

In Tokyo, social platforms help the Pandemic Olympics shine

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Brasil's Rayssa Leal trains during a street skateboarding practice session at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Friday, July 23, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

A condom fixed Jessica Fox's canoe, and skateboarder Jagger Eaton

celebrated his bronze medal by broadcasting live on Instagram. Margielyn Didal "let" Tony Hawk take a picture with her to post on Facebook.

The stability of the cardboard framed beds in the athlete's village has been tested by Olympians who treated them as trampolines on nearly every [social media](#) platform, and a Greek water polo player created a [dating app](#)—which might have come in handy for American rugby player Ilona Maher, who rolled with the schtick of the "Thirsty Olympian."

The made-to-watch Tokyo Games, where pandemic precautions prevent permitting spectators, have become a digital affair more than ever. From social media to streaming, athletes and their events are reaching the public in record-smashing and trailblazing ways.

More than 100 million unique users had visited Olympic digital platforms or used the Tokyo 2020 app through the first week of the games. U.S. rightsholder NBC has notched 2.5 billion streaming minutes of Olympics content across all its digital platforms, the network said, a 77% increase from the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Games. The first week in Tokyo was the highest-ever weekly usage for streaming platform Peacock.

But it's the social media platforms that are causing the breakout buzz. Social posts by Olympics accounts on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Weibo generated 3.7 billion engagements. The Olympics' social media accounts have a combined total of 75 million followers.



Ilona Maher, left, of the United States is chased by China's Yang Min during their women's rugby sevens match at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Thursday, July 29, 2021, in Tokyo. Credit: AP Photo/Shuji Kajiyama

Then there is the TikTok phenomenon. Launched in 2017, the short-form, video-sharing app has been one of the preferred social media platforms of these games. Athletes you'd never heard about before Tokyo—particularly those from niche sports—have used TikTok to capture moments that have not only gone viral but became the avenue to introduce themselves to the world.

Karate, skateboarding, sport climbing and surfing—all sports that resonate with a younger demographic—certainly helped drive traffic to TikTok. The podium winners in women's street skateboarding were 13,

13 and 16 years old, and [silver medalist Rayssa Leal of Brazil has 3.4 million](#) followers on TikTok, half of her 6.5 million followers on Instagram.

Even the official Olympics page has soared with more than three billion views of videos related to its #OlympicSpirit challenge.



Margielyn Didal of Philippines reacts after completing a trick in the women's street skateboarding finals at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Monday, July 26, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Ben Curtis

"TikTok, as my son told me recently, is the digital place of choice of younger audiences," IOC spokesman Mark Adams says. "The Games has

to go to where the people are."

WHO STOOD OUT

The world was familiar with gymnast SIMONE BILES before her second Olympics, and teammate SUNISA LEE was quite popular, too. After Lee won the women's all-around, she [surpassed 1 million followers](#) on her [Instagram account](#). When she settled for bronze on uneven bars, the 18-year-old admitted her increased fame had been a distraction.

But [ILONA MAHER](#)? Few knew of the 24-year-old rugby player from Vermont who might very well be TikTok's breakout star of the Olympics. Posting while wearing a red, white and blue bucket hat, the self-deprecating 5-foot-10, 200-pound nursing school graduate read an article that called her "the thirsty Olympian" and ran with it.



Jagger Eaton of the United States reacts after competing in the men's street skateboarding at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Sunday, July 25, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Maher uses a #beastbeautybrains campaign and hopes her videos spread body image positivity, bring more attention to the sport of rugby, and, most importantly, land her some endorsement deals.

"As a female athlete in an emerging sport, I don't make a lot of money, so I do hope it opens the doors for brand deals," Maher says. As for the message she's trying to send young girls: "It's OK to take up space. You can be so many things, a beast on the rugby field, a beauty whenever, and have as much brains as the smartest person out there."

[JAGGER EATON](#) arrived in Tokyo with a following in the skateboarding community that began in 2012 when he set a record as the youngest X Games competitor at age 11. But it wasn't until his sport was added to the Olympics that the rest of America became familiar with the 20-year-old Arizonan who won bronze with AirPods in his ears and his iPhone in his pocket.



Margielyn Didal of Philippines, left, and Rayssa Leal of Brazil are seen after the women's street skateboarding finals at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Monday, July 26, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Ben Curtis

When he messed up a trick and then was shown searching for his fallen AirPods, Eaton went viral.

"I am so stoked that skateboarding got that many eyes on it. I think it really pushes the sport forward and legitimizes skateboarding," says Eaton, who says he has "no idea" why America fell in love with him. His [social media presence](#) is deliberate, with a defined aesthetic he hopes legitimizes skateboarding.

"I feel like people really see how much I love skateboarding and how

much I want to give back to the skate community, as well as the younger generation that has given me so much motivation," Eaton says.

Australian canoeist JESSICA FOX found her fame not by winning gold in canoe slalom or bronze in kayak slalom, but when she posted a TikTok video of someone using a condom to repair the nose of her boat.



Jagger Eaton of the United States competes in the men's street skateboarding finals at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Sunday, July 25, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

Filipino skateboarder [MARGIELYN DIDAL](#) posted a picture alongside Tony Hawk, considered the greatest skateboarder of all-time, [that](#)

[jumped in on Hawk's running joke that he's often misidentified](#) in public. When her post was misinterpreted as Didal didn't recognize Hawk, [the GOAT had to explain.](#)

ERIK SHOJI, an American volleyball player, [gained attention with TikTok food reviews and tours](#) from the athlete's village, along with behind-the-scenes looks at the athlete's experience. He didn't take social media seriously until he started a YouTube channel last year while battling COVID.

Shoji amped up his presence as both a way to preserve his memories and spotlight the U.S. men's volleyball team off the court.

"People see us playing but don't really know us off of the court," the Hawaiian says. "I hope that by showing myself and my teammates on TikTok that viewers were able to get to know us in a different light and fall in love with our team."



Greece's Marios Kapotsis (4) looks for a teammate past Hungary's Krisztian Manhercz (3) during a preliminary round men's water polo match at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Sunday, July 25, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Humphrey



Jessica Fox of Australia celebrates as she crosses the finish line to win gold in the Women's C1 of the Canoe Slalom at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Thursday, July 29, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth



United States' Erik Shoji reacts during the men's volleyball preliminary round pool B match between United States and Russian Olympic Committee at the 2020 Summer Olympics, Monday, July 26, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez

Halfway around the world in Slovakia, [18-year-old](#) synchronized swimmer SILVIA SOLYMOSYOVA gained traction even though she's not yet an Olympian. Solymosyova has [studied TikTok trends to gain 1.2 million followers](#) while reaching the U.S. audience with her underwater videos.

"Lots of Slovaks think that everything from abroad is better. My region is too small and my niche is too specific. That's why I was trying to engage mostly with U.S. TikTokers and target the English speaking

audience," she said. "Because I'm GenZ who is setting trends on TikTok, I've learned necessary skills, and I'm a little ahead."

Then there's MARIOS KAPOTSIS, who is trying to lead Greece to its first-ever Olympic medal in men's water polo. The 29-year-old developed a dating app called "Vespr" that only functions at night.

"So the app starts when the sun goes down, it's open, and when the sun goes up, it's closed," Kapotsis says. "So it's only during the night. Whatever you do during the night, the next night, everything is finished. So every night is something new."

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