More Than Medals

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Chapter 4

A Turning Point
The 1998 Winter Paralympics in Nagano

The Paralympics to this point have received limited newspaper and television coverage. This time was different. Our newspaper company dispatched some 40 journalists to Nagano and provided extensive daily coverage on the front pages, the society pages, and the sports pages. Television coverage was considerable, too, and it was increased further in response to viewer requests.

Kotani Naomichi, 1998

With the 1998 Nagano Winter Paralympic Games, Japan achieved a status unique among Paralympic hosts. Only a handful of countries had hosted more than one Paralympics, and Japan became the first to hold both the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games. Nagano’s Paralympics were also the first Winter Games held outside of Europe since they were initiated in 1976, and they set a new and long-standing record for the number of athletes competing. Thus, the 1998 Nagano Paralympics were only the latest example of Japan’s ongoing—and often groundbreaking—contributions to the international Paralympic Movement. Nagano’s Games arguably had an even more significant impact at home. Tokyo’s 1964 Paralympics, described in chapter 1, had proven foundational in many respects, but by 1998 much had changed in Japan and in the Paralympic Movement. This chapter explores key differences between Tokyo and Nagano that explain why the 1998 Games came to be seen as a turning point, fostering what some have dubbed the “normalization” of disability sports in Japan.

To understand the differences apparent in Nagano and their consequent impacts, it is necessary to situate the Games in their larger sociohistorical context. The 1998 Winter Paralympics were organized and held against a backdrop of increased attention to disability-related issues. In the years leading up to them, Japan was deeply engaged in several international disability awareness and rights programs linked to the United Nations, and the 1990s were
marked in particular by significant changes in national activism, policies, and approaches related to disability. Such changes also reflected growing domestic concern about Japan’s rapidly aging population. The Nagano Games were able to capitalize on these developments, and many of the measures pursued in connection with the Winter Paralympics reflected broader national and international concerns. Although these background factors tend to be overlooked in accounts of the 1998 Games and their impact, I emphasize them here in part to check the common tendency to portray the Paralympics themselves as the driving forces for changes. Nagano’s Games generated disability-related improvements in Japan, but they did so—or sometimes failed to do so—in no small part because of the sociohistorical environment in which they were held.

Along those same lines, the environment for disability sports in 1998 was different in almost every respect from that of the Tokyo Games thirty-four years earlier. At the international level, the Paralympics had continued to develop and expand, formally welcoming athletes with a wider variety of impairments and developing closer connections with both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. By the early 1990s, Olympic hosts, like Nagano, were more or less expected to hold the Paralympics, even though the bidding processes remained separate. As disability sports took root and flourished in countries around the world, the Paralympics moved away from their rehabilitation-oriented origins toward an emphasis on elite-level performance. Many of these changes in the Games were tied to organizational reforms discussed in chapter 2 that eventually culminated in the establishment of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) in 1989. From the very beginning, then, Nagano’s Games were embedded in an international sports scene with little resemblance to that of 1964.

The situation within Japan had also undergone a dramatic transformation since Tokyo’s earlier Games. Although not yet part of “mainstream” awareness, Japan’s involvement with disability sports had become much deeper and more frequent. As the examples of FESPIC and the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon from earlier chapters indicate, Japan had become a leader in the realm of disability sports well before 1998. Japanese athletes were regularly engaging in a wide range of events at home and abroad and, just as importantly, were increasingly competitive at the international level. Fueled by rising international and domestic expectations, the years leading up to Nagano were marked by significant changes in support for and views of Japanese Paralympians. In terms of representational practices, these changes often translated into official approaches that sought to portray participants as elite athletes like their Olympic counterparts, yet this transition proved far from seamless, as older rehabilitation-focused understandings lingered. Outlining the evolu-
tion of both the international and the domestic disability sports scene around the time of the 1998 Paralympics brings these unique characteristics into high relief and clarifies how and why these Games became a turning point for disability sports in Japan.

As Kotani Naomichi, an editor for the *Yomiuri* newspaper, observed in the statement quoted in the epigraph, Nagano’s Games were especially noteworthy because of the increased media attention they generated. Studies of media coverage since 1998 have verified Kotani’s assertions, demonstrating that this period was, in fact, very different. The Nagano Paralympics proved to be a watershed in both the amount of coverage given to disability sports and the ways in which Japanese media outlets presented Paralympic sports and athletes. To highlight these important changes, the chapter devotes particular attention to examinations of media coverage over time. These comparisons of media treatments of earlier and later disability sports events also reveal continuities in representational trends that persisted up to and even after the Nagano Games, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Paralympics and the media. Because Nagano’s Games were one of the first Paralympics to make extensive use of the Internet, I conclude the chapter with an exploration of the potential benefits and pitfalls associated with the growing use of new media forms since the 1998 Games.

### Different Times, Different Games

Official accounts date the inception of the Nagano Paralympics to 1990, nearly a year before Nagano won the right to host the 1998 Winter Olympics. Even at this early point, potential organizers had already begun exploring the possibility of holding the Paralympics, because they were aware of increasing pressure on Olympic venues to host these Games as well. The first formal indication of Nagano’s intent to hold the Winter Paralympics came during the September 15, 1990, press conference for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) meeting in Tokyo. As part of his presentation, prefectural governor and head of Nagano’s Olympic bid committee Yoshimura Gorō declared, “We also want to hold the Winter Paralympic Games and share the pleasure of winter sports with more people, including those with disabilities.” After this public pronouncement, informal organizational efforts related to the Paralympics continued, gaining new momentum after the city was selected as the Olympic host in June 1991. In November 1991, the IPC dispatched its official letter requesting that Nagano uphold the “efforts to establish a tradition” by “hosting the 1998 Paralympics Winter Games at the same site and venues of
the 1998 Olympic Winter Games.” More planning, committee work, and formal declarations of support from Japanese national and local governments followed, culminating in Nagano’s official bid for the 1998 Winter Paralympics. During its general meeting in Berlin, the IPC formally named Nagano as the Paralympic host site on September 10, 1993. The Nagano Paralympic Organizing Committee, commonly dubbed NAPOC, was established on November 16, 1993. Just over four years later in March 1998, NAPOC would succeed in hosting an event that the IPC praised as “the best Paralympics of the Summer and Winter Games held so far.”

The reasons behind the success of Nagano’s Paralympics were, of course, multifaceted, but there is no denying that, compared to the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics, those in Nagano benefited in particular from both time and timing. The Games in 1964 had been an afterthought. In contrast, discussions about hosting the 1998 Paralympics were initiated before organizers were even certain that Nagano would be holding the Olympics. Quite simply, this meant that organizers in Nagano had much longer to prepare for their event. This extra time translated into a range of other benefits, including more extensive PR and fundraising campaigns, increased opportunities for volunteer and spectator recruitment, and greater attention to issues of accessibility. In the case of accessibility, the timing for Nagano’s Games was also especially fortuitous. During the years surrounding the Games, international and domestic attention to disability-related issues was notably greater than had been the case three decades earlier, thanks in part to a series of international and national campaigns focusing on disability, as well as growing concern about Japan’s rapidly changing demographics. Combined with the extended time frame, these background factors help explain changes in NAPOC’s approach to promoting the Games and especially organizers’ greater interest in using the Paralympics to foster barrier-free environments in Nagano and elsewhere in Japan.

Well aware that many in Japan were still unfamiliar with the Paralympics or disability sports, organizers in Nagano were driven from the beginning to expose as many people as possible to the Paralympics and its athletes. To achieve this end, NAPOC launched an intensive, wide-ranging, and well-supported publicity campaign almost immediately after its formation. Preliminary budgets for the Games earmarked more than 10 percent of expenditures for publicity-related expenses alone, and their final costs amounted to nearly triple the original estimates. With extra time and resources, organizers engaged in marketing efforts in Nagano that had simply not been feasible for Tokyo’s earlier Games. In fact, publicity efforts in Nagano were much more similar to those pursued for the recently held FESPIC Games in Kobe, reflecting the increased time and funding, and perhaps the fact that the chair-
man of NAPOC’s publicity subcommittee had also helped organize Kobe’s event.

As in FESPIC’s PR efforts, Nagano’s promoters used a series of public contests to decide on mascots, slogans, and songs that would represent the upcoming Paralympics. The earliest of these national competitions was launched in December 1993, only a month after NAPOC was established. Nagano’s Games also relied on print-based outreach campaigns, producing a variety of regularly updated pamphlets, posters, and leaflets that were distributed throughout Japan and abroad. Between September 1994 and February 1998 NAPOC published nineteen editions of *Paralympic News*, an eight-page newsletter featuring details on organizational activities and introductions to Paralympic sports and Japanese athletes. With print runs of nearly 8,000 copies, *Paralympic News* was distributed widely, especially among schools and groups in the Nagano area. On the eve of the Games, NAPOC produced and sold an official ninety-six-page, pocket-sized guidebook; a separate directory of Japanese participants was also prepared for the Games. Naturally, organizers employed traditional advertising, too, including newspaper ads, radio and TV spots, and fliers on Japan Railways trains. At the same time, NAPOC turned to some of the newest outreach tools available, setting up an official webpage a year before the Games, a development that is explored later in the chapter. Expanding on NAPOC’s promotional efforts, monthly publications from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Japan National Council of Social Welfare, and the Japanese Society for the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities ran regular article series introducing the Winter Paralympics, their sports, and their athletes to readers.

NAPOC took advantage of the longer planning time frame to organize a series of “warm-up” ceremonial events designed to raise interest in the Games, again adopting an approach similar to that of FESPIC in Kobe. The first of these events was a ceremony and parade held in March 1994 in central Nagano to mark the arrival of the Paralympic flag from Lillehammer, Norway, the previous Winter Games host. As the Paralympics approached, NAPOC celebrated key milestones—3 years, 1,000 days, 2 years, 500 days, 1 year, 300 days, 200 days, and 100 days to go—with increasingly elaborate events in Nagano. The earlier occasions often featured announcements of slogan and mascot contest outcomes, whereas those occurring closer to the Games were used for local outreach and peddling Paralympic-related products and tickets. By the time the Paralympics arrived, organizers were selling more than sixty Paralympic-branded products. Many of these goods bore images of Parabbit, the official symbol for the Games represented by various rabbit characters derived from a stylized combination of the recently adopted Paralympic symbol of the
tricolor *taegeuk* spirals and the Chinese character for “naga” from Nagano. Throughout this pre-Games period, NAPOC representatives and their larger-than-life costumed mascot traveled to a number of disability sports events outside Nagano, setting up information booths with photo displays, PR videos, Paralympic merchandise, and sporting equipment to try out. From October 1996 to January 1997, NAPOC also joined the organizing committee for the Nagano Olympics in a nationwide “caravan” designed to ensure that enthusiasm for both events was not limited to the host region.¹² These sorts of events illustrate Paralympic organizers’ proactive approaches to raising awareness about their Games.

As the sale of Paralympic merchandise suggests, publicity campaigns in Nagano often went hand in hand with fundraising efforts. Given the depressed state of Japan’s post-bubble economy in the 1990s and the pressure on Japanese companies to support the Olympic Games, NAPOC was mindful that financing the Paralympics was going to be challenging, especially if potential corporate sponsors remained unconvinced of broader public support for the event. From the beginning, the prefectural and local governments hosting the Paralympic events were planning to cover the bulk of costs (nearly 75%) with limited support from the national government. At the same time, organizers were counting on other income streams. As with Tokyo’s earlier Games, NAPOC sought out donations from groups like Japan’s Rotary and Lions Clubs, organizations linked to sports gambling, and social welfare or medical associations. Financial contributions came from a variety of other sources as well, including a donation link on the official website. PR campaigns themselves often performed double duty as fundraisers, as exemplified by the Paralympic poster displays and accompanying donation boxes set up at JUSCO department stores in the Nagano region and eventually other areas of Japan.¹³

In contrast to Tokyo, NAPOC successfully cultivated multiple corporate sponsorships, with some thirty-six companies offering formal support for the Games. Originally, organizers had planned to sell advertising rights to official sponsors, but initial inquiries fell flat in part because of corporations’ concerns about the potential for confusing overlap with Olympic advertising in a fiscally tight market. Fortunately, NAPOC had enough time to change course. Rather than requesting that would-be sponsors pay for rights, organizers began asking them to support the Paralympics in whatever way they could as part of their “social contribution activities.”¹⁴ In exchange, sponsors’ names and logos would feature prominently in Paralympic-related materials, with the specific nature of such displays dependent on the type and level of contributions. As the Games approached and the long-running PR campaigns began to reap dividends in the form of rising public attention to the Paralympics, busi-
nesses proved increasingly willing to sign on. Ultimately, they offered more goods, services, and financial contributions than organizers had anticipated. Corporate contributions were more than three times greater than original estimates, with the final tally accounting for well over 10 percent of all revenues. In this sense, Nagano’s Games demonstrated that, with time and the right approach, the Paralympics could be highly marketable, even in a less-than-ideal economic environment.\footnote{Ticket sales served as further evidence of the Paralympics’ broadened appeal in Nagano. Although both the Lillehammer and Atlanta Paralympic Games had charged for tickets, no disability sports event in Japan had ever charged any sort of admission fee for spectators. Pointing to the increasingly elite level of Paralympic sport and the pride of Paralympians, NAPOC decided to follow the model of recent Games and sell tickets for all of the Paralympic events. Organizers worked with a variety of travel companies and other existing ticket sellers to market tickets at some three thousand locations in Japan and abroad. At less than $10 in most cases, the price points for tickets were relatively low, and significant discounts were available for groups, students, and those with disabilities. Presales began in May 1997 as part of the celebration marking the 300-day countdown to the Games and ended in February 1998. NAPOC originally planned to sell same-day tickets as well, but before the presale period ended, all of the tickets had been sold. By the close of the Nagano Paralympics, more than 151,000 people had attended events as paying spectators, definitively marking a turning point for disability sports in Japan.\footnote{The revenue from ticket sales contributed a relatively small amount to the Games’ overall budget, because making money on admission fees had always been secondary to organizers’ desire to foster broad exposure to the Paralympics. In fact, nearly one-third of the tickets were sold to school groups from the Nagano region at sharply reduced rates. Many schools attended Paralympic events as part of their involvement in Nagano’s pioneering “One School, One Country” campaign. Through this Olympic and Paralympic education program, students at local schools learned about specific countries and then met and supported athletes from those countries during both sets of Games. A variety of anecdotal comments from students and educators suggest that attending Paralympic events, the tickets for which often proved cheaper and more available than Olympic events, played an important role in broadening students’ understanding of and interest in what they had been learning in school about the Games and their athletes.\footnote{Nagano’s torch relay represented another striking example of NAPOC’s efforts to promote direct, mass involvement with the Games, particularly for local residents with disabilities. Highlighting Japan’s history of involvement in Olympic and Paralympic sport, the Nagano torch relay sought to engage local residents in the Games and to foster a sense of civic responsibility and pride. The relay began in April 1998, with a symbolic flame ignited at the site of the nation’s first Olympic flame, the 1964 Tokyo Games, and ended at the same site in Nagano. The relay route traversed the length of Japan, visiting every prefecture, and included special stops at key locations such as the home of the 1964 Tokyo Games, where the flame was transferred to Nagano. The relay was a tremendous success, with millions of people lining the route to watch and cheer on the torchbearers. The relay route was designed to symbolize Japan’s history of involvement in Olympic and Paralympic sport, and to inspire a new generation of Japanese athletes and spectators. The relay was a powerful symbol of the spirit of the Games and a testament to the dedication of the Japanese people to the ideals of sport and peace.}
with the Paralympics, the relay began on February 25, 1998, with a torch-lighting ceremony at the site of Tokyo’s 1964 Paralympics. The nine-day event culminated in the lighting of the Paralympic Flame during the opening ceremony, thereby establishing a direct link between Nagano’s Games and all of the relay’s 754 formal participants and more than 180,000 spectators. The relay itself consisted of two main elements: a prefectural relay that featured the bulk of participants and passed through 149 of Nagano Prefecture’s neighborhoods, and a final relay in Nagano City that delivered the torch to the opening ceremony on March 5. Some 351 local teams applied to participate in the relay, of which 120 teams were selected; 80 of these five-person teams included at least one local resident with a disability, with 21 composed entirely of those with disabilities. For the final leg of the relay through Nagano City, organizers received 295 applications from throughout Japan and abroad and selected 20 teams, the majority of which also included members with disabilities.  

Rich in symbolism, spectacle, and PR potential as it was, the torch relay proved particularly attractive to corporate sponsors and media outlets. Both Coca Cola and NTT Communications provided financial support. Japan’s three major daily newspapers featured the torch-lighting ceremony on their front pages, and their regional affiliates offered coverage of various parts of the relay up through the final day. Perhaps understandably, the most extensive press attention came from Nagano’s local newspapers, which provided maps of the relay route, multiple daily reports and photos, and regular quotes from relay participants and spectators. The local Shinano mainichi newspaper, for instance, featured relay runner Miura Jirō, a 64-year-old from the village of Miyata. Miura, who had a form of muscular dystrophy, had spent the last fifteen years campaigning to improve accessibility throughout his home town. Mirroring organizers’ intended outcome, Miura pointed to local spectators’ enthusiastic response to the relay as a sign of improved awareness of disability in the region. There was no denying that the torch relay had provided a wide swath of Nagano’s population, disabled and nondisabled alike, with a direct encounter with the Paralympics.

As another means of expanding the influence of the Games, organizers held hundreds of cultural and social events linked to the Games. Ranging from musical concerts to folk craft exhibits, many of the events held before and during the Paralympics were meant to serve as forms of publicity, raising awareness of the Games among those who might not otherwise be attracted to or be aware of disability sports events. Other activities, especially those hosted for international athletes during the Games, provided opportunities for promoting intercultural exchange and introducing aspects of local history and culture.
Perhaps the most prominent and influential cultural event associated with the Games was Art Paralympics Nagano 1998. Proposed and organized by a group of volunteers, Art Paralympics was a multi-week, multi-site festival of visual and performing arts meant to complement the sporting events by giving artists with disabilities forums to display their talents. At its conclusion, the festival had engaged more than one thousand artists and performers and attracted tens of thousands of attendees. Paralympic researcher Kazuo Ogura has argued that the Art Paralympics not only brought attention to the previously overlooked work of artists with disabilities but also unsettled stereotypes by challenging the notion that disability was something that needed to be overcome. Thus the festival fit well with the broader goals of the Paralympics and epitomized organizers’ desire to assure that the impacts of holding these Games in Nagano extended well beyond athletic venues.21

One key to that expanded impact was the work of volunteers, as exemplified by their role in the Art Paralympics. NAPOC, like organizers for earlier disability sports events, realized that reliance on volunteerism was both a necessity and an important means of fostering local citizens’ engagement with the Paralympics. Initial recruitment drives, launched in June 1994, proved quite effective, with nearly seven thousand people applying to assist with the Games in some way. The majority of applicants were interested in helping out with cultural events, but 3,195 people ended up serving as official volunteers. These individuals participated in multiple training sessions and assisted with specialized aspects of event management, ranging from transportation and interpretation to ID checks and trash pickup. With the luxury of extra time for recruitment and training, NAPOC was able to identify and address particular areas, such as information technology, where they needed more volunteers. Organizers also tried to match work sites and tasks to applicants’ abilities and interests, resulting in the more efficient use of—and ideally better experiences for—volunteers.22

Volunteers in Nagano did not simply wait for organizers to tell them what to do; in many cases they assumed the lead, with impressive results. The Nagano Para Bora no Kai (NPBK), a particularly active group of volunteers based in Nagano City, offers a case in point: it was members of this group who proposed and organized the Art Paralympics. Formed in November 1994, NPBK brought together existing volunteer groups, local organizations interested in social welfare, and individual volunteers, including many with some form of impairment. With support from Nagano City and its own members, NPBK held monthly meetings and published a seasonal newsletter. In support of NAPOC, group members often helped organize countdown events and regularly assisted with merchandise sales and other promotional activities. During
the Games, NPBK set up a special booth at Nagano’s central train station to assist attendees and encourage passersby to support the Paralympics in any way possible.\textsuperscript{23}

Yet NPBK was more than a cheerleader for NAPOC, as an overview of one of the group’s newsletters attests. The fall 1996 edition, for instance, included details on upcoming NPBK events, calls for more volunteers, and requests for suggested outreach activities for the upcoming Games. Large portions were devoted to information and photos from the recent Atlanta Summer Paralympics, with particular attention to Japanese athletes and their experiences at the Games. Another story reported on a local middle-school PE teacher who had become interested in wheelchair basketball after working with a Nagano-based club; inspired by this experience, he was planning to teach the sport during an upcoming service trip to Syria. Other stories in the newsletter mentioned NPBK’s recent inspection tours of Nagano’s sports venues to assure that they would be truly accessible. Several articles addressed the group’s outreach presentations at local middle schools, including details that were shared with students about a study tour to the United States where some members met pioneering disability rights activist, Ed Roberts. The newsletter published a mix of student responses as well, with several noting students’ increased interest in Paralympic sporting events after hearing the presentations. One particularly telling comment highlighted a student’s realization that Japan needed to do a better job of making sure that its streets were safe and accessible for everyone. While NPBK members were certainly promoting Nagano’s upcoming Paralympics, their newsletter showed that they were actively seeking to use the Games to promote other ends as well.\textsuperscript{24}

### Human-Friendly Games

Indeed, many of NPBK’s activities before and during the Paralympics centered on issues of accessibility and creating more disability-friendly communities in Nagano. In addition to the visits to Paralympic venues mentioned in the newsletter, in the lead-up to the Games NPBK members joined with several other local and national groups to carry out multiple inspections in Nagano City with an eye toward accessibility. During the Paralympics, NPBK assumed primary responsibility for using a variety of adapted vehicles to transport spectators who needed extra assistance because of physical impairments. Volunteers from the group were also instrumental in helping NAPOC develop and use a special snow wheelchair that would allow spectators to reach the outdoor venues.\textsuperscript{25}

NPBK was certainly not alone in linking the Paralympics to the promotion of accessibility at the Games; NAPOC itself emphasized the need to reduce or
eliminate barriers for both athletes and spectators. Unlike Tokyo’s Paralympics, those in Nagano were planned alongside the preceding Olympics from the early stages, which meant that organizers had not only more time but also more opportunities for input. Such differences were particularly apparent in the Athletes’ Village. From the beginning, both individual rooms and public spaces were designed with accessibility in mind: wide doorways, ramps, low counters, large bathrooms equipped with handrails, braille signage, and a range of other modifications were quite literally built into these spaces. Athletic venues, too, were set up to assure that appropriate parking, walkways, elevators, seating, and restroom facilities would be available to accommodate the needs of athletes and spectators. The extra time also allowed NAPOC to identify and sometimes address potential problems, particularly given that they had hosted a series of pre-Paralympic athletic events at the same venues. For example, one such event held in 1997 revealed poor visibility from some of the wheelchair seating sections, which prompted plans to expand and elevate the viewing area during the Paralympics.

Facing the added challenges of dealing with cold temperatures, ice, and snow, especially at outdoor venues, NAPOC embraced diverse strategies to help athletes and spectators reach and enjoy the events. Their transportation approach mixed tried-and-true technologies like lift-equipped buses and vans with locally developed devices such as the snow wheelchair and other powered snow vehicles modified to carry one or more wheelchairs. During the events themselves, NAPOC provided accessible warming tents, as well as specially designed blankets and heaters for wheelchairs. Volunteer sign-language interpreters were available throughout the Games to assist those with hearing impairments, and at indoor venues, special real-time FM broadcasts and freely available radios were provided to allow anyone with a visual impairment to follow the events. Both before and during the Games, NAPOC also printed braille versions of many of its publications, including the official guidebook for the Games. As these various measures suggest, organizers sought to ensure that accessibility would be more than just a buzzword at Nagano’s Paralympics.

In addition to NAPOC’s efforts at Paralympic sites, a range of local governments and other organizations used the Games as opportunities to pursue their own “barrier-free” agendas. For instance, a 1995 story from the Shinano mainichi newspaper reported that officials from the village of Hakuba, the Paralympic venue for cross-country skiing, had participated in a program where they used wheelchairs or eye masks to experience for themselves the lack of accessibility. Participants also received instruction on the proper procedures for carrying people in wheelchairs up and down stairways—a necessity because
many sites in the village, including train stations, lacked elevators or accessible ramps. Similar sessions were undertaken at other venues, reflecting elements of “human-friendly community development projects” that were intended to help local areas identify and address accessibility issues before the Paralympics, thereby moving their communities closer to a barrier-free ideal.

Perhaps the most intensive campaign occurred in Nagano City. Nagano’s own “human-friendly” project had been launched in 1993. To evaluate the effectiveness of earlier campaigns while identifying and ideally addressing problems before the Games were held, city officials, volunteer groups like NPBK, the local chambers of commerce, transportation providers, and a host of other stakeholders joined forces in August 1997 to spend several days inspecting downtown roads, shops, hotels, and public transportation networks to assess their accessibility. Thanks in part to widespread participation from local citizens with disabilities, the inspections revealed a number of shortcomings, ranging from bicycles blocking the tactile pavement used by the visually impaired to a lack of accessible restrooms in some large stores, banks, and hotels. Some of these issues were more easily addressed than others, but at the very least, these types of campaigns made it far more difficult for local officials and others to claim ignorance when it came to questions of accessibility in the Nagano region.

In the years leading up to the Games, greater attention to barrier-free ideals was also increasingly apparent in local policies and funding decisions. In 1992, even before it was officially named as the Paralympic host, Nagano City updated a preexisting long-term accessibility plan and launched an immediate implementation of improvements by building ramps, adding sidewalk curb cuts, and refurbishing existing accessible restrooms. These and similar projects were pursued over the following years at locations throughout the area, many of which had little direct connection with the Paralympics themselves. In 1996, Nagano City also revised a set of social welfare guidelines dating from 1982, pursuing a new approach that emphasized “minimizing barriers as much as possible” and fostering a “normalization mindset” toward accessibility issues.

The city’s revised guidelines coincided with and came partly in response to the implementation of Nagano Prefecture’s new Social Welfare Community Development Ordinance, enacted in March 1995. The prefectural ordinance aimed to “promote comprehensive social welfare community development by setting appropriate standards that will allow for the safe and easy use of facilities by individuals with disabilities and other needs.” It included a lengthy list of regulations spelling out accessibility expectations for facilities or services that welcomed the public. Beginning in 1996, nearly all
new construction or renovation of such facilities was expected to align with the specified standards, and existing facilities were encouraged to find ways to comply as well. For those looking (or needing) to pursue barrier-free modifications, financial support was available in the form of special government subsidies or loans from the local Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion Fund. One such subsidy helped private bus companies in the region purchase lift-equipped buses before the Games.\textsuperscript{32}

A World beyond the 1998 Games

Given these sorts of policy changes, the financial outlays that they entailed, and the various human-friendly campaigns just described, it is understandable that many people at the time and since have credited Nagano’s Paralympics with advancing barrier-free principles in the region and in Japan more broadly.\textsuperscript{33} At the very least, it would seem that these Games—much like the FESPIC Games in Kobe—served as a fresh and pressing incentive for enacting preexisting plans and measures designed to support those with disabilities. Yet therein lies a key point, one that can be easily overlooked when focusing on the legacies of these sorts of events: neither Nagano nor Japan was a blank slate, waiting for the Paralympics to leave their marks. To understand why and how the 1998 Paralympics had the impact that they did, it is also necessary to take into account a number of factors beyond the Games themselves.

For one, the response to the Paralympics in Nagano was grounded in the region’s significantly longer history of engagement with progressive disability-related approaches. As early as 1975 (predating the first Winter Paralympic Games), the Ministry of Health and Welfare designated Nagano City as one of its Social Welfare Model Cities. The city’s initial long-term plan for promoting accessibility dated from the early 1980s and was explicitly linked with, if not directly inspired by, the UN International Year of Disabled Persons. The guidelines that the city later revised in the lead-up to the Games had already been on the books for more than a decade. The initial tagline for these older guidelines, “Developing a community where everyone can live well,” reflected a clear commitment to fostering greater accessibility, even if the guidelines themselves lacked the legal heft that the later prefectural ordinance provided.\textsuperscript{34}

These earlier policies serve as reminders that many people in the region had been working to improve accessibility well before the Paralympics. Miura Jirō, the Paralympic torch runner from Miyata Village who had been active locally for some fifteen years, was a case in point. In addition, support for hosting the Games in Nagano emerged early on at both the governmental and
volunteer levels in no small part because organizers were not starting from scratch. A volunteer group like NPBK might have been formed specifically in response to the Paralympics, but many of its members were already engaged in various forms of disability-related advocacy. As just one example, Ikeda Jun, a vice chair of NPBK, had been a long-time prefectural case worker who had become involved with the Independent Living Movement as it was beginning to gain support in Japan during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A key participant in NPBK’s school outreach programs, Ikeda was instrumental in launching the group’s study tour to the United States. In the months immediately following the Paralympics, he helped establish Human Net Nagano, an NGO dedicated to promoting and supporting opportunities for people with disabilities to live independently in their home communities. Although Human Net Nagano might be considered a legacy of the 1998 Games, it also exemplifies the debt that such legacies owed to people like Ikeda, who had already laid the groundwork for the Paralympics to deliver results at the local level.

A second major factor behind the impact of Nagano’s Games was the significant shift in policy and law occurring in Japan as a whole in the years leading up to the Paralympics. A survey of key laws related to disability in Japan shows that the national government passed or revised six such laws between 1993 and 1998, with several other new or amended measures put in place within a few years of the Games. As an example, the new 1994 law known as the “Heartful Building Law” called for improving the accessibility of public buildings, and it clearly served as the impetus and legal backbone for the similar Nagano prefectural ordinance and the revised Nagano City guidelines discussed earlier. Among its provisions, the national law established the subsidies that could be used to implement approved barrier-free construction or remodeling plans at the local level. Following up on a significant 1993 revision of the Fundamental Law for Disabled Persons, which originally dated from 1970, the prime minister’s office also issued the Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities in 1995. This seven-year plan was “based on the philosophy of rehabilitation (which aims at fulfilling human rights at all stages of the life cycle) and normalization, which aims to create a society in which persons with disabilities are equal to those without disabilities with respect to daily life and activities.” With references to many of the new or forthcoming legal changes, the plan targeted seven areas, including various efforts to improve accessibility and promote independent living. It cited sports specifically and characterized the upcoming Nagano Paralympic Games as an example of Japan’s promotion of sporting opportunities for those with disabilities.

On its surface, this cluster of legal and policy changes in the years surrounding the Nagano Paralympics seem to offer further evidence of the Games’
impact on Japan. A closer look, however, reveals that many of these changes stemmed from a unique confluence of domestic and international pressures, with the Paralympics assuming a relatively minor role in the mix when it came to disability policies. Domestically, Japan's disability rights movement was entering its fourth decade in the 1990s. A full examination of the movement (which like most movements was complex and multifaceted) is beyond the scope of the present chapter, but generally speaking, in the 1980s the movement began to move away from its protest-centered, welfare-oriented roots. As legal scholar Katharina Heyer has observed, activists' approaches in the 1980s onward tended to focus on lobbying local and national governments to gain financial and logistical support for a "broad list of issues that affect people's daily lives: the right to live in the community, to be educated along nondisabled peers, to have access to employment, and to navigate the public sphere." Many elements of Nagano's human-friendly campaigns, the volunteer activities linked to the Games, and Japan's policy changes reflected such aspects of the disability rights movements' broader goals and approaches. Much of this sort of activism in Japan had little direct connection with the Paralympics, though the Games almost certainly offered advocates an opportunity to gain additional leverage as they pursued their goals, especially on the ground in Nagano.

Japanese policymakers at nearly all levels were also responding to concerns about changing demographics. As noted in chapter 3 in relation to Ōita, rural depopulation presented problems for many regions in Japan throughout the postwar period. The situation was further complicated by the fact that younger people tended to be the ones relocating to the cities, leaving rural areas with shrinking and increasingly older populations. By the 1980s, government reports were sounding the alarm about the rapid aging of Japan's populace nationwide, a result of declining birthrates and increased longevity. According to estimates at the time, by 2020 more than 20 percent of Japan's population were expected to be older than age 65. This "graying of Japan" posed challenges for many sectors, but its impact was definitely felt in the disability-related measures implemented in the 1990s, as exemplified by the 1995 Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities cited earlier that described rehabilitation in relation to "all stages of the life cycle." Heyer's study of Japanese government reforms suggests that concerns about the elderly often served as a more pressing driver for change than an increased commitment to disability rights. It is not surprising then that many of the policies and campaigns from this period explicitly referenced the elderly or aging. The less-used official name of the 1994 "Heartful Building Law," for instance, was the Law for Buildings Accessible to and Usable by the
Elderly and Physically Disabled Persons. Ordinances and guidelines in Nagano, too, cited the region’s aging population as a major justification for the need to implement changes. Descriptions of the “human-friendly” campaigns almost invariably linked them to fostering greater accessibility for both the elderly and those with disabilities, usually with little recognition that accessibility needs for people in those groups might differ dramatically. Supporters often cited statistics to highlight the necessity for all these local efforts, figures that perhaps unintentionally seemed to underscore the greater urgency of meeting the needs of the elderly: as of October 1996, 16.31 percent of Nagano City’s population was over the age of 65, in contrast to 2.91 percent who had a documented disability.41 Obviously, concerns about Japan’s aging population had little to do with the Paralympics themselves, but it is easy to see how the 1998 Games benefited from growing attention to issues of accessibility in this context. Here again, it also appears that those interested in pursuing change, particularly in Nagano, latched onto the Paralympics—and especially the additional publicity and pressure they brought—as a tool to help them address these sorts of long-standing challenges in Japanese society.

In addition to these domestic factors, changes in Japanese policy and law were being influenced by developments at the international level. As planning for the Paralympics began in the early 1990s, the UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–92) was nearing its end, but the succeeding Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993–2002) continued to pursue and expand on the UN campaign’s goals. These extended development programs were too complex to explore in detail here, but overviews of both offer insights on how they influenced Japanese policies at the time. Both campaigns laid out ambitious agendas that aimed “to improve the situation and status of persons with disabilities,” particularly by encouraging national governments to implement measures for improvement in targeted areas over the course of the decade.42 Although UN-affiliated groups or committees took a leading role in both campaigns, they were supported, and often compelled to act, by a variety of international experts, global advocacy organizations, and national stakeholders. During each of the decades, key individuals tied to the programs met at regular intervals to assess progress being made toward the outlined goals, establishing a degree of accountability for participating countries. These international or regional meetings not only served to highlight achievements or shortfalls but also provided opportunities to revise goals and targets.

By the end of the UN Decade, the agenda had been modified from an initial focus on prevention, rehabilitation, full participation, and equality to one that gave greater attention to “equalization of opportunities for disabled persons.”43 Reflecting, in part, the ongoing international growth of the Indepen-
dent Living Movement and other similar forms of disability-related activism, this changing agenda emphasized disability rights, independence, integration, and greater involvement of people with disabilities themselves in these efforts. In late 1992, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific picked up these revised priorities when it launched the Asian and Pacific Decade, a development program motivated by the region’s booming economy, diversity, unique challenges, and high percentages of both aging populations and individuals with disabilities. The original agenda for this follow-up decade campaign emphasized the national implementation of legislation and policies that would help the region achieve “full participation and equality of persons with disabilities.” As the campaign neared its end, efforts were increasingly oriented toward a rights-based, barrier-free approach. This first Asian and Pacific Decade has since been followed by two others in the region, with the most recent aiming to “Make the Right Real” by 2022.

Naturally, responses to these UN development programs differed dramatically, and recent work in the field of disability studies offers critical reminders that such attempts to impose purportedly universal definitions and values across such a diverse set of places and people were inherently complicated and problematic. In Japan’s case, many of the measures related to disability enacted in the 1980s and 1990s were directly tied to these international campaigns. As Heyer’s study of the UN Decade’s impact on Japan points out, the UN campaigns and mandates not only helped inspire the shifts in the Japanese disability rights movement discussed earlier but also pushed the government to adopt international “normalization” ideals as guidelines for revising its disability policies.

These new commitments and forms of activism continued, and arguably deepened, with the Asian and Pacific Decade. The seven-year time frame for the 1995 Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities, for instance, was clearly meant to coincide with the endpoint of the Asian and Pacific Decade. Japan’s official report prepared for the meeting that concluded the decade campaign in 2002 explicitly linked policy changes during the previous two decades to UN-related efforts. Giving minimal attention to any earlier measures or activism, the end-of-decade report begins with the 1980 establishment of the national government’s Headquarters for Promoting the UN International Year for Disabled Persons. Additional details about successive long- and short-term programs, plans, and legal changes—all of which overlapped with the international campaigns in terms of both timing and goals—highlighted the ways in which Japan had been largely successful in meeting expectations associated with these international development projects. Based on this report, Japan could now claim to be a leader on these issues in the region.
Japan’s engagement with these long-running UN-affiliated development programs and the impacts of that engagement were certainly not contingent on the hosting of the Paralympics. Taking these international pressures and their concomitant domestic elements into account, however, does provide a clearer picture of how Nagano’s Games occurred at a particularly opportune moment, one that left Japan, and more specifically Nagano, primed for the Paralympics. The UN agendas and the Japanese domestic measures they inspired made specific, if limited, reference to sports as a form of culture that needed to be accessible for those with disabilities. It is thus possible to see the enthusiastic embrace of the Games during this period as both consequence and evidence of Japan’s international commitments.

At the same time, the Paralympics served as an amplifier for broadcasting the ideals of the UN movements within Japanese society. This role was exemplified by NAPOC’s rhetoric about the Games’ broader purpose and goals. Official materials produced for Nagano’s Paralympics gave little more than passing attention to the UN or Asian and Pacific Decades themselves, yet the language used in these materials was strikingly different from that of Tokyo’s organizers more than three decades earlier. In the materials prepared for Nagano, the references to rehabilitation so prominent in reports and writings in the 1960s and throughout the early years of FESPIC were largely absent. In their place were frequent allusions to awareness, accessibility, opportunity, independence, and the UN mantra of “full participation and equality.”49 In part, the move away from rehabilitation reflected developments in the Paralympic Movement’s approach to sports, which are discussed in the next section, but the telling use of UN terminology also speaks to the extent to which these international ideals had permeated the Paralympics in Nagano. It also brings us back to an important question: What role did the 1998 Games actually play in realizing these abstract international goals of accessibility, equality, and participation in Japan?

As outlined in the preceding pages, crediting the Paralympics alone for the changes occurring in Japan and Nagano would be overly simplistic, because so many other factors were involved. Yet there are several ways in which the 1998 Games seem to merit their reputation as a turning point, even beyond the realm of disability sports. Unlike the earlier Games in Tokyo, Nagano’s Paralympics offered far more opportunities for people with disabilities—especially nonathletes—to engage with and even shape the event. This difference reflected both broader changes occurring in Japan at the time and new approaches on the part of Nagano’s organizers. The work of NPBK, the human-friendly campaigns, and other such efforts also indicate that disability advocates were able to tap into the official and popular publicity associated
with the Games to present their ideas to a new and dramatically expanded audience. It seems fair to say, then, that the Paralympics played a role in raising awareness about disability and accessibility issues, particularly in the Nagano region. Yet it is also important to acknowledge how challenging it can be to evaluate such changes in awareness or participation. The available evidence—much of it anecdotal—tends to focus on the times, places, and people most associated with the Games, making it difficult to determine broader, long-term impacts.

Accessibility would appear to offer a more concrete (literally in some cases) example of the impact from Nagano’s Paralympics. Although concerns about creating a “barrier-free” society were hardly unique to Nagano during this period, the Paralympics provided both an opportunity and a deadline to demonstrate Japan’s and the region’s accessibility bona fides. With the world turning its gaze to the region, Nagano did not have the luxury of waiting until the end of the Asian and Pacific Decade to act: accessibility had to become more than lip service in Nagano, and changes had to happen immediately. The urgency created by the upcoming Paralympics combined with the other domestic and international factors to generate the flurry of accessibility-related policies, campaigns, and actions pursued in Nagano before and during the Games. In marked contrast with Tokyo 1964, several of the accessibility measures associated with the Paralympics also outlived the event itself, because they were encoded in policy or incorporated into the built environment or transportation networks. As just one example, Nagano’s barrier-free Athletes’ Village was converted into apartments, housing that served as a first-time independent apartment for one of the members from Human Net Nagano beginning in late 1998. Although it is not clear how many other people with disabilities were able to take advantage of these facilities, it is no stretch to say that their very availability—along with the presence of countless new curb cuts, elevators, and accessible restrooms—was inextricably linked to the 1998 Paralympics.

Unfortunately, Nagano’s Games also exhibited shortcomings in terms of accessibility. By many accounts, the various human-friendly campaigns in the region provided a remarkably effective means for raising awareness about the barriers that individuals with disabilities faced on a daily basis in their communities. But awareness (and new guidelines) did not always translate into barrier-free environments, as seen in particular with the persistence of accessibility problems in Nagano that were documented in the August 1997 campaign only six months before the Paralympics. Infrastructural or building changes required time, money, and motivation, and for whatever reason the proper combination was not always there for Nagano’s Games.
lingering barriers might help explain reports from the time indicating that people with disabilities were not very visible outside the athletic venues or Paralympic Village. In other cases, the “barrier-free” fixes—such as the temporary structures built in some area hotels to overcome the customary step into the bathroom—generated their own new barriers while failing to address the problems for the long term. Even the sports venues, which were generally lauded for their attention to accessibility, faced criticism for usability issues: they had less-than-ideal and often segregated seating, small elevators, limited accessible restrooms, and long distances between seating, elevators, and restrooms. From the perspective of some critics, these problems apparent in Nagano were not unique to these Games but rather exemplified broader patterns in Japanese society. In an effort to become barrier-free, Japan was starting to make progress on the “hard side,” with the widespread recognition that barriers existed and with new facilities being built to code. On the “soft side”—motivation, understanding, acceptance, appreciation, and general approaches to disability that went beyond the letter of the law—there was still a long way to go. Nagano’s Games did not (and ultimately could not) make Japan or even Nagano barrier-free, but the changes in and discussions about accessibility that they helped spark demonstrated the power of the Paralympics as a tool for pushing a barrier-free agenda at home. In so doing, they not only marked a dramatic shift from Japan’s first Paralympics in 1964 but also set the stage for the ongoing campaigns connected with the 2020 Paralympics that are addressed in chapter 5.

“None Other than Competitive Sport”: The Evolving Disability Sports Scene

Among the many differences between Tokyo’s Paralympics in 1964 and those in Nagano, the shift in focus away from rehabilitation was particularly striking. As noted in chapter 1, organizers for the 1964 Games tended to downplay the importance of competition to focus attention on the medical and social benefits of the Games. Three decades later, the focus for Nagano had swung nearly 180 degrees, with organizers repeatedly emphasizing that the Paralympics were, first and foremost, a competitive sporting event involving some of the world’s most elite athletes. Although this marked shift certainly reflected the broader developments in approaches to disability discussed earlier, the driving forces behind the changed emphasis came from the realm of disability sports. With its intentional efforts to forge closer connections with the Olympic Movement, the still relatively new IPC set the tone for Nagano’s
Games from the earliest planning stages. The IPC’s goals and approaches were reinforced by trends and developments in Japan’s disability sports scene that helped make the 1998 Paralympics remarkably different from those held in Tokyo more than thirty years earlier. This combination of factors also positioned Nagano’s Games to have a profound impact on disability sports at multiple levels—from bolstering the status of the IPC to reshaping how athletes with disabilities were represented.

The origins and early organizational history of the IPC are well documented in other works and were presented in chapter 2 in relation to FESPIC. In connection with Nagano’s Winter Games, three overlapping aspects of the early IPC merit brief consideration here. First, the IPC was still a relatively young organization when Nagano began planning for its Games. Established in 1989, the IPC only assumed organizational control over Paralympic events after the conclusion of the 1992 Winter and Summer Paralympic Games; in other words, the 1998 Paralympics were only the third Games held under the direction of the IPC. The IPC had a vested interest in seeing that these Games happened in Nagano and that they suited the image of the Paralympics that the committee was working to cultivate.

By design then, Nagano’s Paralympics were going to be operating with a very different set of guidelines than had been the case in 1964, and official materials make it very clear that NAPOC coordinated closely with the IPC from the beginning. For instance, scattered throughout the official report on the 1998 Games are references to activities or approaches carried out in line with The Paralympic Handbook for Organisers of Paralympic Games, which was enclosed with the first official correspondence from the IPC requesting that Nagano host the Games. Taking advantage of the lengthy planning phase, NAPOC provided regular updates on planning at IPC meetings, hosted IPC officials for multiple onsite inspections, organized several “pre-Paralympic” international disability sporting events to test the region’s readiness, and dispatched study groups abroad to observe and report back on various IPC events, including both the Lillehammer and Atlanta Paralympics.

IPC influence was especially apparent in relation to the sporting competitions themselves. Venue design, officiating, antidoping measures, and the classification of athletes all bore direct signs of substantial IPC engagement from beginning to end. NAPOC’s approach to the classification of athletes, in particular, revealed and reinforced the IPC’s still-emerging position as the international authority on disability sports. When Nagano received the official invitation to host the Games, no medical specialists in Japan held IPC certification for classifying winter sport athletes, something that is hardly surprising since the IPC itself was only a few years old, with its first Winter Paralympics
still to come. But almost immediately, NAPOC began dispatching several Japanese specialists to IPC-affiliated sports events abroad so that they could acquire the necessary training and have IPC certifications in hand before Nagano’s Games.\(^{58}\) As this example demonstrates, NAPOC proved to be a reliable and even beneficial partner for the IPC as it charted its new leadership of the Paralympic Movement.

The situation in Nagano also reflected a second feature of the early IPC, notably its relationship with the Olympic Movement and with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in particular. The IPC was established, in part, to facilitate better interactions with the IOC, but the relationship between the two in the 1990s was still in the formative phase. As noted, the bidding processes for the Olympics and Paralympics during this period were still separate, and Olympic hosts were not obligated to hold the Paralympics. This point is reflected in the language in the IPC’s first official letter to Nagano’s would-be Paralympic organizers on November 8, 1991: Nagano was asked “to consider the possibility of hosting” as part of the IPC’s continuing “efforts to establish a tradition” of Paralympic Games being held in the Olympic host cities.\(^{59}\) The case for this tradition was bolstered by a (relatively short) list of recent and upcoming cities that had agreed to host both events. In addition to such calls to participate in a clear invention of tradition, the letter pitched joint hosting as ways to cut costs for the Games and build on the logistical know-how of Olympic organizers, a pitch that seemed to overlook the fact that the easiest way to keep costs down and avoid organizational hassles was not to host the Paralympics, as many Olympic cities had chosen to do after Tokyo’s 1964 Games.

Of course, when the IPC dispatched its letter, it already had a strong indication that Nagano was going to accept, given previous formal expressions of interest in the Paralympics during the Olympic bidding process. The first public statement came from Nagano’s governor during the IOC meeting in September 1990. In January 1991, Nagano’s written response to the IOC inspection committee’s questionnaire also confirmed that “if Nagano were named the 1998 Winter Olympic host city, it was prepared to accept the Winter Paralympic Games.”\(^{60}\) The timing of such official statements raises an interesting question: Were early expressions of willingness to host the Paralympics seen as a way to bolster Nagano’s case for its Olympic bid?\(^{61}\) The scandals that later plagued the IOC in connection with the bids for the Olympics in Nagano and Salt Lake City suggest that Olympic promoters at potential host sites had been seeking any sort of advantage possible, and they would almost certainly have been aware of the newly emerging relationship between the IOC and IPC. In that context, Olympic organizers in Nagano had little to lose by offering to
host the Paralympics, and they could point to Japan’s track record in disability sports to demonstrate that this was more than an empty commitment. Whatever the specific motives behind the decision to pursue both Games, there is little question that Nagano’s Olympics and Paralympics were linked from early on, in no small part because of developments unfolding within international sports institutions.

The changes at the top were replicated—and reinforced—on the ground in Nagano in various forms of coordination between NAPOC and the Nagano Olympic Organizing Committee (dubbed NAOC). From shared office spaces to joint publicity tours, both committees worked together far more closely than had been the case with Tokyo’s events in 1964. Cooperative efforts throughout the process contributed to the improved accessibility of venues and the Athletes’ Village. The committees carried out several joint training sessions for volunteers, and a number of staff were directly involved in planning and holding both events. NAOC also helped NAPOC cut its costs by sharing resources and supplies acquired in connection with the Olympics. In this sense, Nagano’s experience lived up to, and perhaps even exceeded, the IPC’s promised benefits of hosting joint Games.

Yet the relationship was not all smooth sailing. NAOC resisted calls for holding exhibitions of Paralympic sports during the Olympics, pointing to organizational challenges and the fact that they had already “invested a great deal in the Paralympics.” A controversy over national team uniforms less than a year before the event sparked widespread attention and criticism as well. The Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) initially denied requests to allow Japanese Paralympians to wear the same uniforms as the Olympic team and only relented under pressure from the prime minister and the Ministry of Education. The uniform controversy highlighted the lingering tensions between the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the negative publicity it generated and the ultimate reversal from the JOC indicated that the relationship between the two sets of Games was then still in flux.

The uniform controversy also exemplified a third aspect of the young IPC’s approach: the promotion of the Paralympics as an international, elite sporting event on par with the Olympics. As noted in chapter 2, the Paralympics and disability sports in general had been gravitating toward an emphasis on elite, competitive sports for several years before this, a shift in focus that became even more pronounced with the formation of the IPC. In part, this shift reflected the IPC’s explicit goal of establishing stronger ties with the Olympics, with many insisting that being parallel to the Olympics meant “that the Paralympic Games must be serious and that they must be only for elite athletes—distant from any notion of recreational sport.”
The emphasis on elite competition was also part and parcel of how the still evolving IPC was seeking to define itself and its mission. As the initial correspondence with Nagano put it, “The mandate of IPC . . . is to organize Paralympic Games and World Championships for ALL [sic] categories of disabilities. One of the important aims of IPC is to integrate events for disabled athletes into competitions for able-bodied and to give top-level sportsmen and women the exciting thrill of being part of the elite sports movement [sic] in the world.”\textsuperscript{66} At the time, the IPC’s “mandate” and aims of integration were far less clearcut (and far more controversial) than this letter implied, but the letter left little doubt that elite sport was at the center of IPC concerns. In an article published in a Japanese sports medicine journal just before Nagano’s Paralympics were held, IPC president Robert Steadward employed a bit of historical oversimplification to reinforce this connection, citing 1989—the year of the IPC’s establishment—as the turning point in the disability sports movement when emphasis shifted from rehabilitation to “competitive sports focusing on sporting excellence, and high-level performance.”\textsuperscript{67} For the IPC, the ability to deliver elite-level sports competition was clearly integral to its leadership claims in the realm of disability sports.

Given this broader context, it is hardly surprising that NAPOC’s official report described the Paralympics as “an event for the disabled that gathers the world’s highest-level athletes” and outlined an official “Hosting Philosophy” that listed “giving the disabled an opportunity to participate in high-level competition” first among NAPOC’s goals.\textsuperscript{68} Official materials in general are littered with references to competition and elite athletes, with many echoing Steadward’s idea that an emphasis on rehabilitation in connection with the Paralympics was (or should be) a thing of the past. A NAPOC pamphlet targeted would-be volunteers with this reminder: “When hearing about the Paralympics, there is a tendency to think of it in terms of medical care or assistance, but the Paralympics are competitive sporting events involving highly trained athletes.”\textsuperscript{69} A number of Paralympians used their “Word of Greeting” space in the official directory of Japanese athletes to comment on the highly competitive nature of these Games. One alpine skier claimed that in his mind the “Paralympics and Olympics are the same,” and several other Paralympians reminded spectators to view them as athletes, rather than disabled people.\textsuperscript{70} It is worth recalling here, too, that the decision to charge for tickets at the 1998 Paralympics was framed in terms of the elite-level competition at the event. With their record number of “elite” athletes and sold-out competitions, Nagano’s Paralympics broke new ground and in the process offered a strong case that the IPC was on the right track.
Disability Sports in Japan

If some involved with Nagano’s Games were only beginning to realize that the Paralympics were “none other than competitive sport,” for others more intimately engaged with disability sports in Japan, the rising level of international and domestic competition would have been far from surprising. In the decades since Japan first hosted the Paralympics, the disability sports scene at home had changed on multiple fronts, with several significant developments unfolding largely in response to the upcoming Games in Nagano. Fujita Motoaki, a leading scholar of disability sports in Japan, subdivides the years leading up to 1998 into three periods, each building on the preceding one. His framework is useful for understanding the domestic context for Nagano’s Paralympics and why they marked a moment of transition.

For Fujita, the years up to 1975 were a foundational period, marked by the institution building and international engagement detailed in previous chapters. The establishment of the Japan Sports Association for the Disabled (JSAD) after the 1964 Games was obviously critical during these years, but so too was the launching of annual national sports meets in 1965. Over the years, official reports demonstrate that these meets provided increasing numbers of men and women with venues for developing and displaying their athletic skills. Japan’s national meets were also significant because they embraced a multi-disability format from the beginning. In addition, because these events customarily followed the annual Kokutai or National Sports Meets, they moved to a different prefecture each year, generating the potential for increased local awareness of and access to disability sports well beyond the Tokyo region or other rehabilitation-related sites. Another key domestic development during this foundational period was the opening of the Osaka Municipal Disability Sports Center in 1974, the first such venue in Japan dedicated to sports for those with disabilities. Together with rehabilitation-oriented sites like those in Ōita, the Osaka Center provided a valuable model for future sites in terms of both facilities and staffing.

The period from 1976 to 1990 was defined by the continued expansion of disability sports throughout Japan. The number of facilities available for athletes with disabilities jumped dramatically during these years, going from a mere handful to ninety-one by 1990. Domestic sporting events and organizations also proliferated, with many groups and competitions focusing on the promotion of particular sports, including several winter sports that were only beginning to attract international attention. Another milestone for disability sports came in 1985 when JSAD launched a formal system for training
and certifying disability sports specialists. The new system helped standardize event officiating in particular but also laid the groundwork for future developments in the training of new disability sports instructors and coaches throughout Japan. All of these factors and the ongoing opportunities for competing at home and abroad were beginning to have an impact on athletic performances as well, even though the most dramatic improvements for Japanese athletes were still to come. Despite these positive developments, Fujita points out that throughout this period disability sports remained more or less segregated from nondisabled sports and largely invisible to the broader public.

Fujita’s third period, from 1991 until Nagano’s Games in 1998, witnessed a particularly dramatic increase in visibility, thanks in large part to significant changes in Japanese media coverage of disability sports, an issue explored in the following pages. The establishment of sport-specific organizations and sports facilities continued, and the development of certification programs at universities and technical schools beginning in 1993 resulted in a significant increase in the number of qualified disability sports specialists. Reflecting international developments, it was also during these years that sports for athletes with intellectual impairments began to gain national recognition in Japan. Although some local areas had offered competitions for individuals with intellectual disabilities earlier, a recurring national event was not organized until 1992. These Games were soon followed by formal affiliation with the Special Olympics in 1994.

The increasing emphasis on high-level, elite performance at the international level during the years immediately preceding Nagano’s Games understandably sparked a desire to help Japanese athletes remain competitive. Recruitment and training received greater attention in Japan, and qualifying events and ranking systems were put in place to ensure more selectivity and improved performance of athletes. The best example of such changes was the establishment of the Japan Paralympics in 1991, which focused initially on swimming and track and field. Japan Paralympic events for skiing and sledge hockey were launched soon after in 1993 and 1994, respectively. As Nagano’s Games drew closer, “athlete strengthening” took on even more prominence as athletes and promoters alike sought to use the upcoming Games to demonstrate that Japan, too, was an elite-level competitor at the Paralympics. Behind the scenes, domestic research and design efforts also sought to assure that Japanese athletes had access to the most up-to-date adapted sports equipment. Beginning in 1995, many of these overlapping measures benefited from increased financial support from the central government.

These national developments and their results were on prominent display as Nagano prepared for and hosted Japan’s first Paralympics in more than thirty
years. Nagano itself was no stranger to disability sports by that point. In 1958 Nagano Prefecture was among the first places in Japan to host a local sporting event for individuals with disabilities. In the intervening years, the Nagano area also established a reputation as a wheelchair basketball powerhouse, and the Hokushin district in Nagano began hosting local sports tournaments for physically and intellectually disabled athletes during the late 1980s. Taking advantage of its natural environment, its reputation as a winter sports mecca, and the upcoming Games, Nagano Prefecture launched its own “athlete strengthening” movement aiming to increase the number of participants and medal winners from the prefecture in the still relatively new field of winter disability sports. From 1993 onward, the prefecture’s Disability Winter Sports Promotion Project sought to recruit and train local athletes, ultimately producing impressive results: of Japan’s seventy athletes, twenty-one had some connection to the prefecture, and six of them won medals at the Games. Because they included high-level international competitors, the various “Pre-Paralympic” events hosted in Nagano also served as a key element of the broader athlete strengthening program, allowing Japan’s athletes to hone their skills and identify targets for improvement in advance of the Winter Games themselves.

The cumulative outcomes of Fujita’s three periods of development were behind many of the “groundbreaking” sporting elements associated with Nagano’s Paralympics. The first formal inclusion of medal events for athletes with intellectual impairments at these Games reflected trends at both the international and domestic levels, but it is worth noting that this important Winter Paralympic “first” was never a given. The possibility of incorporating these medal events generated much debate among NAPOC, the IPC, and the international organization overseeing sports for intellectually disabled athletes—often centering on questions of classification and Japan’s relative lack of experience with these sports, which were just beginning to gain national attention. Eventually, NAPOC overcame its initial concerns, agreeing in early 1997 to include competitions in cross-country skiing for athletes with intellectual impairments at these Games.

As the host country, Japan might be expected to field a large team for Nagano’s Paralympics, but both the size and success of the national delegation seemed to indicate that the intense recruiting and strengthening efforts leading up to the Games had significantly enhanced normal home-team advantages. The team itself was more than double the size of the largest Japanese delegation ever dispatched to the Winter Games and nearly as big as the Japanese team at the Summer Paralympic Games in Atlanta in 1996. Japan has yet to come close to the size of the seventy-athlete team for any Winter Games since Nagano.
The oft-referenced “medal rush” at the Nagano Paralympics, too, reflected the dividends of Japanese investment in winter sports for those with disabilities. With forty-one total medals—twelve gold, sixteen silver, and thirteen bronze—the overall medal count for Japanese athletes at Nagano remains by far the highest for Winter Paralympics and ranks among Japan’s top five medal counts for all Paralympic Games. As some at the time (and many since) have pointed out, these impressive numbers can be somewhat deceiving. Japanese athletes won a disproportionate number of their medals (17 total) in the women’s ice sledge speed races. Because of the difficulties of classification and the small number of eligible athletes, most of these races featured fewer than five athletes, with several having only three; Japan fielded two or three competitors in each race, virtually assuring one or two medals in each competition.

Nevertheless, Japan’s ability to field multiple athletes when most other countries could not spoke to the impact of the aggressive recruiting and training efforts leading up to the Games. It is also worth observing that several medal winners in Nagano continued to be successful at later Paralympics. Even after sledge speed racing was dropped as a Paralympic sport after Nagano, some athletes continued to find success in other sports. For example, Tsuchida Wakako, who won two golds and two silvers in women’s sledge racing in Nagano, went on to become a top international competitor in wheelchair racing, with a career that has included multiple Paralympic medals and a world record set at Ōita’s Marathon in 2013. In other words, the years-long push to assure that Japanese athletes with disabilities could compete at an elite level on the global stage reaped results for and beyond Nagano, representing yet another reason these Games have been hailed as a turning point.

Toward the Normalization of Disability Sports

As the ongoing successes of Japanese Paralympians after Nagano suggest, the Winter Games, like the earlier Paralympics in Tokyo, exerted their most direct impacts on the continued development of disability sports in Japan and beyond. Internationally, Nagano’s Games made several significant contributions to the Paralympic Movement. In addition to being the first Winter Games held outside Europe, the 1998 Paralympics attracted new participating countries and a record number of athletes, bolstering the prestige and reach of the movement. As a relatively new organization, the IPC realized multiple benefits from these Games, ranging from enhanced ties with the Olympic Movement to the reinforcement of IPC ideals and governance. In particular, Nagano’s Games and the responses to them confirmed the
notion that the Paralympics could be marketable, especially if the focus remained on elite performance. Even some of the challenges associated with the 1998 Games—apparent gaps in the Handbook for Organisers, lingering tensions with the Olympics, questions about how to incorporate athletes with intellectual impairments, and ongoing concerns about classification, safety, and fairness—benefited the IPC by drawing attention to areas for future improvement.

In the immediate aftermath of Nagano’s Games, Japan’s disability sports scene also underwent a number of key changes that built on preceding developments. Just a month after the Winter Paralympics ended, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare convened a nongovernmental group of Paralympians, sports organizers, academics, media figures, and other stakeholders to outline suggestions for the future of disability sports in Japan. The resulting report from this “Roundtable on Disability Sport” cited the recent Games, praising many of the positive developments mentioned earlier. Yet the report was looking forward, not back, and in the views of participants, much work remained to be done. Generally, the report called for adopting a “normalization” approach toward disability sports. Although roundtable participants acknowledged that sports still had an important role to play in rehabilitation efforts and in increasing social awareness of disability, they argued that Japan needed to move beyond that: the country needed to foster opportunities for more people with disabilities to pursue sports both in their daily lives and at the elite level. In other words, disability sports had to be viewed and treated more like nondisabled sports. To achieve these abstract goals, the report drew attention to several specific measures, ranging from increased financial support to active promotion of sports for those with intellectual disabilities. Group members also noted that normalization and improvements necessitated much closer interaction between disability sports organizations and the Ministry of Education, the Japanese Olympic Committee, and the Japan Sport Association, all of which oversaw various elements of nondisabled sports. Many of the initiatives and measures mentioned in the report were already beginning to be implemented in the lead-up to Nagano’s Games, and the roundtable participants were pushing for them to continue and expand. To be sure, none of these suggestions were binding, but the ministerial decision to convene the group and publish its report pointed to a higher level of government receptiveness sparked in part by Nagano’s Paralympics.

Given the emphasis in this report, it is perhaps not surprising that the next few years witnessed several organizational changes in Japan that exemplified the broader goals of normalization, greater opportunities for participation, and improved competitiveness. In 1999, JSAD expanded its purview to include
athletes with intellectual disabilities, and in 2003 it expanded again to include athletes with mental illnesses. The Japan Paralympic Committee was founded in 1999 and tasked with recruiting and training elite-level athletes. Taking a step toward integration, JSAD established an official affiliation with the Japan Sport Association in 2000, and that same year disability sports were formally addressed in national plans for promoting sports more generally. Although Nagano’s Games were certainly not the only factor driving these sorts of changes, many of which were years in the making, the 1998 Paralympics provided advocates with strong evidence to support their case that disability sports merited more attention and support at the national level. It is equally important, however, to acknowledge what several critics pointed out after the Games ended: much of the funding for promoting disability sports in connection with Nagano’s Paralympics plummeted thereafter. In this sense, Nagano’s Games not only laid the groundwork for later developments that are discussed in chapter 5 in relation to Tokyo’s 2020 Paralympics but also served as a cautionary tale for those seeking to continue the promotion of disability sports after the conclusion of the 2020 Games.

As a host, Nagano understandably saw several specific impacts from the Paralympics in terms of disability sports, including the establishment of Sun Apple, a prefectural social welfare center that featured multiple sports facilities and programs for those with disabilities. Planning for the center began in 1992, and with funding provided by the prefectural government, the facility opened a month after the Games in April 1998. Together with its four regional satellite facilities that opened in later years, Sun Apple served more than 2.6 million people in its first twenty years. In addition to the local athlete strengthening programs and various regional sports events discussed earlier, the 1998 Paralympics sparked the founding of the prefectural adapted sports organization in 1994, as well as Nagano City’s disability sports association in 1997. Since the Winter Games, both organizations have remained actively involved in promoting a wide variety of sports in the region and beyond.

It is also more than happenstance that Nagano was selected to host the first Special Olympics World Games held in Asia. These 2005 Winter World Games merit a full study in their own right, but even an overview of official materials reveals the close connection with Nagano’s earlier Games. When Special Olympics International approached the Japanese national organization about the possibility of hosting the Winter Games, Nagano was the go-to choice thanks to its successful track record with large-scale winter sporting events and early commitment to promoting sports for those with intellectual impairments. Using organizational and promotional approaches similar to those for the Paralympics, the Winter World Games eventually welcomed nearly two
thousand athletes from eighty-four countries for competitions in sixty-two events. With nearly 10,000 volunteers, more than 90,000 spectators, and dramatically increased media coverage, the 2005 Special Olympics marked another success for Nagano, earning high praise from Special Olympics chairman Timothy Shriver, who dubbed them “unequivocally the best Special Olympic World Winter Games in history.” With these Games in the books, Nagano had not only achieved another first but also bolstered and renewed the region’s earlier commitments to the promotion of a barrier-free society.

“Support Me as an Individual Competitor, Not a Disabled Person”

The repeated emphasis on elite-level sports and performance associated with Nagano’s Paralympics had a profound influence on the ways in which Japan’s athletes were represented before, during, and after the Games. Athletes associated with Nagano’s Paralympics received significantly more attention as a group and as individuals than had been the case with those participating in Tokyo’s Games in 1964. This increased attention came in many forms, ranging from the expanded mass media coverage addressed in the following section to the greater prominence of athletes in official documents. Like those for Tokyo, the official reports and promotional materials for Nagano still regularly featured organizers and their commentaries, but thanks to developments in disability sports in Japan and the formal emphasis placed on hosting an event appropriate to the “highest-level athletes,” Japanese Paralympians were clearly featured more in the marketing campaign for Nagano. For instance, one set of posters used during the Games depicted five different Japanese athletes, each of whom was fully outfitted in his or her sports equipment. In the months leading up to the Games, periodicals connected to government ministries and rehabilitation-oriented organizations published a range of articles on the Paralympics. Although many of the early pieces described developments in the organizational process or explained particular Paralympic sports, articles appearing closer in time to the Games featured detailed interviews with Japanese athletes who had been named to the national team. After the Paralympics, many of these same journals ran interviews with medal winners as well. Perhaps the most concrete example of increased recognition of athletes in connection with Nagano was the official directory of Japanese Paralympians published by JSAD on the eve of the Games. The directory not only featured photos and basic information about the sports, classifications, and home prefectures of every single Japanese competitor but also included
multiple comments from each of them, addressing topics from training regimens to their broader hopes for the Nagano Paralympics.  

The official directory exemplified another impact that became apparent in Nagano: the changing nature of these representations. Japanese athletes linked to Nagano’s Paralympics not only received more attention but were also much more likely to be treated like athletes, rather than individuals seeking medical or social rehabilitation. While the official directory provided information on athletes’ impairments, their comments were overwhelmingly focused on preparations for or expectations about the upcoming competitions. Similarly, the promotional posters depicting athletes were each labeled with the individual’s sport, with no specific references to disabilities. Published interviews from specialty journals both before and after the Games also concentrated on practice routines, expectations, competitors, and challenges. The Ministry of Health and Welfare’s April 1998 interview with alpine skier Obinata Kuniko offered a case in point. Obinata, who won three medals in Nagano—gold (Japan’s first in any Winter Paralympics), silver, and bronze—started with a brief account of how she took up alpine skiing, but both the interviewer’s questions and her responses then focused on more general sports concerns, such as training, comparisons with foreign rivals, the challenges of balancing employment and a busy athletic schedule, and the need for additional support for disability sports if Japan wanted to build on its recent successes. As a Paralympian at the very top of her sport, Obinata did not ignore the fact that sports played a role in rehabilitation and recreation, but that was not her story. She was a competitor, and from her perspective, the Nagano Games had done much to show Japanese society that the Paralympics were “not rehabilitation, but competitive sport.”  

Yet even as she offered this positive evaluation of the recent Games, Obinata expressed some skepticism about the extent to which perceptions of Paralympians in Japan had actually changed.  

Indeed, it is critically important to note that the connection between disability sports and rehabilitation did not disappear with Nagano’s Games. The persistence of older understandings of disability sports was particularly apparent in materials from organizations that did not deal with these sports on a regular basis. For instance, an article from the National Land Planning Association’s monthly magazine used decades-old language to describe the role of the Paralympics in providing “bright hope” and promoting friendships, with hardly any mention of athletic competition. Similarly, a February 1998 article from the Ministry of Education’s monthly journal shared basic details about the upcoming Paralympics and their sports but somehow neglected mention of elite-level competition. Its description of the Games also hewed remarkably close to those from thirty years earlier, emphasizing the role of the Paralympics
in promoting hope, courage, and international goodwill. Other education-oriented publications seemed to follow a similar logic. In discussing the educational significance of the Paralympics, a January 1998 article in the journal *School Sports (Gakkō taiiku)* by longtime disability sports advocate Nakagawa Kazuhiko focused almost exclusively on rehabilitation. Another 1998 article from a journal targeting elementary school teachers noted that Paralympic athletes had acquired “high-level competitive skills through intense practice,” but this detail was nearly buried amidst far more numerous references to the “inspiration” (kandō) that the Games provided, particularly for “able-bodied” (kenjōsha) spectators. Based on these sorts of articles appearing so close to the Games, it would seem that promoters in Nagano were not entirely effective in selling a new view of the Paralympics and their athletes.

In part, this lack of effectiveness stemmed from muddled messaging. Many of these articles directly referenced the Nagano Paralympic theme, “Connection and Inspiration” (fureai to kandō), often echoing the official language used to explain it. Thus the official materials themselves harked back to older language, even as they simultaneously proclaimed a new purpose for the Paralympics: elite competition. Connection, inspiration, and high-level performance were not mutually exclusive—one need only consider how similar language could easily be applied to the Olympics. But given the challenges inherent in shifting perceptions of the Paralympics, organizers were not really doing themselves favors with these baggage-laden phrases, and their use pointed to lingering tendencies to view the Paralympics as something other than an elite sporting event, even among organizers. As Saitō Yoshihiiko, an athlete with disabilities himself noted in a critical essay published after the Games, organizer’s use of slogans like “The joy of living” for an event that was supposed to be for the world’s best athletes exemplified a significant disconnect between rhetoric and approach. He also questioned the use of insensitive language on a promotional poster pulled from distribution because of widespread opposition to its content. The poster allegedly read, “We are human whether or not we have both hands. We are human whether or not we have both legs. We only need mental strength to overcome handicaps.”

To Saitō’s examples of organizational disconnects, we might add the decision to use “Hope” as the theme for the opening ceremony in Nagano. As Saitō observed, the issue was not that organizers should refrain from using disability sports events to foster inspiration or hope, but rather that the real focus in Nagano still seemed to be centered on overcoming disability rather than the competitive sports that the rhetoric cited.

I would suggest that what Saitō was describing in the case of Nagano reflected more than just problems with NAPOC or Japanese attitudes toward
disability: it was a manifestation of what disability sports scholars have called the “Paralympic paradox.” In Nagano, promoters were trying to expand the reach of the Paralympics by using elite athletes to appeal to and inspire a largely nondisabled audience. To a certain extent, this meant downplaying disability while emphasizing performance and achievement. At the same time, the Paralympics were supposed to inspire and benefit those with disabilities, necessitating ongoing attention to the impairments of the athletes, even as the Games moved away from their earlier emphasis on sports as a form of rehabilitation.

Nagano’s Games came at a point of transition in the international and national Paralympic Movement. They also predated efforts on the part of the IPC to articulate a clear ideology or set of written goals, a process that did not occur until 2003 and even at that point resulted in what some have described as a “rather vague and empty” motto: “Spirit in Motion.” In many respects then, it is hardly surprising that Nagano served as center stage for a perhaps unsolvable clash of competing discourses about the purposes and goals of Paralympic sports more broadly.

At the heart of this clash in Nagano were the Japanese athletes, which might explain why some spoke about sports’ role in helping them overcome disabilities, whereas others felt compelled to insist that they were elite athletes seeking to win. Yet even those whose comments focused more on rehabilitative aspects would likely agree with alpine skier Maruyama Naoya’s request that fans support him “as an individual competitor, not a disabled person.” Unlike in Tokyo, even the newest athletes in Nagano were there to compete. For all of Japan’s athletes, the Paralympics had become the pinnacle, not the gateway to recovery. By the end of the Nagano Games, the idea that Paralympians were elite competitors was clearly gaining ground, thanks in no small part to extensive media coverage and a number of Japanese victories. At the same time, implicit questions about the ultimate purpose of the Paralympics remained largely unaddressed. In this sense and others, the Nagano Games revealed continuities and differences with the 1964 Games, highlighting some of the ongoing dilemmas faced by the Paralympic Movement as it looked toward Tokyo in 2020.

Mass Mediated Games: Nagano in Perspective

In addition to their many other ground-breaking elements, the 1998 Nagano Paralympics have often been cited as a moment of transition in mass media coverage of disability sports in Japan, and for good reason. The 1998 Games not only generated a remarkable number of print and broadcast media reports
but also pioneered new means for sharing information about the event via the Internet. The shifting representations of Paralympic athletes and these Games also owed much to changes in media approaches, as reporters sought to align their coverage with the focus on competition coming from Nagano’s organizers and participants. All that said, it is critical to remember that Paralympic supporters in Japan had long been actively pursuing and cultivating media attention. Closer examinations of the resulting coverage reveal that, as much as the Nagano Games’ media coverage differed from earlier years, it also reflected a number of similarities.

To shed light on both changes and continuities up through and beyond the 1998 Paralympics, the remainder of this chapter focuses on four aspects of mass media coverage. Changes in the quantity of coverage are the most obvious development since the 1960s. On their surface the increased numbers of articles and reports suggest a tale of remarkable progress, with Nagano marking a major turning point. Yet more thorough analyses raise important questions, indicating the need to look beyond the amount of coverage when assessing the media and its impact. Examinations of regional press coverage offer insights on the critical role that these less prominent news outlets have played in promoting disability sports in Japan and highlight meaningful differences between local and national coverage. Qualitative explorations of media representations of athletes over time also draw attention to connections between older rehabilitation-oriented approaches and the ongoing reliance on inspirational discourses in Japanese coverage, although recent developments do point to a greater awareness of problematic representational practices. I conclude with an interrogation of new media forms that have their roots in Nagano’s Games but seem poised to play a pivotal, if still indeterminate, role in 2020 and beyond. A comprehensive analysis of each of these aspects or trends could easily provide enough material for four stand-alone chapters, so the goal here is to provide a sense of how key elements of media coverage evolved in the more than five decades since Japan began its engagement with the Paralympic Movement.

In recent years, Paralympic media coverage has received increased academic attention, although most of this research has focused on European or American contexts. Linguistic barriers have largely prevented scholars outside Japan from accessing the rich archive of Japanese source materials, as well as several recent studies that Japanese scholars have produced using these media-related resources. In the hopes of breaking down some of these barriers, I describe several of these Japanese-language studies here alongside data from my own studies of Japanese press coverage of FESPIC events and the Ōita Marathon. Much of the scholarship coming out of Japan has focused on
newspapers, a reflection of the availability of full-text, searchable databases for three of Japan’s major dailies: the *Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, and *Mainichi* newspapers. These databases have allowed researchers to document even passing references to the Paralympics or disability sports with remarkable precision. Broadcast coverage, in contrast, has proven far more difficult to study, especially for the earlier years when coverage was dominated by NHK, which has long been stingy about access to its archives. In this area, however, recent Japanese studies and survey results have begun to improve our understandings of how the Paralympics and its athletes have been portrayed in Japanese television programming. Thanks to Japan’s long history of engagement with the Paralympic Movement at multiple sites, an examination of the evolution of Japanese print and broadcast coverage promises unique insights on the past and present role of the media for the Paralympics in Japan and elsewhere.

**Media Bubbles**

Long before Tokyo’s Paralympic Games in 1964, sports in Japan were completely intertwined with the media. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that mass media would come to play an important role in disability sports. Given how difficult it has been for the Paralympics to attract attention in other countries, however, the degree of media attention that the Paralympics and disability sports have generated in Japan is striking, resulting in far more extensive coverage than one might expect. Reporting before 1960 was more or less nonexistent, but attention to the 1964 Games was remarkable for the time and included multiple articles in the major urban dailies and a mix of live and recorded broadcasts on the NHK public television network. The various FESPIC Games and the wheelchair marathons in Ōita also received significant media attention, especially at the local levels. Nagano’s Games were understandably famous for the media’s response, and if the extensive pre-Games reporting is any indication, Tokyo 2020 could end up being the best-documented Paralympics to date.

As noted at several points in this book, such coverage has been no accident. Organizers for all of these disability sports events in Japan were well aware of the benefits of media coverage and incorporated media outreach as central components of their planning from the beginning. Official materials also make it very clear that organizers frequently sought to make it as easy as possible for media outlets to cover and promote these events. In many instances, media companies had established official sponsorship roles, helping assure increased coverage in both print and broadcast forms.
Fujita Motoaki, a leading scholar on disability sports in Japan, has published several analyses that offer insights on long-term trends in Japanese newspaper coverage. Figure 4.1 summarizes his analysis of articles on disability sports published in the *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* dailies from 1960–2010. Fujita’s searches produced zero articles for the years between 1900 and 1960, as well as the year 1973, but the spike connected to the 1964 Games accounted for 127 articles from the two newspapers. After 1964, coverage dropped significantly with the number of articles only exceeding 100 again in the lead-up to Nagano’s Games, a detail that makes it clear why the 1998 Paralympics have been characterized as a turning point for Japanese media coverage.

Figure 4.2 updates Fujita’s research with more recent coverage and additional information from searches of the *Mainichi* newspaper. In particular, it documents the remarkable change in coverage after 2013 when Tokyo was named as host for the 2020 Games. The jump for Nagano still stands out, with total articles for 1998 topping out at a then-record high of 630; however, the number of articles in these three national dailies nearly doubled between 2013 and 2014 and has continued to climb.

Fujita’s findings were also borne out in the experiences of Yamaguchi Ichirō, a reporter for the *Mainichi* newspaper who has been writing on disability sports for more than twenty years. Yamaguchi noted minimal interest during his early years of reporting, followed by a significant increase in media attention during the 1998 Games and truly dramatic jumps in coverage since 2013.

As important as these dramatic shifts in recent years have been, we should not let them obscure two other points: the less abundant, though still important,
earlier coverage and the lack of sustained media interest in disability sports after these mega-events have ended. Before 1961, coverage of disability sports was largely absent in Japan, which means that the jump to nearly 130 articles in 1964 represented a manifold increase that is arguably even more numerically significant than more recent changes. It is also important to remember that Fujita’s findings only account for a portion (substantial though it is) of Japan’s print media outlets. In my own research, in addition to finding front-page coverage in the major dailies, I encountered articles on the 1964 Paralympics in mainstream magazines, several sports newspapers, and in local newspapers, such as those from Ōita. It is difficult to know how many readers at the time saw these reports, but considering the
fact that media options were far more limited than they are today, the coverage in 1964 might have been more conspicuous than the numbers alone suggest.

It is equally noteworthy that, over the next several decades after the 1964 Games, coverage dropped drastically. This drop appears all the more telling when one recalls that Japan hosted national disability sports events every year since 1965 and that Japanese athletes were regularly engaged in international competition from 1962 onward, including regular participation in the Paralympics and two FESPIC Games hosted by Japan in 1975 and 1989. Fujita’s results revealed that it was not until 1996, a Summer Paralympic year leading up to Nagano, that the number of articles again topped 100, after which point coverage has tended to remain higher. Although less dramatic than the drop after 1964, similar “bubbles” of media coverage have been documented in connection with other disability sports events after Nagano. The various peaks after 1998 on Fujita’s graph in Figure 4.1 corresponded to Paralympic years. In general, Summer Games have attracted more attention than the Winter Games, and off-years have witnessed sometimes significant declines in coverage. Another example of media bubbles can be seen in the establishment and then dissolution of two specialty magazines for disability sports in connection with the Nagano Paralympics. Both were established around 1995, but ceased publication soon after the Games. Perhaps it goes without saying, but what these various bubbles suggest is that disability sports media coverage has been—and continues to be—event dependent, with bigger and more prestigious events attracting more attention. As the events end, so too, does the attention, a trend that casts doubt on assumptions about the long-term awareness-raising potential of disability sporting events.

Another press study by disability sports scholar Araragi Kazuma provides a more nuanced view of media coverage between Tokyo’s 1964 Games and those in Nagano. Focusing on coverage in the Asahi newspaper between 1945 and 1999, Araragi used a method that measured not just the number of articles but also their relative length, the size of their headlines, and their use or lack of images. In general, Araragi’s results paralleled those in Fujita’s study, though the more focused approach drew attention to additional, smaller examples of media bubbles occurring in connection with international events. The Asahi published only slightly more content in 1975 and 1989, years that corresponded, respectively, with the FESPIC Games in Ōita and in Kobe. Given Japan’s pioneering role in these events, the relative lack of media attention they received is all the more striking and speaks to perceptions of prestige and perhaps location—neither was held in or near Tokyo—as additional factors shaping print coverage of disability sports events.
In terms of broadcast media, sports historian Sakita Yoshihiro recently gained special access to NHK’s archives to examine coverage of the 1964 Paralympics. His study of television broadcasts leading up to and during the 1964 Games documented forty-two distinct news stories and nineteen other programs aired between July 1962 and November 1964. These broadcasts included live coverage of both the opening ceremony and one of the Japanese team’s wheelchair basketball games. Of course, such programming was less extensive than that provided for the preceding Olympics or for disability sports events today, but the amount of NHK’s coverage in the early 1960s demonstrates that the Paralympics were certainly not ignored during their earliest years in Japan.\footnote{115} Given the state of broadcasting at the time and especially NHK’s dominant market share, it is arguable that even this limited coverage might be on par with the coverage we find available today. People simply have more options now and are unlikely to watch something just because it is on television. In fact, a survey by NHK indicated that, despite record amounts of broadcast coverage for the Rio de Janeiro Summer Paralympics, less than 30 percent of those surveyed had watched coverage more than once during the Games, and roughly 29 percent reported that they did not watch it at all.\footnote{116}

Academic studies of later broadcasts in Japan remain limited, though official reports, commentaries, and survey results from Nagano and later Games offer some insights on how this aspect of media coverage has continued to evolve. For one thing, it is widely acknowledged that Nagano’s Games received “unprecedented” attention from broadcast outlets, even though it is important to note that such references generally lack details situating Nagano in a broader historical context.\footnote{117} Based on accounts from the time, television reporting for Nagano does seem to have differed markedly from what had preceded it in recent memory. Live coverage of the opening ceremony was available on several local and national networks, and NHK eventually opted to offer live broadcasts of the closing ceremony in response to popular demand. Kondō Fumito, a chief producer for NHK, noted a few months after the Games that Nagano marked “the first time that NHK had provided full-scale broadcasting of the Paralympics,” including nightly “Paralympic Hour” shows, special programs, the live broadcasts of ceremonies, and regular stories during news broadcasts. For Kondō, another key aspect of his network’s efforts in Nagano was the need to draw on the expertise of both those who specialized in sports and those who worked with social welfare coverage.\footnote{118} In this sense, NHK’s coverage seemed to reflect some aspects of the tensions described earlier.

In the years since Nagano, there is clear evidence that broadcast programming on the Paralympics and disability sports in Japan has been increasing. A
disability sports research group affiliated with the Yamaha Motor Foundation for Sports examined Japanese television coverage for the Summer Games in Beijing, London, and Rio de Janeiro. With more than 234 hours of total coverage, the 2016 Paralympics received nearly three times as much airtime as the London Paralympic Games in 2012. Notably, NHK maintained a dominant role in Paralympic coverage over the course of these three Games, benefiting from the fact that it offers programming on both its general and education channels and has exclusive broadcast rights to the Paralympics themselves. The survey results indicate that other television networks in Japan only began to turn their attention to the Paralympics since 2013 when Tokyo was awarded the 2020 Games. Their coverage levels have remained well below that of NHK, but this new attention from other networks clearly fueled the dramatic jump in hours of programming for the Rio de Janeiro Paralympics in Japan.119

As Japan prepared to host the 2020 Games in Tokyo, upward trends in broadcast coverage continued, taking on a variety of forms. For anyone following disability sports on Japanese television, it is now much easier to find live reporting for major international events, including the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon.120 Several major networks set up regular Paralympic-related programming as well, ranging from a well-advertised biopic series on Paralympians airing on the pay-per-view network WOWOW to the child-friendly animated series on disability sports running on NHK.121 Athletes with various impairments were also featured with increased regularity as guests on Japan’s numerous talk shows, and even the number of television advertisements featuring Paralympic athletes increased.122 All of these developments marked positive trends in terms of both print and broadcast media even before the Games themselves began.

At the same time, it appears that like much else associated with the Paralympics, media coverage is now experiencing one of its periodic bubbles. The question of how coverage of disability sports can be sustained after the Games is among the many issues included in what many have dubbed the “2021 problem” for disability sports in Japan. Determining the impact of this increased coverage also remains difficult, because survey results continue to suggest that overall viewing rates remain low and that even the most successful Japanese Paralympians continue to be little known in Japan.123 It is also critical to remember that the dramatic increases in coverage—important though they may be—are only part of the story: the nature and type of such coverage also need to be taken into account.
Of Dogs and Old Men: Regional versus National Coverage

Like any major event, the opening ceremony for the first FESPIC Games in Ōita was planned to the smallest detail. Yet even the best-laid plans can go awry, as evidenced in this case by a stray, barking dog that unexpectedly joined the opening procession. For perhaps obvious reasons, the dog did not make an appearance in official accounts, nor was it featured in the relatively limited reporting on these Games in national newspapers. The only reason anyone knows about this dog’s “participation” in the first FESPIC Games at all is because of local media coverage. Alongside its far more extensive coverage of the Games and their athletes, the Ōita gōdō newspaper included a short account and photo of the dog strutting beside the parading participants.124

The story of this dog is obviously not central to understanding the broader history of the Paralympics in Japan, but it does draw attention to the fact that local media outlets offer a unique perspective on disability sports events and their participants. In contrast to other areas around the world, the local mediascape in Japan remains remarkably diverse. A number of cities or prefectures support one or more local newspapers or broadcast networks, and the national broadcast or print conglomerates often rely on local affiliates or publish regional pages to speak to the interests and needs of local consumers. Perhaps because such coverage is inherently limited in its reach and more challenging to access, it is largely overlooked in the recent Japanese scholarship on disability sports and media. This lack of scholarship belies the fact that local coverage of disability sports has long been prolific in many regions. Local reporting needs and practices have also resulted in surprisingly detailed and nuanced stories about Paralympic athletes and disability sports more generally. Therefore, giving attention to coverage at the local level promises to enrich our understandings of how disability sports are perceived on the ground. By looking at specific examples from the FESPIC Games and the Ōita Wheelchair Marathon we can also see important differences from—and potential problems in—the national media.

Figure 4.3 details the yearly breakdown of the 266 total articles related to the FESPIC Games that appeared from 1972 through 2017 in all editions currently included in the databases for Japan’s three major dailies: the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri newspapers.125 This chart is noticeably different from Figures 4.1 and 4.2 that portrayed coverage of disability sports more generally. Here, too the bubbles related to events are noticeable, with the “peaks” all reflecting coverage of specific FESPIC Games (1975, 1977, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006). Because the FESPIC Games were last held in 2006,
coverage understandably tapered off after then, with later articles appearing in connection to FESPIC's role as predecessor of the Asian Para Games. The Kobe FESPIC Games in 1989 stood out as a defining moment for media coverage, suggesting once again the impact that hosting such events can have on media attention. The rapid jump from 1994–99 paralleled results elsewhere, pointing to a "Nagano effect" in coverage of FESPIC as well. That said, it is also clear that overall reporting on FESPIC saw a general decline from 1989 onward, rather than the upward trend apparent in the earlier figures based on Fujita's analyses. This decline seems all the more striking given that this same time period witnessed FESPIC's growing integration with the IPC and increasing emphasis on elite competition, as discussed in chapter 2. At the very least, these details raise questions about common assumptions that link improved media attention to the focus on elite performance.

Incorporating information about local newspaper coverage of FESPIC sheds additional light on this downward trend. Figure 4.4 overlays the totals in Figure 4.3 with yearly numbers of local or regional reports, articles that accounted for 162 of the 266 articles on FESPIC between 1972 and 2017. Several elements distinguish local from national coverage. First, by its very nature, local coverage reaches a more limited audience, but the size of that audience can vary dramatically. An article from a regional paper published
for the Kansai district (which includes the cities of Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe—Japan’s second-largest urban area) is addressing a significantly larger population than an article published on the Ehime prefectural page of the daily Mainichi. What all this coverage shares in common—and the reason I group it together—is its limited reach: traditionally only someone in the specific region or locale would be able to access these “local” articles, which makes them different from those published in the national editions. Second, the local articles represented on the chart all appeared in an edition of one of the three major dailies, but the database archives for these newspapers remain incomplete for areas beyond the major cities, particularly in years before 1995. As these searchable databases incorporate more local news outlets, our picture of early coverage of events such as FESPIC is likely to change. Finally, Figure 4.4 does not reflect articles about FESPIC that were published in truly local newspapers, such as the Ōita gōdō shimbun or the Kōbe shimbun, both of which played sponsoring roles in the Games hosted in their respective communities. The lack of searchable indexes or databases for these local newspapers prevented accurate quantification of their articles. However, surveys of

![Figure 4.4](image_url)

**Figure 4.4.** Total yearly number of articles related to FESPIC and a separate count of local articles published in various editions of the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri newspapers from 1972 to 2017.
microfilm copies revealed that each of these papers offered reporting before the FESPIC Games, with extensive daily coverage during the event itself. Incorporating reports from these sorts of media outlets into the chart would drive the number of local articles and the overall totals even higher. In Kobe’s case, the paper’s coverage in 1989 would likely push the total number of articles above 100.126

Even without including articles published in Ōita’s or Kobe’s newspapers, Figure 4.4 shows that, from 1989 onward, local accounts from various regions made up a disproportionate share of articles on FESPIC in the three major dailies. Indeed, without local reports, coverage of the last two FESPIC Games—which were among the largest and most competitive to that point—would have dropped below that provided for the first Games in 1975. The precipitous drop in national-level coverage helps explain the downward trend in overall attention to FESPIC and serves as a striking example of the bursting national media bubble in the years that also occurred after Nagano’s Paralympics. At the same time, the consistent coverage at the local level points to ongoing, though perhaps scattered, interest in disability sports, a trend that merits closer attention than it has received to date.

In contrast to one-time events such as the Paralympics and FESPIC, Ōita’s International Wheelchair Marathon has been held every year at the same venue for decades, which makes it a unique case for examining trends in media coverage at both the national and local levels. Figure 4.5 depicts the yearly results for the 561 total articles related to Ōita’s marathon from all available editions of the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri newspapers published between 1981 and 2016.127

Before turning to an analysis of local coverage of the wheelchair marathons, several points of comparison with other studies merit notice. Although there is a steady increase in coverage over time, with a marked jump beginning around 1998, most of the peaks and valleys apparent elsewhere do not line up with the marathon, a reflection of its being an annual event. For instance, the spike in relation to the 2008 Paralympics reported in Fujita’s studies appears here as part of a decline, and the increase in 2006 for coverage on the marathon stems from the fact that it was the first time a Japanese male finished first in the race. Most notably, unlike the dramatic upward trend in connection with Tokyo’s 2020 bid, we see a move in the opposite direction for marathon coverage. In other words, the increases in media attention occurring as a result of Tokyo’s 2020 Games have not necessarily been universal.

Figure 4.6 juxtaposes the total coverage with details on the articles published in the local Ōita editions of the three major newspapers. Here again, these are articles that only someone reading the paper in Ōita would have
access to. And like the case of FESPIC, the database archive remains spotty for local coverage before 1995, which may skew the results low in early years. Neither the number of total articles nor those for local coverage account for articles published in the local Ōita gōdō shimbun newspaper, which has been an official sponsor of the race since the beginning. Reviews of microfilmed copies revealed that Ōita gōdō provided fifteen to twenty stories on the marathon in an average year. Content on the marathon has been featured on the front page of the paper since the beginning, and full-page ads and notes from other sponsors for the race have been common throughout. In several instances coverage was even more extensive. The Ōita gōdō newspaper marked the thirtieth anniversary of the race in 2010 by adding a thirty-part series of feature stories to its normal coverage. Including such coverage from this local newspaper would dramatically change the way this chart looks and highlight even more the prominence of local reporting.¹²⁸

But even without incorporating details from Ōita gōdō, it is apparent that in most years after 1996, articles from the Ōita editions of these major news-

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**Figure 4.5.** Total yearly newspaper articles related to the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon from 1981 to 2016 in all editions of the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri newspapers.
papers account for the majority of articles on the race. For a number of recent years, coverage of the marathon in editions outside Ōita dropped significantly, approaching levels similar to the race’s early years, despite remarkably high levels of competition at the race. This slide in coverage challenges narratives on rising media interest in disability sports, but ironically, it may stem, at least in part, from positive developments in wheelchair marathon racing. Ōita is not the only show in Japan anymore: these races are far more common today than when the event launched in the 1980s. Though it is harder to document, I would suggest that location and perceptions of prestige may be beginning to play a role as well, especially since the Tokyo Marathon now includes an elite wheelchair racing division of its own.

Numbers aside, there are several other noteworthy differences between the national editions and the local coverage of FESPIC and the Ōita marathon. Until recently, nonlocal stories—by which I mean those in the national editions of the newspaper—tended to focus on more spectacular elements, such as torch
relays, ceremonies, the role of the imperial family, or competition winners. For instance, the national coverage of FESPIC in 1975 concentrated almost exclusively on the opening and closing ceremonies, with little more than numerical references to the participating athletes and minimal attention to the results. For the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon, national coverage throughout the history of the race has been limited overwhelmingly to brief articles announcing the top finishers, with additional coverage on special anniversaries or occasions when members of the imperial family attended the event.³²⁹

This type of abbreviated national reporting is not unique to the coverage of FESPIC or Ōita’s wheelchair marathon. Another leading Japanese scholar of disability sports, Watari Tadashi has recently begun comparing character counts for articles on disability sports in the major dailies. His preliminary results suggest that the increase in the numbers of articles in recent years may be deceptive, because the actual amount of content being featured is growing far less.³³⁰ The dramatic jump in the number of articles is being driven by brief accounts of sporting results, with little explanation or contextualization, which would seem to detract from their broader impact.

Analysis of the coverage for the Ōita marathon in particular suggests that such abbreviated coverage is not in itself a new development and that it has significant implications in how such events and their athletes are represented. For many years, the national articles named only the top finisher (usually a foreign male) and the top Japanese finisher (who was also a male). They gave minimal attention to the women who have participated in the race since it began in 1981. Eventually, the top female athletes were given attention in national coverage as well, especially in years where Japanese women dominated the race. Yet even in more recent years, the national coverage only reported results for the group of athletes competing under classifications with the lowest level of physical impairments. What this means is that anyone reading the brief national accounts would not necessarily realize that Ōita’s marathon is one of the few competitive races worldwide that remains open to marathoners with higher levels of impairments.

In contrast, local articles on the race can be two to three times as long as those in the national editions and tend to offer far more detailed breakdowns of results. They give attention to the top finishers in all categories, as well as lists of non-elite local athletes who competed in the race. Although I would not go so far as to suggest that the national press outlets are deliberately hiding the presence of these other racers, the coverage they are providing serves to reinforce ableist perceptions that the truly elite athletes worthy of attention are those who are more functionally able. By simply ignoring other classes of athletes—even when they win—such coverage completely fails to educate
potential readers on this often challenging feature of disability sports. After all, one cannot begin to understand differences in classification if it is not even apparent that they exist.

In addition to providing more nuanced reporting on results, local coverage has proven far more effective at giving voice to athletes. For the wheelchair marathon, these differences stem in part from more detailed coverage of the event, with the frequent use of quotations from athletes about their expectations or observations of their performance. Yet this deeper coverage is itself rooted in the needs of local newspapers or the “local desks” associated with larger media conglomerates, and in that sense the situation is hardly unique to Ōita. In his reporting for Mainichi, for instance, Yamaguchi Ichirō noted that many of his early articles ran on various local pages, because he realized that the local desks were always looking for content. My examinations of stories on FESPIC and the Ōita marathon suggest that many other reporters found themselves in similar situations, as a significant portion of the local articles depicted in figures in this chapter were feature stories about “hometown” athletes competing in events.

These sorts of feature stories in local coverage often focus on victorious athletes, but they do so with far more nuance than an article noting a list of medal winners. They often include information on how these athletes came to disability sports, as well as details on their training, past achievements, and future goals. In other instances, local feature stories provide accounts of non-elites who would rarely merit national press attention. Here we might recall the story of Miura Jirō, the participant in Nagano’s Paralympic torch relay who was featured in the local Shinano mainichi newspaper. Perhaps because of its annual need for multiple stories, Ōita gōdō’s reporting on the marathon has been particularly rich, with stories on both elite competitors and those like 90-year-old Kudō Kanejirō, who as of 2016 had participated in all but one of Ōita’s thirty-six races without winning any sort of prize. This sort of local coverage has offered diverse representations of athletes with disabilities, demonstrating that people are pursing sports for an equally diverse set of reasons. To put it another way, this local coverage makes it clear that not everyone participating is in it, to win it.

In an essay published in December 2016, media researcher Yamada Kiyoshi suggested that one of the ways to improve overall participation in disability sports in Japan is to use television coverage to craft media sports hero narratives for athletes with disabilities. In his view doing so would create a new set of stars, who would presumably inspire others to develop an interest in disability sports. A variety of anecdotal evidence suggests that exposure to Ōita’s marathon has been instrumental in bringing more people into the
sport, but as noted in chapter 3, Ōita has proven successful in part by emphasizing both the elite side and the accessible side of its event.

Although I am certainly not against giving elite athletes with disabilities their due—and there has been no shortage of impressive athletes in Japan to draw from—studies about the negative impacts on perceptions of disability associated with the London Paralympic Games should give us pause about the emphasis on elite-level athletes that seems to drive most recent media coverage. Not all of those with disabilities can or want to pursue sports, and among those who do, only a select few will ever perform at a Paralympic level. But if the overwhelming representation of disability in the media is that of the elite Paralympic hero, this image may have little resonance with the vast majority of those living with some sort of impairment, even as a means of inspiration. Some of the evidence from the London Games also suggests that this type of coverage might foster false societal expectations that those with disabilities must necessarily be aiming for Paralympic glory.

By regularly sharing stories that do not focus solely on the elite or those aiming to be elite, local coverage in places like Ōita plays a critical role in representations of disability sports by offering alternative views on the variety of roles that disability sports play in people’s lives.

The diversity of coverage at the local level is also a reminder that analysis of media has to take into account the diversity of Japan itself. Even if their geographic impact might be limited, there are a number of areas like Ōita where these types of alternative narratives have long been part of the mediascape. As dominant as Tokyo’s voice tends to be in Japan’s media, it is not—and should not be—the only one speaking about disability sports. Further research is necessary to give these local materials and the athletes they portray the attention they deserve and to document the ways in which local media are continuing to shape understandings of the Paralympic Movement in Japan.

From Rehabilitation to “Inspiration Porn”?

Local media coverage has played a critical role in Japan, but it is not without its flaws. For both national and local coverage, a third trend is the surprising persistence of the rehabilitation-related focus from the earlier years. Even as the Paralympics have become increasingly elite at all levels and in all regions, many media outlets continue to rely on patterns that link sports to some sort of recovery. Here again, Nagano reflected a moment of transition, but one where competing approaches remained apparent. The explicit focus on rehabilitation in the media faded, but in its place there was an increased emphasis
on inspirational discourses that maintained a focus on overcoming disability. Echoing patterns seen elsewhere, Japanese coverage has maintained this emphasis on the inspirational role of disability sports and their athletes. Recent developments, however, suggest that the nature of coverage for 2020 might have begun to shift in several respects. Qualitative analyses of trends in the media’s representational practices since 1964 offer insights on these changes and what might have driven them in Japan.

As media coverage of the Paralympics and disability sports took shape in Japan in the 1960s, media narratives tended to echo those being used by organizers. This development was not surprising, given organizers’ careful efforts to promote media attention that aligned with their goals. For instance, Sakita’s study of NHK coverage for the 1964 Games highlights the prominence of rehabilitation themes. His research reveals that organizers also significantly outnumbered athletes in terms of representation in much of NHK’s programming.\(^\text{136}\)

For print coverage, the tendency to view disability sports as a form of rehabilitation in the earliest years was reflected in the placement of most newspaper coverage of disability sports events on the society pages, rather than the sports pages. Fujita Motoaki’s work demonstrates that this pattern remained dominant well into 1990s.\(^\text{137}\) Yamaguchi, the reporter for the Mainichi newspaper whom I spoke with, pointed out that for many years those in charge of the sports pages were adamant in their view that disability sports were not sports, suggesting how entrenched this pattern became after the introduction of disability sports in the 1960s.\(^\text{138}\)

Print coverage of the 1964 Games also tended to rely heavily on representations of Japanese athletes as patients who were using the Paralympics for their own recovery. As just one example, the magazine, Weekly Yomiuri (Shūkan yomiuri) ran an article soon after the Games ended under the headline “A Battle between Patients and Members of Society: What the Paralympics Taught the Japanese.” The five-page article provided an overview of the 1964 Games that included details on the ceremonies, three photographs, comments from organizers, and brief accounts of several competitions. Echoing the official approaches discussed in chapter 1, the overall theme of this article was the shortcomings of Japan’s approaches to rehabilitation, as exemplified by comparisons between foreign and Japanese participants.\(^\text{139}\)

Similar references to superior foreign athletes were not uncommon in press coverage of the 1964 Games, and Watari Tadashi observed that many of the newspaper photographs featuring athletes were of foreigners, a pattern that also hewed close to official representations.\(^\text{140}\) Evoking the sociologist Erving Goffman, Watari characterized media coverage of the Tokyo Paralympics as
a form of “ritual inattention.” Reporting on the Tokyo Games rendered those with disabilities in Japan more visible in nondisabled society than before, but did so in ways that would not disrupt social expectations, especially because the time frame for such coverage was limited to the liminal period surrounding the Games.  

Turning to coverage of Nagano in 1998, it was widely acknowledged both at the time and later that media coverage again followed the lead of organizers, this time by treating the Paralympics as an elite sporting event. Kodama Kazuhiko, an early scholar of disability sports coverage, suggested that the high-level performances, especially Japan’s “medal rush,” helped sell media producers on the “news value” of the Paralympics and the need to cover Japanese athletes. In his 1998 survey of editorials from various regional and national newspapers, Kodama demonstrated that print media outlets were quite explicit about the need to focus on the competitive aspect of the event, often citing parallels between the Olympics and Paralympics.  

As noticeable as this sportification of media coverage for Nagano’s Games was, it was not entirely different from earlier reporting. In his 1998 critique of the Games, Saitō Yoshihiko observed that, in contrast to the Nagano Olympics, media coverage for Paralympic events tended to evoke stories of hardship and difficulty and relied heavily on adjectives like “inspiring” in describing the actions of athletes. For Saitō, despite increased recognition of Paralympic athletes, such coverage, which focused on athletes overcoming disability, remained largely “disability focused.” Similarly, Fujita’s analysis indicated that most articles on the Nagano Paralympics were still appearing on the society pages, though the number on the sports pages had increased dramatically throughout the decade. Along those same lines NHK producer Kondō Fumito explicitly noted that his broadcast team for Nagano included those specializing in both sports and social welfare stories. In terms of media coverage then, disability sports in Nagano were being treated not only as “sports” but also as something else, a situation that paralleled the competing representations at the official level.

In the years since Nagano, the nature of media coverage has continued to evolve. Beginning with the 2000 Summer Paralympics, for instance, the number of Paralympic-related articles on the sports pages finally exceeded those published elsewhere in the newspapers, with the years since seeing a general upward continuation of this trend. Nevertheless, many of these articles on the sports pages provided little more than basic details on wins and losses, and it is still not unusual to find more detailed coverage of disability sports and their athletes on the society or local pages. During a 2011 interview, wheelchair basketball star Kyōya Kazuyuki recognized that media attention to dis-
ability sports had increased over the course of his career, but lamented the fact that most newspapers still did not really seem to view them as sports, because stories for most events and athletes still appeared outside the sports pages.\footnote{148} Up through the 2012 London Paralympics, broadcast media, too, seemed slow to change, with the overwhelming majority of coverage appearing on NHK’s education network. Researchers interpreted this pattern as a sign of an ongoing reliance on rehabilitation-oriented views of disability sports.\footnote{149} In another example, it was only in 2015 that those evaluating the annual televised broadcast of Ōita’s marathon footage in the Kyushu region suggested that future years downplay the rehabilitative aspect.\footnote{150} All of these findings point to both significant change and the remarkable persistence of patterns of media representation that were established decades ago in Japan. Of particular note is the continued reliance on narratives connecting sports and recovery. Japanese coverage is hardly alone in this respect, given that one of the most frequent criticisms of present-day media coverage of disabled athletes is the reliance on “medicalized stereotypes of disabled people as ‘super-crips’ who courageously overcome their disability and the issues that come with it to achieve and to be ‘normal.’”\footnote{151} To be sure, such coverage is often influenced by the stories that athletes tell about themselves, a topic explored further in chapter 5.

Yet the ongoing prominence of “overcoming” narratives in media coverage raises important questions about the role of inspirational discourses that have often been tied to disability sports in Japan and beyond. We might ponder whether the inspirational qualities of these events are really all that different from those associated with nondisabled sports. Who exactly is supposed to be inspired by disability sports and how? Do these inspirational discourses have a real, sustained impact, or do they simply make people feel good without really having to do anything to improve the lived experiences of those with disabilities?

Such questions were at the heart of Saitō’s 1998 critique of the Nagano Paralympics, and given that the Paralympic Movement has taken to citing inspiration as part of its explicit goals, they seem even more worth asking today. A number of scholars examining media coverage outside Japan suggest that many of the representational practices employed in the media have resulted in a form of “inspiration porn,” or the tendency for nondisabled society to treat people with disabilities as objects for inspiration.\footnote{152} Here, too Japan has historically seemed to exemplify rather than buck the broader trend, as evidenced by heavy reliance on the language of overcoming, inspiration, and courageousness to characterize the performances of athletes with disabilities.
There is evidence, however, that Japan’s coverage is heading in a different direction, especially in the years since Japan’s successful bid to host the 2020 Games. As media interest has increased and greater attention has been given to questions of disability-related language in Japanese society in general, more reporters have become aware of the potential for their work to rely on stereotypes or potentially problematic inspirational discourses. For example, research by Fujita and others showed that earlier coverage in Japan tended to fit international media patterns, such as the framing of images to hide disabilities or the focus on emotion instead of action. In contrast, examinations of newspapers in connection with the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Paralympics pointed to more nuanced analyses of the Games and their athletes. Television broadcasts associated with the Rio Games also reflected a shift, with decreasing coverage on NHK’s educational network and increasing coverage nearly everywhere else—an indication, perhaps, of a new (or arguably renewed) emphasis on the Paralympics as an athletic event rather than a form of social welfare.

It is also apparent that Japanese scholars, journalists, and athletes are actively tackling the thorny issues of media representations and their broader impacts, as exemplified by a workshop held in July 2018 that explored the relationship between the Paralympics and ableism. In my 2017 interview with Yamaguchi Ichirō, who currently serves as a senior member of the Olympics/Paralympics Promotion Office for the Mainichi newspaper, he readily acknowledged the tendency of earlier Japanese coverage to rely on a sort of inspiration porn (kandō poruno), noting that phrases related to overcoming and inspiration were almost epithets for disability sports in Japan. He was optimistic that more extensive and nuanced reporting—combined with more familiarity with disability sports on the part of reporters, editors, and potential readers—would help media coverage avoid these issues in the future. Concerns about inspiration porn were also raised at several other workshops and presentations I attended while conducting research in Japan during 2017, suggesting fairly widespread familiarity with the problem, if not a straightforward solution. Whether these promising developments will continue remains to be seen, but Tokyo’s 2020 Paralympics, like those more than fifty years earlier, are certain to have a profound impact on how disability sports will be reported for the foreseeable future. In that sense, it behooves us to give careful attention to ongoing representational practices in the media.
For Better or Worse? The Rise of New Media

One final media trend merits attention because it, too, has links with Nagano and has already proven pivotal for Tokyo 2020: the emergence of “new media.” At present, scholarship on the role of new media in disability sports is still relatively limited, with little focus on its historical background. Yet, with a constantly growing body of source materials, new media represent a potentially rich, if not overwhelming, field for ongoing research. This may be especially true in the case of disability sports, because several athletes and organizations, including the IPC, have embraced blogs, websites, live streaming, and an ever-growing list of social media platforms to connect with audiences. The goal here is to provide historical context and consider some of the implications of the growing reliance on new media outlets in Japan.

The turn to new media in the Japanese context has been both a reflection of broader technological and social developments and a response to frustrations with mainstream media that have historically offered limited coverage of even major international events. Although this aspect of the Games has been almost entirely overlooked, Nagano’s Paralympics were at the forefront of some new media developments. As part of its general promotional efforts, NAPOC opted to take advantage of new technology, working closely with IBM’s Japan affiliate to launch a website a year in advance of the Games. The site was designed from the beginning with accessibility in mind. Data were presented in ways that would be compatible with screen-reading software, and the layout employed large-size icons with colors and backgrounds that would be easy to see. Much of the content was available in both Japanese and English, and it included information on the events and venues, as well as links to purchase Paralympic merchandise and tickets. A messaging system allowed people to share comments with participants. As the Games approached, organizers coordinated with participating National Paralympic Committees to gather and post descriptions of athletes. During the Paralympics themselves, results were posted within an hour of each competition. Such information on events and athletes proved especially useful for mainstream media reporters, as well as the many schoolteachers and children participating in the One School, One Country educational programs in the Nagano region.

By November 1997, the website was already registering about 10,000 hits a day, and results naturally spiked during the Games themselves, with more than seven million hits over ten days, bringing the total number of hits for the website to more than thirteen million. Although these numbers paled in comparison with the record-setting 600 million hits on the Nagano Olympic site, they were unprecedented for a Paralympic Games, opening up a new forum
for people to engage with the event. The messaging system alone received more than five thousand messages, most of which were words of encouragement or praise directed to athletes. 

Nagano’s website also stands out in the history of new media for the first-time use of live streaming for the Paralympics. In response to the general lack of live TV coverage for most events, organizers took advantage of improving technologies and the support of IBM and numerous volunteers to stream nearly eighty-two hours of live coverage that captured an estimated 80 percent of the Games’ competitions and ceremonies. The live-streaming teams included recording crews, announcers, and support staff, all of whom were provided with official media credentials. The resulting access improved their coverage, which was accessed more than 21,000 times, a striking figure given the still relatively low levels of international Internet availability in 1998. As commentators at the time noted, Internet broadcasting still had a long way to go before it would rival traditional media, but Nagano’s Paralympics were a successful test case. The embrace of this pioneering approach in Nagano seems all the more remarkable considering that the IPC did not launch its own live-streaming network until several years later, in connection with the 2006 Winter Games in Turin.

In more ways than one, Nagano was just the beginning when it came to innovative uses of technology to generate improved access to and visibility for disability sports in Japan. A case in point would be the nonprofit organization STAND, founded by Itō Kazuko in 2005, well before Tokyo won its bid to host the 2020 Games. Inspired by her own lack of exposure to disability sports before a chance encounter with wheelchair track and field, Itō began her work in 2003 by launching efforts to provide Internet broadcasts of several high-level disability sports events that were almost completely ignored in the mainstream media. After its founding, STAND served as a de facto marketing service for a variety of sports and athletes. It organized promotional and fundraising events, sought out partnerships with companies like Japan’s IT giant NEC to explore new approaches for broadcasting competitions, and established a clearinghouse website that both produced and shared original footage of athletes and events beyond the Paralympics. In 2010, STAND joined forces with well-known sports journalist Ninomiya Seijun to establish the Challengers TV website. Although it is now one of several similar sites available, the founding goals of Challengers TV were to provide a venue for highlighting disability sports events and athletes and to promote disability sports in Japan as sports rather than a form of rehabilitation. The website regularly features news stories, interviews, photos, and videos and hosts a large collection of links to athletes’ private blogs.
As Tokyo prepared to host the Paralympics for a second time, there was no shortage of media content. Many affiliated organizations boasted attractive and regularly updated websites complete with their own collections of video clips, athlete interviews, and other resources. Most also shared content regularly on multiple social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. One of the most prolific sharers of content was the Paralympic Support Center, which clearly benefited from its affiliation with the Nippon Foundation, but even smaller-scale organizations like the disability sports association for Nagano City relied on a variety of new media forums to share information.¹⁶⁶

Japanese athletes, too, embraced new media, but from a variety of approaches. For instance, professional wheelchair tennis star Kunieda Shingo maintains a personal website, as well as an official Facebook page that had more than 17,000 followers, but as of this writing he has only a minimal presence on Twitter and Instagram.¹⁶⁷ In contrast, track-and-field Paralympic medallist Ashida Hajimu has a webpage with a blog, a Facebook page with 1,600-plus “Friends,” a Twitter feed with more than 1,200 followers, and a much smaller Instagram following.¹⁶⁸ These two athletes were hardly unique in making use of multiple new media outlets as they sought to bring greater attention to themselves and their sports, which raises an important question: What does the presence of all this content on new media mean for disability sports in Japan?

On the one hand, it is not hard to see these developments as positive. New media have freed athletes and supporters from relying on previously uncooperative mass media networks. These various platforms provide widespread access to a range of information on athletes and sports that would have been unimaginable only a few decades earlier. It is now far easier for fans and potential fans to engage with these sports and athletes directly. New media also give athletes and organizations a degree of agency over what they say and how they say it. In addition, proponents of new media argue that the increased availability of new content will lead to increased awareness and interest, which will in turn eventually promote improved coverage from traditional media. At the very least would-be reporters now seem to have easy access to a wide variety of information, making it harder to claim ignorance as a reason for a lack of quality coverage.

On the other hand, new media are not without problems and challenges, not least of which are concerns about privacy that continue to plague many social media platforms. Improved technology and software—particularly in the form of smartphones, tablets, and new applications—have made these new media outlets accessible to an ever-growing number of people, including those
from less developed regions and those with various impairments, but this process remains far from complete. Therefore, heavy reliance on new media may exacerbate already existing gaps in access to information on disability sports.

Moreover, the rapid proliferation of media platforms can present its own problems. Picking an outmoded app could easily limit the size of an audience, no matter how interesting the content might be. This means that athletes and organizations are faced with the challenge of maintaining an ongoing presence in multiple forums simultaneously. Opting for this approach, however, places a not insignificant burden on the athletes themselves. It shifts responsibility for giving attention to disability sports away from the mainstream media and society in general and back to the individual athlete.

Another concern is that the increasing reliance on new media could take the pressure off mainstream media networks to step up and provide coverage, and it might even risk further marginalization. The link between social media and the potential for social fragmentation is no secret. Without the larger media presence to generate broader initial awareness, it is not hard to imagine that most consumers for new-media-based disability sports content will be those who are already familiar with the sports and athletes or those who have actively sought out the content. How many people are going to look for something if they do not even know it exists?

Perhaps then, the best that can be hoped looking forward is a continued concomitant growth of both new and traditional media coverage, with each complementing the other. Whatever role new media ultimately take, its growing prominence is one more example of how disability sports coverage in Japan today has experienced significant change since Tokyo’s first Paralympics. Here again, Nagano proved to be a turning point, breaking new ground in Japan’s mediascape and leaving Tokyo better placed to reap results in 2020.