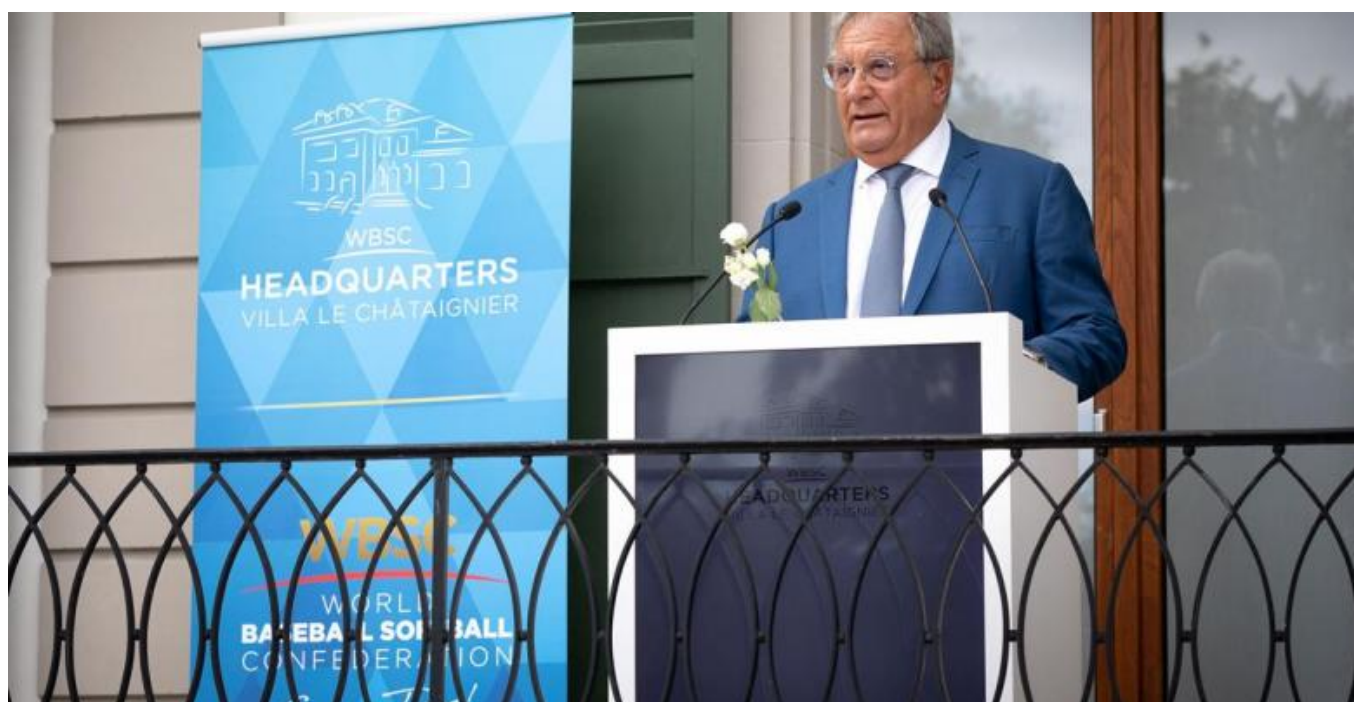


One year to go until baseball-softball's 'spectacular' Olympic comeback: WBSC President Riccardo Fraccari
op-ed

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In just under a year, baseball and softball will mark their spectacular Olympic comebacks at the Tokyo 2020 Games. And although the Olympic Games have been delayed by one year, there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about what the future holds for baseball and softball, in general and within the Olympic framework.

Our return to the Olympic stage will take place in one of baseball-softball's spiritual homes. Like in many countries across the world where our sport is the national sport, baseball is the 'king of content' in Japan. Our sport is number one in Japan and as we saw during the 2019 WBSC Premier12, our hosts know how to put on a thrilling contest. We can expect nothing less in 12 months' time.

In addition to the electric atmosphere that we have grown accustomed to in Japan, softball has been awarded the privilege of opening the

Games, with women's softball scheduled to start on 21 July 2021, two days prior to the Tokyo 2020 Opening Ceremony.

Not only will we be the first of 339 Olympic events at Tokyo 2020, our first Olympic game since Beijing 2008 will take place at the Fukushima Azuma Baseball Stadium. It is a privilege for our sport to have been chosen by the IOC and Tokyo 2020 to play a supporting role in the recovery of the region and its people, and one which we assume with great pride. In total, six softball and one baseball games will be held in Fukushima and we will do everything we can to ensure that they shine the best light possible on Fukushima's transformation, as well as how the Olympic Games are now more than ever a universal symbol of hope and solidarity for humanity.

As I stated to IOC President Bach when we opened our new global headquarters earlier this month, our ambition at the world level is to become a permanent sport on the Olympic programme.

But our decision to establish our headquarters in Pully at the heart of the Olympic Movement is also a demonstration that we are not only seeking to participate at Olympic events. The WBSC is determined to be making sustained and substantial contributions to the long-term health of the Olympic Movement.

Baseball's accessibility and inclusivity are examples of the positive contributions our sport can make to the Movement. Our newest discipline will be the first Olympic team sport to feature mixed-gender teams, when it makes its debut at the Youth Olympic Games in Dakar, helping to build on the IOC's commitment to promoting gender equality across all of its events.

And for more than a century, our sport has allowed children, and particularly young girls, to play and stay in sport. The youth appeal of our sport is something the WBSC has capitalised on with our competitions starting at the U-12 level for both boys and girls. One year ago, in Taiwan, I had the privilege of opening the Tainan Asia-Pacific International Baseball Stadium and Training Centres — a first-of-its-kind elite baseball facility designed specifically to host our U-12 Baseball World Cup and target youth athletes aged 12 and under.

Our focus on youth, and the successes it has brought, is bringing us closer to reaching our vision of a billion-strong global baseball-softball community. One billion men, women and children of all ages connected through their love of baseball-softball.

My personal hope and the WBSC's ambition, as we mark one-year-to-go until Tokyo 2020, is that our community's passion for sport will continue to strengthen the Olympic Games, its values and its wonderful family for many years to come, as we look to the IOC and the Olympic Games -- the most important sporting platform on earth -- for inspiration, now more than ever.
