

Q&A: What's next for the Tokyo Olympics as virus spreads?

March 2 2020, by Stephen Wade



In this Feb. 18, 2020, file photo, a man wearing a mask takes pictures of the mascots for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo. The spreading virus from China has put the Tokyo Olympics at risk. The Olympics are to open on July 24 - less than five months away. IOC President Thomas Bach declined to speculate about a postponement, cancellation, or any combination of those possibilities. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

The spreading virus from China has been reported in more than 60 countries and puts the Tokyo Olympics at risk. The Olympics are to open on July 24—less than five months away. The Paralympics follow on Aug. 25.

IOC President Thomas Bach, in an interview last week limited to Japanese media, said the "IOC is fully committed to have the opening ceremony there on July 24th in Tokyo." He declined to speculate about a postponement, cancellation, or any combination of those possibilities.

Bach told the Japanese: "I'm not ready to add fuel to the flames of speculation there in any way."

Others are.

An Irish bookmaker last week began taking bets: 4/6 the opening ceremony will not go ahead in Tokyo as scheduled, or 11/10 that it will. In gambling terms, that means it's slightly above 50-50 that it will.

Senior IOC member Dick Pound last week suggested Tokyo and the IOC had roughly until the end of May to announce a decision. Pound, a former International Olympic Committee vice president, said there's no decision so far and stressed talks were nearly constant with the World Health Organization.

He has characterized the virus as the "elephant" in the room, likening the fight against it to "the new war."

"You just don't postpone something on the size and scale of the Olympics," Pound told the Associated Press. "There are so many moving parts; so many countries, so many different seasons and competitive seasons, television seasons. You can't say: 'We'll do it in October.' It's a big, big, big decision and you just can't take it until you have all the

reliable facts on which to base it."

The virus has caused more than 3,000 deaths, the vast majority in China. Japan has reported 12 deaths with almost 1,000 cases.

Q: WHAT'S THE NEXT THING TO WATCH?



In this Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020, file photo, spectators' stands are empty during play in a preseason baseball game between the Yomiuri Giants and the Yakult Swallows at Tokyo Dome in Tokyo. IOC officials announced on Monday, March 2, 2020, that a baseball qualifying event for Tokyo Olympics was postponed from April to June. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko, File)

A: Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto is holding a teleconference on Wednesday with the IOC executive board in Switzerland. The 14-member board along with Bach made the big decisions.

There could be changes to the torch relay, which is set to open March 26 in Fukushima prefecture, northeast of Tokyo. The event is heavily sponsored by Coca-Cola and Toyota. It might face crowd limits the way Sunday's Tokyo Marathon did. Preseason baseball games are being played in empty stadiums, soccer's J-League has suspended play, and a large Sumo event will be held without fans. Training for Tokyo's 80,000 unpaid volunteers has been postponed until at least May.

A month ago, Muto said he was "seriously worried" by the spread of the virus. He has become more cautious with his words since then.

Q: WHAT'S UP WITH THE TEST EVENTS?

A: There are 18 remaining test events. Many are small and involve only Japanese athletes, a chance for organizers to test venues and logistics. Two in the next several weeks are planned to have non-Japanese attending: Paralympic wheelchair rugby on March 12-15, and a gymnastics meet on April 4-6. They'll be watched to see if non-Japanese athletes compete.

Crowd restrictions could be put in place, although many don't call for fans in the first place.

Q: WHAT ABOUT OLYMPIC QUALIFYING EVENTS?

Officials announced on Monday that an Olympic baseball qualifying event was postponed from April to June. It will be held in Taiwan as scheduled, but on June 17-21 instead of April 1-5. The World Baseball Softball Conference said it was because of "player, personnel and

spectator health and [safety measures](#) against the spread of the coronavirus."

Olympic qualifiers have been moved from China. Bach said that many Chinese teams and athletes are out of China and training elsewhere: the table tennis team is in Qatar, the women's basketball team is in Croatia, and wrestlers are in Serbia.

"We have managed to move qualification competitions and tournaments within weeks from China to other countries where the safety of the athletes could be ensured," Bach said.



In this Feb. 24, 2020, file photo, a man with a mask walks past a display promoting the Tokyo 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. The spreading virus from China has put the Tokyo Olympics at risk. The Olympics are to open on July 24 - less

than five months away. IOC President Thomas Bach declined to speculate about a postponement, cancellation, or any combination of those possibilities. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Q: IOC MEMBER POUND MENTIONED LATE MAY AS A DEADLINE. IS THAT FIRM?

A: Pound is a senior IOC member. But he was speaking as a rank-and-file member when he speculated that late May was a deadline to decide on Tokyo's future. The call will be made by the IOC [executive board](#), the WHO, and local organizers.. It seems reasonable that a decision will have to be made with two months to go.

The Olympics have thousands of moving parts. Sponsors who have paid billions must activate ad programs. More than 11,000 Olympic athletes and 4,400 for the Paralympics have to know their training schedules. Add to that: flights, hotel reservations, catering, ticketing, and broadcast schedules. Almost 75% of the IOC's income of \$5.7 billion in a four-year cycle is from broadcast rights.

Tokyo is officially spending \$12.6 billion to organize the Olympics, although a national audit board says it's twice that much.

Pound said all of the alternatives had major drawbacks: pushing the start back a few months, postponing until 2021, moving events to scattered venues or another city, or an outright cancellation. The modern Olympics dating from 1896 have been canceled three times during the two World Wars, and faced boycotts in 1976, 1980 and 1984.

Q: WHAT IS THE MOOD IN JAPAN?

A: It's uncertain and stressful, prompting some fear and hoarding in shops. On the other hand, daily life seems about normal, perhaps with fewer commuters on Tokyo's trains and more people wearing masks.

The government has asked all schools to close for more than a month. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been criticized for getting started late fighting the virus. He announced a 270 billion yen (\$2.5 billion) emergency economic aid package on Saturday. He said the country was at a critical juncture to determine whether it can keep the outbreak under control ahead of the Olympics.

"Frankly speaking, this battle cannot be won solely by the efforts of the government," Abe said. "We cannot do it without understanding and cooperation from every one of you, including medical institutions, families, companies and local governments."

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