

# COMRADESHIP BRINGS POWER TO PARA ATHLETES

*A gold medalist for Germany in para athletics, Heinrich Popow now serves as a technical coach to the Japanese team for the Tokyo 2020 Games. With extensive experience and knowledge as a para athlete, he has been striving to support Japanese athletes for the event.*



At the World Para Athletics Championships held in Dubai in 2019, the Japanese long jump team delivered outstanding performances. Heinrich Popow—who won a gold medal in the 100-meter sprint at the London 2012 Games and another one in the long jump at the Rio 2016 Games—supported their success. As a technical adviser, he has been working alongside Japanese athletes as they aim for the Tokyo 2020 Games.

Popow had his left leg amputated above the knee as a result of osteosarcoma (a bone cancer) at the age of nine. A very sporty child, he began playing para-sports after the amputation, and achieved remarkable success, including breaking world records in both the long jump and 100-meter sprint. However, as an amputee, he was disheartened by the lack of prosthetic products available for sports use. That is why, after retiring in 2018, he became a qualified

prosthetist. He says, “I am always looking for ways to create an environment in which we can play sports without any worry about prosthetic products.”

Popow’s decision to accept the role of Japanese national team coach in 2019 was driven by his friendship with Japanese para athlete YAMAMOTO Atsushi. The 39-year-old Yamamoto won silver medals in the men’s long jump at both the Beijing 2008 Games and the Rio 2016 Games, and is going to compete in the upcoming the Tokyo 2020 Games as well. Popow says, “Atsushi and I shared our experiences as para athletes, giving advice to each other after competitions. Rather than rivals, we were fellow professional athletes. We both still have a responsibility to keep pushing the development of the Paralympic movement.” Since the COVID-19 pandemic prevented him from visiting Japan to coach players in person, Popow has continued to actively give the Japanese athletes technical advice

## HEINRICH POPOW

Born in Kazakhstan in 1983, Popow moved with his family to Germany at the age of seven. He competed in his first Paralympic Games in 2004 (Athens), and has since won two gold medals. He started working as a prosthetic limb manufacturer in 2007, and in recent years, began holding running clinics around the world.

by watching videos of their performances via the Internet and giving them feedback. Through those endeavors, he has been teaching the athletes to maintain their individual performance goals while helping each other out, just as he and Yamamoto have done. “Unlike any other team, the Japanese team is one in which everyone tries to support fellow team members who may be in trouble.”

Another mission Popow has committed to with passion is the running clinics he holds around the world. At those clinics, he teaches amputees how to run using sports prostheses. “Sports helped me to accept my disability and live positively. I want other people to have that experience.” Popow himself also often learns from the participants. “In Japan, people of all ages—even those in their 70s—actively participate in the clinics. Thanks to those older participants, I have come to realize that sport is open to everyone, regardless of age or ability.”

The Tokyo 2020 Games are fast approaching. While Popow has high hopes for his athletes and is looking forward to meeting them directly and supporting them in their competitions, he is also envious that they will experience the Games in their

home country. “Participating in the Olympics or Paralympics in your home country is a wonderful experience and they will go down in history.” Though the COVID-19 pandemic continues to threaten the world, limiting the freedom to take part in sports, Popow believes that sports are needed now more than ever. “Sports have immeasurable power, and during such difficult times, there is a profound significance in sharing joy and passion through them. I look forward to seeing that happen at the Tokyo 2020 Games.”



At a running clinic, Popow teaches people how to run using prosthetic legs. Most participants do not believe they are able to run at first, but after the clinics, they discover that they can.



Left: Popow adjusts prosthetic legs to fit the athletes’ bodies at a running clinic. “My job is to adjust the prosthesis to the muscle mass that changes with training, so that athletes can use their bodies to their maximum ability.”

Right: In order to spark an interest in prostheses, when visiting Japanese elementary schools, Popow tells the children to feel free to touch his own prosthesis.



Comradeship with YAMAMOTO Atsushi (left) encouraged Popow to start coaching the Japanese team. They continue their efforts to develop the Paralympic movement.