Coda
The 2021 Problem

There are a lot of people who wonder if this isn’t just a bubble, so there is uncertainty about where to go from here.

Asō Manabu, 2017

As I sat in the office conference room of the Japanese Para-Sports Association (JPSA) in April 2017 interviewing Asō Manabu about his work with the FESPIC Movement, his comment on the concerns about a potential “bubble” for disability sports reminded me of my own first visit to the office of the organization tasked with overseeing these sports in Japan. It was June 2011, and much of Japan was still coming to terms with the all-too recent (and in some ways ongoing) 3–11 triple disaster. Power shortages were causing offices, train stations, and public facilities throughout the country to dim lights and turn down or shut off air conditioning. Every place in Tokyo seemed dark and hot.

At that time, the Japan Sports Association for the Disabled (JSAD) was still using the older version of its English-language name, and the organization’s office was located in a different, much older building on the back streets of Tokyo. Despite following the directions on the website, I got turned around on the way there and ended up asking a nearby taxi driver taking his break if he recognized the address. It was only after we both puzzled over a detailed map of the neighborhood for several minutes that we realized I had walked by the building multiple times without knowing it because of inadequate signage.

I had written in advance about my visit and my research project, so when I arrived and knocked on the open JSAD office door, I was immediately in-
vited into a small office, packed with desks, paperwork, and people. After brief introductions, a few of us gathered in a corner of the office with a small table and some chairs that seemed to have been set aside for welcoming visitors like myself. As I spoke with the staff about my search for resources on the Paralympics, they were exceptionally helpful, providing me with countless materials, including a copy of a documentary film on the 1964 Paralympics that I never would have found otherwise. They also allowed me to borrow several official reports for a couple of days to read and copy the sections I needed for my research. I vividly remember feeling like I had stumbled into a scholar’s treasure trove. I also recall asking staff members about the rumors circulating at the time that Japan was going to bid again for the Olympics and Paralympics despite the recent disasters. They predicted that Tokyo would be bidding again in 2013 and somewhat presciently noted that, given recent events, the bid would probably be framed around the idea of recovery.

Six years later, with the 2020 Games only three years away, I traveled to the offices of the JPSA for my prearranged interview with Asō. At the new office, located in a much nicer building on the main road, I arrived in a decorated entryway with a countdown clock, closed doors, and a phone for announcing my arrival. After a call and a brief wait, Asō emerged from the office and escorted me to the large conference room where we sat at a table using a couple of the room’s many chairs and spoke for the next hour about his long-standing involvement with disability sports in Japan and the Asian region. After his comment about the bubble near the end of the interview, I could not help but glance around the room and realize that the space—empty but for the two of us—was only slightly smaller than the entire JSAD office had been six years before this. Although I was well aware that a lot had changed since 2011, at that moment the concerns about the current situation being a bubble seemed not at all far-fetched. And I, too, wondered what the future of disability sports was going to look like when the 2020 Games ended.

This coda explores that question, looking in particular at how some in Japan have begun grappling with what has been dubbed the “2021 problem” (2021 mondai). Introducing ideas from Japanese scholarship to a broader, English-speaking audience, and sharing my own observations, of course, does not give me the ability to predict the future. What I hope to offer instead are additional insights on the challenges and opportunities ahead for Japan and perhaps other countries, as people in these societies seek to assure that the impact of the Games proves as lasting and significant as possible.

One of the things that makes the current situation for disability sports in Japan all the more remarkable (bubble or not) is the fact that almost none of it existed sixty years ago. The preceding chapters have shown how Japan
experienced a dramatic transformation in the realm of disability sports, all in less than a single lifetime, a point I was reminded of when speaking with 1964 Paralympian Suzaki Katsumi. After the introduction of the Paralympic Movement to Japan in 1960, the decision to host the 1964 Paralympics sparked the establishment of institutions, organizations, competitions, and patterns that laid foundations for the continued development and promotion of Japan’s domestic disability sports scene. Although critically important to what we see in Japan today, these early developments were not uniformly positive, as exemplified by some of the problematic representational patterns that also took root in this period. Thanks to Tokyo’s 2020 Games, Japan’s embrace of the Paralympics at a relatively early stage in the movement has become a more familiar part of the broader history of the Games, but lack of access to source materials and language barriers have tended to prevent closer analyses of these early years before now.

These same challenges also hid some of Japan’s significant contributions to the international movement in the years since 1964. The now defunct FESPIC Games may have largely disappeared from popular and even institutional memory, but their roots in Ōita, their more than thirty-year history, and their impact on the development of disability sports in the region and the international Paralympic Movement more generally are too important to continue to overlook. The same could be said of Ōita’s famous wheelchair marathon, which for almost forty years played pivotal roles at the individual, local, national, and international levels, yet remained largely unfamiliar to those outside the sport or the city. Even within Japan, people were constantly surprised when I mentioned how long the annual race had been going on. All of this is to say that Japan’s contribution to the international disability sports scene has been longer running and more significant than most people realize. While Paralympic advocates have often used Japan’s perceived backwardness as a rhetorical device to promote needed change, it is worth recalling that Japan has been a leader in the movement as well.

Since they represented a turning point in multiple respects, Nagano’s 1998 Winter Paralympics Games stand out as another defining moment in Japan’s engagement with the Paralympic Movement at home and abroad. They not only contributed to the institutional strength of the nascent IPC but also helped reshape how the Games were organized, conceptualized, and shared within Japan, particularly in relation to changes in media coverage of the event and its athletes. Indeed, the debt that Tokyo 2020 owed to the many changes stemming from Nagano often goes unstated. Tokyo 2020 promoters clearly built on Japan’s track record of contributions to the larger Paralympic Movement, as seen most clearly through the organizing committee’s close involvement
with international Paralympic educational activities. Organizers for Tokyo’s second Paralympics also capitalized on more than fifty years’ worth of trends, changes, and improvements, combining all of that with an influx of new institutional, promotional, and economic support to prepare for a Summer Paralympic Games that would be unlike any before.

All that said, it is equally important to consider the impact of Japan’s historical engagement with the Paralympics beyond the realm of sports or successful sporting events. In this area, the story is less triumphant and necessarily equivocal. At several points, this study has observed how assessing the impacts of one-time or even annual events of any sort is a fraught prospect given the limitations of available resources beyond the anecdotal level. Nevertheless, it is possible to see several ways in which the Paralympics and sports for those with disabilities were integral elements of shifting approaches to or understandings of disability in Japan since the 1960s. Early on, the Games were inextricably linked to the promotion of new rehabilitation techniques and methods, and the rehabilitative benefits of sports continued to be seen as primary well into the 1990s, even as the views of athletes and some event organizers began to reorient toward competition before that time. As problematic as this rehabilitative emphasis is now seen to be—for multiple, understandable reasons—it is also important to acknowledge how events like the FESPIC Games and the Ōita International Wheelchair Marathon coupled that approach with the goal of promoting broad-based accessibility to sports. These events intentionally opened the door to a wide range of individuals who might not otherwise have had the opportunity to participate in sports at all.

This earlier approach to broader accessibility stands in marked contrast to the emphasis in later years, particularly in Nagano’s Games. Influenced by the push toward elite competition coming from the IPC and domestic athletes alike, the focus on rehabilitation was dropped; the discourses surrounding the 1998 Paralympics centered on notions of equality and accessibility in keeping with international campaigns and domestic shifts in Japan that were pushing the country toward a rights-based understanding of disability. Here I would note that in contrast to FESPIC, the Paralympics were trending toward exclusivity rather than open access. In the process, they were also becoming ever more reliant on inspirational potential as the means to promote greater interest in and opportunities for people with disabilities to pursue sports. Accessibility in Nagano was increasingly linked with the creation of barrier-free environments, generating significant discussion—if not always satisfactory outcomes—about how Japan might better meet the needs of its aging population, as well as those with impairments. Many of the social-impact elements in Nagano were even more evident in the organizational efforts for Tokyo
2020, in no small part because they were built into the process from the earliest phases. Even if limitations and shortcomings were already apparent before the Games, the increased urgency of Japan’s demographic situation and the outsized influence of Tokyo as the national capital, major media hub, and largest metropolitan area in Japan all promised an impact in terms of accessibility and social awareness well beyond anything Nagano could have achieved.

Taking into account this history of changes and developments, it is more than fair to say that the Paralympic Movement has had an important impact—uneven though it may be—on Japanese society beyond the realm of sports. I would, however, add a caveat. In popular parlance, it is not unusual to encounter references to the Paralympics “transforming” people, cities, or even societies, and to some extent, this notion makes sense—with countless stories and even my own work seemingly lending support to the idea. At the same time, such phrasings seem to obscure a key element necessary to understanding how and why the Paralympics have the influence they do: the people. To put it another way, the Paralympics in and of themselves do not transform or change anything; rather, people use the Paralympics to pursue and implement change. The impacts that have resulted from Japan’s sixty-year history of engagement with the Paralympics have been brought about not through some mystical transformative power inherent to the Games, but because people like Nakamura Yutaka refused to believe that “no” was the only answer when he proposed a new approach. Transformation has come from athletes discovering a passion and turning it into their lifework. It has come from volunteer translators and racers returning year after year to make Ōita’s marathon feel like a home course, or from organizational leaders who worked with skeletal, often volunteer, staffing and inadequate offices for most of the past sixty years, while still managing to hold regular competitions or even launch new ones. Changes have come from athletes and coaches pushing for equal access to facilities and resources or from volunteers and activists carrying out usability or accessibility checks and publicizing their results. Important developments have come from journalists questioning their own approach to covering athletes with disabilities and sometimes even from politicians and government bureaucrats who use such events to push forward reforms or projects. In short, the Paralympics and disability sports have had an impact in Japan because people in Japan have made them matter. This was as much the case in 1960 as it is today, a point that brings us back to the future and the challenge of making the 2020 Games matter in the long run, too.

In recent years, legacy has become a critical question for both the Olympics and Paralympics, and Japan’s 2020 Games were no exception. Thanks to his historical research, ongoing survey work, and a nonacademic writing style,
leading disability sports scholar Fujita Motoaki has laid out a particularly clear and astute articulation of the 2021 problem in his recent book, *How to Enjoy the Paralympics* (Pararinpikku no tanoshimikata). In line with Asō’s concerns shared at the beginning of this coda, Fujita cites economic factors as one of the largest hurdles ahead for the disability sports environment in Japan. After outlining the dramatic increases in governmental funding for disability sports since 2014 (which amounted to a 100 percent increase from 2014 to 2016 when his book was published), Fujita explains that much of this funding will simply disappear after 2020. He is certainly well aware that comparatively high levels of government spending in connection with Nagano’s Games were more or less zeroed out afterward, a precedent that does not bode well for Tokyo 2020. Fujita also highlights the significant additional support currently being provided by the Nippon Foundation, as manifested through its establishment of the Paralympic Support Center. This financial support, too, he explains, is officially slated to end in 2021. According to Kazuo Ogura, another scholar and head of the Paralympic Support Center who has written on the question of legacy for 2020, the lost revenue is projected to be offset by increased private sector sponsorship, but at this point it seems unclear why private sector businesses will be motivated to continue contributing after the Games have concluded.

From Fujita’s perspective, the likely loss of significant governmental funds and of the Nippon Foundation’s support will create two additional challenges: maintaining institutional structures and facilitating the recruitment and training of athletes. In the lead-up to the Games, the Paralympic Support Center provided several national, sports-specific organizations with office space and institutional support that were previously unavailable. Without Nippon Foundation funds, that arrangement will become untenable, potentially forcing these organizations to revert to earlier, essentially volunteer-based patterns. Although Fujita is hopeful that it will be possible to maintain the Center beyond 2020, he acknowledges that this may not be possible. In that case, he contends that these organizations will have to streamline their efforts and reduce costs as much as possible, while also seeking out additional support from the private sector. The goal in the long term—with such efforts supposedly already underway—is for each sports organization to become self-sustaining. The problem here, of course, is that each of these organizations will be competing against each other for an increasingly smaller slice of the metaphorical pie. In other words, the future situation here is far from ideal if the Paralympic Support Center closes as planned.

Additionally, much of the present governmental funding and significant portions of the support coming from the Nippon Foundation were dedicated
to the recruitment and training of potential athletes for the 2020 Games. As Fujita observes, the loss of these funds will make it impossible to continue with approaches that relied on cost-intensive, large-scale events used to raise awareness, find new athletes, and then get them into training as quickly as possible. Fujita’s worry is that failure to come up with new approaches will lead Japan down the same path as other former hosts that saw declining sports participation rates after their Games.\(^5\)

To continue recruiting new talent, Fujita proposes a solution very much in keeping with his role as an educator. Looking forward, he sees the key to success as reaching potential athletes early on at the grassroots levels, particularly through schools or rehabilitation facilities. He argues for incorporating more training on disability sports into required curriculums for school PE instructors, nurses, doctors, and physical or occupational therapists. Such training would provide these people with greater familiarity with these sports and make them aware of the opportunities available to people with a variety of impairments with whom they might interact. Perhaps more importantly, this approach would address a current gap in exposure and access to sports for individuals with disabilities who do not attend specialized schools or do not have access to more specialized rehabilitation centers. With additional training, a teacher or therapist encountering students or individuals with some form of impairment would not only feel more comfortable integrating them into athletic activities on the spot but would also be able to connect them to local and national sports organizations to pursue their interests further and continue developing their skills.\(^6\) With calls for 30,000 trained disability sports specialists (who in most cases are volunteers) nationwide by 2020, the JPSA is clearly thinking along similar lines, but the comprehensiveness and ambitious scope of Fujita’s proposal make it unique.\(^7\) Those same factors potentially make it more difficult to achieve, because it would require several programs at all levels of the training process to rework standards and incorporate new materials and instructors. As Fujita notes, in perhaps a bit of an understatement, “Efforts to change such a situation will be necessary.”\(^8\)

Although I generally agree with Fujita about the importance of pursuing this grassroots approach, it needs to be paired with efforts to assure access to both equipment and existing sports facilities throughout Japan. If sports wheelchairs are not available or not allowed in some local gyms—as widely reported when the Nippon Foundation Para Arena opened in Tokyo in 2018—then even having a conscientious and well-informed gym teacher or physical therapist might not be enough.\(^9\)

In discussing legacies of the 2020 Paralympics beyond the realm of sports, Fujita points to barrier-free urban environments and changing attitudes as potential long-term benefits. He notes that increasing media coverage and
awareness-raising programs in schools and communities all over Japan are likely to have a positive effect on people’s perception of disability sports and those with disabilities more generally. Given his own focus on the disability sports themselves, it is understandable that Fujita does not offer more thorough discussions on the need to assure that barrier-free campaigns and changed attitudes do not end with the Paralympics. But these issues, too, are a key piece of the 2021 problem. The history outlined in the preceding chapters provides plenty of warnings about the risks of assuming that these legacies are somehow natural or permanent outcomes of hosting the Games. Media bubbles pop, funds dry up, popular enthusiasms wane, and even entire movements can fade from memory. Although it is clear that many in Japan are seizing the opportunity of Tokyo’s second Paralympics to push for change, making those changes happen and making them stick beyond 2020 are both going to take a lot of work. But Japan’s history of engagement with the Paralympic Movement also shows us that people in Japan are up for the challenge.