

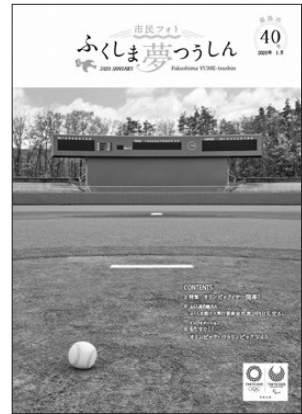
Fukushima Dreams – a quarterly publication of Fukushima City — JANUARY 2020

Thank you for picking up this quarters' "Fukushima Dreams – a quarterly publication of Fukushima City".

In this issue, we hope that you will learn more about, and be moved by the various charms that Fukushima City has to offer.

With a population of around 290,000 people, Fukushima is surrounded by the beauty of nature. Due to its location, the city has a characteristic basin climate, and is a famous fruit production area: producing many varieties through the seasons, including cherries, peaches, Asian pears, grapes and apples.

We hope that through this edition, you'll come to appreciate even a little of what Fukushima City has to offer.



P. 2, 3

① The Dream Stage at the Top of the World! The Olympic Year has Opened!

② 2020 is an Olympic year! The curtain is about to go up on the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Starting off the 55 events will be the Japanese softball team competing at Azuma Baseball Stadium in Fukushima City. Before the dynamic battle begins between the top athletes of the world, we asked former Olympian and Japanese National Women's Softball Coach Reika Utsugi and former Paralympian competing on the Japanese Wheelchair Basketball team, Megumi Mashiko, about their passion for the Olympics.

③ The Olympics are a dream stage that only come once every four years. We represent Asia.

At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics approaching this summer, the women's softball team, who shone bright when they captured the gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, are making a comeback for the first time in three competitions. The current leader of the Japanese national team, Coach Utsugi speaks with great passion, "I want to win. That feeling is growing stronger and stronger. Japan is the only team representing Asia at the Tokyo Olympics. We are carrying a great responsibility as Asia's representative, too. Japan is hosting as well, and I just want to win."

The Olympics, which are only held once every four years are a special stage. They are special to the coach also, who has competed in the Olympics twice before as an athlete. "In the athlete's village, there is an atmosphere that everyone wants to win. I can be a champion at world championship competitions and other tournaments but the Olympic gold medal is a reward only given to those who have spent their entire lives working to stand at the top of the sport."

At the Beijing Olympics, team ace, pitcher Yukiko Ueno threw 413 balls. "The outfielders united in their effort to somehow get at least one point for our ace, who just kept throwing and throwing. At the game in Azuma Stadium in 2020, I hope the citizens of Fukushima come together with the athletes as one creating a heated game as we work hard to get to Yokohama Stadium."

Uniting to win! That is the Japanese national team's strength

The Olympics also have a special ability for communication, says Coach Utsugi.

"The Olympics are able to show people who don't know about softball what makes it attractive, and that Japan has a strong team. It is also an opportunity to communicate the beauty of the host city to the rest of the world." And those attractions are "of course the speed of the game, but its strategy and teamwork also make it attractive. The speed at which the pitcher throws the ball is so fast that you'll miss it if you blink. That's why you constantly have to pay attention."

Also, "the strategy is similar to golf. Golf has 18 holes and softball has 7 innings, and you have to battle it out within that given time frame. In golf there are irons and putters, and every golfer has to be able to use all of them. It is the same with batters. Softball is a team sport, so athletes have different body types and personalities, and you have to control those differences and become one to win. The Japanese national team members are capable of doing that. The basic goal is to win. Dramas are born from the wins. I want to aim for wins with tenacity."



P. 4, 5

① The renovated stadium is a wonderful environment and the food in Fukushima is delicious!

Coach Utsugi has been to Fukushima City, home to Azuma Stadium, many times, including for training camps. "The stadium renovated with artificial turf is enormous and full of greenery. It's wonderful. The food is delicious too. When we come to Fukushima, I always have to check that the athletes don't gain too much weight from eating too much," she says with a wry smile. She personally loves apples, and when she was a player, she would eat an apple before a game instead of a meal.

At last, we asked her for a message to all of the people looking forward to the opening game. "We are playing softball, but we are always standing alongside the people of Fukushima who are still recovering from the disaster. That's why winning in Fukushima will have such a deep meaning. We are going to become one with the people of Fukushima and win. I want us to play in a way that will lead to good results," says Coach Utsugi. Please start supporting the Japanese national women's softball team with great enthusiasm now to get them off to a good start.

② Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Fukushima City

Wed., July 22 & Thu., July 23 Softball

Wed., July 29 Baseball

③ The Olympic Games being held domestically is a once in a lifetime chance. Let's support the athletes with great enthusiasm!

④ Paralympian Megumi Mashiko also says the Olympics and Paralympics are special. We asked Ms. Mashiko about the power in sports for people with disabilities and their future.

⑤ Medals are proof of gratitude and effort for Paralympians

Megumi Mashiko explains that while not everyone can stand on the world's greatest stage, that is the Olympics and Paralympic Games, everyone has a chance. Although that chance may be slim, Ms. Mashiko has competed in the Paralympics four times as a wheelchair basketball athlete.

She says that the 2000 Sydney Paralympics in which she participated when she was 30, were particularly unforgettable. "By getting the Bronze medal, I was able to repay my debt of gratitude to everyone. You cannot just blindly work hard in order to earn a medal. Carrying out the full process to get there is important. Through understanding the situation of my handicap, searching for the type of training that suits my physical condition, and to continue working hard with all my supporters including my university professors, teammates, and my family, I was finally able to earn the medal. That is why to me, a medal is really proof of my gratitude and effort."

⑥ Regaining confidence through wheelchair basketball

Mashiko began playing wheelchair basketball in 1992 at age 23. Until then, for about a year and a half she would go to the gym and just watch. The turning point came when the Fukushima National Athletic Meet was held in 1995 and sports classes with the purpose of discovering and fostering athletes who would participate in sports competitions for athletes with disabilities were held. "I was born into an athletic family, and I was playing basketball from the time I was a little girl, so my basic handling was pretty good." Ms. Mashiko then began to realize there were many other things she could do on the court, and her confidence grew more and more. "On top of that, when I went to Tokyo for training, there were people in wheelchairs who were married, working, and going here and there for fun...just like in the regular world." Seeing this before her eyes, Ms. Mashiko decided that she would live in Fukushima, where she was born and raised, and spend her life just like the people in wheelchairs in Tokyo.



The opening ceremony of the Paralympics will be on August 25, 2020

While she worked at her job, Ms. Mashiko continued playing her sport to become a Paralympian. "In my generation, it was difficult to build a second career, such as becoming a commentator like an Olympic athlete. I would recommend to junior athletes to do both sports and work, so that they can continue working and earn a living even after leaving from sports. Therefore, many Paralympians from Fukushima Prefecture work while playing their sport." From the day after the opening ceremony on August 25, until the closing ceremony on September 6, the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics will consist of 540 events in 22 sports held at 21 venues. "The Olympics and Paralympics being held in your own country is such a big event that it may only ever happen once in your lifetime. I want everyone to support the hardworking athletes with all their might, and enjoy the games," she told us.

Sports help to maintain mental and physical health. Don't limit yourself and go as far as you can!

We asked about future prospects in the hope that sports for people with disabilities will continue to spread even after the Paralympics. "One element is maintaining an environment for people who have disabilities and cannot easily get out into society. I am hoping that support that allows people to enjoy sports will continue to progress. Just as I was able to regain my confidence through wheelchair basketball, sports have the ability to help maintain both your mental and physical health. I am hoping for further popularization through exchanges between communities." Another element, she continues, is the realization of a society that allows people from children to the elderly, regardless of disabilities, to easily engage in sports or whatever it is that they want to do. In addition, Ms. Mashiko tells us she hopes that people who want to try starting something new, will go ahead and challenge themselves to do so. "Having a dream is what gives your life purpose and gives you the desire to live. It may or may not come true, but it is never a waste. I want people to experience a variety of things; both failures and successes." When Ms. Mashiko starts something new, she often says, "Don't aim to fit within your body limits, go beyond them!" We hope that everyone will make this Olympic year an opportunity to endeavor into new things without limiting yourselves.

P. 6, 7

① Fukushima Machi-Cos is a cosplay event started in the fall of 2015 where people dress up as anime or movie characters and parade down Paseo-dori and the downtown area. As the years pass, participants increase from not only in and around Fukushima City and its suburbs, but also from places further afield like outside the prefecture. It has become such a popular event that there are now more than 10,000 participants in total. This issue's featured person of appeal is Mr. Takeshi Nakayama, the man who set up the executive committee with his friends, started, and promoted this Fukushima Machi-Cos event.

② It started as one of the contents in an event on Paseo-dori

Fukushima Machi-Cos started with Paseo Muse (held from 2015-2017), which was an event held at Fukushima City's Paseo-dori to invigorate the community. At the planning meeting for the event, someone said, "Cosplay is popular nowadays, isn't it?" and that was the trigger. That was what started Machi-Cos as one of the contents of the event. Mr. Nakayama participated in the planning of Paseo Muse only from the middle, but felt that if he was going to be involved, he wanted to make it an event that would revitalize the town. Other members of the executive committee felt the same, and "we decided to build a system that enables running the event on participation fees alone to make it a sustainable event."

③ People from within and outside the prefecture are increasing every year to now exceed 10,000

However, there was not enough time that first fall of 2015 to properly advertise the first Fukushima Machi-Cos before it was held, and only seven people participated. "To us, those seven people seemed like gods, but we were so frustrated with the numbers, we immediately started preparing for a winter event," said Mr. Nakayama. The second event was held on the illuminated Paseo-dori street, and they even received permission to photograph the shrine - something that is said to be difficult to obtain throughout the country - and had 50 participants. The third event held in the following spring was a joint event with the Paseo-dori Flower Festival and there were 120 participants. In the 4th event in the summer, there were 300 participants. Since then, every time the event was held, the number of people coming from far away increased. When Paseo Muse closed after its final event in 2018, Machi-Cos became an independent event. Since then, it has collaborated with other events held in front of JR Fukushima Station and in downtown areas, and in the fall of 2019 when the 17th event was held, there were 800 participants, bringing the grand total to 10,000 participants.

The goal is revitalization of the town. The key is preparation, partnership, and cooperation.

What has proved effective? "Preparation, partnership, and cooperation," Mr. Nakayama answers. "There are some unspoken rules and tacit understanding in cosplay events. On the Fukushima Machi-Cos executive committee, we have members who are very knowledgeable about both cosplay events and events held within the city, so we are able to avoid various risk. The participation fee is inexpensive so the hurdles for participation are low making it easy to participate in, and the number of stores cooperating with us has increased, which I think are major factors."

On the day of Machi-Cos, there are photo areas along several routes leading from the plaza in the city center to Fukushima Inari Shrine. While participants are provided with information on stores that allow photos inside and which stores are selling food, cooperating stores are also provided with menu ideas. Overall, the committee focused on creating relationships that would allow everyone to enjoy the event. Recently, the number of cooperating stores that allow people to enter in their costumes has increased to 25. Mr. Nakayama says excitedly, "If you spend the time to properly promote what it is you are working on, then further growth will not be merely a dream."

In February, the MAX Fukushima will be used for Machi-Cos in its entirety, and the 19th Machi-Cos will be held on April 5. Why not come out and enjoy a stroll around Fukushima?



P8

① Fukushima City native, Mana Sasaki has been selected for the women's 400m run in the Tokyo Paralympics

② I want to meet the expectations of everyone supporting me with a gold medal!

Coming in 4th place at the World Para Athletics Championships, I received so many messages of support and encouragement. I want to meet the expectations of those people! That thought is what motivates me to keep going through even the toughest training. I am working right now to earn the gold medal at the Tokyo Paralympics. I want to bring smiles and courage to the people of my hometown, Fukushima.

The highlight is the last 100 meters. I want you to see my tenacity!

I was quite introverted at first, but track and field has given me the opportunity to meet many people and learn how to be confident in my communication with them. One sport has the power to change who you are. I really feel that track and field has that appeal for me. The 400-meter race is the longest distance in the short distance events, and it is said to be the most demanding. What distinguishes me is my tenacity that comes from my personality that hates to lose. In particular, I want everyone to see that tenacity in the last 100 meters of the race, which is the hardest.

③ On the cover

Newly renovated Fukushima Azuma Baseball Stadium

In addition to changing the entire surface to artificial turf improving water runoff and cushionability, the stands and toilets have been made barrier-free in the renovation. The stadium has a capacity of 30,000 people. The very first competitions of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held here as the stage for softball and baseball.

