



TOKYO: Fireworks light up the sky during the closing ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

Tokyo bids colorful farewell to 'historic, fantastic' Paralympics

TOKYO: Tokyo bid a colorful farewell to the Paralympics yesterday after 12 days of stereotype-defying, record-shattering performances despite a year-long pandemic delay. International Paralympic Committee chief Andrew Parsons declared the Games closed on a cool night in the Olympic Stadium, saying they had "not just been historic, they've been fantastic".

It was a Games like no other, postponed a year because of the pandemic and dogged by difficulties and low public support in the build-up. But the action did not disappoint when it got underway, with a record 86 teams winning medals and 62 claiming at least one gold.

Parsons said the Games had "opened the door", and it was "time for us all to play our part to break down the barriers". "During our carnival of sport, we have celebrated difference, exhibited the best of humanity and shown unity in diversity," he said.

The closing ceremony, with fans locked out over virus fears but with roughly 2,000 athletes and officials in attendance, took "harmonious cacophony" as its theme. It featured a riot of neon-clad break-dancers, unicycling butterflies and strutting stilt-walkers, using materials recycled from the Olympic

opening ceremony for its vivid props.

Among the athletes carrying their nations' flags were Afghanistan's Hossain Rasouli and Zakia Khudadadi, who arrived in Tokyo with the Games already in progress after being evacuated from Taliban-controlled Kabul. The pair, wearing red and green team tracksuits, handed the flag over to a volunteer before joining other athletes in helping to decorate a replica of Tokyo's Skytree tower.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike handed the Paralympic flag over to Parsons, who passed it on to Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, representing the 2024 hosts. Parsons then announced the end of the Games, bringing the curtain down after 539 gold medals across 22 sports, contested almost entirely behind closed doors because of the virus.

"I don't want to do this, but the time has come for me to declare the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games closed," he said. China finished on top of the

medal table with 207, including 96 golds, followed by Britain, the United States and the Russian team.

Charismatic figures

Highlights included cycling legend Sarah Storey becoming Britain's most successful Paralympian with her 17th gold medal, 29 years after her first. Charismatic figures like Italian wheelchair fencer Beatrice "Bebe" Vio and German long jumper Markus Rehm wowed TV audiences.

And Japanese wheelchair tennis player Shingo Kunieda delighted the home crowd on the penultimate day by claiming one of his country's 13 gold medals. There were also impressive performances from Britain's wheelchair rugby team, who won their first ever gold, while badminton and taekwondo made their Paralympic debuts. The Games featured 163 delegations — one fewer than the London 2012 record, despite several teams withdrawing because

of pandemic difficulties.

The final day's action began with the early morning marathon events, with Swiss wheelchair master Marcel Hug defending his T54 crown. "Silver bullet" Hug opened up an early gap on the field, and moved away from silver medalist Zhang Yong over the last two uphill kilometers. "I don't know how to feel. I'm just tired. Empty," said Hug, who won the sixth Paralympic gold of his career in a time of 1hr 24min 2sec.

In the women's T54 marathon, Australian Madison de Rozario clung on to finish ahead of Swiss great Manuela Schaefer, winning the gold by just one second. "That was the longest 500 meters of my life," de Rozario told reporters after finishing in a Paralympic record of 1:38.11. "That finish line couldn't have come quick enough."

Organizers had urged local residents to stay home and watch the action on TV, but sweet shop owner Atsushi Nishimura told AFP in Tokyo's Asakusa district that he was glad he saw it live. "We could have enjoyed the Olympics and Paralympics differently if they weren't during a pandemic, but I think it was good for us that we could host the events," he said. — AFP



Record 86 teams won medals

Brilliant Verstappen storms to home Dutch Grand Prix triumph

ZANDVOORT: Home favorite Max Verstappen snatched the world championship lead from Lewis Hamilton yesterday as the Red Bull driver produced a scintillating performance to win the first Dutch Grand Prix since 1985. A week after the farcical washout in Belgium, pole-sitter Verstappen controlled the race from the start in bright sunshine at a circuit set in coastal sand dunes at the beach resort of Zandvoort.

His seventh win in 13 races this season turned a three-point deficit into a three-point lead over seven-time world champion Hamilton ahead of Monza next weekend. Hamilton came in second, setting the fastest lap on the final lap to earn a consolation bonus point, with Mercedes team-mate Valtteri Bottas a distant third.

"As you can hear already, it's just incredible," said Verstappen, roared on by some 70,000 orange-clad fans at a venue where the last winner was Niki

Lauda for McLaren 36 years ago. "Expectations were high going into the weekend. I'm so happy to win here. It's such an amazing day, the whole crowd, incredible."

Verstappen, who earned half points for his win over two laps behind the safety car at Spa last Sunday, pulled away on the opening lap here, keeping Hamilton in his rear-view mirror and surging clear. A narrow track with punishing deep gravel traps made overtaking difficult, prompting Mercedes to use varying strategies for Hamilton and Bottas to ramp up the pressure on Verstappen.

Hamilton pitted on lap 21, inducing Red Bull to immediately call Verstappen in and leaving Bottas briefly at the head of the field. Verstappen retook the lead as he burst past Bottas down the final straight on lap 31 to the sound of bellowing roars from the grandstand, but with the Finn having allowed Hamilton to eat

away at the gap to the Dutchman.

Verstappen delights home crowd

Hamilton again came in on lap 40 to switch to medium tires, needing to pick his way through traffic as he returned to the track. A nerveless Verstappen continued to frustrate his title rival who feared his tires wouldn't last to the finish.

As Verstappen cruised towards the line, igniting jubilant celebrations along the North Sea coast, Hamilton entered the pits for the third time in a successful last-ditch attempt at the quickest lap. On a day that began with Verstappen showing Dutch King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima around the Red Bull garage, Hamilton though simply had no answer to a regal display from the 23-year-old.

"Max did a great job, congratulations to him. I gave it everything, they were just too quick for us," said Hamilton, again frustrated in his bid to become the first man to win 100 Grands Prix. "They had that upper edge, and it's very hard to follow here. The last lap was one of the best parts of the race for me - single lap, low fuel. This is now one of my favorite tracks."



ZANDVOORT: Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (right) holds the winner's trophy as Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (left) applauds on the podium of the Zandvoort circuit after the Netherlands' Formula One Grand Prix in Zandvoort yesterday. — AFP

Pierre Gasly took fourth in his AlphaTauri ahead of Ferrari's Charles Leclerc. Fernando Alonso made up three places on the grid to finish sixth followed by Carlos Sainz in the second Ferrari.

Sergio Perez, who began the race in the pit lane after an engine change, came home eighth with Alpine's Esteban Ocon and Lando Norris of McLaren completing the top 10. — AFP