Can Tokyo's efficient rail system handle Olympic strain?

By Alex Barreira
The Associated Press

TOKYO — First, Tokyo Olympic fans will have to find scarce tickets and pay the price. Then there's the quandary of landing a hotel room with rates that are being inflated due to unprecedented demand. And the summer heat and humidity will be off-putting for some.

Then there's one more hurdle: getting around, or even finding a tiny space to stand on Tokyo's famously efficient but over-stressed rail system.

Japanese professor Azuma Taguchi at Chuo University has researched Tokyo's system for years and says it's already running at double its capacity and the Olympic crunch could push it to the breaking point.

"When peak capacity is twice or three times above normal, it's possible some people could be killed," Taguchi told The Associated Press.

His computer simulation predicts that the biggest wave of Olympic spectators will collide with work commuters at popular transfer stations during the morning rush hour, while small stations closest to venues will be overwhelmed.

Add to the mix, newcomers carrying luggage aboard subway cars and struggling to maneuver off the train and through crowded stations.

Tokyo transport officials characterize train cars at 200% capacity as giving passengers just enough space to read a magazine. This probably represents a normal commuting weekday in Tokyo.

At 250%, they "cannot even move a hand."

CROWDED CONDITIONS. *A train is seen travelling through the Shinjuku district of Tokyo in this file photo. One of many challenges that Tokyo Olympic fans will encounter next summer is getting around on Tokyo's famously efficient but over-stressed rail system. Organizers hope to bring the level of congestion on subway cars down. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)*

Taguchi's study predicts 15 stations will experience greater than 200% capacity, with several reaching nearly 400% at their peak.

Since Tokyo last hosted the Summer Olympics in 1964, railways have designated special *oshiya*, or "pushers," to pack commuters into rush hour cars — often wearing white gloves. Locals are accustomed to the treatment, but visitors may not be.

Tokyo's Olympic organizing committee question Taguchi's dire predictions. They acknowledge the railways will be packed with 800,000 added passengers daily. They also anticipate that Tokyo expressway congestion will double.

Hoping to head off the crowding, the committee wants to launch a smartphone app, boost multilingual signage, and use boats and robot-assisted technology to help fans and commuters get around. As with all Olympics, authorities are testing special highway lanes and altering the city's transit flow.

Concerns about transportation are nothing new at the Olympics, and crowds are often overestimated and subsequently managed, as was the case in London in 2012. Potential tourists sometimes stay away, knowing it's a bad time to visit with prices soaring. That happened in 2008 in Beijing and again three years ago in Rio de Janeiro.

"Living in Tokyo, we experience this 100%, 150%, 180% crowding every day. We know how to navigate the stations at these times," said Katsuhisa Saito, the head of transport strategy for Tokyo's organizers. "The main concern is when foreigners attend these events and use the stations. They might not know how to deal with this."

Organizers hope to bring the level of congestion in subway cars down to between 150% and 180%, a fairly pleasant day for Tokyo commuters. Also, perhaps, a lofty goal.

Taguchi and organizers agree on one thing: keeping Japanese workers at home during the Olympics could go a long way toward solving the problems.

Organizers are asking companies in Tokyo to encourage their employees to work from home during the Olympics, which open on July 24, 2020 and close on August 9. They say more than 2,000 companies have agreed to participate.

Tokyo University professor Katsuhiro Nishinari is working with the organizing committee, an expert in what he calls "jam-ology" — the study of crowd behavior.

"We're used to having one game per day at the stadium, but at the Olympics we have a tight schedule and we have three to four games in one day," he said. "We have to exchange the audience two or three times. That's where we don't have experience."

Another major challenge will be convincing a famously industrious workforce to avoid the commute — or the office altogether — for two weeks next summer.

"We're explaining to all the companies and the media, asking people not to work during those two weeks," Nishinari said. "Just enjoy the Olympics."

AP sources: Alibaba exec to buy Nets, arena for $3.4 billion

By Brian Mahoney
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — In a record sale for a U.S. sports franchise, the co-founder of Alibaba agreed to buy the remaining 51 percent of the Brooklyn Nets and Barclays Center for about $3.4 billion, two people with knowledge of the details said.

Joe Tsai already had purchased 49 percent of the team from Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov in 2018, with the option to become controlling owner in 2021.

Instead, he pushed up that timeline for full ownership of a team on the rise after signing superstars Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving in July.

Terms were not disclosed, but those familiar with the agreements told The Associated Press that Tsai is paying about $2.35 billion for the Nets and nearly $1 billion in a separate transaction for the arena. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the transactions are not complete.

The deal is expected to be finalized by the end of September and is subject to approval by the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Board of Governors.

It will surpass the $2.2 billion that Tilman Fertitta paid for the NBA's Houston Rockets, and that David Tepper spent for the National Football League's Carolina Panthers.

Tsai is the executive vice chairman of the Alibaba Group, the Chinese e-commerce giant. He already had purchased the Women's National Basketball Association's New York Liberty.

Prokhorov became the NBA's first non-North American owner in 2010 and oversaw the Nets' move from New Jersey to Brooklyn two years later. He spent big in the first couple years after the move in a quest to chase a championship, but the team soon became one of the worst in the NBA before rallying to return to the playoffs last season.

NET GAIN. *Joe Tsai, the co-founder of Alibaba and the owner of the New York Liberty, speaks to reporters during a news conference before a Women's National Basketball Association exhibition basketball game between the Liberty and China, in this May 9, 2019 file photo, in New York. In a record sale for a U.S. sports franchise, Tsai has agreed to buy the remaining 51 percent of the Brooklyn Nets and Barclays Center for about $3.4 billion, according to two people with knowledge of the details. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)*

"It has been an honor and a joy to open Barclays Center, bring the Nets to Brooklyn, and watch them grow strong roots in the community while cultivating global appeal," Prokhorov said in a statement. "The team is in a better place today than ever before and I know that Joe will build on that success, while continuing to deliver the guest experience at Barclays Center that our fans, employees, and colleagues in the industry enjoy."

Prokhorov had invested $200 million and made funding commitments to acquire 80 percent of the team and 45 percent of the arena project. He later bought the remainder of the arena, which quickly became a popular attraction for concerts, boxing, and college basketball, as well as the home of the New York Islanders.

Tsai, a native of Taiwan, is positioned to take full control of the team by the time the Nets head to China to play two exhibition games against the Los Angeles Lakers in October. That comes at the start of a season of renewed excitement for the Nets,

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