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Judo Came to Cuba in the Hands of Love

By: Victor Joaquín Ortega / Special for CubaSi  
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In the book *Efemérides Deportivas* (Editorial Deportes, 2018), by Mario Torres de Diego, it's read that on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1951: "he arrived in Havana, to stay permanently, after marrying a Cuban, the Finnish raised in Belgium and experienced teacher André Kolychkin Thompson, who is widely known for having introduced judo in Cuba and trained hundreds of young people in this martial art in which they reach the eighth degree".

Well, this sport arrived in Cuba in the hands of love. This is how a new love began to grow, strengthened when sport became a people's right, especially after February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1961 with the birth of the National Institute of Physical Education, Sport and Recreation (INDER), emerged from the bowels of the General Directorate of Sports, preamble to the great leap of the athletic movement made official on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1959 by Law 638.

The freedom that brought this and even more essential advances possible did not fall from the sky from the hands of little angels. It was brought by the triumph of the necessary violence of those in power over the least protected by criminal gangs.

Among those who fought for that fair victory was a second degree black belt: José Ramón Rodríguez López (Havana, 8-17-1937 / Havana, 8-11-1957) leader of the action and sabotage of July 26 Movement in Vedado, with actions in other territories and great influence within the student body. A student studying Architecture at the University of Havana, El Temerario, as they called him, used his athletic abilities to confront the henchmen, and transferred them to his companions so that they could do the same. Several police officers shot him to death.

Judokas who start their learning; school, youth, Central American national, Pan American, Olympic champions; instructors... almost all of you wear the kimono and come to the tatami for human beings like

José Ramón: without that battle, discriminatory slaps would prevail against the social origin, the minor power of the pocket, the color of the skin, the territory of residence, the sex...

With so much of Africa in his skin and blood, in that brothel society, could Ronaldo Veitía from Cotorro have been inducted into the International Judo Hall of Fame and become the most outstanding Cuban trainer in the history of the martial art created by the Japanese Jigoro Kano, and one of the greats of the time? For similar reasons, could Héctor Rodríguez from Guanajay be the first Latin American Olympic holder of the discipline, by winning the 63 kg division in Montreal 1976?

Our girls at their best were the team in the world among women, achievement of the "sculptor" Veitía. And his guidance created Idalys Ortiz, from Artemisa-Pinar del Río, the first figure of this sport in her homeland, above her even being the most awarded. She is one of the brightest Cuban athletes of all times.

The Olympic champions shine: Idalys, Odalis Revé, Driulis González, Legna Verdecia, and Sibelis Veranes. Oh Driulis, of course how could we forget about them, including her own...! Lights from Daima Beltrán, Yanet Bermoy, Estela Rodríguez, Amarilis Savón, Yurisel Laborde, Yurisleidis Lupetey.

They all gave their best in training and fighting, but if they did not count, as they did, with the adequate support of their people and the sports movement, their promotion would be very difficult, and even impossible in the worst case scenario.

Torres de Diego says in his book: "(Kolychkin) has presided over the Judo Technical Commission since the beginning of 1959. He is a creditor of a doctorate in Sciences from the Victoria de Girón Institute of Medical Sciences, where he inaugurated in 1999 an honorary chair that bears his name. He died in Cuba, a country to which he dedicated the best of his life and his sport, at eighty-four years old". The jewel that André brought to Cuba, thanks to the love of a couple, would shine because a supreme love came into her power and enriched her.

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