

How Host Towns Are Interacting with Paralympians

The cities of Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture and Odate in Akita Prefecture are among those in Japan serving as “Host Towns” for athletes participating in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympics Games. Their support and exchange activities are helping to realize a harmonious and inclusive society.

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KANAZAWA CITY AND THE FRENCH PARALYMPIANS

Kanazawa City in Ishikawa Prefecture has sister cities to promote friendly relations in several countries, one such city being Nancy in the French Republic (hereinafter France). Kanazawa registered as a Host Town of a Harmonious and Inclusive Society for France (Paralympic swimmers) in December 2019, with the aim of supporting Paralympians and accelerating initiatives to realize a harmonious and inclusive society. The city created guide maps to inform wheelchair users where to find slopes and elevators at the city’s sports and cultural facilities, and created videos introducing these facilities in Japanese, English and French. The city also held the “Barrier-Free Mindset Festa” to help residents deepen their understanding of the challenges facing people with disabilities through personal experience, such as by walking with an artificial leg or with a blindfold and a cane.

In-person interaction with the French Paralympic swimmers has been difficult since last year due to COVID-19, but people in Kanazawa have still been supporting the team. For example, six videos, entitled “Bonds Woven with Music,” were produced and presented to the French Paralympians. These videos featured musical messages from musicians working in Kanazawa, including Christmas carols performed with handbells at Christmas, a Japanese *taiko* drum performance at New Year, and performances of pieces by French composers. The videos were distributed on SNS with explanations in Japanese and French.

They also made a video showing elementary school students and artisans working together to create the Kanazawa traditional handicraft of *karakami-uchiwa* (fans made from *karakami* washi paper), and sent the actual fans to the

- 1 A Kanazawa traditional *taiko* drum performance for the French Paralympic swimming team
- 2 Elementary school students in Kanazawa made fans and sent them to the French Paralympic swimming team along with this video message
- 3 A French Paralympic swimmer sent a video message of thanks after receiving the fans

Photos: Courtesy of Kanazawa City



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4, 5 The boccia exchange tournament, August 2020

6 Still from a video message sent from Odate to Thailand in May 2020 showing people holding toys and photos of the Akita-breed dog Hachikun, the city's mascot

7 Still from a video message sent from Thailand's boccia team to Odate in March 2020

Photos: Courtesy of Odate City

athletes. Having received the fans and the video messages, the Paralympic swimmers sent a thank-you video in Japanese with messages such as, “Thanks to everyone in Kanazawa. Let’s meet again in Japan.”

Moreover, they have also deepened mutual understanding online, such as by introducing sweets in a collaborative project using French and Ishikawa Prefecture ingredients. Currently, preparations are being made to support the athletes during the Games, while taking appropriate precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

ODATE CITY AND THE THAI PARALYMPIANS

The elderly (aged 65 and over) population of Odate City in Akita Prefecture is higher as a percentage than the national average. As a measure to address its aging society, Odate has used exchange with the Paralympic athletics and bocciaⁱ teams of the Kingdom of Thailand (hereinafter Thailand) to engage in “town-building based on universal design” and promote the concept of a “barrier-free mindset,” while in December 2020 it was designated as a Leading Host Town of a Harmonious and Inclusive Society.

Thailand’s champion boccia team won five medals, including two golds, in a total of seven events at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. The team was welcomed to Odate in September and October 2019, when exchanges were held between the boccia athletes and residents, as well as demonstration games with the Japanese team. When COVID-19 hit Akita in 2020, the boccia athletes sent video messages in Japanese, smiling and saying things like, “We’re all connected, so let’s overcome this together” and “Please take care of yourselves.” In August that year, the Hachikun Open, a boccia tournament commemorating the Thai exchange, was held, with appropriate COVID-19 measures in place. (The tournament is named after Hachikun, the city’s mascot.)ⁱⁱ Although the Thai athletes were not able to come to Japan for this event, they still interacted with the Thai team through a livestream of the nine teams from Odate and Akita playing boccia together. COVID-19 situation permitting, Odate City plans to hold the event again to promote para-sports and further deepen exchange with Thailand.

Through steadily continuing interactions like this, there is no doubt that both sides will grow to understand each other better and para-sports will continue to develop. **7**

i A ball sport of European origin, similar to bocce, lawn bowls and pétanque, played by athletes with severe physical disabilities.

ii An Akita dog, purportedly the grandchild of the famous Akita dog Hachiko.

