

Sport Climbing: it's all in the finger(tip)s

by Mark Maestrono

Three new youth-oriented medal sports will debut at this year's Olympic Games in Tokyo: sport climbing, skateboarding (Figure 1) and surfing. We'll be taking a brief look at each.

Generally when we think of "climbing," scaling an icy escarpment in the Himalayas or Alps comes to mind. And in fact, mountain climbing – better known as mountaineering – and sport climbing are similar (Figure 2). Both require strength, agility and a keen eye to map out routes up a steep incline. Mountaineers use various aids, such as cams, pitons, and hooks to assist climbing and for reasons of safety. Sport or "free" climbers primarily use their fingertips and toes. For safety, ropes and sometimes carabiners, are also used.



Figure 2. Mountaineering and sport climbing require the same skill sets.

Sport climbing began as an outdoor activity, eventually moving indoors to sport climbing gyms. Facilities, such as the "Rocodromo" in Manresa, Spain (Figure 3), have popped up around the world.

Figure 3. The "Rocodromo" sport climbing facility was opened in Manresa, Spain in 1997. Note the two climbers on this special handcancel.



Figure 1. Sports climbing and skateboarding will debut at Tokyo. They join mountain biking, introduced at the 1996 Olympics, as youth-oriented sports. (From 2005 Canada booklet of stamps, Scott #2121)



Figure 4. Climbing gym in Amman, Jordan.

Inside these multi-story facilities, freestanding walls engineered from metal or wood have been constructed (Figure 4). Ranging in height from 4 to 15 meters, the walls may be positive (i.e. a slope of less than 90°), known as a *slab* in climbing lingo, or negative, creating a steep overhang.

In some cases, the walls may be faced with a composite material in which handholds are molded right into the surface, mimicking stone. In competitive environments, panels are secured to the underlying frame work into which small holes have been drilled in a grid pattern resembling a tool peg board in your garage. Instead of holders for tools, variously-sized and multi-shaped hand/foot holds are installed, secured from the back with t-nuts. This allows for an infinite number of configurations of the holds for different levels of difficulty. The end result resembles a colorful abstract painting (Figure 2).

There are three main disciplines in sport climbing: speed, bouldering and lead climbing. You will see all three at the Tokyo Games. Men and women will compete separately.

Speed climbing is done on a 15-meter high negative wall set at a 95° angle. Two identical sets of holds are fixed to parallel courses on which two climbers at a time compete head-to-head against

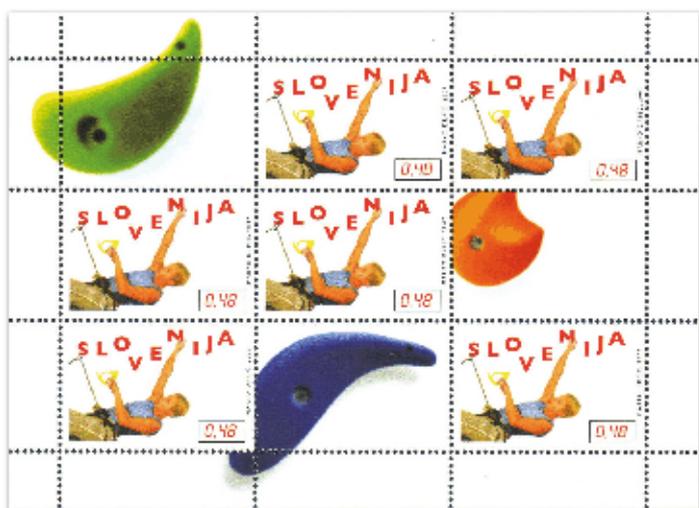


Figure 5. The background of Slovenia's 2007 minisheet displays the colorful holds in various shapes and sizes that are secured to the wall. The climber on the stamps is engaged in leading; he is using a safety rope threaded through quick-draws secured to the wall.

the clock in a bracket tournament structure. The winner of each heat advances to the next. A false start results in immediate disqualification!

This is the fastest event at the Olympic Games. Look for typical winning times for men at between 5 and 6 seconds, while women scale the wall in 7 to 8 seconds. The first time I saw this event I thought I was watching a *Spider Man* movie come to life! Check out this Youtube video for a preview of the action: youtu.be/fXkmmesjE68

Bouldering challenges the climber with four different routes up a 4-meter wall. Each route is called a "boulder" and is of varying difficulty. Climbers are permitted multiple attempts within a set time period of 4 minutes per boulder.

Competitors climb each of the four boulders in succession. For each boulder, credits are awarded for reaching the top in the fewest attempts. If the top is not reached, a climber may still receive credit for reaching a designated "zone hold" midway up the boulder (see red arrow and sign in Figure 6).

The last discipline, lead climbing, is performed on a 15-meter high wall. Each climber has 6 minutes to scale the wall using any route he or she chooses. Points are awarded for each controlled hold that the climber achieves; reaching the top results in the most points. Unlike bouldering, lead climbing permits each competitor only a single attempt.

While climbers in both the speed and lead disciplines are secured by safety ropes belayed by the ground crew, lead climbers also utilize "quick-draws" which consist of two carabiners connected by a textile sling and attached to the wall. Climbers slip their rope into the lower carabiner where it is

allowed to run freely as the climber continues his ascent (Figure 5).

A kerfuffle of sorts arose when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) informed the International Federation of Sport Climbing (the sport's governing body), that only one medal event each for men and women would be available at Tokyo. Normally at competitions, each of the three disciplines is contested as a stand-alone event as many climbers are specialists in one or more disciplines.

The sport climbing competition at Tokyo will be an Olympic Combined event in which each competitor will compete in all three disciplines, much like in the gymnastics all-around competition. A final score for each competitor will be based on multiplying together the placement results in each discipline. For example, if a climber places first, tenth and fifteenth in the three disciplines, his combined score is 150 (1x10x15). The lowest combined score wins the gold!

Two medal events each for men and women in sport climbing have been approved for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games; speed climbing will be its own medal event, while bouldering and lead will again be combined for a second medal.

What can we expect at Tokyo? Over the course of four days, 20 men and women will compete. The final consists of the top 6 who have passed through from the qualifying round. There is no semi-final.

Olympic qualifying events have been ongoing with the final set of climbers to be selected in continental competitions this spring. Climbers at Tokyo 2020 will compete at the outdoor Aomi Urban Sports Park in the waterfront Bay Zone from 4-7 August.



Figure 6. Jakob Schubert of Austria approaching the yellow "zone hold" at upper right in the bouldering portion of the Combined Event (Innsbruck 2018). Schubert qualified for one the 20 men's spots at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

Photo courtesy of IFSC

Surfing: Shootin' the Curls at Tsurigasaki

by Mark Maestrone

The second of the three new youth-oriented Olympic sports I'll be discussing is surfing. As with sport climbing, which was presented in the Spring 2020 issue of *JSP*, the inaugural Olympic surfing competition (Figure 1) at Tokyo 2020 will consist of just one discipline: shortboard.

"Shortboard" you may be asking? Yes, surf boards come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The more traditional 10-foot-and-over longboard was introduced to the mainland United States back in the summer of 1885 by 3 Hawaiian princes attending school in California (Summer 2013 issue of *JSP*).

The shortboard, also known as a "thruster," is the standard for today's surfing competitions (Figure 2). While not as easy to paddle as a longboard, it is unparalleled in speed, power and control – the three criteria used in judging. Competition regulations do not specify the dimensions, however the average length of a shortboard is 6 to 7 feet with a pointed nose. Competitive surfers use three fins mounted on the underside of the tail. These provide directional stability and increase control.

Readers may be forgiven for not realizing that Japan has more than a passing acquaintance with the sport of surfing.



Figure 2. Shortboards, like the two shown at right on this Jersey stamp, will be used in Olympic competition.



Figure 1. In the shadow of Mt. Fuji, a surfer rides the famous "Great Wave" captured by Japanese 18th century printmaker, Katsushika Hokusai.

At its most rudimentary level, surfing in Japan began in the 19th century with body boarding, or *Itago-no-ri*. Itago were actually small "belly boards" (Figure 3) fashioned from the removable floor boards of Japanese boats. The oldest written documentation of Itago is the diary of Dokurakuan Kanri, a Japanese haiku poet who, upon visiting Yunohama Beach in 1821, wrote:



Figure 3. Body or belly boarding (upper right).

"Perhaps ten children of 12 or 13 are there, taking the boat's planks they go, embarking and diving into the racing sea, further and further out they go, then riding the waves they come back to shore, fast, like an arrow, so many times they go."

True surfing in Japan was born along Sagami Bay, introduced in the 1960s by American soldiers stationed at Atsugi Naval Air Facility (NAF). In their off-hours, the servicemen (Figure 4) would take their boards down to the beaches along the Shonan



Figure 4. 1967 card from an American soldier stationed at the Atsugi NAF (FPO 17008) to family in California. Might he have been one of the surfing servicemen?



Figure 5. Four different Japanese pictorial postmarks showing surfers (clockwise from top left): Fujisawa Nishikaigan (2006), Todohokke-Mura, Hokkaido (1988), Hiratsuka Tanabata Festival (2002), All Japan Surfing Championship, Fukushima (1986).

Coast, about 30 minutes drive south of the base. The coastal towns of Hiratsuka, Chigasaki and Fujisawa (Figure 5) are all well known for their surfing.

The servicemen would teach surfing to interested Japanese boys, often leaving their own U.S.-made boards in beach huts or with local families for safe-keeping. It was not unusual for locals to sneak a ride now and then!

Much of the Pacific Coast of Japan has not only excellent beaches, but great waves. Japan's surfing Mecca is Miyazaki on Japan's southernmost main island, Kyushu.

For the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach (also known as Shidashita Beach), on the eastern side of the Chiba peninsula will serve as the surfing venue. About a 2-hour drive southeast of Tokyo by car, the volcanic sand beaches can also be reached by train from Tokyo Station.

Through various meets around the world, 20 men and 20 women will qualify to the inaugural Olympic competition. While surfing has been dominated by athletes from the USA, Australia, Brazil, and South Africa, the Olympic roster is limited to a maximum of two men and two women from a country. Japan, as host, is guaranteed one spot each in the men's and women's events.

In the opening round of Olympic competition, 20 surfers will compete in five heats of four surfers each. The next round will consist of 16 competitors,

with half qualifying to the quarter-finals, and so on through the semi-finals and into the medal round. Both men and women will compete each day. The competition will be conducted over four days, weather and waves permitting.

Each surfer is permitted to ride up to 25 waves per heat. A panel of five judges will score each ride on speed, power and flow. All elements of a surfer's ride will be assessed as a whole and scored on a scale of .1 to 10 (in one-tenth point increments). The highest and lowest of the five scores are discounted and the middle three scores are averaged together, giving the surfer a total for that ride. For each heat, the surfer's two best rides will be added together. A perfect score for a single heat would be 20.

Because no two waves are identical, it's up to the surfer to decide on how best to satisfy the "key elements of commitment and degree of difficulty, innovative and progressive maneuvers, combinations of major maneuvers, and variety of maneuvers." The most experienced surfers will carefully select waves offering them the best potential of scoring, rather than attempting all 25 allowed.

Spectators should watch for maneuvers such as a Backside Bottom Turn for a quick change in direction, and an aerial in which the surfer launches



Figure 6. Launching into an aerial gets the judges' attention.

off of the lip of the wave, gains air and lands back on the face of the wave (Figure 6). Not exciting enough? Well how about a 360 where a surfer spins in a complete circle in the air, landing with precision while still continuing to move with the wave. This inaugural Olympic surfing event should prove quite exciting!

Is surfing at the Olympic Games here to stay? In the short term, yes! The IOC has approved the sport for the 2024 Paris Games, and permitted the French to hold the surfing competition 9,800 miles from Paris in Tahiti, French Polynesia (Figure 7).

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Figure 7. Tahiti will be the site of the 2024 Olympic surfing competition.