

Team Toyota Olympic and Paralympic Athletes Get Candid On the Year Ahead

July 23, 2020



When the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 were postponed by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Toyota shared in the inevitable collective first shock of the news. The decision was disappointing, to say the least but the decision was respected to ensure the Games are a safe and memorable experience. Team Toyota athletes have been training hard and Toyota Team Members have been cheering them on, as well as looking forward to being a part of an event that brings people around the world together on a grand scale. “The Olympic and Paralympic Marketing Team has been pouring their heart and soul into the planning for Tokyo 2020, so naturally, we were sad at the thought of not being able to see those plans come to life this summer,” says Ed Laukes, group vice president, Toyota Marketing, Toyota Motor North America.

However, there was also no denying the gravity of the situation that created the postponement and disappointment was soon replaced with powerful hopefulness and optimism in the face of an historic challenge. Instead of focusing on “what might have been,” the Olympic and Paralympic Marketing Team forged ahead with innovative solutions, fine-tuning their approach and seizing the opportunity within the sudden change of plans. Now, the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 are again one year out, retaining the original name. Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 will run from July 23 to August 8, 2021, and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 run from August 24 to September 5, 2021.

“The team has done an excellent job at adapting to the current environment, especially since the situation has been so fluid,” says Laukes. The power of adapting is a key philosophy at Toyota as the company undergoes transformation from traditional automotive into a mobility company. This moment pushes athletes and sponsors to dig deep for resilience. After all, turning obstacles into opportunities is at the heart of the Start Your Impossible mindset. As Laukes says, “The team made a very deliberate choice. Rather than see this postponement as an insurmountable challenge, they chose to use the time as a gift and aim to do more for our Team Toyota athletes, our National Governing Body [NGB] partners, and the Olympic and Paralympic Movement.”

Given that in-person events are at a standstill, like many organizations, Toyota quickly pivoted its digital and creative content strategies to accommodate virtual communication and maintain social engagement. Laukes explains that the team implemented virtual athlete appearances on Microsoft Teams which, he says, “has been a fantastic way for Team Members and external groups to get to know our incredible roster of Team Toyota athletes.” Continues Laukes, “With our 17 NGB partners, we’ve historically activated at numerous live events, but the team quickly shifted our strategy to be digital-first, allowing us to still communicate with their membership bases, just in a different way.”

Team Toyota athletes embrace that same challenger spirit and use the present moment as a catalyst to inspiration and to share what it means to keep going as they re-start their impossible. Says Laukes, “We remain in close contact with the athletes, and what we have seen is that they embody the Olympic and Paralympic spirit and are resilient in the face of this challenge. We remain fully committed to supporting them in their journey to the Games and beyond.” Like people in other lines of work, Team Toyota athletes are finding creative ways to adapt to the change. In this case, being flexible often means training in their home gyms, driveways and backyards. Like the rest of us, athletes are also finding a new perspective on the bigger picture. As Laukes says, “It’s been great to see the athletes taking this time to focus on other aspects of their journey beyond the physical training. They continue to have a positive outlook and are inspirations to us all.”

Here’s how the Team Toyota athletes are thinking about the upcoming year.

Paralympic swimmer [Jessica Long](#) is leaning on her support system.



We all know this has been a tough time and everyone is going through their own challenges. I'm trying to be adaptable — what's been really helping me is just slowing down, trying to appreciate the small things, and checking in on others. I've been checking in with my grandparents and spending more quality time with my family, which has been great. Kindness goes really far.

But it's also okay to have tough days. You can have a bad practice, you can add time, the Games can get postponed by a year. With everything that's going on right now, it's okay to struggle through something, but be sure to reach out to your support system and find ways to pick yourself back up.

Paralympian [Steve Serio](#) is working on staying connected with the wheelchair basketball team.



When all of this started, I was watching a lot of TV, but I quickly realized I needed to be more productive. Our team is living all across the world because about half play professionally in Europe and the other half is scattered all across the U.S. We have team calls every two weeks and hop on FaceTime® to work out together and try to motivate each other. We're just trying to figure out ways to stay connected and I think after Tokyo, we're going to look back on this moment as a team and see it in a positive way.

I was really down at the beginning, but being a high-performance athlete, part of that is not making excuses. Although I'm pretty ready to get back to normal and stop doing pushups on my carpet, we still have an obligation to be the best version of ourselves. No excuses — we've still got stuff to get done.

Paralympic Track & Field team [David Brown](#) and [Jerome Avery](#) are adapting to a new method of training.



Brown: We did have to change a lot, not only with Tokyo being pushed back, but also with COVID-19. Back in March, we had to start social distancing on the track, so no more training with the tether. Jerome is going back to his caller days, clapping me down the track and I run toward him. Eventually, the training center in California closed, so I'm at a different facility and Jerome is training from home.

Avery: We definitely have to do a lot of stuff apart and figure out different ways to stay in shape and come together. But one of the great things about our partnership is that we've been running together for so long, so when we get back together it's like riding a bicycle. We're not as worried about being apart for training and coming together to run together, because we've done that before. Now, it's like riding a bike.

Olympic BMX racer [Alise Willoughby](#) embraces challenges and finds strength in uncertainty.



The stage was set and obviously like everyone else we hear the news that everything is being shut down and cancelled, postponed. It's a blow, but at the end of the day, everyone is going through this together. I could take this negatively, but instead, you have to choose to accept that challenge as you do with anything in life.

I did take a little bit of time off training because obviously when you find out that you have 16 months instead of four, the training demands change a bit. I think that as an athlete, I've been training for my whole life. We're always in the uncertainty. No matter how hard you work for something, you are never guaranteed a result. Right now, what I can do is I can stay home and follow whatever guidelines I'm meant to follow during the pandemic. I can also work my butt off in the gym so I can get as strong as I can, so when I get on the track, I can spend time focusing on that. You have to put your best foot forward regardless.

Skateboarder [Jordyn Barratt](#) is gliding through quarantine with a newfound appreciation for downtime.



With quarantine, it's definitely been a little challenging to keep skating because the skate parks have been closed. Honestly, I've kind of been enjoying the downtime. I'm not going to lie. I've had quite the crazy last three or four years. So, to be able to sit in one place is kind of weird, but it's also kind of nice.

With all this going on in the world, it's so much more important that we take the time that we need to discuss everything about those events. Once time comes by and the Olympics are around in 2021, it'll be way better. Looking forward to all the future of that and things along those lines.

Charting the road ahead

Toyota is fully committed to helping the athletes throughout their journey to the Games and beyond. For the summer athletes, the company has extended their contracts and is offering continued support to the entire Team Toyota roster. Since the Summer Games will only be five months ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games Beijing 2022, the team has room to bridge the two events in a more comprehensive and impactful way.

Laukes adds, "We see this as an unprecedented opportunity, a time in which the Olympics and Paralympics will be top of mind for consumers for a much longer period of time than ever before."

At the end of the day, though, the well-being of Toyota's Team Members, Team Toyota athletes and partners remains a top priority as the company navigates this new normal on the road to Tokyo. And even though the global audience was looking forward to an exciting summer with the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo

2020, Toyota now has what Laukes calls “a longer runway” and with it more time to build and reinforce awareness of our commitment to the Olympic and Paralympic Movements. The teams feel certain the effort will not be in vain, and that there is an even larger role for the participants to play beyond the thrill of the medal count. Laukes sums up the importance of the moment and adds a further note of inspiration as the new year-long run up to the Games begins: “We believe the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 will be the most watched ever and will help play an integral role in helping us heal as a global community.”