
US wrestlers compete in Cuba despite frayed relations

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Two dozen athletes from the U.S. flew to Cuba despite rising tensions between the countries to participate in the island's most important Greco-Roman and freestyle annual wrestling competition.

The athletes came from states including New York, Minnesota and Wyoming and included several Olympians.

"We're down here to compete in one of the greatest sports in the world," said Robby Smith, a 2016 Olympian from Danville, California.

He said he was too focused on the sport to think about political issues. "When it comes down to it — sports — it gets rid of all that. It's a peaceful thing. It's not political."

The visit comes several months after the U.S. government imposed major restrictions on educational and recreational travel to Cuba as President Donald Trump continues to roll back Obama-era efforts to restore normal relations.

Luis Alberto Orta, a Cuban wrestler in the 130-pound (60-kilogram) category, brushed aside those issues.

"It's essential that athletes from all countries be able to fraternize with us," he said.

A total of 14 countries are participating in the Granma Cup and Cerro Pelado competition in

Havana, among them Canada, Honduras, Argentina and Hungary. The Granma Cup hosts Greco-Roman wrestlers and takes place Monday and Tuesday. The Cerro Pelado is for freestyle wrestlers and is scheduled for Feb. 15-16.

Manuel Rodríguez, a member of Cuba's National Wrestling Commission, said it is the event's 53rd edition.

"Trump can have those policies, but we are always going to receive all those athletes who want to come and compete with us," he said.

The American athletes are visiting at the same time as Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York. Dolan was invited by Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel and has said he seeks to build bridges between the people of both countries.
