

Tokyo Marathon 2021 Wheelchair Elite Race Preview

Tokyo Marathon Wheelchair Race Director
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It's difficult to determine how the elite wheelchair race will take its turn at the Tokyo Marathon 2021. It will be an exciting race, as nobody can guess the race outcome and the winner.

Due to COVID-19, five of the major events were squeezed in last fall over the course of six weeks. On top of that, the Tokyo Paralympic Marathon was held on September 5, and the Oita International Wheelchair Marathon, where both world and national records were established, was held on November 21. The Tokyo Marathon 2021 was initially scheduled for October 17, 2021, but with its postponement to March 6, 2022, the event will take place for the first time in two years.

Different from previous years, we will be inviting much fewer international athletes due to COVID-19 and increased travel stress on the athletes. Therefore, the Japanese athletes will take over eighty percent of the elite field.

This is the reason why I said in the beginning that it is difficult to determine this year's race, because its normally the international athletes who take the lead.

Another consideration that we have to pay attention to is partial course changes due to road constructions. Especially the two left turns soon after the start will make a big difference. Normally, when coming into a corner, athletes will reduce the speed, then increase it back after making a turn. Thus, athletes who have strong thrust at the start will have the advantage at turns, because they tend to have greater strength to raise the speed back up more quickly. We may see some athletes opening up a huge lead even from the start.

By actively racing against the international athletes and taking over the race, the Japanese athletes will have a greater chance of winning at this race. More so, because there are less opportunities for athletes to compete due to other races canceling in the pandemic, I truly hope all athletes will adjust and focus on establishing fast records to gain greater strength at the Tokyo Marathon, especially for athletes who missed the Tokyo Paralympic.

■ A Winning Chance for Japanese Male Athletes

Let me first introduce the men's field. From overseas, the Tokyo 2020 Games marathon Paralympians, Marcel Hug (SUI) and Johnboy Smith (GBR) will be joining the race. Hug has won his second gold medal since Rio, and Smith secured tenth finish at his first paralympic marathon. Both athletes demonstrated a different racing approach, where Hug created his own race by leading the group, whereas Smith carefully monitored the race flow in the back.

One and only one representing Japan at Tokyo Paralympic marathon, also not to mention that it was his first paralympic, Tomoki Suzuki (JPN) who finished seventh at the game will be joining the Tokyo Marathon. In November 2021, at the 40th Anniversary Oita International Wheelchair Marathon, even though there was a gap between Hug who established a new world record for the first time in 22 years, Suzuki finished second rewriting the national record. Suzuki is powerful, and we can look forward to him defining the race.

With the partial course change at the Tokyo Marathon 2021, we can expect a game change from the beginning. Considering the record times and racing strategy of each athlete, Hug and Suzuki may likely lead the race gaining a gap between the rest from the start. Therefore, the rest of the athletes must be mindful to keep up the pace at all times, for it will be very difficult to catch up once they lose sight. To better strategically plan the race, I hope the Japanese athletes will take their time to understand and prepare for the course change at the start.

Even if there is a gap during the race, I hope the athletes will stay calm and maintain a good rhythm to stay close as much as possible with the lead. Looking at past records, I believe Smith and Ryota Yoshida will most likely lead the second group. I also believe the athletes will divide into two or three groups during the race, and I look forward to how Hiroki Nishida and Sho Watanabe will play the game aggressively challenging other athletes.

The Tokyo Marathon course is mostly flat, and last year, Suzuki performed a record-breaking solo run from 8km, winning the race with a new course record of 1:21:52. If other athletes recognize that this course is suited to achieving fast records, we can expect fast overall performance. This year too, I hope it will be a fast race to smash last year's winning record.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe the Japanese athletes will have a great chance at this race, and truly hope they will gain something from it. It's only three years until the next Paralympics. I hope all athletes will set their goals high in achieving good results and go at its fullest. And if they manage to win over the unbeatable Hug, or Suzuki and Smith, who gained experience at the Tokyo Paralympics, they will leave a deep impression with greater confidence in them.

■ Don't Miss Out on Women's Field

This year, only Japanese athletes will be joining the race. First up is Tsubasa Kina (JPN). She entered her first Paralympic marathon last year in Tokyo, finishing seventh with a time of 1:42:33. I believe she was disappointed with her record, and therefore, I hope she will challenge our race with a fresh mindset.

Next to Kina, I look forward to Wakako Tsuchida's (JPN) experienced performance. The eight-time Paralympian marked fourth with the time of 1:38:32, little short to her personal best at the Tokyo Paralympics marathon, even though it was her second sporting event within a week following paratriathlon.

There are very few female wheelchair marathon athletes in Japan. For that reason, I hope these three athletes will deliver exciting races to inspire other athletes to challenge marathons in the future.

■ Fixating Bonus Point at the First Half of the Race

Since 2019, we have been launching the "sprint bonus point", awarding AbbottWMM wheelchair race bonus points, and this year too we will launch it, but adding on our own twist.

In the last event, we have fixed the location of the bonus point at 37km, within the last half of the race, but with the interest to shake up the race early, we will move the location to 13km near Nihombashi-Muromachi. Because the early stages of the course consist of downhill, the race tends to be high paced, and by the time athletes reach 10km, they start to feel fatigued. But by setting the bonus point at 13km, I hope it will trigger a race change by stimulating athletes' minds to shift gears to cling on to leading athletes, or fight back.

This year, we will set a time trial challenge within the bonus point of 400m. Any athletes who cross the finish of the bonus point with the lap time or world record pace (as of Oct. 2021) will win bonus prize money. For men, the lap time we have calculated is 35 seconds, and 45 seconds for women. And due to operational reasons, the actual distance has been shortened from 400m to 380m, which means, the athletes will have an advantage in achieving those times. I look forward to seeing athletes taking on the challenge.

■ Extending Athlete Field

The wheelchair division at the Tokyo Marathon is limited to para-class T53 and T54, and every year at our event, the wheelchair elite invite field is mainly filled with T54 athletes who are classified to have less impairment.

However, with the hope that more athletes will challenge wheelchair marathons and explore greater possibilities, we have also invited Tomoki Sato (JPN), wheelchair T52 track Paralympian of the Tokyo Paralympics. Even though he will not be subject to our prize purse, nor will he be included in the elite field, he has happily accepted our invitation.

Para-class T52 athletes have greater restricted movement, sometimes including their hands. But Sato has marathon experience, and he has the qualifying record time of sub two hours to race the Tokyo Marathon. In addition, he is an astonishing athlete achieving gold medals in both 400m and 1500m at the Tokyo Paralympics. Compared to T54 athletes holding record time under 1:30:00, Sato's record time may seem less powerful, but he will definitely perform a great race. And it will be exciting if he surpasses T54 athletes in the event.

The qualifying time to enter the Tokyo Marathon is strict, and I recognize that some feel overwhelmed to enter our race. But I hope more athletes will recognize that they can enter our race as long as they have a record time under two hours, and use our event to challenge themselves. At the same time, I hope that the Tokyo Marathon will be a motivational event for everyone, and Sato's entry will be an inspirational message to all.

The race outcome will surely depend on the weather, and athletes have no control over it. I expect all athletes to be fully prepared before the start, by monitoring their conditions and adjusting their practice drills. I look forward to witnessing the breathtaking race.