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For finely tuned Olympic athletes, a one-year postponement changes everything

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A single year is an eternity to an Olympic athlete whose whole career may last less than a decade, whose athletic peak is even shorter than that and whose entire competitive life is scripted and defined by the ancient rhythms of the four-year Olympic “quad.” A 12-month pause to the Tokyo Games, from summer 2020 to summer 2021, may be a negligible blip within a modern Olympic movement that has existed for 125 years.

But to an athlete whose moment is right now, Tuesday’s news of the postponement of the world’s biggest and most expensive sporting event from this July and August to sometime in 2021 in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic changes everything.

“In the NFL, you have the Super Bowl every year. We wait four years for these events to come around,” American slalom canoeist and three-time Olympian Casey Eichfeld said in a telephone interview Tuesday. “It’s hard now to think we already waited four years, and now we have to wait another year. But that’s just how it has to be.”

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The one-year postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games will affect the world's elite athletes in different ways. From archers to wrestlers, teenage skateboarders to 50-something equestrians, all must rethink meticulously planned training regimens, take stock of their motivation and, in many cases, assess their ability to finance another year of training for an Olympic goal that's now one year further off.

How long is one year to an Olympic athlete? Long enough for a young phenom to blossom into a world-beater, for a superstar in peak form to suffer a career-ending injury or for an aging veteran giving it one last go to realize one more year is one too many. The Olympics may just be on a one-year pause, but time marches relentlessly on.

"It's getting harder, because I'm not getting younger," said swimmer Ryan Lochte, a 12-time Olympic medalist seeking to make his fifth U.S. Olympic team and who will turn 36 on Aug. 3, six days before the Tokyo 2020 Games would have ended. "I was ready. I was ready to go. I'm swimming amazing right now. But I've always had to deal with bumps in the road, and I've always overcome them.

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“So this is just another bump. ... If anything, this will just p--- me off and make my fire even bigger. I’ll be more focused. I want it even more now. Nothing has changed. It’s just getting pushed back a year.”

Across the Olympic landscape, athletes around the world expressed rough versions of the same sentiment: It is disappointing to be forced to wait a year, but postponement was the right choice. In many ways, it was the voices of athletes — and the subsequent decisions by entire countries, beginning with Canada, to pull out of the Tokyo Games if they went on this summer — that forced the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo 2020 organizers into Tuesday’s announcement.

“I am obviously extremely disappointed, but this is more important and bigger than me or any of the athletes that have been taking part,” British swimmer Adam Peaty, a two-time Olympic medalist, said in a statement. “This is a matter of life and death, and we all need to do the right thing.”

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“Our dreams aren’t cancelled, they’re just postponed,” tweeted American runner Emma Coburn, a two-time Olympian and 2016 bronze medalist in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.

Perhaps nowhere is a single year felt more profoundly than in women’s gymnastics, which has been long-dominated by prepubescent teenagers and is restricted by age — athletes must turn at least 16 in the year the Olympics are held. The one-year postponement means an entire new wave of younger gymnasts, who previously figured their chance wouldn’t come until Paris 2024, is suddenly eligible for Tokyo.

“You have to worry about that,” said agent Sheryl Shade, who has represented gymnastics champions Shawn Johnson, Nastia Liukin and Laurie Hernandez. “Before puberty, you have no fear.”

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To some extent, that dynamic will play out across all Olympic sports: To an older, established competitor, that young up-and-comer nipping at your heels has another year to catch you. Time is on their side, not yours.

“Next year there’s going to be a bunch of junior kids coming up in the senior ranks for me,” said U.S. men’s gymnast Akash Modi, who turns 25 in May. “They’re going to be one year better, so it’s going to be harder for me. I’m okay with that; I just want the U.S. to be better overall. I’d still love to make the team. But if I get beaten out by a younger guy, and I am at my best — it just means that the U.S. team is going to be better.”

For older athletes, the calculus of a one-year postponement includes how much is left in those aging muscles and ligaments. Tiger Woods has said he would like to make the four-man U.S. team in golf for Tokyo, but he has dealt with back pain this season and will be 45 next summer. Decorated sprinter Justin Gatlin, who has said he planned to retire after Tokyo, will be 39. Beach volleyball star Kerri Walsh Jennings, a three-time gold medalist, will be 42. American sprinter Allyson Felix, who will be 35 next year, had said this year’s Olympics would be her fifth and final Summer Games. Tennis legends Roger Federer and Serena Williams both turn 40 next year.

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As Lolo Jones, a 37-year-old American hurdler and two-time summer Olympian, tweeted following Tuesday’s news, “Retirement will have to wait another year.”

While the decision to postpone the Games was widely expected and welcomed — if only to put at ease the minds of athletes whose training regimens have been disrupted by coronavirus-related social restrictions — it will also spark a long period of chaos across Olympic bodies worldwide because each country and each sport has different timetables and systems for qualification.

Some athletes in various sports and from various countries had already earned their spots in Tokyo — and those countries and those sports must now decide whether those results will stand until 2021.

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“Seems like you’d almost have to clean the slate and start over,” said Jess Graba, coach of gymnast Sunisa Lee, 17, who helped the U.S. women to the team gold at the 2019 world championships and is expected to contend for the gold medal in Tokyo in the uneven bars.

But the majority of athletes across the globe faced some sort of qualifying or Olympic trials competitions this spring or early summer to earn their berths — some of which were already wiped out, or about to be wiped out, by measures aiming to slow the spread of the virus.

“There are so many variables, so much uncertainty,” said U.S. wrestler Helen Maroulis, an Olympic gold medalist in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. “I just qualified a week and a half ago. Does that count? Does that not count? Do we have to re-wrestle the tournament? ... As athletes, we’re going to have to rise up and be resilient, like the rest of the world.”

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Because American Canoe had scheduled its Olympic qualifying events for April — and had only recently moved to cancel them — Eichfeld, the slalom canoeist, had already begun to point his body and mind toward a peak he hoped to hit a month from now.

“You always have the Olympics in the back of your mind as you’re training. But when the calendar flips to [2020], it moves to the forefront,” he said. “It’s hard to come off the high. But from a positive standpoint, it gives you another year to let things settle down and reevaluate our training. The goal is just to buckle down and do what we have to do to get through this. The training and racing will be there waiting for us on the other side of the storm.”

The Olympic quad — the four years between Summer or Winter Games — is so baked into the lives of athletes that it dictates the timing of major life events. Female athletes have timed their pregnancies so their childbirths arrive in the first year of the quad — after the previous Olympics.

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Melissa Stockwell, a paratriathlete and bronze medalist at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Paralympics, moved her family from outside Chicago to Colorado Springs in January 2019 — exactly 18 months before the scheduled opening of the Tokyo Paralympic Games. She wanted to be able to train at the Olympic Training Center there on a schedule scripted and optimized to put her in peak form for this August.

“You have this big endgame in mind,” said Stockwell, 40, a former Army lieutenant who lost a leg in the Iraq War. “An Olympic athlete’s timeline is very specific. You know by 2019 you need to have entered certain races. You should be at a certain world ranking; you should have 'X' amount of qualifying points. This throws a wrench into the athletic plan, but that doesn’t mean the plan can’t be reworked for 2021.”

Last week, the training center was shut down because of coronavirus concerns, a decision that displaced some 200 American athletes, including Stockwell, who regularly used the swimming pool, weight rooms and other equipment.

"I don't think anybody was prepared for this virus happening," said Noah Lyles, a 22-year-old sprinter who attended T.C. Williams High in Northern Virginia and is the 200-meter world champion. "You look over the history of the Olympics, and you see it's usually war that has stopped the Olympics from happening. Seeing [this], it really puts it in perspective that we're all human, we're all dealing with the same thing."

Swimmer Katie Ledecky, a 23-year-old from Bethesda, Md., and a five-time Olympic gold medalist, has spent much of the past two weeks, along with U.S. teammate Simone Manuel, scrounging for a pool after officials closed the one at Stanford University where they train. On a few occasions, they resorted to swimming in someone's backyard pool.

"Honestly, it's been more just therapeutic. It hasn't really been training," Ledecky said. "It's just been something to do, something to get our minds off the uncertainty that we've all been in these last 10 days or so."

Ledecky said she hopes to be back in a regulation pool — one that doesn't have a slide or a Nerf basketball hoop — by May or June, ready to resume regular training.

"When that time comes, I think we'll all be rested and ready to put in that year's worth of work and see what we can do next year," she said. "It'll be a challenge, something new to adjust to. We're flexible. We're athletes — we've all faced different challenges. This is one we're all facing together, which makes it a little easier, I think. We'll figure it out."

Liz Clarke, Rick Maese, Adam Kilgore and Matt Bonesteel contributed to this report.