

The South Sudanese athletes practice on grounds in the city with the support of coaches, interpreters, and other local volunteers.



FEATURE >>> Overcoming Difficulties amid the COVID-19 Crisis

# TOKYO 2020: Athletes Bond with Host Towns

While the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 back a year, the challenges posed by the pandemic have strengthened the bonds between athletes from across the globe and their official host towns around Japan

**T**he COVID-19 outbreak has had a massive impact on several teams of athletes who had already arrived in Japan to train for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020.

One of those groups was the Mongolian Para-athletics team, which had been training in Yaizu, Shizuoka Prefecture since February. Although the athletes originally planned to stay in Yaizu for no longer than a month, flights to their country were suspended as of February 28. As the team was forced to extend its stay because of that



The Mongolian Paralympic track and field team works out in Yaizu, which boasts a temperate climate year round.



predicament, Yaizu City supported the athletes until June. During that time, thanks in part to the city's temperate climate, the athletes were able to continue to focus on their training, and all of them managed to beat their personal bests.

As word about the stranded Mongolian Para-athletes spread throughout the city, the local residents pitched in to help, offering the athletes masks, fruit, and other forms of support. ONODA Satoshi of Yaizu City Hall says, "We consider these athletes to be members of our community. I understand that it is difficult to train in Mongolia for months on end because of the cold weather there. Although it will depend on the coronavirus situation, I hope that they will be able to come again this winter to train in the warm weather of our city." With the Tokyo 2020 Games now less than a year away, Yaizu is set to host such athletes and will make sure that they have what they need to join the competition in top condition.

Meanwhile, another city, Maebashi in Gunma Prefecture, is the official host town for five members of the South Sudan Athletics team. While South Sudan gained independence in 2011, the young state is in a severe



The South Sudanese athletes take Japanese classes in the morning. At their request, they are also learning how to use PCs.

situation with ongoing insecurity left over from the civil war. Refugees and internally displaced persons number 4.3 million—over one-third of the state's citizenry. As the country is unable to provide its team with an adequate training environment, Maebashi City expressed its willingness to host a pre-Games training camp for an unusually long period of ten months. The city secured funds for the camp through donation-based crowdfunding, and was able to welcome the South Sudanese team in November 2019. Not long after that, however, came the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Tokyo 2020 Games were officially postponed by a year, Maebashi City decided to keep hosting its South Sudanese

The South Sudanese team also has opportunities to experience Japanese culture. Here the athletes try their hands at pounding mochi.



athletes all the way through to the end of the Games.

"If the athletes we're hosting show what they can do at the Tokyo 2020 Games, South Sudanese sports could become a unifying force for their whole nation," says KUWABARA Kazuhiko of Maebashi City Hall. "We'll do what we can to help make that happen. Having the team in Maebashi is great for our community, too—it's a chance for us to appreciate how lucky we are to live in a peaceful environment where sports are a normal part of everyday life."

The athletes train day in and day out, with Japanese coaches and volunteer interpreters helping. Just eating nutritious meals every day and being able to run with all their might on a quality track constitute a remarkable experience for them, and they all say, "We want to use the time remaining to train hard and put in a good performance for the sake of our families, friends, and all the citizens of South Sudan."

Many hardships have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, but the bonds forged between the official host towns and the world's athletes—who have set their sights on the Tokyo 2020 Games—are sure to surmount these trying times and become even stronger. ✿



The Mongolian team says that it was encouraged by messages of support from the Yaizu City residents. The team also received a Special Sports Citizen Certificate from Yaizu City Hall as a show of eternal friendship.