

Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games – an Opportunity for (Competitive) Sports

Olympische und paralympische Spiele Paris 2024 – eine Chance für den (Leistungs-) Sport

The past two Olympic and Paralympic Games were exceptional in many respects and were characterized by special challenges from a medical and sports medicine perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic dominated public life and sport in many areas between 2020 and 2023 and naturally also had a lasting impact on competitive sport.

In April 2023, the Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach declared the pandemic to be over in Germany. Nevertheless, the effects on medicine and sport in Germany are still to be felt to varying degrees today - including reduced sporting activities in clubs, a lack of exercise and an increase in mental health problems, particularly among children and adolescents. In addition to competitive sports, recreational sports were initially hit particularly hard by the pandemic-related restrictions. Public sporting activities were severely restricted by the closure of sports facilities, contact bans and quarantine measures. For organized sports, this meant a significant drop in sports club memberships and a marked decline in physical activity - especially among children and adolescents - with negative effects on physical fitness and obesity prevalence in this age group.

Particularly in the field of competitive sports and at major sporting events, the measures for preparing and holding competitions under rigorous hygiene requirements led to some bizarre scenarios. From

extensive PCR tests, some of which were carried out daily during the events, to extensive hygiene measures with far-reaching facemask requirements as well as the complete exclusion of the public. Therefore, the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo and Beijing took place under conditions that had nothing to do with the philosophy of untroubled sporting events and wide-ranging sporting and cultural exchange between the participating nations. In retrospect, it was nevertheless important to hold these events in order to send out a signal that, despite or precisely because of the pandemic, sports and elite sports have an important function, signal effect and pioneering role for society.

Fortunately, with Paris 2024, the Games will once again take place under completely different conditions and many people are looking forward to them with great anticipation. In addition to the athletes, there are numerous journalists, sports enthusiasts, fans, families and local volunteers who can look forward to the Games in relaxed and free conditions in Paris this summer. The French organizing committee leaves no doubt that the city, the sports facilities and the people are very well prepared to host outstanding, professional and joyful games. For us as "Team D", the organization in advance and also the logistics on site will be much easier, from the short journey that can be made by public transport to simple import regulations, the lack of a language barrier and European standards for equipment and medication. If you take a closer look at the athletes with disabilities, there is still a small question mark regarding accessibility, especially when it comes to transportation, as travelling by public transport with luggage for three weeks and several wheelchairs per athlete seems unrealistic and hardly any parking on site. With regard to the Paralympics, however, it is very positive to emphasize that the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris will continue to grow together. The preparations of the organizing committees are going hand in hand and for the first time in the history of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, even the mascot of the two games will have an identical basic design. It bears the name "Phryge" in reference to the traditional Phrygian cap and stands for freedom. The Olympic Phryge and the Paralympic Phryge complement each other, and the common motto is: "Alone you go faster, together >

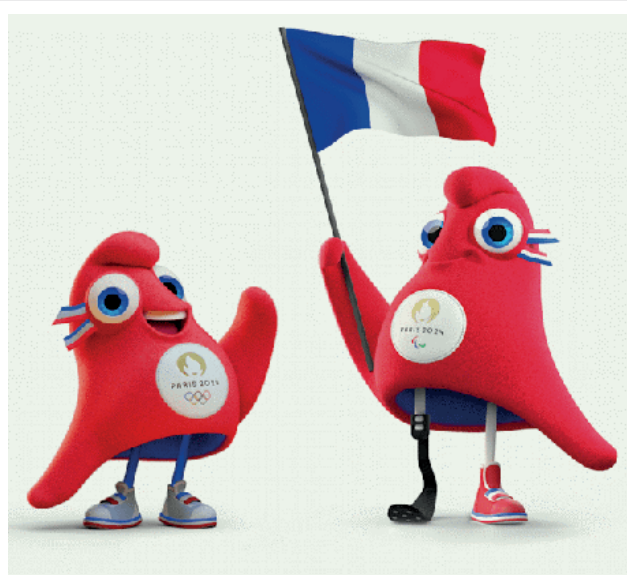


Figure 1
Olympic mascots 2024 (4).



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you go further”, symbolizing the way the mascots and the people of the world can improve each other by working together.

From a sports medicine perspective, the most important potential health risk discussed concerning Paris is a possible heatwave. A recent study shows Paris as the city with the highest excess mortality due to heat among 854 cities (3).

Corresponding preparatory measures have therefore been extensively discussed and initiated in recent months. This applies in particular to Paralympic athletes, whose heat tolerance can be significantly reduced (1, 2), even if the climate at the end of August/beginning of September is expected to be milder than in July. In any case, heat management strategies should be individually well-planned and tested in advance in order to minimize health risks and achieve the best possible individual performance.

Following a decision by the IOC Executive Board in November 2021, the position of “Welfare Officers” was introduced for the first time for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Beijing 2022 based on the experience gained from the Games in Tokyo, which were marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. As this position has proven effective and helpful, it was again implemented and strengthened into the upcoming Games, regardless of the pandemic. The delegations of the individual nations have the option of accrediting 1-3 professionals with training in mental health and safety, depending on the size of their delegation, to support athletes and coaches with mental health problems and provide help with mental stress during the Games. This will also increasingly reduce the stigmatization of mental health problems and lower the threshold for seeking help. It will be interesting to see how often this accreditation will be used and how often the respective “Welfare Officers” will be consulted.

The Paralympic and Olympic Games in Paris in 2024 offer a great opportunity to bring the Olympic and Paralympic Games back to a wide audience and to present summer sports in all their diversity with bright and fascinating images, thus creating motivation and advertising for sports not only in the high-performance sector but at best also in the area of popular and especially youth sports. For Germany, we hope that this summer’s major sports events will also increase interest and motivation to organize such major sports events in Germany. In order to best support the urgently needed efforts in terms of prevention through exercise in all sports, performance classes and age groups in the future, a German bid to host the Olympic Games would also be of great benefit. Independently of the Olympic and Paralympic Games themselves, the path to this goal would involve material and idealistic investments that could be of great benefit to sport and society. In this context, sports medicine would also benefit, not only in the manageable segment of competitive sports medicine, but also in particular concerning the optimization of the framework conditions for practicing sports in all areas, which could be improved in conjunction with a clear commitment to sport and competitive sport. ■

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