

Have you ever seen this sign before? It's the sign language for "Deaflympics." Have you ever heard of the Deaflympics? Most people here probably haven't. Don't worry; I was once in the same position. The Deaflympics is a sports event for people who are deaf or have difficulty hearing. Today, I'll share how I learned about the Deaflympics and how it has impacted me.

In April, I came across a beautiful poster displayed in my school corridor. It featured this message: "The Deaflympics, an international sporting event for deaf athletes, will be held in Japan for the first time in 2025." Not knowing the meaning of 'deaf,' I did not think much about it. About two months later, an email from a volunteer organization's website caught my attention. It was announcing an introductory course for sports volunteers for the Deaflympics. I love watching sports and have always been interested in volunteering for sporting events, so I signed up. That was when I first learned what 'deaf' and 'Deaflympics' meant.

Let me first introduce the Deaflympics. Even if you haven't heard of the Deaflympics, you're probably familiar with the Paralympics. The Deaflympics began in 1924, several decades before the Paralympics, which started in 1960. However, the Paralympics are held in conjunction with the Olympics, receiving extensive media coverage and public attention. The Paris 2024 Paralympics ended in September, and the memories might still be fresh. But many people might not recall the location or date of the last Deaflympics.

Returning to my story, I started my introductory course in June. I felt a mix of hopes and fears because I didn't know how to communicate with people who are deaf. The instructors included deaf volleyball athletes, the coach of the Japanese national team, and sign language interpreters. We learned about the history of the Deaflympics and the role of volunteers. All the information was new to me, and I was busy taking notes. I enjoyed talking with them by speaking more slowly and loudly. I was especially shocked when I heard how deaf volleyball players kept jobs, raised families, and engaged in rigorous training like Olympic athletes. They worked as engineers or doctors, and they were full of passion for their sport. The course made me realize that my previous sympathy had been rooted in pity—a denial of their equality. I had confused sympathy with kindness. Such a perspective overlooks the true abilities of people with disabilities and can lead to significant losses for our society. When people with diverse viewpoints and experiences collaborate, they can generate new ideas and innovative solutions. For example, Thomas Edison, known as the father of invention, was hard of hearing. Similarly, Vinton Cerf, known as the father of the Internet, also had hearing loss. The most important lesson I've learned from them is that having a disability does not limit one's potential.

Now, I've overcome my internal barriers regarding people with disabilities. I no longer feel nervous around them. Recently, I have been practicing international sign language once a month. It's challenging because it involves both facial expressions and body movements, but I'm determined to continue learning it just as I do with English. I'm planning to cheer for the event with my friends using visible cheering gear. I hope you'll find some of your favorites and join us in cheering for the Deaflympics in 2025.

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