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## Cuba, the Island of Olympic Champions

By: Salim Lamrani

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Since the advent of the Revolution in 1959, Cuba has made the development of sport a national priority, becoming a global reference.

Before 1959, Cuba had a modest record of five Olympic medals, including four gold, won in Paris in 1900, in Saint Louis in 1904 and in London in 1948. At that time, sport was far from being a government priority and the few infrastructures present on the island were focused mainly in the capital and reserved for the bourgeoisie. The vast majority of the population was thus excluded from any access to sporting practice.

With the arrival of Fidel Castro to power, the revolutionary government adopted a national policy of social inclusion, universalizing access to education, health, culture, recreation and sports. In 1961, the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER for its acronym in Spanish) was founded and a programme for the development of sport was launched at a national scale, with a policy of finding the best talents. Public and free infrastructures were built, accessible to all, throughout the national territory and physical education was taught in every school establishment in the same way as any other subject. Sport then became a right of the people and ceased to be a privilege reserved for a minority.

In 1962, Cuba made the political decision in the Olympic spirit by banning professional sport, which was festered by money, and achieved spectacular results. After the modest results of the 1964 Tokyo Games (1 silver medal) and the 1968 Mexico Games (4 silver medals), the Caribbean island reaped the rewards of its commitment with 8 medals in Munich in 1972 (3 gold, 1 silver and 4 bronze), 13 medals in Montreal in 1976 (6 gold, 4 silver and 3 bronze) and 20 medals in Moscow in 1980 (8 gold, 7 silver and 5 bronze).

Cuba did not participate in the 1984 Games in Los Angeles or in Seoul in 1988 for political reasons. After a twelve-year absence, the island triumphed at the Barcelona Games in 1992. Despite the serious difficulties caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, it won a total of 31 medals, 14 gold, 6 silver and 11 bronze, and reached fifth place in the world, just behind the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the United States, Germany and China.

In 1996, at the Atlanta Games, Cuba, hit hard by the disappearance of its historic Soviet partner and the tightening of Washington's economic sanctions, maintained its momentum and achieved remarkable results, despite the "Economic Shortage in times of peace." With a total of 25 medals, including 9 gold, 8 silver and 8 bronze, the small island reached eighth place in the world, behind the United States, Russia, Germany, China, France, Italy and Australia.

The Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Games were also great successes for Cuba with 29 medals (11 gold, 11 silver and 7 bronze) and 27 medals (9 gold, 7 silver and 11 bronze) respectively. At the Beijing 2008 Games, Cuba won 30 medals (3 gold, 10 silver and 17 bronze) and 15 medals (5 gold, 3 silver and 7 bronze) at the London 2012 Games. Finally, for the Rio 2016 Games, the island won 11 medals (5 gold, 2 silver and 4 bronze), while its balance for the Tokyo 2020 Games was 15 medals (7 gold, 3 silver and 5 bronze) and a remarkable 14th place.

Cuba, first Latin American country in Olympic medals

Thus, for the period from 1896-2021, Cuba ranked first in Latin America with a total of 235 medals, including 84 gold, 69 silver and 82 bronze. The island has no rival on the continent. Indeed, Brazil, a demographic giant of more than 200 million inhabitants, ranks second with 150 medals. Argentina ranks third with 77 medals. Mexico is fourth with 73 medals and Colombia ranks fifth with 34 medals. In terms of the number of Olympic gold medals won per capita, Cuba, with a population of 11 million inhabitants, ranks first in the world.

Boxing is the king sport in Cuba with no less than 78 Olympic medals, including 41 gold, 19 silver and 18 bronze. Legends Teofilo Stevenson and Felix Savon wrote the history of the noble art, both being three-time Olympic champions. Above all, they left their mark by having rejected astronomical amounts of several million dollars to go professional. Stevenson received an offer of five million dollars in exchange for a fight against Mohamed Ali, but he preferred to remain faithful to the "affection of his people." During his historic visit to Cuba in 1991 just after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela, a great boxing fan, asked Fidel Castro for a meeting with Stevenson, one of his favorite boxers. Felix Savon, as for him, was asked by the famous promoter Don King for a fight against Mike Tyson, then at the top of his game, for 10 million dollars. His answer was identical: "I will never exchange the love and affection of my people for all the millions in the world."

Athletics has brought Cuba 50 Olympic medals, including 11 gold, 14 silver and 20 bronze. Wrestling and judo are the third and fourth Olympic sports on the island, with 27 medals (11 gold, 6 silver and 10 bronze) and 37 medals (6 gold, 15 silver and 16 bronze) respectively. Mijain López, a legend of Greco-Roman wrestling, has won five Olympic gold medals.

For the 2024 Paris Games, Cuba is presenting a modest delegation of 61 athletes (27 women and 34 men). It's true that the flight of athletes requested by other countries with significant resources has greatly harmed the island, which is currently facing one of the most serious economic crises in its history, mainly due to the state of siege imposed by the United States. Indeed, no less than 21 Cubans born and raised on the island will defend the colors of 14 other flags (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, the United States, Canada, Turkey, Chile, Puerto Rico, Azerbaijan, Poland, Brazil, Belgium, CIO). But Cuba, the island of Olympic champions, adapted to adversity and which has made resilience a feature of its identity, as usual, proudly defend the colors of its flag and its people.

\*PhD in Iberian and Latin American Studies from the Sorbonne University, Salim Lamrani is a professor of Latin American History at the University of La Réunion and is specialized in relations between Cuba and the United States.

**Translated by Amikal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff**

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