

MY TURN

■ Wayne Chan



A winter wonderland without the winter

The Winter Olympics have been an Olympian effort, if I ever saw one.

I'm not talking about the athletes, although their dedication to their chosen sports is, as always, a marvel to watch. And I'm not talking about any particular country winning a truckload of gold medals, either.

No, I'm talking about Beijing, the site of this year's WINTER Olympics.

I'm highlighting "WINTER" because this

is the first Winter Olympics in which the competitions took place in a city with virtually no snow. Nearly every venue, from snowboarding and the luge to Alpine skiing had manmade snow. Olympian effort, indeed!

Watching some of the coverage on television, it became immediately apparent to me. Just beyond the ski runs, when looking carefully at the backdrop, viewers didn't see the normal snow-lined fir trees. What one did see was low-lying brush and foliage, or as someone like me who lives in southern California might call, "my backyard."

From what I've read, Beijing receives, on average, one inch or more of annual snowfall compared to here. To be clear, "here" is San Diego, California — where the average amount of snowfall is zero.

That means the International Olympic Committee awarded the Winter Olympics to a city with relatively no snow. In other words, snow is no longer a requirement for a city to host the Winter Olympics.

I'm not trying to criticize China for hosting the Winter Olympics in a city with little snow. The Olympics brings a lot of prestige to a city, and if China is seen as successful, more power to them. And I don't mean to make light of the fact that

experts warn that future Winter Olympic games will undoubtedly face similar challenges due to climate change.

But this development does raise some intriguing possibilities. If one doesn't need real snow for the Winter Olympics, then it can really be held anywhere. Why not host the Winter Olympics right here in San Diego? I mean, we only receive one inch less of annual snowfall than Beijing, right?

Here's my 30-second elevator pitch for San Diego to host the Winter Olympics:

1) We can easily replace the giant slalom flags with palm trees. It'd be the perfect tropical winter wonderland!

2) We can save a lot of money on the curling venue by using a local gym and replacing the curling stones with Roomba vacuums — great competition and the end result is a clean gym. There's nothing like killing two birds with one Roomba.

3) Since running snow machines non-stop can get expensive, we can cut back on some of the less popular winter events and introduce some new ones. Take the biathlon, for example. This is the sport in which athletes ski until they're exhausted and then stop and shoot at targets with a rifle. Personally, unless your name is James Bond, I just don't see this as a very practical skill. We can still call it the biathlon, but instead of skiing and shooting, let's adapt it to something more relevant to San Diego. How about a timed event featuring rollerblading to the local taco stand and downing some fish tacos?

But there's one thing I won't sacrifice — we need to keep skiing as an event. The only question now is, snow ... or water?

Humor writer Wayne Chan lives in the San Diego area; cartoonist Wayne Chan is based in the Bay Area.



Is omicron leading us closer to herd immunity against COVID?

By Victoria Milko
AP Science Writer

Is omicron leading us closer to herd immunity against COVID-19?

Experts say it's not likely that the highly transmissible variant — or any other variant — will lead to herd immunity.

"Herd immunity is an elusive concept and doesn't apply to coronavirus," says Dr. Don Milton at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

Herd immunity is when enough of a population is immune to a virus that it's hard for the germ to spread to those who aren't protected by vaccination or a prior infection.

For example, herd immunity against measles requires about 95% of a community to be immune. Early hopes of herd immunity against the coronavirus faded for several reasons.

One is that antibodies developed from available vaccines or previous infection

dwindle with time. While vaccines offer strong protection against severe illness, waning antibodies mean it's still possible to get infected — even for those who are boosted.

Then there's the huge variation in vaccinations. In some low-income countries, less than 5% of the population is vaccinated. Rich countries are struggling with vaccine hesitancy. And young children still aren't eligible in many places.

As long as the virus spreads, it mutates — helping the virus survive and giving rise to new variants. Those mutants — such as omicron — can become better at evading the protection people have from vaccines or an earlier infection.

Populations are moving toward "herd resistance," where infections will continue, but people have enough protection that future spikes won't be as disruptive to society, Milton says.

Many scientists believe COVID-19 will eventually become like the flu and cause seasonal outbreaks but not huge surges.

How many times can I reuse my N95 mask?

By Emma H. Tobin
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — How many times can I reuse my N95 mask?

It depends, but you should be able to use N95s and KN95s a few times.

The U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention says healthcare workers can wear an N95 mask up to five times. But experts say how often the average person can safely wear one will vary depending on how it's used.

Using the same mask to run to the grocery store, for example, is very different than wearing it all day at work.

The amount of time a mask is worn is more important than how frequently it's worn, says Richard Flagan, who studies masks and aerosols at the California Institute of Technology.

In general, he recommends limiting the use of an N95 mask to about two or three days.

With every breath you take in an N95, particles accumulate on the mask, Flagan says. That could make it more difficult to breathe if the mask has trapped a lot of particles.

"They are degrading the performance of the mask," Flagan says.

The elastic band on the mask could also get worn out and not fit around your face as snugly. It might also get dirty or wet, especially if you're using it while exercising.

If you notice any of these changes to your mask, it's time to stop using it — even if you've only used it a few hours. And since N95 masks can't be washed, they should be thrown away once you can no longer use them.

Can you get long COVID after an infection with omicron?

By Laura Ungar
AP Science Writer

Can you get long COVID after an infection with omicron?

It's too early to know for sure, but many doctors believe it's possible to have long-term effects from the omicron variant of the virus.

Long COVID is usually diagnosed many weeks after a bout with COVID-19. Any long-lasting effects typically appear about 90 days after symptoms of the initial infection go away, Maria Van Kerkhove of the World Health Organization said.

Overall, some estimates suggest more than a third of COVID-19 survivors will develop some symptoms of long COVID. Symptoms include fatigue, brain fog, shortness of breath, anxiety, and other problems. The lingering illness is more likely if you've been hospitalized with COVID-19, but research shows it can happen even after a mild infection.

Omicron (B.1.1.529) began its race around the world late last year. The variant generally causes milder illness than the delta version (B.1.617.2) of the coronavirus, but has still overwhelmed

hospitals.

Van Kerkhove said she hasn't seen any research indicating that the portion of COVID-19 survivors who get long COVID will change with the omicron variant.

Dr. Linda Geng of Stanford University, who co-directs one of the many clinics specializing in long COVID, said that though she can't say for sure, a new wave of patients is likely.

"We have to be very cautious and very careful and prepared," Geng said.

In the meantime, scientists are racing to figure out what's behind the mysterious condition. Some theories? It may be an autoimmune disorder. Tiny microclots may be causing the disabling symptoms. Or perhaps latent viruses in the body have been reactivated.

Scientists are also looking at whether vaccines could be part of the answer. A Yale University team is studying the possibility that vaccination might reduce long COVID symptoms. And two other studies offer early evidence that being vaccinated before getting COVID-19 could help prevent the lingering illness or at least reduce its severity.

Vaccines are a natural and effective way to teach your body to protect itself.

Vaccines help your immune system do its job better and faster by teaching it how to identify and get rid of germs without having to get sick.

1 Vaccines are made from germs or parts of germs that have been weakened or are no longer alive.

2 Once these germs are introduced into your body, your immune system makes antibodies to fight them.

3 Our immune system cells remember the instructions for making antibodies and can recognize these germs in the future.

Sometimes, immunity to a germ may naturally begin to wear off.

A booster reminds the immune system how to make more antibodies.

4 Because your immune system now knows how to fight these germs, it can respond faster and more effectively than it would have been able to prior to vaccination.