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Title

The Paralympics and Evolving Media Representations of Athletes with Disabilities in Japan, 1964-2020

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When organizers first raised the possibility of hosting the 1964 Paralympics in Tokyo, athletes from Japan had *never* participated in the Games before, and many in Japan dismissed the idea as preposterous. Today, the situation could not be more different. As Tokyo prepares to host its second Paralympic Games, the city has integrated athletes with disabilities throughout the bid and promotion process. This paper examines how this shift came about, focusing on representations of athletes with disabilities in popular media over the past fifty years. The 1964 Games, Japan's first encounter with the Paralympics challenged longstanding social perceptions of the disabled, but repeated emphasis on the rehabilitative role of sports also reinforced less-progressive notions that disability was an individual, medical issue. Japan's second Paralympic experience in Nagano benefitted from decades of engagement with the Paralympics and widespread media coverage. The expanded attention proved mixed, as rehabilitation-focused approaches increasingly clashed with athletes' desires to be viewed as elite competitors. The nascent professionalization in Nagano has been even more apparent in promotional materials for Tokyo's upcoming Games. Although these developments suggest a new willingness to embrace athletes with disabilities as symbols of national pride, they also raise questions about the purpose of Paralympic sports for individuals with disabilities in Japan and beyond.



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