

THE ALARM

Why the Tokyo Games must be put on hold



A woman wearing a face mask takes a photograph in front of the Olympic rings in Tokyo as fears mount that the 2020 Games may be postponed or cancelled.
Picture: Getty Images

OLYMPICS JULIAN LINDEN

IT'S already too late to save the Tokyo Olympics this year.

Even if they go ahead — and that's a very big if right now — the biggest multi-sports event on the planet has been compromised.

The only course of action for the International Olympic Committee and the Japanese organisers now is to postpone the Games for at least another year and hope the COVID-19 crisis is resolved by then.

It's understandable why Olympic officials are dragging their heels on making the hard call because no one, at least in

sport, truly understood the full gravity of the unfolding catastrophe until the last few days.

The repercussions of cancelling or postponing the Olympics are far greater than in any other sports event because this is the biggest peaceful gathering on the planet so there's just no easy solution.

That's why the IOC's heads will be spinning as they contemplate the unthinkable while holding out for a miracle.

Who's to say that won't happen because the situation is changing so rapidly that things could be back to normal when the Olympics are due to start on July 24 — still four-and-a-half months from now.

There's enough signs from Asia, where

the coronavirus first struck, to suggest things will get better but as more and more cases emerge in the rest of the world, time is running out and the Olympics just won't be the same even if they do proceed.

The Games are meant to be a worldwide celebration of humanity, a time when the whole world can join in watching and admiring the finest athletes on the planet competing under the official creed that "the most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle".

That's a noble concept but the notion of the world sitting back and cheering on athletes taking part in sports events will

BELL RINGS

Safety spike for beach volleyball

VOLLEYBALL
SELINA STEELE

ATHLETES will have their temperatures checked, playing balls will be wiped down with disinfectant between games and spectators could be separated into groups ahead of beach volleyball's Olympic qualifying event at Coolangatta this week.

As the coronavirus spreads globally, it has caused a major impact on the sports world and, with organisers cancelling the Formula One in Melbourne this weekend, beach volleyball officials are scrambling to ensure players and spectators remain safe.

The tournament from March 18-22 is part of the FIVB World Tour and has crucial Olympic qualification points on offer, but the event has taken on added significance following the cancellation of FIVB events in China, Singapore and the Philippines.

President of Volleyball Australia Craig Carracher said the event would still go ahead but organisers would make a call this week whether it would remain open to the public.

"What I can tell you is all athletes will be medically assessed and have their temperature checked, the stadium will be washed down with disinfectant, the ball boys and girls will be wearing gloves and the ball will be washed down in between games," he said.

"We have made the decision to fence the venue and reassess whether it's a closed or open event based on expert advice in the coming days, but I want to add this event is very different to the Grand Prix ... it attracts a crowd of about 1000 compared to hundreds of thousands."

seem frivolous at best if the death toll, human misery and economic fallout is as grim as the experts are forecasting.

The IOC is standing by its line that it's still business as usual and a final decision doesn't need to be made until the end of May so they still have time but they really should make the call before then, in fairness to the athletes if no one else.

And the issue of fairness is central to why the Games should be postponed.

The coronavirus outbreak has already created such an uneven playing field for the athletes that the Latin motto Citius, Altius, Fortius (faster, higher, stronger) just won't apply this time.

The preparations of far too many ath-

letes have already been destroyed by the lockdowns and bans on mass gatherings.

With borders closing and increased restrictions on international travel, most athletes don't even know if they'll even make their Olympic teams yet because this is prime time for qualifying.

Dozens of Olympic qualifying competitions have already been postponed, leaving organisers facing a logistical nightmare just to figure out which athletes will be allowed to compete at the Olympics and athletes stuck in the dark.

Though that's probably the least of their concerns right now.

Already plenty of athletes have tested positive to the coronavirus and through

no fault of their own, it's inevitable that some athletes will be barred from competing because they shook hands with a neighbour or sat next to the wrong person on the flight over to Japan.

COVID-19 doesn't discriminate so nor should the IOC.

Training camps and practice events have been cancelled while some athletes — the unlucky ones whose countries have been hit the hardest — can't even train because they're locked in their own homes.

If that means the differences between winning and losing will be reduced to a lucky dip then that's the IOC's cue to call it off and start again next year.



IOC president Thomas Bach had been hopeful the Olympic Games would proceed as scheduled, although Australian PM Scott Morrison (inset) has admitted it is unlikely Australian athletes could compete. Picture: AFP



It's Games over for Australian athletes

JULIAN LINDEN

AUSTRALIA'S Olympians have been told they won't be allowed to attend the Tokyo Games in the unlikely event they go ahead this year.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the newly introduced rules banning Australians from travelling overseas applied to everyone, including any athletes selected for the Olympics.

That means prospective Australian Olympians will be blocked from going to Japan unless the restrictions are lifted by July — which seems highly unlikely after the Prime Minister warned the nation the lockdown could last in excess of six months.

"The AOC will make their decision but the simple answer is that we have a complete travel ban to the rest of the world, so the smartraveller advice and the advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade I think is

pretty clear," Morrison told 7News.

"The health of all Australians is the most important thing and there's nothing more important than that."

The Australian Olympic Committee said "the AOC respects and complies with all public health requirements."

Publicly, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is still maintaining that the Olympics will proceed as planned on July 24 and if they do, it could mark the first time Australia has missed the Summer Olympics.

One of just five countries to have attended every edition since 1896, Australia's best hope of maintaining their perfect attendance record is if the Games are delayed but sources have told The Daily Telegraph officials are now leaning towards an unprecedented postponement.

The fate of the Tokyo Olympics could be decided as early as tomorrow with the IOC and Japanese organ-

isers looking for the best time to reschedule rather than the nuclear option of cancelling everything.

The IOC's executive board will be meeting by conference call to discuss whether to hold the Games for 2021 or 2022 ahead of another critical meeting with Japanese organisers later this week where the final decision could be made.

Despite IOC president Thomas Bach saying there was no need to rush into a decision, sources have said international broadcasters and sponsors have been briefed to expect an announcement sooner rather than later.

This is a direct response to the growing complaints from sporting bodies around the world who have questioned how athletes can be expected to continue training while health authorities are warning them to go into isolation and governments are introducing strict lockdowns.

Australia's elite competitors have not been as badly impacted as athletes from other countries where the outbreak is already out of control but their preparations are unravelling because high performance centres are being closed.

Members of Australia's track and field, triathlon, women's water polo and synchronised swimming teams were due to move to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra in coming weeks but those training camps are now in doubt after the ACT went into lockdown.

"The situation with regard to COVID-19 and travel restrictions is rapidly evolving," the AIS said in a statement sent to The Daily Telegraph. "The AIS will be consulting with government and other relevant bodies at federal and state/territory level to ascertain options for athletes coming in and out of the AIS Campus in Canberra."

Let the Games begin, a bit later

JULIAN LINDEN

JULY 23, 2021. Mark it down in your calendar now.

That's when the world will be reunited after the dark isolation of the coronavirus pandemic has passed.

A year later than originally planned, Tokyo will host an Olympic Games the likes of which have never been seen before.

The first Olympics to be rescheduled, the 2021 Games will serve as an everlasting triumph of humanity, proof that anything can be overcome when the will is there.

Tears will be shed for the lost loved ones but Tokyo 2021 is the beacon of hope

that's helping to console the hundreds of Australian athletes whose dream of competing in the Japanese capital this year has been destroyed by an invisible killer virus sweeping the globe.

"Whenever you encounter a roadblock or a speed bump or an obstacle you just think 'OK, what's my next step to get to that end goal,'" swimming champion Cate Campbell told *The Courier-Mail*. "Sometimes you have to step sideways, sometimes you have to step backwards but you still have that one direction and that one focus, which is part of the athlete mentality and the athlete psyche."

Slammed as being tone



Australian Olympic swimmers Cate and Bronte Campbell. Picture: Phil Hillyard

deaf less than a week ago for insisting the Games would go ahead this year despite the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) did the right thing by telling our best athletes to go home to their families now until starting preparations for 2021 when

the worst is over and it's safe to go back out.

It's not official yet that the Games will be rescheduled to 2021 but you can take it as read after the International Olympic Committee and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe both acknowledged that postponement was preferred ahead of cancellation.

The AOC admitted as much and more by telling athletes to prepare for the 2021 northern summer – which is insider code for the last week of July and first week of August – the tiny window that suits the American broadcaster NBC, whose agreement to postpone the Games is pivotal to it happening.

"We are now in a position where we can plan with greater certainty," AOC chief executive Matt Carroll said.

The IOC said it will make a formal announcement on the fate of the Games within the next four weeks but it'll come much sooner now that Australia – one of only five countries to have attended every Summer Olympics since 1896 – has told athletes to down tools.

Ultimately, it was athletes that forced the IOC's hand, by sending a powerful message that they did not want the Games to go ahead unless there was a level playing field.

That simply isn't the case in Europe – the current epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak – and North America, where the death toll is rapidly increasing.

Relatively untouched so far, Australia is bracing for the worst to come but has led the way in persuading the IOC and the Japanese organisers to change the biggest sports event on the planet, but these are unprecedented

times that require unprecedented solutions.

Rescheduling the Games is a mind-boggling, complex procedure because it involves so many different stakeholders and will end up adding billions to the final balance sheet so there's still a lot of work to be done.

Some athletes who would have gone this year won't make it in another 12 months and the entire sports calendar for 2021 will have to be completely rearranged.

"Although it's a devastating prospect for the Games to be postponed, it is the correct decision," Swimming Australia boss Leigh Russell said.

"When the time is right, we will look ahead to the planning phase for 2021 but right now our focus must remain on stopping and slowing the spread of COVID-19 and supporting our people."

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OLYMPIC GAMES: WHERE ARE WE NOW

TOKYO 2.0

WHAT
LOOK LIKE
COVID, A

EMPTY spectator stands, Japanese robots presenting medals and athletes being sent straight home as soon as their events finish to watch the closing ceremony on television instead of marching in the stadium.

They're among the most radical ideas floated to ensure the postponed Tokyo Olympics go ahead in 2021, but athletes should not be alarmed. If anything, that's the best news they've been told in months.

Those proposals are listed as "worst-case" scenarios because the overriding message from the International Olympic Committee is that everything possible will be done to ensure Tokyo 2.0 proceeds.

"This Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 in 21 can, should and will be the light at the end of the tunnel that all humankind is in at this moment," IOC President Thomas Bach (pictured) said. "At the end of this very difficult period for humankind, the Olympic Games can be a great symbol of hope, of optimism, of solidarity and in unity in all our diversity."

Exactly how the Games will look in 2021 hasn't been finalised because it depends on how the world is coping with the global pandemic in a year's time. The IOC is secretly preparing for multiple scenarios and has more than 200 different proposed changes, but the one certainty is that this will be an Olympic Games like no other.

EVENTS AND VENUES

All the venues were locked in for 2020 will remain the same for 2021, al-

though there is a strong possibility the open water swimming course will move because the 2021 tides in Tokyo Bay will be different from 2020.

The competition schedule is unchanged, apart from some minor tweaks to starting times to fit in with broadcasters. Prompted by an Australian request, the IOC will lift the age limit for men's football from 23 to 24 so that every player who helped their team qualify can still participate.

NUMBER OF ATHLETES

There will be no reductions in the number of athletes competing. Australia expects to send a team of about 480 athletes. Already, 339 spots are guaranteed, with 74 individual athletes confirmed in their teams.

There are potential problems for qualifying competitions yet to take place if international borders remain closed but they will be decided sport by sport and won't affect numbers.

ATHLETE PREPARATION

Australian athletes are way ahead of most other countries in being able to prepare for the Games but the biggest concern remains the limited opportunities to compete against international opponents in the lead-up.

The Australian government is looking at ways to allow foreign athletes to come here if our Olympians can't travel to warm-up events.

FUNDING

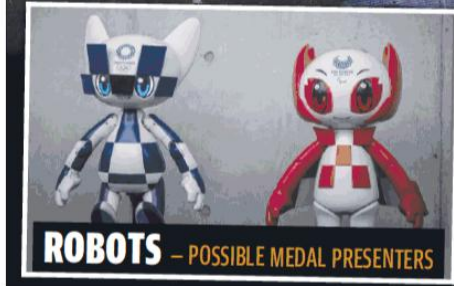
Unsurprisingly, the operating budget for the Games has blown out by billions, so Japanese organisers are trimming off all the unnecessary fat.

There will be no cuts to athletes and their programs, with the Australian government already committing to provide full funding for the extra year. However, international sports federations have been told the gravy train has come to a stop, so they will have to reduce their number of delegates and freeloading entourages.

QUARANTINE

Japanese immigration will allow all Olympic participants, including athletes, coaches, officials and media, into the country without having to serve quarantine in Japan.

But it is expected athletes will have to enter quarantine bubbles in their own countries before travelling to Japan, with North Queensland the most likely site for Australia's com-



petitors. It is unknown if foreign visitors who are not credentialed for the Games will be allowed into Japan, so the families and friends of athletes may have to watch from home.

SPECTATORS

This is the biggest question that no-one can give answer just yet. If things

stay as they are, there's every chance the number of spectators will be reduced or the stands left empty, but Japanese organisers remain hopeful that won't happen.

"We shouldn't make spectators go through hard times," said Tokyo Olympic organising committee President Yoshiro Mori.

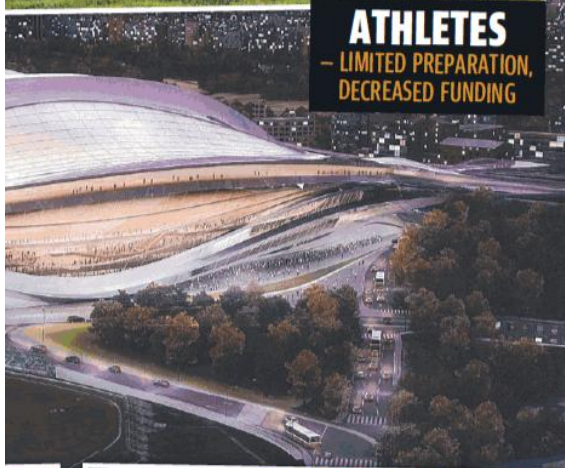
"Sporting events are all about the whole country empathising."

CEREMONIES

For the first time, each country will have two flag bearers, one male and one female, but the number of participants at the opening and closing ceremonies could be reduced.

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ATHLETES
— LIMITED PREPARATION,
DECREASED FUNDING

CEREMONIES — REDUCED PARTICIPANTS

Organisers are adamant they will prevent athletes from marching if they want to but it's possible they'd have to leave Japan once their pants are over, which will limit participants for the finale. The protocols for medal ceremonies could also change if competitors have to social distance and not hug each other.

MISSING IN ACTION
The country that could benefit the most from the 12-month delay is Russia – if it wins its appeal against widespread doping. Russia is banned from competing in international events for four years, but the verdict of its appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport will be delivered before July 2021.

FINA drags heels over Mac's gold

EXCLUSIVE
JULIAN LINDEN

FIVE months have passed since Sun Yang was booted out of swimming for eight years and Mack Horton is still no closer to getting the gold medal he should have been awarded at last year's world championships.

Swimming's world governing body had promised to look into the possibility of promoting Horton from silver but sources within FINA have told *The Sunday Telegraph* the matter has still not even been discussed at board level.

That's typical of the way FINA operates. Deciding important issues relating to swimmers happens at a snail's pace while any matter affecting the sport's bureaucrats accelerates faster than Winx.

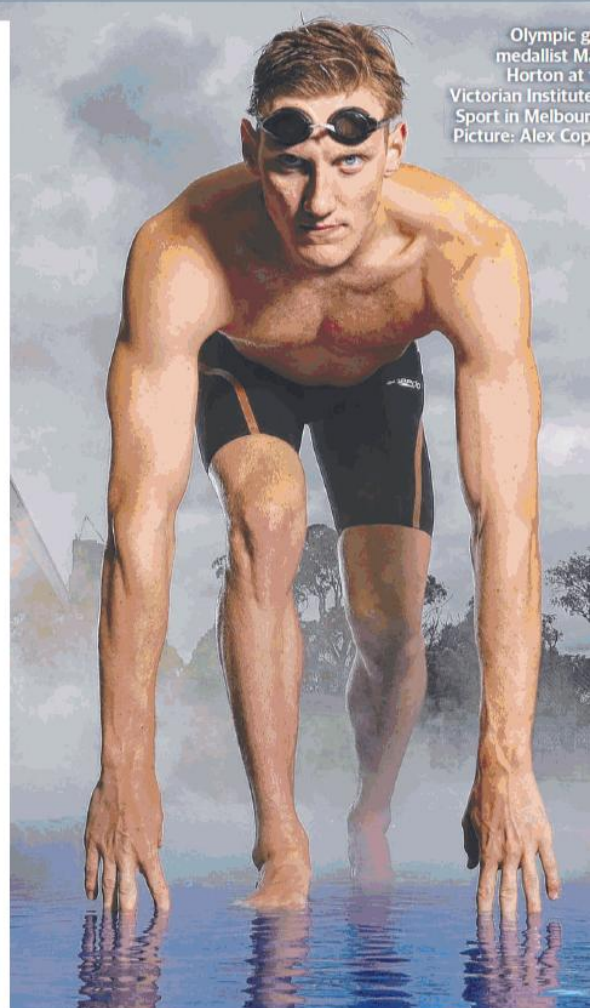
The most recent review into the governance of international sporting bodies by the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) ranked FINA on the lowest tier, along with weightlifting and judo authorities. Instead of taking that on board, FINA fired off an angry letter to the ASOIF asking that the damning assessment be changed.

If Horton is surprised or disappointed by FINA's tardy response to his case, he's not saying because he's done talking about the whole episode. He said everything he needed to with his courageous protest at the world championships, which was aimed not at Sun, but at the officials who have failed to protect clean athletes.

That's all water under the bridge now as far as Horton is concerned as he turns his mind and body to trying to defend his 400m freestyle Olympic title.

Ian Thorpe and Murray Rose are the only men to have won the eight-lap event at successive Olympics and if it hadn't been for the global pandemic, Horton would have been defending his crown on Sunday.

"I didn't even know what day it was to be honest because I just deleted everything out of my calendar. I don't need that anymore and I haven't really looked back," he said. "I've just kind of been enjoying the time that we've had to slowly



Olympic gold medalist Mack Horton at the Victorian Institute of Sport in Melbourne. Picture: Alex Copp

build back up and I guess putting my focus into that rather than what could have been this year."

As Horton's opponents have discovered, his easygoing manner hides the fire that still burns in his belly. One of the hardest trainers in Australian Olympic sport, his gruelling workouts are legendary and the lockdown has only helped remind him why he pushes his body so hard.

"Having eight weeks out of the water I've never been so desperate to swim in my life," he said. "Usually when I'm training, I'd be doing 6-7km every session but we've just hit 5km, so we're really taking our time and working on all the little skills to master. The initial lockdown was a novelty probably for the first week and then I started to get quite bored. I got into cycling a bit, running,

tennis, just like anything to get fit but none of it really came close to the feeling that you get from swimming."

Originally a 1500m swimmer, Horton has been steadily coming down in distance as he gets older and tries to add more speed. He swam a blistering anchor leg in the Australian 4x200m relay that won gold at the world championships and the 24-year-old is trying to be consistently faster so he can remain on the team.

"I've always loved the relays but is my body in a position to do that at every major meet?" he said. "Previously, not necessarily because sometimes the speed's there, sometimes it isn't but we're working hard on that, to try and improve that 400m. The 400m is the focus but for the 400m to get better, the 200m needs to get better."