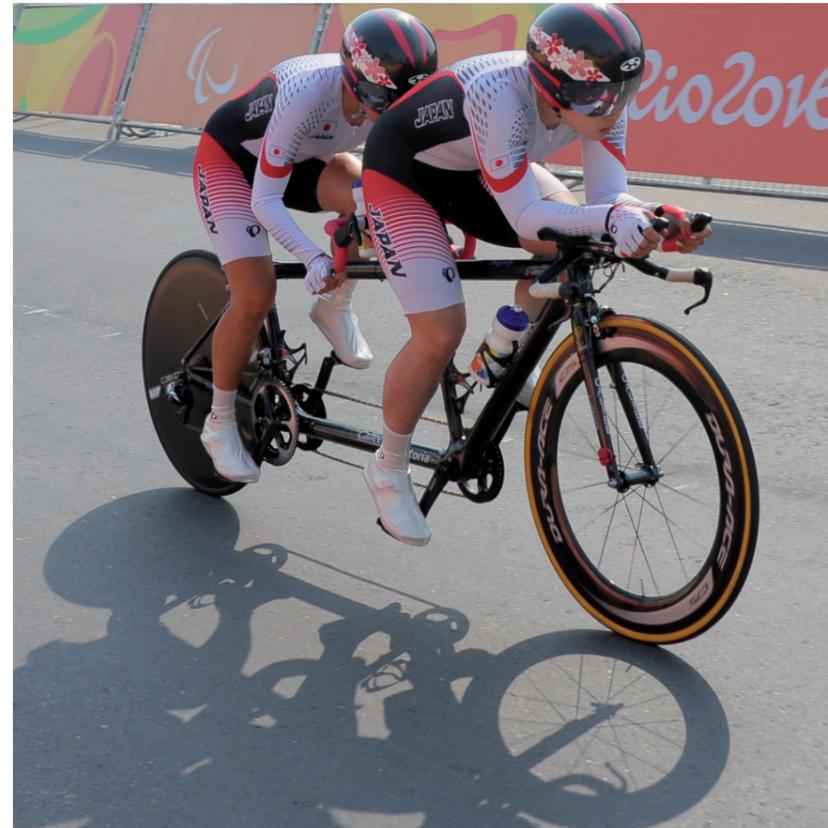


From Rio to Tokyo

Paralympic Medalists Carry On the Athletic Spirit



Mai Tanaka and Yurie Kanuma hug each other after their victory



Mai Tanaka (front) and Yurie Kanuma taking the silver medal at Rio



Celebrating after the event

photos by X-1

By Taeko Kuwana

Mai Tanaka is a professional Girl's Keirin¹ cyclist. At the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, she participated in the tandem² women's road time trial with Yurie Kanuma, who is visually impaired, and won the silver medal.³

Two athletes and one tandem bicycle, in a race against time. Tanaka, the pilot, sits in front and steers the course. Kanuma is the stoker, sitting in back and powering them along. When the power and skills of the two harmonize on one bicycle with one chain, a world of unlimited possibilities unfolds.

The partnership between Kanuma and Tanaka dates back to 2013, although Tanaka broke up their partnership for a while to concentrate on her own *keirin* career. For Tanaka, participating in the Paralympics was a difficult choice made after much hesitation. This was because it meant that she would have to leave the

keirin world—a world she was passionate about and where she had many fans—and commit herself to tandem, which is also a cycling sport but requires very different techniques.

Kanuma had participated in the Vancouver 2010 Paralympics as a cross-country skier, but she injured her shoulder and switched to cycling.

When Tanaka discovered that Kanuma wanted to win a Paralympic medal, she thought that this could happen only if the two of them paired up. So she decided to participate in the Paralympics and do all she could to fulfill Kanuma's dream.

Anticipation was high that the Tanaka-Kanuma pair would win medals. But in the first 1,000-meter time trial, they came in fifth. Next, in the 3,000-meter individual pursuit, they were eliminated in the qualifying trial. Feeling desperate, they then participated in the 30-kilometer road time trial, in which they took second place with a time of 39 minutes, 32.92 seconds.

Tanaka says that, for her, the Paralympics was an experience that gained her more than a medal.

"The race and interaction with the other athletes at the Paralympic Village were very stimulating. The feelings the Paralympic athletes had toward their sport were overwhelmingly strong: holding dreams and working for all it's worth for their sport. I wondered if I have that fortitude. I was made acutely aware of the fact that I was not strict enough with myself."

Many of the sports were televised in the Paralympic Village. Some were sports that Tanaka had seen for the first time. Seeing the athletes' best performance and the heated competition, she learned how amazing the Paralympics are to watch.

In 2020, Tokyo will host the Olympic and Paralympic Games. "When I was racing, lots of Brazilians and other non-Japanese people cheered me on, calling out 'Japão!' When the Paralympics come to Tokyo, I hope that not only the Japanese spectators but the many foreigners who come will cheer on the athletes

participating from all over the world."

Tokyo, four years from now. Expectations are high that the Paralympic Games will be one in which, at the stadiums and on the streets, people will experience and be thrilled by the power of para-sports. Tanaka says she grew as a result of her own Paralympics experience and vows that she will connect this to taking on future challenges in her athletic career.

1. Girl's Keirin: A type of women's bicycle racing held in Japan.
2. Tandem: Bicycle racing competing for finishing order or time using a tandem bicycle. In the front is a non-disabled person and, in the rear, a blind or visually impaired person.
3. Won the silver medal: In Paralympic events for the visually impaired, such as cycling and track events, medals are also given to the non-disabled partner.

Taeko Kuwana is a journalist who has published books about the service industry and the Paralympics.