

TOKYO OLYMPICS

2020



NEW SPORTS

The five new sports this year were skateboarding, sports climbing, surfing shortboard, karate and 3x3 basketball. A major motivator for this decision was to appeal to younger audiences and bridge the generation gap. Younger generations prefer other options for entertainment over TV, which is evident as the median age of Olympic television viewers is in the low to mid-50s.

“We want to take sport to the youth,” said IOC President Thomas Bach. “Taken together, the five sports are an innovative combination of established and emerging, youth-focused events that are popular in Japan and will add to the legacy of the Tokyo Games.”

SKATEBOARDING

There has been a growing interest in urban sports, which are sports mostly played by youth on the streets. The skateboarders competed in four events: women’s park, women’s street, men’s park and men’s street. Shaped like a fishbowl, the park course allowed skateboarders to twist and turn mid-air at impressive heights. The street course was made up of challenging obstacles such as stairs, rails and benches that the competitors used to show off various skills during runs. Teenagers and young adults dominated the events, most notably seen in the all-teen podium of women’s park. The top medalling countries are led by Japan with three gold, one silver and one bronze and followed by Australia and Brazil with one gold and three silver respectively.

SPORTS CLIMBING

Thanks to indoor climbing gyms, rock climbing has become more popular in recent years. It is a unique sport that requires an athlete to push their limits and use their problem-solving skills. Olympic sports climbing is a form of rock climbing that tests athletes in three disciplines: bouldering, lead and speed. In bouldering, climbers must finish a 4.5-meter wall full of overhangs and challenging holds under a time limit and without safety rope. Lead event climbers, equipped with safety rope, must climb as high as they can on an over 15-meter-high wall in six minutes. The leading technique consists of attaching safety rope to quickdraws on the wall that straighten the rope and allow more fluid movement. In speed, two climbers compete against each other as they finish a 15-meter wall with identical routes at a 95 degree angle. Alberto Ginés López of Spain and Janja Garnbret of Slovenia respectively became the first male and female Olympic climbing champions.

SURFING SHORTBOARD

The International Surfing Association has been pushing for surfing’s debut at the Olympics since 1995. This year its wishes were finally fulfilled in Japan, an island country with an established surfing culture and plenty of beaches. To determine the finalists, athletes competed in three rounds, quarterfinals and semifinals. Competitors were judged on speed, power, turns, combinations, flow, difficulty and innovation of maneuvers. Unlike other sports, where athletes compete against each other in the same event to win medals, Olympic surfing consists of 30-minute heats. After three rounds, quarterfinals and semifinals, two surfers would compete for bronze at the bronze heat and two surfers would compete for gold and silver in the gold heat. Ítalo Ferreira of Brazil and The United States’ Carissa Moore respectively became the first male and female Olympic surfing champions.

KARATE

It’s only fitting for karate to make its Olympic debut in its home country. The sport featured two events: Kata and Kumite. Kata is a discipline where karatekas perform their forms, which are routines that feature various defensive and offensive moves. Instead of the traditional flag scoring system, the Olympics’ kata used a point system to score a competitor’s athletic and technical performance. The Olympics’ kumite event had three weight classes for both men and women. Karatekas would fight each other for 3 minutes in a 64 square meter area. Competitors gain points by kicking or punching their opponent’s head or other designated body parts. The events did not go as expected for the host country, as it only gained a bronze in kumite and a gold and silver in kata.

3X3 BASKETBALL

A decade after its international competitive debut, 3x3 basketball appeared in the Olympic spotlight. This sport is played in a half-court and one hoop with three players in each team. The game has a faster pace than traditional basketball, since players only have 12 seconds – half of traditional basketball’s – to make a shot. Furthermore, an attacking or defensive role is assigned to a team. The United States won 18-15 in the women’s event and Latvia won 21-18 in the men’s event.

SHARED VICTORY

In high jump, two athletes found compromise and, for the first time in Olympic history, shared a gold medal. Both Mutaz-Essa Barshim of Qatar and Gianmarco Tamberi of Italy scored 2.37 meters in their competition. After attempting to exceed that height, they failed repeatedly. Typically, this circumstance would lead to a jump-off in which both athletes would take turns jumping until one managed to exceed their original score. It’s as much a test of stamina as it is a test of technical skill. But Barshim suggested that the two share the gold medal instead, and remarkably, officials agreed. The two high-jumpers have made history at these Games — this time, not just for their incredible athleticism, but also for the incredible sportsmanship, humility and generosity they showed together on that podium.

FIRST GOLD MEDALS

Tokyo’s 2020 Olympic Games have provided many historic moments, including the first time gold medals have been awarded to multiple countries. Bermuda, who only sent two Olympic athletes to compete in Japan, saw Flora Duffy win gold for a 1:55:36 triathlon time. Duffy has also competed in Beijing, Rio de Janeiro and London. This is her first Olympic medal and Bermuda’s first gold.

The Philippines also claimed their first gold medal, after over 100 years of competition. Weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz won gold in the women’s 55 kilogram category, and set new Olympic records by lifting a total weight of 224 kg. Diaz was stranded in Malaysia from February of 2020 to July of 2021 due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions.

MENTAL HEALTH

American gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from the women’s Olympic team gymnastics final due to concerns regarding mental health. Years ago, athletes of Biles’ standing might have been hesitant of sharing their mental health struggles because of the stigma that surrounds the issue; however, Biles hopes that discussing these challenges will have a far more powerful influence than just winning gold medals.

“I just feel like we have to focus on ourselves as humans, not just athletes,” Biles said. “Because I feel like we lose touch of our human feelings sometimes.”

The narrative has begun to shift in recent years. The NCAA created their mental health initiative in 2015, and swimmer Michael Phelps discussed his struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts before the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics. In May, tennis player Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open citing concerns over her bouts of depression. Track and field athlete Noah Lyles talked about his use of antidepressants and how he didn’t aim to follow in the footsteps of star athletes, but to just be himself.

“That’s not who I am. I’m Noah Lyles,” he said. “I’m not Usain Bolt’s successor. I’m not Andre de Grasse’s successor. I’m nobody’s successor. I am me. And that’s who I’ll always be.”

