But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

What’s it like to compete in the Olympics?

July 26, 2024

Jane 00:20
This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. This summer, some of the world's best athletes are meeting in Paris, France. They're going to compete for the chance to win a gold, silver or bronze medal and to push themselves to their physical limits. Have you heard of the Olympics? There are the Summer Olympics and the Winter Olympics. Each one happens every four years, but they're staggered so we get to watch one or the other every two years. 2024 is a Summer Olympics year and the day we're putting this episode out is the opening day of the Games. Whether you're interested in sports or not, you'll probably be hearing about the competitions as people all around the world turn their attention to running swimming, gymnastics and cycling and some competitions that you might not watch at all except during the Olympics, like skateboarding, breaking--or breakdancing--archery and badminton. In total, there are 32 Summer Olympic sports. There are eight Winter Olympic sports. Of course, there are a lot more competitions than that because even within a sport like skiing or swimming, there are a lot of different distances and competitions but 32 summer sports eight winter sports. Today we're going to celebrate the Olympics and Olympic athletes with an episode that pulls together some of the interviews we've done over the years with Olympians and answering some of the questions you've sent us, starting with: what's all the hype about winning a big piece of metal? And are those medals really made out of gold, silver and bronze?

Helaina 01:54
Hi, my name is Helaina. I'm 12 years old and I'm from St. Paul, Minnesota. My question is, what exactly are Olympic medals made out of?

Jane 02:06
You probably know that there are three medals that get awarded to the top finishers in a race or a game: gold for first place, silver for second place and bronze for third place. The Olympic medals are named for the metal they are made out of. And the silver and bronze medals are still made out of...you guessed it, silver and bronze. But a solid gold medal would be worth a lot of money and way too expensive to make as many as they would need for all the winners at the Olympics. The Olympic Committee says the gold medal is made out of silver, and it's covered with a thin layer of real gold. The medals themselves are slightly different size depending on whether you win gold or silver or bronze, but they weigh about a pound. The medals are usually round like a coin, but they get redesigned for every Olympic Games, usually by an artist from the country that's hosting the Games. Andrew Weibrecht is a skier who has won Olympic medals.

Andrew Weibrecht 03:08
I have two medals, so one is from the 2010 Vancouver games, which is a bronze medal. And so that's a little more brown. And that design of that mdal was kind of like a wavy, almost looks like a maybe like a Pringles potato chip or something like that. My second medal was a silver medal from Sochi.
Jane 03:27
That's the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

Andrew Weibrecht 03:30
And that is obviously silver. And that medal's design has a bit of crystal in the middle. So it's actually see through in part of it. They are not super shiny anymore, because I like to share them with everybody that wants to pick them up and hold them. So they've definitely taken a little bit of wear and tear. But you know, to me, it's more special that everybody gets to appreciate and hold an Olympic medal, not just people that win them. And that's more fun from my perspective. You know, probably the biggest surprise everybody has is how heavy they are. They each weigh a couple pounds. So when you pick them up, you're definitely surprised that how much heft there is to them.

Jane 04:07
Now the medals are worth some money, something like $750 to $850 or less for a gold medal. But athletes will tell you it's not the dollar amount that makes them valuable. It's all the hard work and tremendous achievement these medals represent. But did you know that most countries do actually reward athletes who win Olympic medals at the games with cash? If you're a US athlete who wins a medal, the US Olympic Committee will give you $37,500 for winning gold, $22,500 for silver and $15,000 if you take home a bronze. That might sound like a lot of money and it is, but it's less than many adults make in their jobs in the course of a year. And the Olympics only come around every four years. Now, some athletes can make enough money to support themselves just doing their sport by winning big competitions or being in advertisements or getting sponsors. But most Olympic athletes have other jobs that they do in addition to training for their sport. So they often have to be really passionate and love their sport and have to keep doing it while working and having other life obligations. And winning an Olympic medal represents something different to each athlete. We asked Olympian Elana Meyers Taylor what it felt like to her. She's won five Olympic medals: silver in 2022, 2018 and 2014, and bronze in 2022 and 2010. Her sport is bobsledding.

Elana Meyers Taylor 05:37
Winning a medal is the most incredible feeling I could ever imagine, aside from marrying my husband. It was such a cool moment to be on the podium and have a medal draped around your neck and knowing all the hard work and dedication everyone around you and yourself have put into this moment. It's truly incredible. And to do for your country is awesome.

Jane 06:00
Olympian Lea Davison competed in the 2012 and 2016 summer games in mountain biking, and told us it was an amazing experience.

Lea Davison 06:08
The Olympics is everything that it's cracked up to be and more. So it's it really is, I mean, it sounds cliche, but it is a dream come true. And everything about it is is just such an incredible experience from meeting different athletes in the village. You know, you never know who's going to walk in the elevator in the Team USA housing. It could be Michael Phelps, it could be Missy Franklin, anyone. Just from
having the support of you know, your entire hometown or the state of Vermont, and representing your country is really something that most people don't get to experience. And it's an it's an incredible thing.

06:50
So many kids want to be professional athletes. And you know, maybe it's "I want to be in the NBA" or "I want to be a professional baseball player," or "I want to go to the Olympics." And you kind of need that drive to make it happen. But there are also a lot of adults in our lives who are like, "Oh, that's a nice dream, honey, but, you know, why don't you set your sights on something that's more reasonable." But you've made it happen. So what's your advice to kids who, you know, at age five, or eight or 10 are saying, "No, this is what I think I want to do. And I want to be an athlete and I want to make it happen."

Lea Davison 07:23
Yeah, you can make it happen. You know, my advice to kids, I was that same kid with the dream of going to the Olympics. And when I was a kid, it was, I thought it was gonna happen with downhill ski racing. So it just takes a lot of hard work. You just need to work very hard, but you can set your mind to anything that you want to do.

07:47
Up next we'll chat with an athlete heading to Paris for the Paralympics this year.

BREAK 07:52
BREAK

07:53
I'm Jane Lindholm and this is But Why. Today we're learning more about the Olympics and hearing from some talented athletes who competed at the top of their sport in previous Olympic Games. But now we want to hear from someone heading to Paris for this year's games! Emelia Perry, who goes by Emi, is a member of the US Paralympic triathlon team. The Paralympics are a major multi-sport event for athletes with disabilities. They happen just after the Olympic Games and have been officially going since 1960. This is Emi's first time competing in the Olympics, but she is no stranger to sports competitions. Emi was born in the United States and moved to Osaka, Japan, in her early childhood, where she grew up fond of running. She competed in track in high school and cross country in college until she had a spinal cord injury in 2017 when she was 24. Emi's no longer able to use her legs. So she uses a wheelchair to get around. Making sure she could get back into sports was really important to her recovery after her injury.

Emi Perry 08:52
I went to Magee Rehab in Philadelphia, because I was living in Philly. And they have an adaptive sports program. So when I told them that I was a runner, they were like, "Oh, you should try wheelchair racing." And I was like, I don't really want it because I'm not planning to be in a wheelchair forever. But I guess I would try, kinda. They had a race chair that was just sitting in a garage that like fit me really good. So they were just like, take this chair and start pushing. And then they also helped me get my first race chair that was measured for me. So that's how I kind of got into it. I wouldn't say that I loved it the first year two that I was doing it, because I kept comparing to running and it just was so different
from running. But I felt like it was supposed to be the same. But after a while, I was like, okay, this is
different and it's okay to be different. And I met a lot of people by going to different races and I think
that's what really helped me to kind of enjoy the wheelchair racing.

09:54
Emi has always loved sports and even thought being a full time athlete would make for an interesting
lifestyle. But it wasn't a goal of hers to make the Olympic team until she watched the 2020 Tokyo
Paralympic Games.

Emi Perry 10:05
I feel like I always wanted....that full time athlete lifestyle sounded so nice. As an able bodied, like
running, I wasn't good enough to like, even close to that. So I feel like it wasn't my goal. It was it was
like, it'll be so nice, but like, I'm just not there yet, kind of. And after I got injured, some people would be
like, "Oh, are you gonna try to make it to the Games?" And I'm like, no, absolutely not. I'm not good
even close to that. So I feel like it wasn't my goal. It was it was
good enough to do that. Honestly, it wasn't until, like at the Tokyo Games, I watched the paratriathlon race.
And Lauren Parker from Australia, she was at the Games. And Lauren had her spinal cord injury like
two months before I did and she was already at the Games. And I feel like watching that was like, wow,
maybe like I could if I try really hard, maybe I could make it, too kind of moment.

10:54
To qualify for the Paralympics is no small feat. Athletes have to compete and place in competitions
around the world, just like their able bodied peers do.

Emi Perry 11:05
To qualify for the paratriathlon, it's like a one year window of qualification period. It started on July 1,
and then ended on June 30 this year. And it's a point system and the ranking is based off on points. So
different kind of races have different amount of points that you can get, but you have to finish within 20
or 25% of the first finisher to get any points. And also each country can only have two athletes per
category. So you have to be in like second in the nation and top nine in the Paralympic ranking.

11:41
Over the last year, Emi has been training in Colorado at the US Olympic and Paralympic Training
Center, surrounded by other Paralympic athletes. And she says the huge achievement of making it onto
the Olympic team didn't really sink in at first.

Emi Perry 11:54
Sadly, it wasn't as dramatic as I want it to be. Because like, by doing the math, I kind of knew that I was
going to make it but it just wasn't official. So I couldn't like be certain about it. I feel like it took me a
couple of days to really know what that meant, because I'm training with people who has been to
multiple Games and medaled in multiple Games and stuff. So I'm surrounded by people who like, you
know, going to the Games isn't maybe as special anymore, because they've done it before. So it didn't
feel like a big deal at first because everyone around me has also made it, too. But then I was thinking
back to seven years ago when I got hurt and how much support I got to get to this point from my family
and friends and like, you know, different organizations that like helped me get the equipment that I needed. And I was like, okay, this is kind of cool.

12:52
The triathlon consists of three events. That's why it's called a TRI-athlon. Swimming, bicycling and running. For athletes like Emi, who use a wheelchair, the running portion can be completed using a wheelchair or handcycle. Paralympians with other types of disabilities might use other adaptive techniques to complete the three events. Emi says it can be kind of scary to do some of the events in triathlon.

Emi Perry 13:15
For triathlon, when I'm swimming, I'm like freaking out. Because I'm not a good swimmer. So then I feel like the gap is opening or like, it's open water swim at the race. So I'm getting nervous that I'm going to the wrong direction or something. So I feel like I'm half panicking during the swim. And then I get onto the bike. And then depending on the course, some course is, like, very technical. And there's just a lot to think about, like how to take the turns and like be set without losing that much speed. So I kind of have to like focus a lot. And then I feel like when I lose focus is when I like, don't make a good turn, and I have to brake hard. And I have to like stop. And then on the run, it's because it's like my favorite part. I'm just like, trying to like, catch people, if I see anyone. I mean, during a race, it's so hard that I feel like I don't feel that empowered, like during the race. It's more like after I crossed the finish line and get my mind to get out like, okay, that was fun. Yeah.

14:16
Even when you're competing on your own, when you're part of a team, you draw a lot of support from the people around you.

Emi Perry 14:22
It's just my teammates are so great, they're funny. And they're great athletes too, but they're also just great people. I really like going into different road races because people who participate are always like so nice. For me, like, after having the injury and starting this and like starting to go to different races and like having that community was like really helpful to kind of move on from like, being stuck on like, I want to be able to walk again, so I'm just gonna do rehab stuff all the time to like okay, I should just enjoy my life as it is and see how it goes.

14:57
For Emi competing and triathlon is about more more than winning,

Emi Perry 15:01
It makes me feel like I'm able to do stuff. Because I feel like in everyday life as a wheelchair user, like, you know, you see steps and it's like, oh, I can't do it or like, you know, I have to go take the elevator instead. There's like a lot of stuff that you know, just can't do it. But then when it comes to like doing sports, like, you know, I could go 26 miles in my race chair, like I can do a triathlon. So it just makes me feel very like empowered in a way.
The paratriathlon races for the 2024 Paralympics are scheduled to take place on Sunday, September 1 and Monday, September 2. The paratriathletes will compete in a 750-meter swim, a 20-kilometer bike and a five-kilometer run on the same course as the Olympic triathlon. Though the paratriathlon is a little bit shorter. We asked Emi what advice she would give to young Paralympians.

**Emi Perry 15:55**
I would say like enjoy the process, because I feel like a lot of time like people get caught up on like the end result and they don't really think about the process that you're going through. And then I feel like that could be kind of miserable. Because if you don't get what you want, then the whole thing is like nothing. But I feel like if you focus on the process of getting there and get like a lot of things out of it in the meantime, and at the end, like you know, you make it to the Games great. Like if you get a medal that's really great, but I feel like you want to make sure your process is like fun and enjoyable and yeah, you're getting stuff out of it too. Because otherwise if you don't medal, if you don't make it to the Games, you feel kind of empty. I feel like.

After Emi has crossed the finish line, her go to post-meet treat is ice cream. Her absolute favorite flavor is vanilla and mint ice cream with Pop Rocks. It's made by Baskin Robbins in Japan.

**Juna 17:03**
My name is Juna and I am eight years old. My question is, who is the fastest runner in the world?

**17:11**
The fastest runner in the world is Usain Bolt. He's the fastest man who's ever been timed. He's a Jamaican sprinter, and he holds the world record for both the 100 and the 200-meter sprints. He has nine gold medals at the Olympics and 11 world championships. His record for the 100 meter sprint is 9.58 seconds. That is super fast. That's more than 23 miles an hour. How fast do you think you could run 100 meters? I'm gonna give it a shot and try it out right now. Let me get my timer out. I'm gonna run as fast as I can. I put my sneakers on. And we'll see how close I can come to Usain Bolt. On my mark, get set, go!

**Jane 18:21**
RUNNING SOUNDS FOR 23 SECONDS

**Jane 18:23**
23 seconds. Man, 23 seconds; Usain Bolt could have gone all the way to the end and back and started running out again in the time it took me to do just one 100-meter dash. Holy smokes that is fast.

**Jane 18:39**
So Usain Bolt is the fastest man alive. The fastest woman is Florence Griffith Joyner. She set the world record in the 100-meter dash for women at 10.48 seconds. And she set that record in 1988. But no one has beat it yet. Why don't you try running 100 meters yourself, see how fast you can do it. Tell us how you do. I bet you can run faster than me.
19:07
That's it for this episode. Let us know what Olympic sport you would want to compete in if you could be an Olympic athlete. And maybe someday you'll be one! Now, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record it. It's easy to do on a smartphone using an app like Voice Memos or Voice Recorder. Then your adults can email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. We can't answer every question we get, but we love hearing from you and knowing what's on your mind. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette, Kianna Haskin and me, Jane Lindholm. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We make the show at Vermont Public and we're distributed by PRX. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!