

Multimedia

“More than Medals” Sets the Stage for Tokyo Paralympics First-of-its-Kind Historical Analysis

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Abstract

This book review of “More than Medals” by Dennis J. Frost highlights the numerous strengths of this text’s coverage of the Paralympic movement in Japan. The first of such historical accounts written in English, Frost describes the progression to current day through analysis of five disabled sports events from the post-World War II era to the upcoming Paralympic Games in Tokyo. This text initiates an important call to action in ending the Eurocentric portrayal of the Paralympic movement with greater inclusion of Eastern perspectives.

Keywords: Paralympics, Japan, identity

As the world prepares for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, it is an ideal time to consider a new publication focused on the Paralympic movement in Japan, “More than Medals” by Dennis J. Frost. Much of the current and past coverage of adapted sport has been limited to a European or American context. “More than Medals” belies that notion. It is a deep dive in the history of a relatively unknown sports movement in the East. Author Dennis J. Frost (2020) attributes the restricted coverage of the Paralympic movement in the East to language barriers but cultural differences related to the perception of disability also seem to be at play. Frost deftly navigates historical storytelling to a cohesive timeline of both individuals and the Paralympic movement in the East.

The research for this book entailed translation from Japanese to English, and the author acknowledges this at the very beginning. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that there is a rich body of para-sport research written in Japanese. Sport scholars have spent years studying the system leading to literature both discussed in this book, and other work yet to be uncovered to a global audience. “More than Medals” focuses on five sports events in Japan: the 1964 Paralympics, the FESPIC Games, the OITA International Wheelchair Marathon, the 1998 Nagano Winter Paralympics, and the 2020 Summer Games. Until now, this coverage was limited due to a combination of language and access barriers.

Frost begins with Japan’s storied history of persons with disabilities with formal programming dating back to the World War II era. Post War rehabilitation centers for veterans also hosted sport events for persons with disabilities. The 1960 Rome Olympics was the inception of the Stock Mandeville Games. A predecessor to the modern Paralympics, many para-athletes used the same facilities used by non-disabled athletes in the weeks prior to these Games. In 1963, Japan announced its intent to host the Paralympics. Despite

assumptions that the Japanese had no prior experience with adapted sport, the wheels were set in motion for an international event.

Frost's book describes the inception and progress of the adapted sport movement in Japan. From its beginning as a public health rehabilitation measure to now hosting two Paralympic Games, amongst other sport events of repute. The examination of Japan's history, its people, and success in hosting these sports events provides perspective on the meaning of disability and sport in the East.

Central to the success of sporting events and their potential impact on society is media coverage of the events. Frost dedicates an entire chapter on the media coverage of persons with disabilities in Japan. Para-sport was initially advertised for rehabilitation. This was how promoters of sport events advertised competition, and this frame was further reinforced by the media. Frost traces the evolution of media portrayals of athletes with disabilities across time.

Howe (2008) has said that media research in, and coverage of Paralympic Sport has increased considerably in recent years to the point where, in the twenty-first century, the Paralympic Games are "a relatively high profile mediated event." In a comparison between the coverage of the 2004 Athens Paralympic and Olympic Games, Chang and Crossman (2009) add that media representations of sport events perform a wider hegemonic function of normalizing what society perceives about "body, gender, class and ethnicity. This has the effect of reinforcing ideologies.

Members of the Royal Family in Japan, and later politicians who would attend these events would be given central attention in said press coverage. The chapter on the media is

well portrayed and raises questions of the real purpose for hosting adapted sport events.

However, the vivid description of visual and film could have been complemented with some images in the book.

Considering the intersection of culture and disability, Frost describes the portrayal of western athletes versus that of the local Japanese Paralympic team members. The Japanese media referred to the foreign visitors as “bright” and successful. On the other hand, Japanese athletes were demeaned to highlight flaws, often related to their disabilities. European models were praised as countries which helped “disabled people feel very bright.” Frost (2013).

These comparative portrayals should be further examined by scholars of decolonization and critical race theory. As one looks at sport through the lens of sociology, humanities, and other related disciplines, one understands the links between sport and society. Frost provides a useful roadmap for future research, including the role of disability studies in understanding Paralympic sports, their media coverage, and its impact on society.

If you track the progress in the growth of adapted sport in Japan, over time one can see the introduction of professionalism which made the games more recognizable to an international audience. It also speaks of the impact Japan had on neighboring nations who were being introduced to adapted sport either by attending these events, or by interacting with the media.

A potential weakness of this analysis may be the missing measurable impact of the Games on the East. What has been the impact of the Paralympic movement on the people of Japan? Have legislative changes concerning the human rights of persons with disabilities been aligned with the growth of the Paralympic movement in the East? If the media perception of adapted sport sets the tone for everyday conversation, it would be worthwhile

to measure its impact on Japanese society at large. Has accessibility in Japan improved in response to hosting these five historical events?

According to van der Veere (2020), organizing committees for the 2020 Games “are duplicating common misrepresentations that already exist within Paralympic discourses.” The Supercrip and Superhero tags, commonly used to market the Games, set impractical expectations for the larger population of persons with disabilities. In other words, there seems to be this disparity in how Paralympians are portrayed in the media when compared to the everyday lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Van der Veere refers to this as a “visual dominance of persons who can take advantage of technology.”

This book was published prior to the second COVID-19 wave, and the hosting of the Tokyo Games, postponed from 2020 to 2021. As subsequent waves of COVID-19 variants rage across the East of the world, questions on the viability of the Games have been raised. While athletes with disabilities may disproportionately be at a greater risk of contracting COVID-19 infections, this discussion should not be restricted to the Paralympics alone. Yamaguchi (2021) reports that as of June 2021, less than 10% of the country’s population is vaccinated. Citizens of Japan are calling for the Games to be canceled in fear of rising cases Turner (2021). A subsequent edition of this book could explore the impact of the pandemic on the adapted sports movement globally.

“More than Medals” upends the assumption that the Paralympic movement has been led exclusively by the West. While largely a historical account, Frost’s book also highlights the role of innovation in the advancement of the Games. Readers with a disability studies background will appreciate his nuanced analysis of the shift of disability coverage and perceptions across the timeline. “More than Medals” is a historic first with its English

language coverage of the Paralympics in the East. It should be widely read for this reason and the strong foundation it builds for future literature to come.

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