

## Managing the Olympics during Covid-19

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Julian Walker: Well, it's the top of the hour. So good morning, good afternoon, good evening. And wherever you are, you're most welcome to join us today. And we sincerely hope that you and yours are in good health. I'm Julian Walker, and this is business travel on the fly. Today in our virtual broadcast studios or homes as I like to call them. I'm delighted to welcome two former Olympians: Kaveh Mehrabi who is now head of Athlete Relations and Engagement from the International Olympic Committee and Tom Steitz, the former kayaking skiing coach who led teams at seven different Olympic Games, and who is the founder and CEO of 3 PEAKS leadership.

A warm welcome, and thanks to you both for giving your time so generously. And also to you, our audience, as you join us for 20 minutes or so of conversation, where we discuss the human impact of the fast moving COVID-19 crisis. And specifically, its effect on the Tokyo Olympics. Today, we'll learn a little about how the IOC had to have effective communication to employees, partners, and what it's doing to keep athletes and employees motivated, focused and informed given the evolving landscape. And also we'll share some thoughts on how to adapt and plan ahead as global restrictions start to be lifted. And if we have time at the end, we will try and answer a couple of questions which had been sent through in advance. But for now, let me hand over to our guests: Kaveh and Tom.

Tom: Kaveh, how are you this morning?

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Kaveh: Hi, Tom. Hi, everyone. I'm good. Thank you very much. How are you?

Tom: I'm great. But I'm still, I have to tell you, the Olympics in itself is an event unlike any other and now to be dealing with something like this. I mean, nobody could have planned for this one.

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Tom: So what are you seeing?

Kaveh: No, it's very true, Tom, there is no blueprints for this. There is no blueprint for organizing your postpone Olympic Games, as you know very well. We organize and we prepare for it against for six, seven years in advance. And in some ways, redesigning the whole thing.

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This organizing the Olympic games. So it's a huge task, a huge undertaking, but one that we are very motivated to do. Because obviously, the Olympics is hopefully bringing a message of hope to the whole community and the whole world at the end of hopefully this pandemic next year.

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Yeah, I know that, you know, the mental challenge, especially for the athletes, and the coaches who've been planning for you say up to six or eight years, when I speak with some of the younger coaches, especially some who have only been through maybe one or none Olympics because as you know, usually going to one Olympics is a chance of a lifetime. And actually, if you think about it, if you're an athlete, some athletes start when they're four or five years old, dreaming of going to the Olympics, and suddenly everything is postponed. And nobody really knows how to handle it. It's really remarkable at this point. Unremarkable at this point.

Kaveh: Yeah, you're absolutely right. I think to put it into perspective, actually, you're really right that even going to the games for once is an opportunity of a lifetime, actually, only 70% of the summer Olympians only manage to go to one Olympic Games. So meaning only 30%, they can go to more than once. In the Winter Olympics that's slightly lower. So 60% of the winter Olympians, they only go to one Olympic Games and about 40%, they go to more than one. So again, the large majority are only managing to qualify once in their life. And as you said for them it takes decades to prepare. You're right there's the mental, the mental challenge of this situation, it's massive for everyone, it's everyone feeling it. And an athlete at the end of the day as strong as they are as much as they are looked up to as a role model, but they're still part of the society, they're still human. So they still feel all the challenges and all the difficulties that everybody else feels into society. But hopefully they're a little bit better equipped through their own journey and as an athlete to deal with it. But it's not to think that they don't face these challenges.

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Tom: Yeah, you know, it's, I laugh a little bit, it's easy for you and I to sit here and talk about how people should get over it and put it in their back of their mind. But try to put it in perspective as you said if it truly is a once in a lifetime. And it's postponed you know, the mental, I can't even begin to describe the mental gymnastics that that goes through. What I have told people in my experience because I've been lucky enough to been through many of these right, seven Olympics in Salt Lake and Olympics,

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Tom: If you think back we had 911, in September, obviously, five months later, the US was hosting the Olympics in Salt Lake City. And at that time, I remember there was talk about postponing the Olympics with all of the terrorism threats. And at the time, we couldn't even begin to deal with it. But looking back on it, what I learned is, this, too, will pass. And what we decided to do then is we spent a lot of time talking, analyzing the risks. And myself and many of the Olympians were actually on the, on the day two of the international flights when they opened back up, and we flew from the US into Germany, because we had just decided that life has to go on. And I remember

being on that plane and thinking, okay, am I doing the right thing. But my learnings from that is, as hard as it is to kind of internalize all of this, things will get back to normal.

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Kaveh: Now, I really liked what you said and about what you said that this too will pass. It is not the first time that humanity or society is facing a big challenge. It's obviously a very concerning health challenge. But this too will pass as well. And then, as you said, and I want to quote, one of our guests that we had a discussion with the other day, Eliot ..Chokey, who is the first human being that won the marathon under two hours. And he put it actually in a very interesting perspective, and I don't remember him word by word, but kind of quote him, he was saying that in Marathon, you will never, you hardly ever have a super flat track.

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You know, you have a level of uphill, you have a level of downhill, some areas are the flat. And you always have to get used to those conditions and have to prepare and know that in the part of the marathon, that is a bit of an uphill, even though it's a marathon, eventually, that part also will come to an end. So I guess, as a society, and as a community, we are a little bit on the outcome of the marathon.

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But I think we can all by confidence, say that this two also will pass and then hopefully, we will come to the other side of it, and then look back and as a community feel all stronger.

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Tom: Yeah, I mean, I think that's a great way of putting it right, we all have to climb over a little hill, although I would describe this hill this a little bit more, a little bigger than just a little hill, right.

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You know, when I think back to the Salt Lake Olympics, the US Ski Team had a goal of 10 medals. And we were lucky enough to achieve that. But one of the things that we did realize is, and this seems a bit ironic, but we were able, we were one of the first nations to kind of go back to work. And I'm not advocating that everybody should go back to normal, everybody has to make their own decision. But we were sort of forced, because it was the home games. And so there was more pressure on us to do well. And you know that as the organizer, as an organizer, right. And so we decided, look, life has to go on. And we were one of the first teams to go back to international travel and international practice, if you will. And I know some of the former Olympic coaches from other countries are friends of mine, they waited until they were absolutely sure that it was the

right thing to do. And then they brought their teams back together and began to practice. And specifically, there was a lot of trepidation or fear about coming to the US to practice on the venue. And a lot of teams forego or gave up that chance. And, you know, looking back on it, I think they would have done it a little bit differently. But again, I'm not here advocating telling everybody to travel, that was just our own personal experience of how we tried to take a negative and turn it into a little bit of a positive.

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Kaveh: "Yeah, no, I see exactly what you mean. And I will add to that, I think in any situation, if you just extract one element and try to address the situation in isolation with considering only one aspect, you probably will not land on the right place. And any situation like this situation, there is a variety of points that you need to consider to decide what are the next actions and what is the direction you want to go and as you said in this situation will be the similar case that all the balancing act that everyone has to do.

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Of course, it's a major health concern. So we have to follow all those advices but we have to balance that with also the reality of life and make sure that we take an informed decision and a balanced decision and I think the reality is that the the real logistical challenges or the reality of life for each industry or each sector in business, will probably will be a bit different.

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So probably something that what could work with one company might not directly work for another. So that's why I always try to think about all the different aspects of the decision and balance them all out and then try to find the best possible way forward. And I don't think this is particularly any different from that principle way of considering how to make the decision.

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Tom: Yeah, no, I agree with you, everybody's going to think about it differently be, you know, back to some of the Olympians, as you say, it's a once in a lifetime, that the best advice I can give the coaches and the athletes is focused on what you can control, we can't control the spread of the virus, but you can control how you go to work and how you do your job, and specifically how you're going to prepare. So again, as you know, most Olympic teams, regardless of the country, what a lot of people don't realize is we get together with other nations and compete and train together because it is one big family. But suddenly, if you're from country A and you had a practice session scheduled with Country B, you're not getting together. And so how to, um, you know, my advice to the coaches and the athletes is, how can you maximize this situation, to do your job the very best because, look, every time you turn on the news, every time you see a webinar like this, and everything, your brain just fills up with all of the uncontrollables. And I think, to your point,

the same with business, we need to think about how we do our job the best? And how, if and when travel becomes a part of that?

Kaveh: Yeah, no, I couldn't agree more and one point I, again, every I'm building out everything you say. But I think you touched on very, very well, that there is a huge amount of information out there with social media, with news outlets, with, as you said, webinars and everything. So I think actually, to a very large extent, it's very important to even make that decision. And you know, as a coach, and as an athlete, and I certainly did the same that you even have to be selective on information that you're taking in to make sure that it's from the credible sources. So the decision ultimately you want to make is based on those informed decisions. So these days with everything going on on social media, and all different news channels, is even probably more important than ever to make sure that we actually get our information from credible sources.

Tom: Yeah, and I think actually, as you say on that, I'll build on you, right, that the business travelers the business world, they have a bit of an advantage of, at least I will, I'll pick on the US from the US Olympic team, right? The Olympic coaches and leaders are not experts in health and safety and travel, right? And whereas if you look at some of the companies, you know, around the world, they have experts whose job 24/7 is to determine when it's safe, and how much travel when and where. And so the companies and the employees of the workforce are a little bit in a little bit better place than the athletes of the world because they're much more prepared. And so my advice to those folks would be, is: focus on what you control, do your job, find a way to figure out how to maximize what it is you what you're paid to do, and leave it to the experts. And they will figure out when you can start to ease into travel because it's going to happen. I mean, I certainly don't mean to be flippant of a situation, but 10 years when we look back on this from now, it won't seem as big a deal. It just never does. That's just how life works.

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Kaveh: Yeah, true. I always when you're in the middle of it, it feels more, yeah, more overwhelming than it might be when you look back and then experienced usually in this period, it helps is again, bring it back to the sport context. That's where you see probably the biggest difference between a young athlete and a more experienced athlete because the more experienced athlete probably has seen those kind of pressures points a few more times in his or her career. So she or he is more comfortable with dealing with these pressure points. Where a younger athlete the first few times that they face that they feel like okay, this is the mother of life or death. You know, we're an experience that we can digest it and even in real time make it more calm decisions.

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And I think that metaphor putting it to what you said it makes, it makes complete sense that looking back probably in some years time you will see that okay, it was definitely tough, but it's

something that we get through it and then it probably will feel less, less overwhelming, looking back than what we feel probably today.

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Tom: Yeah, no, I'm sort of chuckling to myself. Because, you know, as you know, as you said, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity. And, you know, the interesting thing is if you make the Olympics and go to the Olympics, and let's just say you're 25, 20 years later, if you're meeting a new friend, or it's your a cocktail party, and you say, Oh, I went to the Olympics 20 years ago, the very first question you always get asked is, How did you do? Right? And so the difference here is, I challenge anybody who's going to a business meeting or business travel 20 years from now, when they're explaining it to somebody in a social setting, they're not going to say, how'd the meeting go? And so the stakes are a little bit more or a little higher, definitely in the Olympics.

Kaveh: Yeah, no, I couldn't agree more.

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Kaveh: Yeah, the one thing I wanted to touch on is, as you said, like how we'll get through this, and how we'll get over this whole, I think, I the one thing we have experienced from our side, and something that we really try to practice within our team and across the organization is that transparency and engagement with the team around you, you know, because there's always people that they might be either exposed to more information or more experience in the job. And, you know, comparing that with a sport context will be probably the coach athlete relationship that the coach might have had more experience and you know, have more knowledge, and so on, but to to help get through this situation, that transparency and engagement in the process is very important, because you have to bring the persons and the team with you. And you explain to them why you make certain decisions that you make. And then and usually that helps even in the difficult times, even if the decisions might be difficult for them to accept it easier, and then be part of you to push forward. And the other two things in this context that are personally experienced is that the contingency planning, again, is very similar to sports. Like, you always have to have your tactic BCD ready, because it's not always that the plan a will work. And then you probably won't have time, if plan A works to start thinking about Plan B, and C, you should already have it in your backpack ready. And the third thing that again, we have experienced is that a balancing act between the long term and short term goals and vision, which again, you can really compare that to an athlete and coach life. And, you know, you always want to have that long term goal, which is hopefully winning the Olympic gold medal. But that's not the first goal you will achieve. There's probably a number of goals you have to achieve before you hit that one big goal. So I think, at least from our point of view, and from the practice we tried to do in, in our team, those are very, very transferable and very implementable in business as well. And I certainly found it very helpful with my immediate team.

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Tom: Yeah, ya know, as you say that I'm actually learning a little bit myself when I'm thinking about my own travel, because it comes down to how you handle it and how you deal with it as a person. I can give you an example of when we didn't handle it very well. And I was with a younger Olympic coach, right. In 1991, when we had the Gulf conflict, we were actually evacuated during the year during the World Cup season, and we were actually evacuated before the war started. And the CIA had gave us a warning and they had evacuated us in the middle of the night. But the World Championships in Italy, the Nordic World Championships were four weeks after that. And we were getting ready we were putting on the uniforms we were going to walk in opening ceremonies was 300,000 people in the stands televised worldwide. And the rest of the nations voted and became very afraid. And they came to us and asked us to please not march in opening ceremony. And of course, we couldn't go out there and march after the rest of the nations came and said, Hey, we feel safer if you didn't. And that rattled myself and the rest of the athletes so badly. We were never able to get our act together, if you will. And it was the worst World Championships that I ever had as a coach, because I just fell apart. I couldn't deal with it.

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Tom: Right? Yeah. I'm hoping I'm a little bit older.

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Kaveh: Yeah, it's very difficult. I mean, my coach used to tell me, you can never be too prepared because no matter how many scenarios you will be going through your mind is unfortunately sometimes that one scenario like in your case that probably in your worst dreams, you would have not even thought about it. So it's difficult. That's why it's very, very important to consider about all different options. So if you can, I don't think you can ever be too prepared because there's just so

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many unknowns out there. So you really have to think about different aspects of the business and and work when you're when you're coming to the situation.

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Tom: Yeah, no, I totally agree. So my advice will continue to be to the athletes and the coaches that I talked with, and to some degree, the same people in business is, how do you turn this into a competitive advantage? I mean, you and I are competitors, probably a little bit more than the average business person. But I think, okay, the whole world, all of the Olympic teams, all of the business world has delivered has is dealing with the same setback, how do we take advantage of that and get a little bit of a competitive edge, right? Again, I'm not saying you need to be the first to travel. But I do know that, you know, there will be an advantage to some of the companies and or people who get out there a little bit earlier and able to, and are able to attend a few meetings, visit a few customers, that sort of thing, again, only when it's safe. But, you know, looking back on

the situations that I dealt with, I can't say that I ever acted too quickly. And I probably erred on the side of caution. And it's so hard when you're in a situation like this, to actually put it to the side and act, it's so easy to sit and wait for somebody else to act to your point. So everybody, including the business travelers need to make a plan and need to be ready to move on that when they feel safe and secure.

Kaveh: Yeah, yeah. And I think we, again, building on what you said, I think is about probably setting new goals and setting new expectation. Maybe in some cases, for your business and even for your team and, because that things has changed, let's be honest about it, you know, and at least for the short periods of times, we will have to adapt our activities or how we behave to some extent. So by looking at our strategies and our businesses and how do we operate, and then hopefully will help you talking about the competitiveness, it will help you to get a competitive edge over others, you know, if you think about like, okay, when it's safe, how do I want to operate and set new expectation and new goals, and accepting the reality of the situation and kind of playing a little bit with the new rules, if you like, then hopefully, as a business, you can get a

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competitive advantage, because it's one thing that it has proved to us this health crisis is that the world is a competitive place. And if you're not able to adapt quickly, and adjust and set new expectation and new goals, you might be one or two steps behind. So I think, again, this is something that we try to do as well. And that would mean different things for different businesses, and everybody has to decide when is for them safe to do certain actions. But I think one thing is for sure that you do need to look at it with a new fresh set of eyes, setting new expectation and setting new goals. And again, very importantly, discussing that with your team to make sure the whole organization and the whole business comes on the journey with you.

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Tom: Yeah, no, I think that's well said, I do feel a little bit sorry for you, my friend right now. Because as I think about this, I'm putting into the context of a business meeting. I can't think of any other meeting and I'll use that word that would bring more people from more nations together than the Olympics. I mean, that's the point of this right, is to bring everybody from the world together. And let's face it, every country is going to handle it a little bit differently. You've got to take into effect every single nation and how and when they're coming out of this. And when it's safe to bring them all together. You know what, I'm kind of glad I don't have your job right now.

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Kaveh[laughing]: Yeah, but and, you know, we are very lucky. The good thing is that, as you see, we also have the best and the most global partners in the world with us. And, you know, it's not a decision that we will be making alone, you know, we are continuously following the World Health Organization advice. We are obviously liaising very, very closely with the Japanese government



with the local organizing committee, this type of decision and you said it perfectly, with these skills with the fact that we are literally bringing the whole world together for those few weeks time. No organization will do it alone. So we are very fortunate that we have very strong partners, very strong international partners and with the best experts in the world that can as you said, like let's leave it to the expert like we can collectively make sure that we have the best information and then hopefully, the leadership's will be able to make the best possible decision based on those information, but I think one thing that we have been very cautious and very careful about is to make sure that we consult and we get the best advice in the world that we can get to make sure that the decisions are the decisions that it could be made.

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Tom: Yeah, now me myself, personally, I'm actually even though it's quite a ways out, and hopefully, the epidemic will be hot be behind us, it'll still be part of us. But when I think about it, the Olympics in you and the IOC bringing all of the athletes of the world together, when everybody walks out in the opening ceremonies as a group. I know personally, that's going to make me feel that the world is actually coming together and putting this thing behind us. So I'm really looking forward to sitting on my couch as opposed to walking in it.

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with a bag of Doritos and a soft drink in my hand and watching the world come together and feeling it safe again.

Kaveh: No, you said perfectly. And you gave me goosebumps with saying those words. And if you would have heard them, the statements of the IOC person following the joint statement, you heard that we all hope and we all work towards making sure that they will Olympics will be the light at the end of the tunnel, then hopefully the pandemic, the worst part of it is behind us.

And as you said, it will be something we'll remember. But hopefully the Olympic Games will be that sign of hope for the world. And really bring the whole world together in unity, and play that role. A real role of the sign of hope at the end of the tunnel that serves anybody motivates us on a daily basis to go to work or I should say go to our kitchen table and work from home these days. But, we are very excited, I'm very motivated and something that we feel that we are doing something that hopefully can contribute to the to the sign of hope to the whole world and even beyond sports.

Julian Walker: Superb. And that's fantastic words of advice for everybody, from you both. Thank you very much indeed. That brings us pretty much to the end of our time slot today. So we don't actually have time for questions. But you've covered those that were submitted. So thank you very much. So we've looked at you know, anxiety training schedules. Two big takeaways are, you know, concentrate on the things that you can deal with yourselves and leave the rest to professionals.



And the other part is contingency planning, plan, plan and plan again. Very, very good insights, tips and lessons there. Thank you both very much, here's a huge thank you to Kobe and Tom for their time. Thank you for joining us as well. And until next time, it's goodbye from all of us on the fly.