

# Tokyo’s Deaf Athlete in the Running for Gold

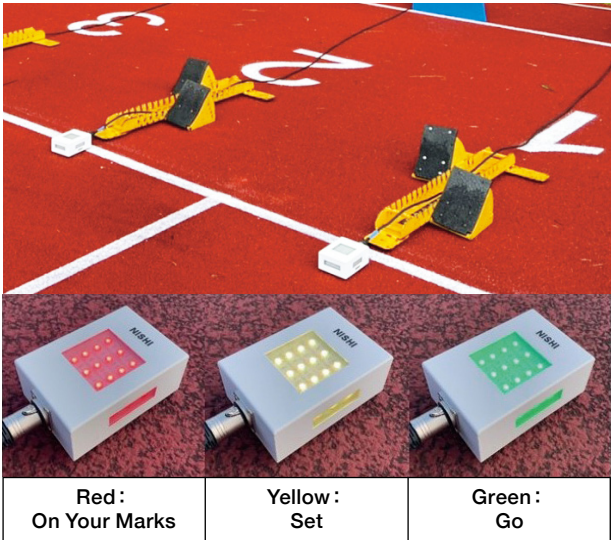
The Tokyo 2025 Deaflympics in November will be the 100th anniversary of the Games and the first one hosted by Japan.

Okada Mio is aiming to win medals in the Women’s 800 meters and 1500 meters Athletics events at the Tokyo 2025 Deaflympics, an Olympics for deaf athletes. She started athletics while she was a student at the Central School for the Deaf run by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. She has loved physical activity since childhood, and her parents inspired her interest in athletics.

“Both my parents were deaf athletes: my father in sprinting and my mother in the javelin. When I was young, my father sometimes took me to his team practices, so I naturally started competing when I was in high school. I always liked running. The middle distance especially suited me.”

## Vital Roles of Starting Lamps and Sign Language

Most of the rules for the deaf athletics are the same as the general ones, but the main difference is the use of light-stimulated starting lamps instead of a starter



The white devices at the start line are the starting lamps.  
Photo: courtesy of Japan Deaf Athletics Association

gun, which may be hard to hear or not heard at all by deaf athletes. The devices are placed near the feet of the athletes and the lights change color to signal the start, with red, yellow and green meaning “on your marks,” “set,” and “go” respectively.

Before that system was developed, “I used to start by watching the movements of the starter and other runners around me,” says Okada. “Of course, that caused a delay and affected my time. In sprinting, where a tenth of a second counts, it had a big impact, but I had no choice but to accept it. My father also told me about his own frustrating experiences.”

The Deaflympics have been using starting lamps for a while, and more and more events in Japan are using them. “I want to tell the next generation how the

situation regarding disadvantages has gradually improved,” says Okada.

Another major difference is the use of sign language during competitions. In addition to the athletes themselves, referees and coaches also use it to give instructions. “Sign language can be used to communicate with someone farther away than voices can carry. Even at a train station with loud noises from trains and announcements, you can talk with your friend on the opposite platform in sign language. So, if a supporter uses it to say ‘Good luck’ from the stands, the athlete will understand it. And if you know sign language, you’ll know what coaches are telling their athletes. In that sense, it’s a fun sport to watch. But as an athlete, I feel that I can’t say anything bad,” Okada says with a laugh.

## Relying on Visual Cues During a Race

In the 800m and 1500m events that Okada specializes in, hearing athletes often make decisions such as the timing of their last spurt based on auditory information such as the roughness of their competitors’ breathing and the sound of their footsteps. How do deaf athletes make those decisions? “I make decisions based on my competitors’ movements and shadows.

Also, I sometimes check the screens in the stadium that show how the race is going,” explains Okada.

She won the bronze medal in the Women’s 800m at the World Deaf Athletics Championships in Taiwan in July 2024. She was in second place throughout the race but was overtaken by a rival just before the finish line.

“She’s a very strong athlete. I knew she was behind me from the screen, but when she caught up, I had no strength left,” she recounts regretfully.



Okada competes in the hard-fought race.  
Photo: courtesy of Japan Deaf Athletics Association

## Raising Awareness About Deaf Athletes

In addition to athletics, there will be 21 other events at the Tokyo 2025 Deaflympics, including soccer, swimming, and table tennis. “I’m looking forward to seeing other events as well as interacting with deaf athletes. Each country competes for medals in the events, and this might sound over the top, but I also feel like I will be competing on behalf of my whole country. I want to turn that pressure into strength and win a medal with a nice color.”

She also has hopes for the 2025 Games as a leading deaf athlete. Hearing impairments are called an ‘invisible disability’ because one cannot tell if someone has one just from appearances. Many deaf athletes are as physically capable as able-bodied athletes, and their efforts and struggles are often overlooked. “I hope that people will realize that there are deaf athletes who are committed to competition despite their disabilities by watching this tournament.”

Her future training goals are clear. “First of all, I want to break my own records (Deaf Women’s Japanese national records) in the 800m and 1500m before the Deaflympics. I’m not just aiming to match my record, but am determined to surpass it.”

The competition for medals has begun.



Okada Mio shows the sign for the Deaflympics. The Tokyo Games will be her third Deaflympics.