

Visually impaired photographer puts inclusion into focus - Joao Maia interview



By Tanmoy Mookherjee at the Tokyo 2020 Games

The opening day of the sitting volleyball competition in Hall A of the Makuhari Messe Exhibition Center in Chiba saw the women's teams of Canada and Brazil play out a five-set thriller, with Brazil pipping their opponents to the post by the slimmest of margins. The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, much like the Olympics that concluded a few weeks earlier, were held behind closed doors without the presence of spectators. But then again, there is a smattering of people besides the athletes, including the support staff of the respective teams, family and friends, volunteers, as well as the covering press milling around.

Joao Maia is not a difficult figure to recognise among the press photographers around the field of play, trying to capture the perfect shot that may become the visual legacy of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, after it was postponed by a year owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. Much like other photographers, even Maia has the typical beige vest with "PHOTO" emblazoned on it in bold, white letters. But instead of looking through the viewfinder or the LCD screen on his Canon DSLR, he has one ear trained on the camera, and the other, presumably, on the game that is afoot before him.

"I listen to the sounds that I can hear when the athletes are going through their routines," Maia tells this reporter while describing his process of taking pictures. "I use other perceptions too, such as the smells around me, but above everything else, I just use my heart to take these pictures. Of course, I need someone to guide me as it is difficult to take pictures on my own."

Maia is one of the few visually impaired photographers on assignment at Tokyo 2020, his second Paralympic Games after the preceding one held in his native Brazil, using a technique that is now better known as sensory photography. Maia's vision is limited to vague shapes and colours that are barely legible, which means he has to rely on his other senses to compose his images.

Making one's way around a stadium can be tricky, as specific areas are marked out for different personnel, and the same applies for press photographers. Maia is accompanied by Sandra Chammem, a social entrepreneur from Osaka, who along with being his guide in Japan, also doubles up as his interpreter from Portuguese to English. "This guidance is crucial," he says.

Originally from Piauí state in the northeast of Brazil, Maia grew up in a family of 10 brothers, three out of whom went on to develop different forms of intellectual disabilities. Maia wasn't always blind as he mentioned earlier, as a condition called uveitis, which is an inflammatory infection affecting the eyes, took away his vision by the age of 28. Until then, Maia's life revolved around his job of a letter carrier.

As a track and field athlete who participated in throwing events such as javelin, shot put and discus throw, Maia would bring his camera to training and take pictures afterwards. "I had the knowledge of these sports, hence when I started getting into photography, I was drawn towards photographing athletic events," Maia says of his journey, which began with a photography course meant for the visually impaired. "This is how I got the chance to cover the Paralympic Games in Rio (in 2016)."

It was in Rio that brought him worldwide recognition with his pictures being splashed across websites and newspapers. But travelling halfway across the world, especially during a global

pandemic, was no small feat either. But with a little help from friends and multiple organisations, Maia was able to make the long trip to cover a variety of sports.

"There are four organisations I am working for here," he says, pointing to his face cover which has their names mentioned. "Fotografia Cega, a foundation that sponsored me to be able to come to Tokyo. Together with a journalist friend whom I met in Rio, we have a project named '4 Sentidos é uma visão' (Four senses and a vision). From there, we started working to come to Tokyo. I'm really grateful for their support, especially from the foundation. I also want to thank another French journalist, who runs a website for photographers, because of his support for me here."

Tokyo is the first city to host the Paralympic Games for the second time, the first one being way back in 1964, when the Olympics and Paralympics were held in conjunction together for the first time as well. After being introduced as the Stoke Mandeville Games by Dr Ludwig Guttman to rehabilitate World War II veterans by making them play sports, the event began gaining popularity and eventually morphed into the Paralympics, with the "para" part of the word referring to paraplegia.

In fact, Japan's very own Yutaka Nakamura, an orthopaedic surgeon who visited the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England in 1960, was so inspired by Dr. Guttman's efforts that he took with him Japanese para athletes to participate in the event shortly after, and then brought the Stoke Mandeville Games to Tokyo later in 1964. This event, in fact, came to be recognised as the second ever Paralympic Games.

All tactile paths lead to Paralympics, at least for Joao Maia

Almost all of Japan's walking streets around the country are lined with a strip of yellow tactile paths or Braille blocks, which began to be installed in 1967, also a Japanese invention by a man called Seiichi Miyake. Maia has taken note of this feature, especially when he makes the walk to the stadium from his hotel that is just across the street, a stone's throw away from the Marines Stadium, home of the Chiba Lotte Marines baseball team.

"I have been taking pictures and making videos of these things (tactile paving) to be able to take it back to my country and show them what we need to do as well," he says. "Japan is leading the world in this aspect and we need to show ourselves what we need to do too."

Championing the case for inclusion

The Olympic and Paralympic Games are considered the pinnacle of sporting excellence, a triumph of the human spirit. While the athletes make a resounding call for inclusion and acceptance in society, the reality outside of the sporting arenas may not be as rosy.

"We have inclusion for physical disabilities, places have accessibility for people here on the streets, and more urban planning is taking place keeping in mind accessibility for persons with disabilities," Maia says. "But accessibility has to be outside that too, on the internet for instance, in social media. For example, when you put one picture in your social media, you put a description for people who are blind like me so I can listen to the description. People are aware that we have a disability and there are movements towards inclusion, but now, people have to speak about inclusion in the digital world too."

Maia's impassioned plea stems from the growing level of importance of social media, especially with regards to being one of the main sources of distributing information to a worldwide audience, something that brought him recognition around the world as well. The internet, he says, "is facility for *everybody*."

"When people go and search for my name, they can see I am one of the few blind photographers shooting sports in the world," Maia explains. "It also gives me the opportunity to use my position to talk about my history, as well as the history of blind photographers with people all over the world. It feels nice to be able to know that other people with visual impairments have been taking up photography in other parts of the world as well, and I'm grateful that I can be an inspiration for others."

While he is working on a book of his works as a photographer, Maia, much like his photography peers, perhaps chooses to focus on the bigger picture. "Taking pictures gives me a lot of joy, but when people get to see the pictures, they don't only belong to Joao Maia, they are for everybody," he says. "It gives me a lot of happiness when people show their appreciation towards my work."

Now that Maia's primary objective of being able to cover the Tokyo Paralympic Games has been realised, it seems as though a weight has been lifted off his back. "I had a dream and it has come true," he says. "Before coming here, I was trying to find out everything I could about Japan, because I'm blind. Now that I'm here, everything that I heard before coming here is so true. It is such a clean country, people are so kind, and I'm so happy to be here because the world is here."

"Also, to be able to travel in these times of the coronavirus, with all the uncertainty, but the world still managed to converge here," he continues. "Of course, these Olympic and Paralympic Games will have their own place in history, but I know when people watch and read about it, I will be a part of it."



Joao Maia (photographs by Tanmoy, 2021)