

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 25. The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

13 August

The Tokyo Olympics have concluded. An Olympic games that took place amidst unprecedented difficulties otherwise known as the COVID pandemic. While domestic debate within Japan for and against holding the Games reached as far as Australia, how were the Games perceived from Australia?

That's something that I want to try talking about.

1. Gratitude and compliments

While the Games were still on, again and again I heard Aussie friends tell me “The Tokyo Olympics have lifted our spirits”. Many of these people remarked on how great it was to be able to watch the events, particularly given that Sydney and Melbourne were both in lockdown at the time as a result of the Delta variant.



Olympic Stadium (Source: aflo)

Major newspapers in Australia featured commentary saying “(following thorough implementation of preventative measures given the state of the world at present) The holding of the Olympic Games itself deserves a medal”. Others remarked to me that “There’s no way the Games could have taken place during a COVID pandemic in places like London, Paris or Los Angeles. But because the venue was Tokyo they were able to go ahead”.

2. Consistent, warm support

The Australian government consistently supported holding the Games. During the Japan-Australian Summit Meeting that took place during the G7 Summit in Cornwall, UK, Prime Minister Scott Morrison expressed his sincere, warm support for the Games.



The Japan-Australia Summit Meeting at the G7 Summit in Cornwall

Also, many will recall that the Australian women's softball team was the first team from among the participating nations to make their way to Japan. The name of that team "Aussie Spirit" spoke for itself. I myself, so beholden to an enthusiastic spirit, later donated some "Tim Tams" to the team during their camp in isolation in Ota city, Gunma Prefecture.



A message of support to the Aussie Spirit from the Embassy team

Something that made me so happy was a thank you message, accompanied by a bouquet of flowers, that was delivered to the Embassy by a local Canberran impressed by the Opening Ceremony. What a lovely gesture! Many messages continued to arrive at the Embassy both while the Games were on and even after the Closing Ceremony.



The message card and bouquet of flowers delivered to the Embassy

3. Golden Girls and a Gold Rush

The extraordinary results of the host nation Japan during the Games were widely reported in and out of Japan. As a Japanese citizen living abroad, I felt an enormous sense of pride in this. And as a former “baseball kid”, I vocally gave my support to “Samurai Japan” in the semi-final and final of the baseball, all while gripping my palms together, wet with perspiration.

At the same time, I also cast an eye over Australia’s results. It was a gold rush with 17 gold medals, thereby equaling the previous Australian record set at the Athens Olympic Games. In their specialty field of swimming, “Golden Girls” such as Emma McKeon, who secured 7 medals, and Ariarne Titmus, who engaged in a series of events against her US rival, were celebrated across the length and breadth of Australia.

4. A major sports power

If you look at the number of medals obtained per head of population, then Australia is probably one of the top level countries in the world.

When I asked a senior Australian government official “Why is Australia so strong at sport? I was amazed by the swimming in particular”, I was told the following:

“Australians have a special relationship with the ocean. 70 to 80% of the Australian population lives along the coastline. As a result, from childhood swimming is compulsory even at school. Everyone can swim. In fact, the “Australian dream” is to own a house with a pool attached to it”.

“Oh I see”, nodding my head in agreement.

Something that I strongly felt Japan and Australia shared in common were brilliant results not only in individual sports but in sports that require teamwork. In relation to individual sports, Australia did well in swimming, sailing, and track and field, while Japan did well in judo, gymnastics, table tennis, wrestling, and skateboarding etc. As for team sports, Australia performed well in hockey, rugby, soccer and basketball, while Japan performed well in baseball, softball, soccer, and basketball.

Am I the only one who felt the quiet sense of pride of a major sports power whenever Australians said “we don’t pursue “niche” sports for the sake of collecting medals”?

5. Tears and sportsmanship

There was another thing that Japan and Australia share in common and which left a strong impression on me while I was watching coverage of the Olympics in Australia. A number of athletes who had won a medal, while showing bright, unbridled joy on their faces, would eventually start to shed tears. Given that these Olympics had been postponed for a year amid doubts about whether or not they would go ahead at all, these athletes, who had to deal with such difficulties with little choice but to continue training, were recalling all of their tough trials and tribulations.

Another thing that caught my eye was the sportsmanship and camaraderie among the athletes. I was particularly moved by the scene of one Aussie female surfer, beaten in a contest against her Japanese rival and a contender for the gold medal, extending a hand of congratulations to her rival on top of a wave moments after losing her hope for a medal.

Moreover, the emotion expressed by the Australian media to scenes of fellow competitors lifting a Japanese skateboarder onto their shoulders after she was unable to obtain a medal despite being a favourite in the women's skateboarding left an impression on me.

It reaffirmed to me that sportsmanship is a strong bond connecting Japan and Australia.

6. An ideal opportunity to sell Japan

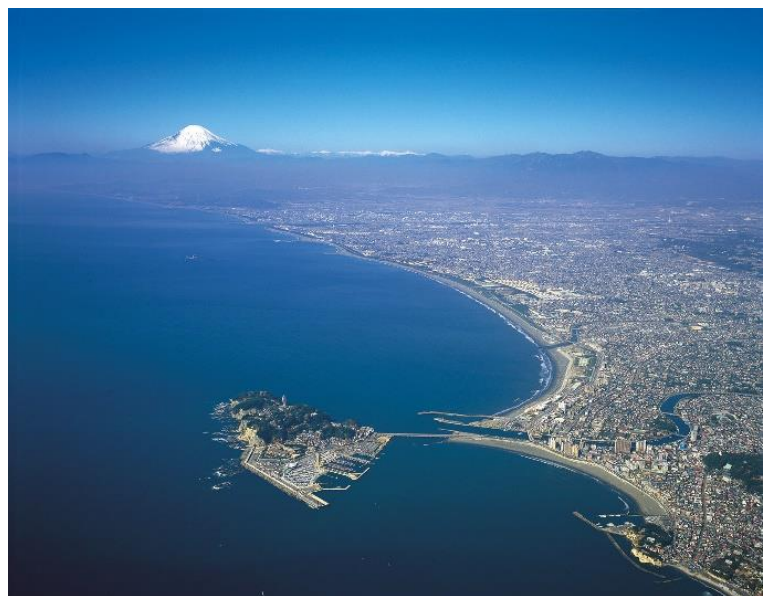
Having said all this, I might be open to criticism that I've been spending all my time watching TV and online streaming services. However as a Japanese diplomat living abroad, the Tokyo Olympics provided the perfect opportunity to sell Japan.

The verdant green of the mountains of Izu serving as a backdrop to the cycling, Mt.Fuji bobbing up into view during the sailing off Enoshima, Odaiba serving as the venue for the triathlon in the metropolis of Tokyo, the boulevards of Sapporo with their mirror-like surfaces welcoming marathon runners dealing with the oppressive heat of summer, and so on and so on.

I want to make the most of the scenes that were streamed into the living rooms of Australians, scenes that one cannot ordinarily see. Once the COVID pandemic subsides, I strongly hope that many Australians (who spend the most among any international visitors to Japan!) will again pay a visit to Japan.



Canyons of Izu



Enoshima and Mt. Fuji

(Source: Shizuoka Prefecture Tourism Association)



Tokyo's Odaiba Marine Park



Sapporo's Odori Park

7. 'Omotenashi'

When I think of it, Japan was trying to sell a Japanese style of 'omotenashi (hospitality)' in holding the Tokyo Olympics. Unfortunately the COVID pandemic meant that in principle no crowds were allowed, and the amount of contact and exchanges that athletes had with Japanese people was severely limited.

I want to pay my sincerest respects and express my gratitude to the extraordinary efforts of those who endeavoured to ensure that the Olympics went ahead despite the enormous challenges faced. It is in that spirit that I intend to invite members of the Australian Olympic Committee and athletes to my Residence in Canberra upon their return to Australia, whereupon Chef Ogata will do his utmost to present an outstanding Japanese meal so that they might taste just a bit of the 'omotenashi' that they weren't able to in Japan.



Chef Ogata's Japanese Cuisine

8. Towards the 2032 Brisbane Olympic Games

Immediately before the Tokyo Games commenced, Brisbane was chosen to host the 2032 Olympic Games. We will share the experience of the Tokyo Games so that it will lead to a successful Games in Brisbane. It seems that this will become a new area for Japan-Australia co-operation.

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