

12. Paralympic Pay Parity

The Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, held in summer 2021 due to COVID-19, was the first time that the U.S. Paralympic athletes received the same monetary prizes for winning medals as the Olympic athletes did. After public outcry in 2021 because Australian Paralympians received no prize money at all, the Australian government also committed funding such that both Olympians and Paralympians would receive the same prizes. Advocates of Paralympic pay parity argue that it is an important way to signal to athletes that they are equally valued and celebrated as representatives of their countries. They also argue that the prize money can play a significant role in offsetting the costs of training, especially for Paralympians who are less likely to sign high-paying sponsorship deals.

However, other countries do not take the same approach. Canadian Olympians get up to \$20,000 for winning, whereas Canadian Paralympians win no money for medaling. This difference is due to the fact that different organizations run the Canadian arrangements for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. One organization has the funds to offer medal prizes and the other simply does not.

Japanese Paralympians do win cash for medaling, but at lower amounts than Japanese Olympians. The Japanese Para-Sports Association (JPSA) explained that the disparity between the prize value of a gold medal for a Paralympian and an Olympian comes in part because the JPSA prioritizes having prize money be distributed more equally among all three medal levels. And, Japan offers non-prize financial support to meet the unique challenges faced by Paralympic athletes, by sponsoring needs like prosthetic limbs and medical treatments.

Explanations of the pay disparities cite that the Olympics is much more popular than the Paralympics among viewers and attendees. Critics of the activist movements for equal pay argue that focusing on having equal prize money only benefits the small percentage of athletes who actually win. They also worry that it distracts from the larger need of directing funding to increasing sports access at all levels, not just at the elite stage.

Though some countries do pay their athletes outright, in other countries, including the U.S. and Canada, medal prizes are not considered payment for work, like salaries. The athletes are not employed by the government nor by a private organization. In these countries, no athletes, Olympians or Paralympians, earn salaries for competing. If prize money is an extra bonus for athletes and not their primary income, then the governments or private organizations that give the prize money do not have an employee-employer obligation in which athletes can expect to rely on receiving payment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do governments have an obligation to provide equal award money for Paralympians and Olympians, either by paying them directly or by paying their organizing committees?
2. Does it matter that the medal awards are prize money and not salaries? Do countries who *do* pay athletes need to pay them equally, regardless of which competition they play in?
3. Ought public popularity and viewership to be factors in determining athlete pay?