

SPORTS



# TOKYO 2020

## ADVENTURE OF UNCERTAINTY

**T**okyo 2020 will remain in the memories of people inclined to history as one that is exceptional when a roll call is made of all past Olympic Games. It came about in a season of hopelessness and helplessness. A season we all will gladly not want to recant. It came when the world was, and still is, ravaged by a disease which had crept into the world unannounced. The world had not prepared for the uninvited guest that has left, and still, leaving tell tale signs wherever it had said hello.

I remember, back in the summer of 2013, the excitement and euphoria that heralded the choice of Tokyo to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games ahead of Madrid and Istanbul. The announcement was met with jubilation in the Japanese capital as it prepared for the event 56 years after it last hosted it. The scenes in Tokyo were of triumph and conquest reminiscent of great Julius Caesar's entry into the great palladium. It was that ecstatic. The Tokyo delegation to Buenos Aires, where the decision was made by the International Olympic Committee, rose to their feet waving the Japanese flag when the announcement was made by the IOC president Jacques Rogge who retired shortly, after spending 12 years in the role. Bid leader Tsunekazu said: "it is a great honour that Tokyo has been chosen. The first thing I will do when I return is to thank all the people of Japan. It is a dream come true."

The theme of the Japanese campaign for the bid was that "the Olympics will be safe in our hands." I must remind here that Tokyo made history by becoming the first Asian city to host the Olympic Games twice.

The then Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, in his presentation during the bid said sports had played a big role in boosting the country's image in the past two years and revelled in the fact that no Japanese athlete had failed drug tests in any Olympic or Paralympic games. This probably did the magic. That was then.

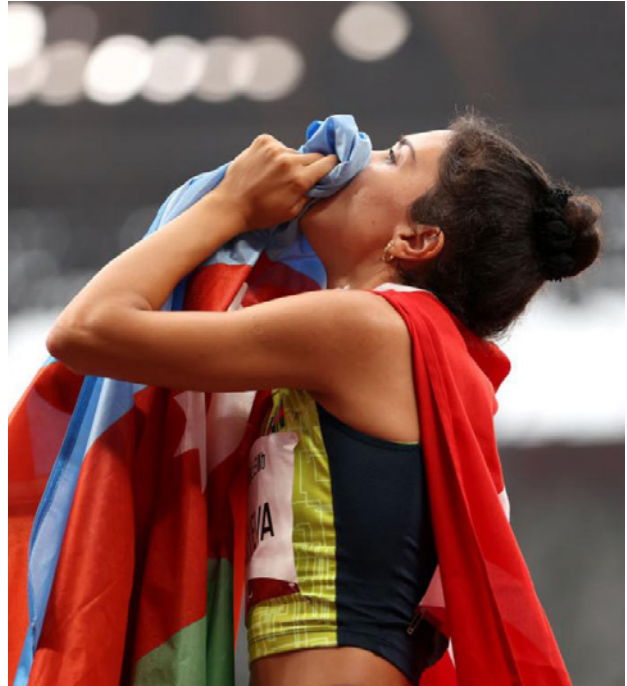
Before I take you into the present, it will be extremely beneficial and incisive to gain an insight into the history of the Olympic games dating back to the 19th century, more than 3000 years ago. Fast track to the first modern Olympics which was held in Athens, Greece, in 1896, 280 athletes from 12 countries participated in the Games. The all-male participants competed in nine sports and 43 events at the Games which was declared open by King Georgios 1 with a crowd of 60,000 in attendance. The sports were track and field, gymnastics, swimming, wrestling, cycling, tennis, weightlifting, shooting and fencing. The IOC symbol of five interlocked coloured rings represents the continents of North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia.

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**Again, fast track to the 1924 games in Paris where 3000 athletes from 44 nations (with more than 100 women among them) took part in the Games which could be well regarded as an international sporting event which had a closing ceremony for the first time in the history of the games.**

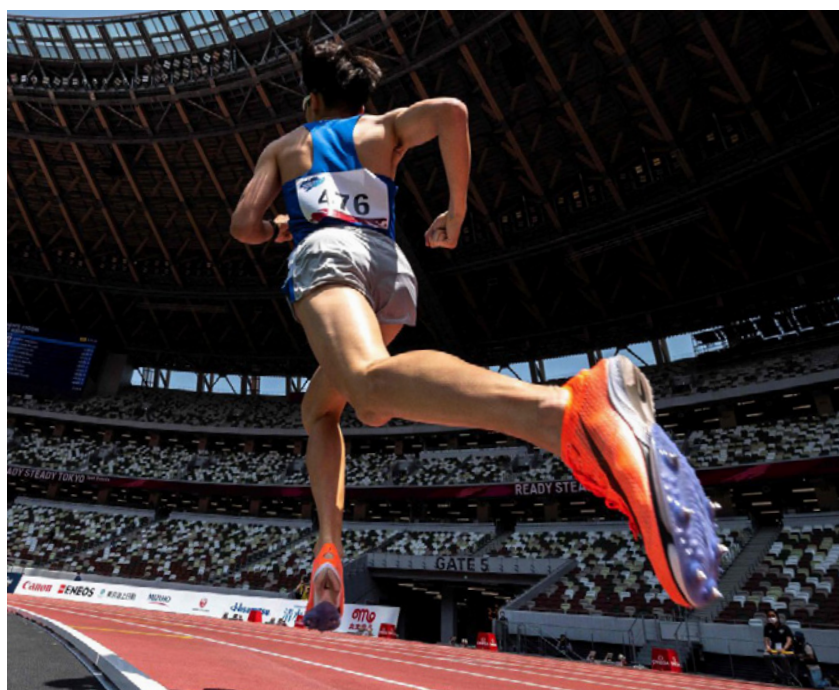
Eighty years later, when the games returned to the ancient city of Athens in 2004, athletes from a record 201 countries and 11,000 athletes took part.

This was a clear and impressionable increase in the number of athletes, sports and events. Of course, the number of spectators invariably increased due to an increase in the events. This was pleasing to the spectators as they had more games to watch at the venues and for some, on television, in the comfort of their living rooms.



Now back to the present. The Tokyo Olympics which should have been held in 2020 got underway a year later due to the Covid-19 concerns. The Japanese government and the IOC had agreed to the change but however insisted that the Games should be referred to as Tokyo 2020, even if it will take off in 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic had struck a sharp dagger into the financial underbelly of the Japanese government and her economy. The Games which, according to the Japanese bid should have cost the economy \$7.3 billion dollars, had doubled to \$15.4 billion dollars at the end of the games. The calculation and projection for gains had been destroyed and shredded by the passage of time. Time, as we must now admit, is a gigantic determinant of the future and of future prospects. I must reiterate that money plays a massive influence in modern day Olympics. The spirit of excellent athleticism and commercialism are juxtaposed with commercial success and commercialism. It is expected, since the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, that a financial windfall awaits any city hosting the Olympics. The bid to host the Games is, usually highly motivated by a strong desire and potential for profit. The heightened desire for money and profit has occasionally affected the process of selection which has led to corruption charges on a few occasions. The Salt Lake City's winning bid for the 2002 Winter Games comes to





mind. IOC members were forced to resign after being accused of corruption. It was discovered that the promoters had bribed the IOC members. The Japanese government had invested a lot in winning the bid to host the games yet it is debatable if it was able to make the expected financial windfall. Could this be a repeat of the 1940 Olympics awarded to Tokyo which was cancelled due to Germany's invasion of Poland and eventual world war?

The enthusiasm that greeted the award of the 2020 Winter Games to Tokyo had waned. Protests against hosting the Games had increased. 11,000 athletes were expected to take part in 33 sports at the Tokyo 2020 Games translating to an increase from the last Games (10,500 athletes and 28 sports). The people would not approve of that. Apart from the athletes who hope to reap amazing financial gains for winning through product endorsements and personal appearances, the presence of tourists and visitors play a significant part in the success of Games.

Tokyo 2020 suffered a big blow when, after careful consideration, the Japanese government imposed a ban on foreign visitors to the games in order to restrict Covid-19 and avert the spread of the coronavirus infection in Japan. Most spectators were

not allowed into the 25 venues of Olympic events located in Tokyo as well as other venues at Miyagi, Fukushima and Shizuoka. It was, indeed, a huge disappointment. However, foreign sponsors and overseas Olympic committees were allowed to attend the Games in person.

Despite, the risks to future health and the embarrassment of getting caught, some athletes would go at great length to use performance enhancing drugs. Winning medals is the greatest admiration for athletes and they would stop at nothing to achieve that. They want to be respected, adored and glamorized. Failed drug tests had happened at earlier Games and Tokyo 2020 was not an exception. As a first measure, 20 athletes were banned from participating in the games for not meeting strict anti-doping rules. Ten of these athletes were Nigerians. Other countries impacted by the decision include Belarus, Kenya, Morocco, Bahrain, Ukraine and Ethiopia. Although the athletes were not named, they were all from the 222 athletes these countries had registered for the games. British athlete CJ Ujah and Nigeria's Blessing Okagbare were two of the high - profile casualties of Tokyo 2020. Other athletes guilty of varying drug abuse offences include Kenyan sprinter Mark Otieno Odhiambo, shot putter Abramyan of Georgia and Bahrain's 1500 - meter runner, Sadik Mikhou.

Russia was disallowed from participating in Tokyo 2020 Games as a country. Rather, her athletes were allowed to compete under a neutral flag as the Russian Olympic Committee ROC. That was Russia’s punishment for years-long doping scandal.

On performance, the USA topped the Games’ medals table, but it was their worst outing in track and field. America is globally known for her prowess in the sprint and relay. They were absolutely disappointing at Tokyo 2020. American Olympic legend, Carl Lewis said “the USA team did everything wrong in the men’s relay. The passing system is wrong, athletes running the wrong legs, and it was clear that there was no leadership. It was a total embarrassment and completely unacceptable for a USA team to look worse than the AAU kids I saw”. (Credit to Twitter). That probably sums up the faltering side of the American team.

Team GB ended Tokyo 2020 fourth on the medals table with 22 golds, short of the 29 won at London 2012. It was also two medals short of the record-breaking performance at the last Olympics at Rio. Remember, the team came back from the Atlanta Games, 25 years ago, with just a single gold medal. Although the team’s performance in athletics is nothing to rejoice about, the swimmers radiated hope and the possibility of a greater and brighter future. The swimming team for the first time in 113 years won eight medals, four golds, three silvers and a bronze at one Games.

The most populous black nation in the world (about 200 million people ), Nigeria, could only muster a miserly one bronze and a silver, coming 74th on the global medals table. She came a distant eighth on the medals table for African countries which was really disappointing, to say the least. The disqualification of 10 athletes immensely affected the overall result of the team. If one considers the fact that athletics account for 13 of the 25 medals won by Nigeria at all Olympic Games, the disqualification of the ten athletes proved devastating. Although the Athletics Federation of Nigeria AFN took responsibility for the fiasco, it was, and is still, not enough to give hope of a brighter future. 2008 Olympic long jump silver medallist, Blessing Okagbare took to Twitter to berate the attitude of the officials saying, “I have said it before and I will say it again. If you do

not know the sport, are not passionate about it /Us (the athletes), then you have no business there as an administrator. The sport system in Nigeria is so flawed and we athletes are always at the receiving end of the damages”. Okagbare was later disqualified before her semi-final event in the jump for failing a drug test. Others have also levelled criticism against the ineptitude and nonchalant attitude of the sports administrators. It does not portend for a brighter future.

As the Olympic torch makes its way to Paris for the 2024 Games. I hope all the countries would have put their worst performances behind them and start training in earnest. More importantly, I also hope the organisers realise that time and events determine what the future holds. So much to learn from Tokyo 2020 and Tokyo 45. Covid-19 and war were the harbinger of discontent and uncertainty. Man proposes but disposes.

\* Please note that the performance of USA, Great Britain and Nigeria were highlighted for reasons of relevance.

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