita’s unique commitment to sports for those with disabilities. Struck by Nakamura’s enthusiasm and confidence and no doubt familiar with his track record, Hiramatsu quickly declared his support.

With the governor’s blessing secured, Nakamura reached out to the organizations in charge of the annual race, only to be told that the official rules for marathons in Japan required that participants run the race using their legs. Wheelchairs, Nakamura was informed, were like bicycles, so wheelchair racers could not compete alongside nondisabled runners as they were doing in some marathons abroad. Notably, this response in Ōita was similar to the argument against wheelchair participation used by the New York City Marathon for several years. Nevertheless, Nakamura remained undeterred and continued searching for a way to allow wheelchair athletes to compete in Ōita.

The specific timing and details remain vague, but eventually the local track-and-field organizations in Ōita agreed to share their know-how and provide logistic support if a separate, wheelchair-only event were to be established. With continued backing from the governor, a new plan took shape calling for an international marathon in November 1981 that would feature only wheelchair athletes. Yet many in Ōita remained unconvinced. Because most of the Japanese athletes would be competing in their first long-distance race, prefectural bureaucrats expressed concerns about their well-being, pointing in
particular to the prefecture’s liability if the event were to result in accidents, injuries, illness, or worse. The prefectural police had safety concerns as well and argued that they could not possibly tie up traffic for the three to four hours that would be needed for participants to finish a full marathon. Citing his medical expertise, Nakamura countered with assertions that wheelchair marathons were safe and provided unparalleled rehabilitative benefits for participants. Ultimately the plan to hold the first marathon moved forward, but with a compromise: instead of a full, 42.195-kilometer marathon, Ōita’s first race would be a half-marathon, a measure meant to address lingering concerns about health, safety, and traffic.

Organizational work for the first marathon began in March 1981, as soon as the prefecture formally approved the plan to host the event in November of that year. Once again, Nakamura and his fellow organizers found themselves facing a time crunch as they put together an international sporting event from scratch, with few examples to work from. Domestic models, after all, were nonexistent, and even the large marathons in the United States only averaged about twenty wheelchair racers a year, while Ōita was aiming for more than a hundred. To assure that they hit that target, Nakamura mobilized his international connections through Stoke-Mandeville, FESPIC, and various professional organizations to recruit foreign athletes, an effort that resulted in the participation of forty-three wheelchair racers from thirteen foreign countries. Among the foreign competitors were several from FESPIC countries and two recent wheelchair champions from Austria and the United States. Funding details are particularly unclear for the first race, but it appears that many of the international athletes received financial assistance to pay for travel and lodging expenses within Japan, a pattern reminiscent of FESPIC that continued to be the norm for some of the later marathons as well.\(^{47}\)

Beppu City Council member Yoshinaga Eiji assisted with domestic recruitment, often citing his own plans to enter the race when he reached out to acquaintances throughout Japan. Naturally, Ōita was especially well represented with twenty-nine participants, but forty-five athletes from other prefectures in Japan joined the first race as well. In a positive sign for the future, Yoshinaga noted that several more of those he spoke with said they would have participated with more advanced notice of the event. Although the vast majority of the participants were men, the marathon was coed from the beginning, with six women, one of whom was from Japan, competing in 1981.

In what proved to be one of many foundational elements, the staff for organizing and planning the first Marathon appear to have come primarily from the prefectural government itself, including sixteen members of the Disability and Social Welfare Section. In fact, Ōita’s first marathon was almost
entirely a local operation. Its three official sponsors were the prefectural government, Ōita’s Sports Association for the Disabled (headed by Nakamura), and the local Ōita gōdō shimbun newspaper, and it was administered by the Ōita Prefecture Athletics Association. As might be expected, Taiyō no Ie staff also played a key role, providing multiple forms of behind-the-scenes support. Although foreign athletes were eventually accommodated at a Beppu hotel known for hosting guests with disabilities, those who arrived early stayed at Taiyō no Ie, which offered its facilities for practice space and for hosting the marathon’s opening ceremony. Like Ōita’s FESPIC Games, the marathon relied heavily on volunteers, especially for foreign-language support. In addition, volunteers joined more than 200 prefectural police in safeguarding the marathon route on the day of the race. The route itself proved particularly troubling to develop, after worries about safety and traffic tie-ups led organizers to reject the traditional Beppu-Ōita Mainichi Marathon course. Aiming to create a course that would be safe, less disruptive of traffic patterns, easily accessible for large numbers of spectators, and good for racers, organizers eventually settled on a route that began in front of the prefectural office, turned toward the coastline, took multiple passes along the coast, and then finished in the prefectural stadium, a route that has remained largely unchanged to the present.

The sponsoring Ōita gōdō newspaper provided extensive press coverage for the first marathon, introducing the event, its organizers, and a number of its racers to local audiences via multiple articles, images, and advertisements. Even the most casual newspaper reader would have had a hard time missing news of the first race or failing to notice that the newspaper itself was a sponsor (nearly every article or ad mentioned that fact). An analysis of the evolution of media coverage for disability sports is provided in chapter 4, but it bears noting that, despite (or perhaps because of) the paper’s vested interest, local reporting on the first marathon was vastly superior in almost every respect compared to what was available in national media outlets. Ōita gōdō’s early coverage set not only a number of precedents but also remarkably high standards for reporting on future races.

The first Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon itself proved a great success. After an opening ceremony and a mandatory medical evaluation carried out the previous afternoon at Taiyō no Ie, 117 wheelchair athletes competing in six classification categories gathered in front of the prefectural office in Ōita City on Sunday, November 1, 1981, to start their race at exactly 11 a.m. Though some racers dropped out before finishing, organizers’ worst fears of crashes or injuries never came to pass. The course turned out to be both fast and spectator friendly. Contrary to the expectations of some, fans provided enthusiastic
support, with numbers similar to the annual Beppu-Ōita Mainichi Marathon, and 109 racers finished, including all but 3 of the Japanese athletes. Considering that most of those participating were competing in their everyday wheelchairs instead of the much lighter and more maneuverable racing chairs we are accustomed to seeing today, the high number of finishers was all the more noteworthy.49

The most controversial aspect of the marathon ended up being its finish. The top two racers, Georg Freund of Austria and Jim Knaub from the United States, were neck and neck throughout and well ahead of the others. Having reportedly discussed their plan in advance, both men joined hands, raised them into the air, and crossed the finish line together. Since Freund’s front wheels had crossed the line slightly ahead of Knaub’s, officials declared Freund the winner by less than one-tenth of a second. Arguing that their “Joint Victory of Friendship” should be recognized, Knaub refused to accept his second-place medal, joining Freund in lifting the championship cup instead. The unanticipated outcome posed an immediate dilemma for organizers, especially because the two racers argued that their gesture perfectly symbolized the event’s stated goals of promoting equality and camaraderie. As one of the key organizers, Nakamura, a man known for bucking the system, offered a somewhat ironic opinion that many have since come to view as a defining moment for Ōita’s marathon. “Wheelchair marathons are competitions, not recreational events,” he argued, continuing, “We need to follow the rules, as determined by the race officials.”50 The almost made-for-media controversy sparked press criticisms of organizers as “cold-hearted,” but the official decision remained unchanged, leaving no doubt that the Ōita marathon would remain a competition.51

The “Joint Victory” controversy did not detract from overall enthusiasm about the event’s success. As it concluded, Nakamura told the Ōita gōdō that the race “had more than satisfied the goals for the [first] wheelchair marathon.”52 Foreign athletes praised Ōita’s race management, expressing hopes that organizers would hold another marathon the following year.53 Beppu City councilman Yoshinaga who finished the race in seventy-fourth place, nursing a blister on his left hand, went a step further, saying, “We weren’t allowed to participate in the Beppu-Ōita Marathon, but I think this race can help people understand the strength of those with disabilities. Next time, I hope they will make it a full marathon.”54

Yoshinaga was not alone in his hopes for the future. At a press conference the next day, Governor Hiramatsu praised the event for its unique ability to “capture the hearts and minds of the able-bodied and disabled alike” and expressed his desire to see Ōita host a full-length wheelchair marathon each year.
While acknowledging that there were obstacles to doing so, he said that Ōita would consult with international disability sports organizations to overcome such barriers as planning moved forward. Even though Nakamura had initially pitched the marathon as a special event to mark the International Year of Disabled Persons, his efforts and comments left little doubt that he, too, was intent on seeing the race become an annual event that hosted a true marathon. In fact, on the eve of the first marathon, he had informed Ōita gōdō that he hoped “to turn Ōita into an international wheelchair marathon mecca.”

Like Hiramatsu, Nakamura was well aware that the organizers would need to overcome a number of barriers to make that happen: the successful completion of Ōita’s first race was only the initial step. It was also necessary to convince doubters in Japan and elsewhere about the viability and safety of marathons for those with disabilities, especially given that the international organizations that Hiramatsu spoke of working with were not yet fully behind efforts promoting these types of events. To garner the additional support he would need, Nakamura began by organizing a Marathon Medical Conference at Taiyō no Ie a few days before the first race, which appears to have served as forerunner for a later Wheelchair Marathon Seminar series that preceded Ōita’s race for several years. Nakamura also arranged to have several foreign and Japanese racers wear monitors to record their heart rates before and during the race, data he would use to make his case. The following year at the Annual Meeting of the International Medical Society of Paraplegia, he reported the results of his research, which affirmed the rehabilitative benefits of wheelchair marathon racing. That report then served as the basis for his petition to the International Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Sports Federation in December 1982, requesting that marathons be recognized as one of its officially sanctioned events. After investigating Nakamura’s claims, the federation agreed, a result that not only bolstered the case back home for Ōita to host a full marathon but also made it possible for that race in 1983 to become the world’s first officially sanctioned wheelchair marathon. Once again, Ōita was breaking new ground in the realm of disability sports and was on its way to becoming the wheelchair marathon mecca that Nakamura had foreseen.

Many Marathons, Multiple Meanings

By the time of Nakamura’s untimely death in late July 1984, his efforts at home and abroad had already helped assure that Ōita’s young marathon would continue and eventually thrive. The push to turn Ōita’s race into a marathon in the truest sense of the word had come to fruition in 1983, when
an internationally sanctioned, 42.195-kilometer wheelchair road race was added alongside the existing half-marathon. The growing list of sponsors and supporters had practically guaranteed that Ōita would continue hosting this unique event well into the future. Thanks to that support and the ongoing work of countless organizers and volunteers, Ōita did become, as Nakamura hoped, a premier destination for wheelchair marathon racing in the years following his death. The success of Ōita’s marathon and its four decades’ worth of history make it a unique vantage point for evaluating changes and continuities in disability sports events and their broader impacts. Unlike most other events, the race in Ōita allows us to see such developments over a significant period of time, at a single site. With that in mind, the following sections offer several observations on the marathon’s evolution and what it has meant for a sampling of the many stakeholders who have shaped it.

Over the course of its history, the marathon experienced a number of changes, yet many of its time-tested elements were already apparent in its earliest years. Most significantly, it remained rooted as a local event, even as its national and international reputation grew. Like many of Nakamura’s projects, the initial success at the local level generated broader interest. By the second marathon, the event had already drawn the official support of the Japan Sports Association for the Disabled, and as noted below, the race eventually attracted critical backing from a variety of corporate sponsors as well. Yet, for most of its history, the Ōita prefectural government has served as the event’s single largest source of both financial support and formal organizational staffing, and Ōita City and the Ōita gōdō newspaper have continued to provide significant funding and support.

The reasons behind such local support for the marathon are, of course, manifold, but two merit special notice here. First, the race quickly came to be seen as emblematic of Ōita’s distinctive history of and ongoing commitment to creating new opportunities for those with disabilities in the realm of sports and beyond. The linkage stemmed in part from Nakamura’s earlier work, as evidenced by repeated local, national, and even international references to the marathon in connection with FESPIC and Taiyō no Ie. Yet it is important to acknowledge that efforts to promote disability-friendly policies and approaches in the prefecture did not end with Nakamura’s passing. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Ōita was often at the forefront of national campaigns for improving the accessibility of built environments, addressing the needs of Japan’s aging society, and promoting social inclusion. A prefectural plan from 2015, for instance, called not only for continuing such efforts but also for achieving the nation’s highest rate of employment for those with disabilities. Of course, not all of these developments can be directly linked
to the marathon, but as Governor Hiramatsu pointed out, the event served as a de facto annual proving ground for the social welfare or rehabilitation sectors, providing a site for highlighting, evaluating, and even motivating progress toward Ōita’s broader social welfare goals. What started as a celebration to mark the International Year of Disabled Persons became a recurring impetus for and symbol of Ōita Prefecture’s own achievements.

As his views on the marathon’s beneficial roles in social welfare reform suggest, Governor Hiramatsu’s commitment to the event was itself a second critical factor that generated ongoing local support, perhaps all the more so because of his lengthy tenure in office. By the time he stepped down, preparations were already underway for the twenty-third annual race, and in the words of his successor, Governor Hirose Katsusada, the marathon had “become one of the most typical sights of late fall in Ōita.” Although Hiramatsu was certainly not alone in promoting the event, his early advocacy and continuing support for the race helped assure that the marathon would become and continue be a prefectural “product” even after he left office.

Hiramatsu’s commitment to the race must be viewed in relation to his “One Village, One Product” campaign that was just beginning to take shape in Ōita in the early 1980s. Aimed at addressing depopulation, increasing regional productivity, and ending dependence on government subsidies, this campaign sought to mobilize existing resources throughout the region and foster local talent to produce distinctive, yet internationally marketable products. Whether by design or good fortune, Nakamura’s proposed international wheelchair marathon aligned perfectly with these ideals, offering the newly elected governor a highly visible annual forum for demonstrating both the validity of his approach and his desire to improve social welfare in the prefecture. The marathon organizers drew on Ōita’s expertise in disability sports to craft a one-of-a-kind event that promised to—and eventually did—bring hundreds of foreign and domestic visitors to the prefecture each year. As it turned out, it also generated multiple, highly lauded visits—nine as of 2010—to the prefecture from various members of Japan’s imperial family. These potential and ultimately realized benefits help explain why Hiramatsu became an early enthusiastic champion for the marathon at a time when such races were still rare and disability sports in general received minimal attention at home or abroad. Nakamura, it would seem, was not alone in hoping that the wheelchair marathon would turn Ōita into a destination.

The event also fit well with Hiramatsu’s larger goals because it could leverage Ōita’s existing reputation as Japan’s cradle of disability sports to turn the region into a national and even global center for marathon-related research. Nakamura’s rehabilitation-related conference and international presentations
in connection with the first marathon provided the earliest hints of this possibility. Beginning with the first race, other medical staff from Taiyō no Ie and from several medical schools compiled medical data from participants and presented their findings on the benefits of marathons at medical, rehabilitation, and physical therapy organizations throughout Japan. Similar medically oriented research projects continued well into the 1990s, as evidenced by a variety of papers published in Japanese and international journals. As the marathon, like other disability sports, began moving away from its rehabilitation roots, the research continued, but its focus shifted toward sports science or scientifically based training. For example, Ōkawa Hiroyuki and a group of fellow medical specialists designed and conducted a series of experiments between the eleventh and fifteenth marathons to understand differences in athletes’ techniques and how they affected performance. These studies were fueled in part by questions about why multiyear champion Heinz Frei—who participated in the research—was so dominant in the marathon.

Beginning in 1987, the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon Seminar provided an annual venue for sharing such research. Held on the Saturday evening before the marathon, the seminar was halted after the 1997 race for reasons that remain unclear, but during its ten-year run, it welcomed a wide variety of domestic and international speakers—eventually moving away from medically centered presentations to those featuring coaches and athletes talking about their own experiences with training, nutrition, and equipment. In addition to such marathon-specific research and presentation opportunities, the success and longevity of the marathon also began to attract the attention of those studying event management or sports history, as in the case of this current chapter. More recently, Ōita was once again linked to high-tech research aimed at helping Japanese racers improve their marathon performances at the 2016 Rio Paralympics. With such an impressive record as both a generator of and a destination for research, the marathon more than succeeded in making a name for Ōita at home and abroad, which helps explain its continued prominence on the international website for Hiramatsu’s “One Village, One Product” campaign. For the former governor, the marathon came to epitomize his goals—and achievements—in Ōita.

Under Hiramatsu’s successor, the marathon changed in character. Arriving in office in 2003 as Japan’s national economy was still struggling to recover from the stagnation of the “lost decade” (1991–2010), Governor Hirose (who continues to serve as governor as of this writing) inherited not only the marathon but also a prefecture with a steadily declining population, decreasing tax revenues, and growing income disparity compared with the rest of Japan. As a result, the marathon, like nearly everything else in the prefectural
budget, was targeted for cost reductions. By this point, however, the event was established enough at home and abroad that its continuity was nearly assured, and compared with other areas, the proposed cuts were minor. Hirose’s initial 2004 fiscal reform plan called primarily for simplification of ceremonial aspects, while leaving support for invited foreign athletes and other elements untouched.

In the end, the 2004 marathon and those after it showed several marked changes from earlier iterations. Most visibly, the opening ceremony was relocated from the prefectoral gymnasiums used in the past to the Galleria Take-machi shopping arcade in central Ōita. Following a scaled-down opening ceremony in the arcade’s domed square, athletes paraded through the shopping arcade to a local park. The 2004 transition was billed as a way to celebrate the shopping district’s one-hundredth anniversary and to allow for greater interaction between athletes and the local population. Without discounting the value of those goals, the shift was almost certainly fueled by the twin desires of reducing costs by using a cheaper venue and drawing visitors to the economically struggling shopping arcade district.

Other celebratory events were also eliminated or simplified to reduce costs. Such measures appear to have proven inadequate to meet cost-cutting targets, because the 2004 Marathon also ended the practice of formally inviting and providing travel support for select participants in the half-marathon, a change that would have been less noticeable to spectators but arguably far more significant for some of the athletes. Although financial support for invited international participants in the full marathon has continued, it, too has been subject to reductions. In the years since he came to office, Hirose’s annual remarks celebrating the marathon have left little doubt that he values and supports the event, but the event’s financial dependence on the prefecture has led to continued efforts to reduce the local financial burden by trimming costs, increasing contributions from existing donors, acquiring new sponsorships, and adding the first-ever registration fees for participants in 2011.

Complicating matters still further is the fact that overall participation numbers in Ōita’s Marathon have been trending downward after peaking in the late 1990s. With the combined full- and half-marathon races, Ōita’s event remains the world’s largest wheelchair-only marathon and is still one of a handful of full marathons sanctioned by the IPC. Yet it is far from the only marathon available for potential racers, even in Japan. The Tokyo Marathon’s elite wheelchair division race was also sanctioned by the IPC in 2016, and in 2017 it was formally added to the Abbott World Marathon Majors Wheelchair Race Series, an elite international point-based competition that notably does not include Ōita’s event.
To continue to attract the best racers and thereby maintain Ōita’s reputation as a high-level, world-class race in the face of such added competition at home and abroad, in 2010 organizers began offering cash prizes for victories and record-setting times in Ōita’s full marathon. After fielding criticism from top-level international athletes that the inadequate prize money in Ōita made their future participation doubtful, organizers more than tripled some of the rewards beginning with the thirty-fifth race in 2015. Although it remains too soon to determine what impact this change will have on participation rates or the future of the marathon in general, it is undeniably clear that the awards will add significantly to the cost of the event. Since it would be out of the question to use Ōita’s tax dollars to cover the more than 4.5 million yen slated for the new annual prizes (not counting costs for record-setting-time bonuses), organizers have had to rely even more on the generosity of corporate sponsors that, so far, have proven amenable.\textsuperscript{78}

Although this reliance on corporate sponsors for prize money is a relatively new development, sponsorship in various forms has undergirded the event from its earliest years. Ōita gōdō, as noted earlier, has been a backer since the beginning, joining a long line of Japanese newspapers that have served as founding sponsors for various sporting events. Details on the marathon’s history of sponsorships are relatively sparse, but it seems to have benefited early on from the support of local broadcast media outlets, as well as domestic and international airlines, which presumably provided assistance with participants’ travel.\textsuperscript{79}

Perhaps understandably, Taiyō no Ie, too, has proven an incredibly important ally, all the more so through its relationships with FESPIC and several larger national corporations. For instance, the official English-language newsletter of the FESPIC Information Center for the Disabled, which was based at Taiyō no Ie, featured prominent advertising for and coverage of the marathon from the earliest planning stages.\textsuperscript{80} This sort of promotion and Taiyō no Ie’s role in recruitment more generally were essential to the ongoing success of the event. As one recent organizer noted, for many years Taiyō no Ie served as the marathon’s “window to the world,” because prefectural organizers lacked other means for reaching international athletes.\textsuperscript{81}

Taiyō no Ie was linked to more formal sponsorships as well. Its oldest joint-venture partner Omron was among the first companies to become an official sponsor of the marathon, doing so in 1988.\textsuperscript{82} Asked about the sponsorship three years later in the business journal \textit{Business Japan}, corporate representatives noted that the company was committing funds to cover roughly one-third of the marathon’s budgeted costs, but dismissed suggestions that this was done for advertising purposes. For Omron, sponsoring the marathon was both a natural outgrowth of its relationship with Taiyō no Ie and an obligation stem-
ming from its “nature as a public institution,” or what today we might call corporate social responsibility. Based on its placement at the front or top of nearly all recent sponsor-related references, Omron has continued to be a leading sponsor for the marathon and has been joined by other major Japanese companies, including five other top sponsors involved in joint ventures with Taiyō no Ie: Sony, Honda, Mitsubishi Shōji, Denso, and Fujitsu.

Official figures from the 2014 marathon reveal that funds from more than fifteen corporate sponsors, combined with those from Ōita gōdō and other donations, covered nearly half of the event’s total costs, a percentage that has likely increased since then, given the need for larger sponsored prizes beginning in 2015. Like Omron’s early decision to back the event, some of these sponsors have almost certainly been motivated to contribute out of a sense of social responsibility, a desire that may very well be based on or reinforced by existing ties with the region. At the same time, marketing changes at the event suggest that sponsors might be finding that contributions are also in their corporate interest. In recent years, the marathon has provided increasingly prominent displays of its sponsors, as exemplified by the backdrop used for the opening ceremony and the annual pre-marathon press conference. Links to all of the major sponsors are featured prominently on both the Japanese and English versions of the marathon’s website. With the first nationwide live broadcast of the event in 2016, the potential audience for the race and consequently for visual displays of its sponsors expanded dramatically. In addition, many sponsors themselves have begun using their involvement with the marathon for a variety of in-house and external PR efforts, suggesting that distinctions between corporate social responsibility and corporate interest in relation to the marathon may be beginning to blur. Whether this will continue to be the case remains unclear, especially if participation at the race were to decrease in significant ways. Whatever their motivations or future intentions, sponsors have played—and perhaps now more than ever—will continue to play a defining role in Ōita’s annual race.

Along with such corporate sponsorships and prefectural support, the third element of what Hiramatsu once described as the marathon’s sustaining “trinity” has long been its volunteers. As noted in the first two chapters, a heavy reliance on volunteerism has been a hallmark of Japan’s disability sports events since the 1960s, and Ōita’s ongoing experience has been no exception. In some years, the number of formal event volunteers assisting with the marathon exceeded 3,000, with numbers in recent years averaging closer to 2,000. A spirit of volunteerism tends to be one of the oft-cited legacies associated with hosting sports mega-events in general, and images of local students greeting foreign marathoners or stories about groups of elderly citizens spontaneously
arranging to clear debris from the course before the race seem to suggest that Ōita’s marathon bears out such assumptions.\textsuperscript{88}

A closer examination, however, reveals a more complex picture. A significant and apparently growing percentage of the volunteers come from outside the prefecture as representatives of companies sponsoring the event. In a recent race, some twenty companies provided more than one-quarter of the total volunteers. Other large groups of volunteers were from prefectural or city offices, the police force, the local Ground Self-Defense Force base, and Ōita’s track-and-field association. A number of others were recruited through disability sports or social welfare organizations that have their own vested interests in the race. Can Do, a club founded to provide foreign-language assistance for the first marathon, continues to serve as the source of roughly 200 volunteer interpreters each year.\textsuperscript{89}

This organizationally based approach to volunteering has obvious advantages, especially for those planning the marathon each year, a point one of the event organizers emphasized when he met with me in summer 2015. Rather than relying on unpredictable local volunteer recruitment drives, this approach allowed him to work with a set number of representatives from more-or-less predetermined groups and to confirm far in advance exactly how many volunteers he was going to have. From an event management perspective, Ōita’s marathon provides an excellent model for the efficient recruitment, training, and mobilization of the volunteers needed to hold the race each year.\textsuperscript{90}

Yet the very nature of Ōita’s volunteer program also seems to unintentionally limit the potential pool of recruits to those already tied to the event, making it difficult to assess whether the marathon itself has had a positive impact on local volunteerism in Ōita beyond such groups. Given the types of groups involved, it is also difficult to avoid wondering how voluntary some of this volunteering might be. Two organizers told me that another challenge they regularly face is balancing the number and skills of volunteers committed by outside groups with tasks that need to be completed. Failure to get the equation right can mean shortages at key moments or, more commonly, people getting bored, which can result in future recruiting challenges.\textsuperscript{91} My own observations of the 2016 marathon seemed to reflect this concern. At many points during the event a significant number of volunteers—whose company jackets made them stand out—seemed to have little to do other than cheer alongside other spectators. Most appeared enthusiastic, but this did not strike me as typical volunteer work.\textsuperscript{92}

My point here is not to criticize the approach in Ōita or to imply that the race does not generate meaningful experiences for volunteers, but rather to
highlight the importance of looking beyond the numbers and assumptions when exploring volunteerism as a legacy of sports mega-events. Ōita’s marathon has undoubtedly benefited from the support of countless volunteers over the years, and many volunteers reportedly enjoy the experience enough to return. But the event also serves as a useful reminder that volunteerism comes in many guises.

The impact of the marathon in Ōita is not, of course, limited to volunteerism. The race is said to attract some 200,000 spectators who line nearly the entire course each year, many with homemade signs encouraging racers in English or Japanese. Although such levels of engagement differ from that required by formal volunteerism, they do suggest that many in Ōita are more than willing to take time out of their weekend to watch the race, much as people in Tokyo, New York, or Boston do for their own local events. The looping nature of the course lends itself particularly well to spectating; it is possible (with a hurried pace) to watch the start, cut to an area near the first checkpoint to see most of the racers, and then head to the stadium in time to catch the fastest half-marathon finishers. The arching Benten Bridge in between the first checkpoint and the stadium is clearly a prime spectating spot. Racers who cross the checkpoint in time go over the bridge twice, reaching high speeds as they descend from either side. During the 2016 race, the sidewalks on both sides of the bridge were packed with people, including several uniformed youth baseball teams, shouting enthusiastically as competitors zipped by, rhythmically thumping away at their wheelchairs’ push-rims. Many people remained on the bridge until the last athlete passed. This final racer struggled to make it up the bridge’s long ascent. Every push on his rims gained him a few inches, which were marked with new calls of encouragement from the crowd, and as the racer crested the hill, his efforts were rewarded with a speedy descent and a wave of applause and praise.93

Over the years, the marathon has provided those following the event in person or via the media with its share of stimulating, exciting, or nerve-wracking sporting moments: photo finishes, maintained or broken winning streaks, world records, and the occasional shocking crash. One of the selling points for the race is the 50 to 60 kilometer/hour downhill speeds that top racers achieve at certain points on the course. Given all the concerns about safety in the early years of the event, the intentional use of these high speeds to market the marathon today reflects how much the sport has changed since 1981.94 In many respects, the race has become an exciting annual sports spectacle in its own right. But it was always intended to be more than that.
Beyond the Races

From the very earliest discussions about the event as a way to highlight the International Year of Disabled Persons to the most recent race, the marathon has been repeatedly billed as a unique opportunity to help Ōita and its citizens foster positive international relations and create social and physical environments that are welcoming and accessible for those with disabilities. Admirable though they might be, these twin goals, given their amorphous nature, are very difficult to assess in concrete ways. That said, a variety of forms of circumstantial and anecdotal evidence point to the fact that the marathon has had an impact in both respects.\(^95\)

In wheelchair marathon circles, “OITA” is a name that has become known worldwide, having even found its way into a 2012 mystery novel by bestselling American author Craig Johnson.\(^96\) There is no denying that for forty years, the event has succeeded in bringing anywhere from 50 to more than 100 international athletes to Ōita each year, people who might otherwise never have visited the region or even Japan. A fair portion of the foreign athletes are repeat attendees, and their comments characterizing the event as “great” or “the best” reveal that for many the desire to return to Ōita stems as much from the local atmosphere with its enthusiastic spectators and welcoming people as it does from the quality of the race itself.\(^97\)

Despite cost-cutting measures that have resulted in the discontinuation or simplification of several ceremonial events, opportunities for interactions between visiting international athletes and local citizens remain abundant, ranging from welcome receptions at hotels or the airport to visits and talks at local schools and universities.\(^98\) Two of the athletes I spoke with in 2016 said that the opportunities to visit with and answer questions from local youngsters are among their favorite parts of their marathon experiences. One of them noted that he has been coming to Ōita for so many years that he is now meeting the children of youngsters he met years ago.\(^99\) Organizers pointed out to me that these sorts of meet-and-greet or public speaking events served a secondary purpose as well, by providing small honorariums for foreign visitors who had to cover their own expenses of participating in the marathon.\(^100\)

Understandably, the marathon courses and official warm-up venues themselves are closed to everyone except officials and racers, but many of the other events before and after the race are open to the public. At these events, the abundance of volunteer interpreters from Can Do—easily identified by their distinctive jackets—facilitates social interactions for any who want to pursue them. Several of the spectators I spoke with said that they tried to come to
the opening ceremony and watch the race each year, though they admitted that they rarely took advantage of the interpreters to talk with the international athletes. Others, including a number of children in wheelchairs at the opening and closing ceremonies, seemed particularly enthusiastic about making connections with Japanese and foreign racers alike, chatting with athletes, shaking hands, and posing for pictures. Several young people even joined in as the group of athletes paraded through the shopping arcade to mark the end of the opening ceremony. We cannot know with any certainty how such informal international exchanges shape people’s attitudes and perceptions, but certainly the marathon has increased and regularized opportunities for these sorts of interactions in Ōita.

A similar case can be made for the event’s impact on local approaches to those with disabilities. For much of its history, organizers contended that the marathon was a tool for deepening the public’s interest in and understanding of disability, often pointing to letters published in the newspaper after races where the writers praised the event for giving them new perspectives. Similar anecdotes about positive or changing social attitudes in Ōita are abundant. Reflecting on their experiences at the marathon over the years, Sakamoto Masato and Sakamoto Ritsuko, a married couple from Osaka, noted that they enjoyed coming to Ōita, because they could go out in the city with their wheelchairs without people staring at them. Writing in 1994 for a weekly social welfare journal, the head of Ōita’s Disability and Social Welfare Section linked the marathon to the fact that his office was no longer receiving reports about people in wheelchairs being denied access to taxis. Whether such changes were, in fact, tied to the marathon is difficult to determine, especially given the prefecture’s history of extensive exposure to those with disabilities. At the very least, the presence of so many people in wheelchairs, year after year, has made disability ever more visible in Ōita and encouraged the region to become more accommodating.

One example of such trends is the local “barrier-free map” posted for several years on the marathon’s Japanese and English websites. Available from at least 2007, the map highlights buildings that offer wheelchair-friendly features such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Although a number of the labeled buildings are public facilities, others are hotels or stores—yet the vast majority of establishments in the area, including several hotels, are notably absent from the map. This fact suggests that the map itself could serve as an informal tool for promoting broader awareness of and the development of accessible environments. It clearly demonstrates that Ōita still remains far from barrier-free after forty years hosting the marathon, an instructive point
for those seeking to use disability sporting events to promote broader social changes. Ōita’s example suggests that the hosting of sporting events might foster change but cannot bring about wholesale change by itself.¹⁰⁴

Among the more striking, and by many accounts successful, attempts to expand the marathon’s desired impact was the “Outreach Workshop” carried out as part of the thirtieth-anniversary celebrations in 2010. In the months leading up to and just after the thirtieth race, local athletes with disabilities visited some sixty elementary and middle schools throughout the prefecture to introduce the marathon, talk more generally about disability and sports, and allow students the chance to try out various adapted sports for themselves. These outreach events in Ōita proved so popular that smaller-scale efforts to promote student and athlete interactions were incorporated as part of the following year’s marathon as well.¹⁰⁵ The hundreds of student comments selected for inclusion in the specially produced photo booklet commemorating the program ran the gamut from single-sentence observations on the difficulty of shooting a basketball from a wheelchair to paragraph-long discussions about overcoming adversity through hard work. Diverse as they were, what these comments revealed was that the workshop had inspired many of these children to consider questions of disability for the first time, one more outcome that speaks to the ways in which the marathon has had an impact on perceptions of disability in Ōita.

Such impacts remain difficult to assess in terms of their broader effect, and it is apparent that not everyone in Ōita welcomes the marathon with open arms. The organizers I met with reported that traffic-related complaints were among the more common issues they have had to address. The latter portion of the full marathon poses particular challenges because athletes with higher needs (T51 in the current classification system) tend to take longer to complete the race, and only a handful of them compete each year. With limited understanding of disability sports and its admittedly complex classification systems, uninformed observers in Ōita see only a single person in a wheelchair seemingly tying up traffic for nearly an hour after many of the other racers have finished. These sorts of impressions then prompt questions about why the marathon does not impose more stringent time limits on participants. Organizers in Ōita expressed regret about the lack of familiarity and empathy inherent in such complaints, but it seems likely that the combination of lower participation rates and extended time frames have led other marathons to cut similarly classified athletes from their races entirely.¹⁰⁶ As just one telling example, the last full marathon at the Paralympics for athletes with T51 classifications occurred in 2004. The very fact that Ōita has resisted such trends in the face of recurring criticism at home is a testament to its organizers’ ongo-
ing commitment to assuring that Ōita’s marathon remains open to as many participants as possible, one of many elements that continues to make this a one-of-a-kind event.

Balancing Accessibility and Elite Sport

Indeed, Ōita has achieved a reputation among athletes at home and abroad in part because it hosts a well-organized marathon that is highly competitive and extremely accessible—two descriptors that can often seem mutually exclusive in disability sports events today. Both of these features were already apparent in the marathon’s earliest years. Like other events Nakamura was involved in organizing, the marathon was rooted in his belief that sports were critical for fostering what its founding statement labeled “physical and mental rehabilitation.” In line with trends in disability sports more generally, this explicit reference to rehabilitation was dropped from the event’s stated goals in 1995, but language citing the marathon as a source of inspiration and a venue for social engagement for those with disabilities has remained.107

Combined with the early lack of models or even regulations for wheelchair marathons, these ideals led organizers to pursue an inclusive approach in Ōita from the beginning: the event has never required qualifying times for either the half- or the full marathon, has offered generous cutoff times at its checkpoints, has encouraged athletes with varying degrees of impairment to participate, and, until 2011, did not require any registration fees. Paradoxically, many of these measures would have been far more difficult to implement if the marathon had been integrated with an existing event as originally planned. All that said, it is also critical to remember that Nakamura sought out the best international athletes to participate beginning with the first race, explicitly rejected the idea of the now famous “Joint Victory” because the race needed to have a clear champion, and aggressively pursued official international sanction for the marathon. In other words, the event that took shape in Ōita was one where elite-level competition and broad-based accessibility were viewed as mutually beneficial or even mutually necessary for the race to achieve its many goals. As Ōita’s marathon has evolved since the early 1980s, these two elements have been pursued simultaneously, producing benefits and tensions in the process.

Both elements of the marathon have reflected and been shaped by many of the changes apparent in disability sports more generally. As noted earlier, the growth of wheelchair marathons as nationally and internationally recognized sporting events has proven a mixed blessing for Ōita. Rising interest in
the event brought more marathoners to Ōita, but this increased demand eventually translated into the greater availability of other marathons, a development now working against Ōita’s interests. The availability of new sports for athletes with disabilities, such as the triathlon, which was first included at the Paralympics in 2016, and hand-cycling, which was added for the Tokyo 2020 Games, will likely have an impact on the race as well.

Because organizers have had to maintain the marathon’s official international affiliations, they have also had to negotiate the shifting winds of disability sports organizations; thus, it is not at all surprising that the marathon was endorsed by several different national and international disability sports organizations before securing its current IPC sanction. These different affiliations and the changes that those organizations made in their own regulations led to varying standards for eligibility certifications, classification systems, and wheelchair specifications for Ōita’s race over time. As just one example, the marathon now uses the functional classification system used by the IPC for wheelchair racing. Compared with the six morphologically based classes used in 1981, Ōita now has three—T51, T33/52, and T34/53/54—and since 2004, the race has clearly identified male and female winners for each class. Responding to similar international developments, the marathon began enforcing antidoping measures in 2001 and more recently instituted rules banning drafting behind athletes of a different gender or classification.

Improvements in wheelchair technology have revolutionized many sports, and Ōita’s race offers a striking case. Changes in wheelchair design at the race are readily apparent in photographs, from the everyday chairs used in the first marathon to the streamlined three-wheeled racers used at present, with many styles in between. Technology’s impact on the race has been undeniable, with average race times dropping dramatically as more participants gained access to the constantly improving equipment.

Despite all of these changes—and in part because of them—Ōita’s marathon has remained highly accessible. The revised approaches to classification have helped assure that both male and female racers in Ōita are competing against and being evaluated in relation to those with similar abilities, in contrast to other races that do not distinguish between classes or that limit the participation of women or those with higher levels of impairment. In addition, the use of lighter chairs that can be tailored to the size and requirements of individual racers has lessened some of the obstacles for those with higher needs, making it possible for more people at different levels to compete and reach the various checkpoints within the time limits. As organizers themselves proudly report, changes in international trends have also meant that Ōita has become home to “a valuable international competition for T/51 athletes.”
If current developments abroad continue in a similar direction, it may become one of the few sites available for both men and women competing in the T33/52 class as well.

International developments aside, long-standing approaches to the event’s management have played perhaps an even greater role in maintaining the accessibility of Oita’s marathon. From the beginning, the race imposed minimal restrictions, which has continued to be the case throughout its decades-long history. In particular, the fact that neither race has required qualifying times for entry has allowed them to remain open to nearly anyone willing to race. For many years athletes were required to undergo onsite medical checks before the race, but it appears that nearly all athletes passed these examinations. Pre-race medical exams were eliminated as a requirement in 2005. Even after registration fees were initiated in 2011, at the present rates of 1,000 yen for the half and 5,000 yen for the full marathon, they remain lower than most domestic and international races, reducing some of the potential financial barriers to participation. Initially set at 18, minimum age requirements, too, have dropped over the years. In 2016, the event welcomed racers as young as 14, whereas the oldest competitor was 90. In addition to this remarkable age range, Oita has become famous for hosting both novice and veteran competitors with a wide variety of skill levels.

As promoters are wont to point out, Oita’s so-called citizen’s marathon, or the half-marathon race, has been particularly important to the event’s continued inclusiveness, especially as the full marathon has become increasingly competitive. Each year the vast majority of first-time and repeat athletes, as well as the youngest and oldest participants, enter the shorter race. An array of individual accounts reveal that for some, especially young Japanese athletes or those with newly acquired impairments, this event has been a gateway to a new sport or even to a different outlook on life. The half-marathon’s continued use of distinct classes, with recognized winners and records in each category, makes it appealing for those seeking competition but not interested in moving to the longer race. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of those who have moved on to compete in full marathons got their start in the shorter race, whereas others have stuck with the half, entering the annual event for recreational, health, or other personal reasons as diverse as the racers themselves.

The sheer variety of participants who compete in the combined full and half-marathons in Oita has clearly been part of the event’s charm. With its history and distinctive approach, Oita’s marathon has fostered the creation of a distinctive international community of wheelchair racers. This community-building role has stemmed in part from the size and the wheelchair-only
nature of the race. As Peter Hawkins, a multiyear marathon participant from the United States, observed, “It’s a pretty cool thing to just watch 500 . . . elbows and hear the punching against the wheels. You don’t hear that in Boston or New York because those are mostly runners. . . . The sound is completely different with wheelchairs.”

The combined emphasis on elite competition and accessibility at the race has also meant that even the newest participants find themselves competing alongside some of the world’s top racers, a fact that Japanese and foreign participants at multiple levels have referenced as one of Ōita’s biggest draws. When Hawkins spoke with me before the 2016 race, he emphasized that Ōita was special because it was the only place where he could compete alongside a recent Paralympic champion, a world-record holder, and a 90-year-old Japanese man who had raced in all but one of Ōita’s marathons to that point. For their part, elite competitors enjoy an unmatched degree of renown and adulation in Ōita, as well as the opportunity to share their expertise with a uniquely attentive and appreciative audience. Previous world-record holder Heinrich Köberle of Germany has compared racing in Ōita to the feeling of “returning to my hometown,” adding that teaching Japanese athletes with severe spinal cord injuries about his own experiences has been “an honor for me.”

By promoting these kinds of personal exchanges and social relationships, the marathon has benefited countless individual athletes. It has also shaped the sport of wheelchair marathon racing in Japan and abroad in ways that have extended well beyond race results.

In terms of such results, Ōita’s marathon has proven no less central to the sport. The marathon’s efforts to promote its elite, competitive side have melded with trends toward increased competitiveness and professionalization in the Paralympic Movement more generally. In Ōita, these developments have been facilitated by the consistency of the race courses, which have remained largely unchanged since the 1980s, fostering their reputation as “technical” courses good for setting personal and international records. As of this writing, Ōita remains home to two world records in the full marathon: the T34/53/54 class, men’s record set by Heinz Frei in 1999, and the women’s record in the T52 class set in 2008 by Yamaki Tomomi. The race has boasted earlier world records in nearly every other category as well and hosted most of the international and Japanese national record holders at some point in their careers. For the world’s best, then, Ōita has long been a destination worth visiting, and their continued participation has become a key part of what makes Ōita’s annual race special.

In recent decades, however, it has proven increasingly difficult for Ōita to continue drawing the biggest names in the sport based solely on the marathon’s reputation and its distinctiveness as a large wheelchair-only event.
The challenge has stemmed in part from the increased number of wheelchair races. In particular, many of the world’s most prestigious marathons have created formal wheelchair divisions that offer significant cash prizes, a trend epitomized by the establishment of the inaugural Abbott World Marathon Majors Wheelchair Race Series in 2016. Several of the top racers themselves have become professional athletes who rely on such high-profile events to maintain and generate interest from sponsors.

In this environment, Ōita has faced several disadvantages. For one, travel to and from Japan comes with significant expense and the potential for jet lag. Compared with marathons in major cities that serve as international transportation hubs, Ōita’s race necessitates significant additional travel, which can interfere further with training regimens or competition plans. Since the race also tends to occur just before the annual marathon in New York City, not all top athletes have been willing to make the trip to Ōita to compete in back-to-back races. In terms of publicity, coverage of the event has historically been limited to the local area. The race was not broadcast live nationwide in Japan until 2016, and despite its reputation in wheelchair racing circles, non-Japanese-language media coverage of the race has always been limited. Adding to these challenges have been concerns that declining participation rates from the sport’s top athletes might lead to lower levels of competition in Ōita. The understandable fear has been that this change could threaten a downward spiral where the lack of competition drives away other top-level competitors, whose participation in the race has long been seen as essential to the marathon’s appeal and thus its continuity.¹¹⁹

To offset the challenges of travel to the prefecture, the marathon from its beginning provided various forms of travel funding for “invited athletes.” Early on, this category encompassed many of the international participants, including those from developing countries in the Asian-Pacific region. Such support was deemed necessary to assure that the marathon would retain a strong international constituency while also maintaining its ideals of broad accessibility. Today, the marathon continues to cover the costs of travel, lodging, and food for invited athletes—expenses that make up roughly 20 percent of annual costs even after recent cutbacks.¹²⁰ However, the category of “invited athlete” itself has become increasingly restricted, limited mostly to those who have already performed at an elite level in the full marathon, a situation that seems to reflect the need to keep these high-level athletes coming to Ōita. To offer additional incentives for such athletes, organizers instituted monetary prizes for the full marathon beginning in 2010. The prizes were initially set up as part of the special celebrations for the thirtieth anniversary, but were maintained at reduced levels for the next several years. As noted earlier, continued
concerns about the loss of elite professional competitors prompted dramatic increases in several of the prize categories beginning in 2015. The increased prizes included those for record-setting times, a clear attempt to mobilize the marathon’s reputation for speed to lure top-level talent to Ōita.

When the prizes were first established in 2010, they were awarded in equal value to the top male and female competitors in each classification. Changes in the awards since then have resulted in significant differences in relation to both gender and classification. From 2011 to 2014, the top male finishers in most categories received more than their female counterparts, whereas the awards for athletes in the higher-needs T51 class were significantly lower than those for other classification groups. With the increase in prize money beginning in 2015, the gender-based inequalities were eliminated, but those for different classifications were exacerbated: winners in the T34/53/54 class since then receive ten times as much prize money and are eligible for five times as much in time-bonus prizes as those competing in the T51 category.

It is not difficult to find fault with such glaring inequality, but unfortunately, the gap in prize money in Ōita’s race is both a reflection of and a problematic response to the present state of elite wheelchair marathon racing. By virtue of qualifying times, if not outright restrictions, the majority of elite marathons, including the Paralympics, are now limited almost exclusively to athletes in the T53/54 category. To offset its inherent challenges compared to these other races and maintain a reputation as one of these elite sporting events, Ōita needed to provide comparable compensation for these athletes; hence, the dramatic jump in prize money for this class of participants. Failure to do so would have made it ever more likely that these racers would simply stop coming to the marathon, a loss deemed potentially detrimental to the event. In contrast, athletes with different classifications find themselves with limited and even decreasing options for competition. This regrettable trend has worked in Ōita’s favor, because its marathon can continue to rely on—and even bolster—its reputation as an accessible race to attract the top-level athletes in these categories each year. To put it bluntly, organizers seem to have determined that in the current environment these athletes were likely to come to Ōita, no matter how much they got paid for winning.

By literally devaluing the sporting achievements of female athletes and those with higher levels of impairment, Ōita’s prizes render apparent some of the inequities lurking behind the increased emphasis on elite sport at the marathon and in the Paralympic Movement more broadly. Part of the issue, as Paralympic scholar Ian Brittain has observed, is the tendency for this emphasis on elite performance to fall back on a “model that matches societal perceptions and understandings of what sport should look like.” For the
marathon, this translates to the highest speeds and fastest times, like those generated by top male athletes competing in the T34/53/54 classification. The distinctions in the rewards—as reflected in the outright elimination of certain athletes from other “elite” competitions—reinforce disablist perceptions that the truly “elite” are those who are more functionally able.

Although these outcomes are particularly problematic given Ōita’s long-held goal of using the race to improve social perceptions of disability, they are hardly unique to the marathon. The constant reproduction of these types of social biases, combined with a host of other barriers to pursuing disability sports at the elite level, has translated to significantly lower participation rates at the Paralympics for women and for athletes with high support needs. Similar patterns are apparent in the marathon. Although Ōita’s races have been open to women from their inception, they continue to face a striking gender imbalance. In its first thirty-six years, the full-marathon race welcomed more than 4,500 participants, but only 231 of them, just over 5 percent, were women. The shifts in classification make exact counts difficult, but in recent years, participation rates for athletes not in the T34/53/54 group have hovered around 10 percent, and most races have no female athletes competing in these categories. Ōita’s recent move to significantly increase prize money for women in the T34/53/54 class and to eliminate the differences between men’s and women’s prizes points to a recognition of the need to promote greater equity, a recognition that may be extended to those competing in different classifications as well. After all, if the goal of increasing the prize money is to lure more of the best to Ōita, equalization of the prizes should theoretically increase participation across the board and bolster the marathon’s reputation as a site that truly values both competition and accessibility. Whether such changes or any of the theoretical benefits of increased prize money will be achieved remains to be seen.

Moving forward, maintaining Ōita’s twin emphasis on competition and accessibility is going to face continued challenges. The newer, high-profile wheelchair races in Japan and abroad are here to stay, along with the geographic barriers Ōita faces. With increasing cash awards to offset these disadvantages, the event appears likely to become more dependent on its sponsors, whose own support for the event is likely far more contingent than any would like to admit. Despite the prizes, participation numbers in almost all categories have continued to drop, and the prohibitive costs of equipment, training, and travel are threatening to create a whole new set of inequalities in the marathon, much as in disability sports more generally. Indeed, the millions of yen being spent on prize money and travel support for elite athletes are emblematic of the disparities in disability sports between the Global North and South.
As the marathon moves forward, searching for ways to address these and other challenges, it may end up becoming a very different event. Yet this does not need to be a negative development. Ōita, it is worth remembering, has a history of bucking trends and breaking new ground. By drawing from local models like FESPIC and its own distinctive community and ethos, Ōita has the opportunity once again to do something different or perhaps new. In the process, it can offer unique insights for other disability sports events struggling with similar challenges. Whatever shape Ōita’s race eventually assumes, the marathon has clearly had a profound impact on the region, its people, and the world of wheelchair marathon racing. Thanks in no small part to its history, local roots, and global reputation, the event seems likely to continue bringing athletes—new and returning, foreign and domestic, young and old—together in Ōita each autumn for the foreseeable future.