
Cuba's Olympic Games

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSi

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This small island has filled the world with athletes and coaches. The reasons are diverse, but the first condition for which they are welcomed in other nations and teams is that they are good; that is, that revolutionary sport—as they say, putting the word in quotation marks, with childish rage—trains excellent athletes. Sometimes there is also a simple and understandable reason: no one has told me, but Yasmani Acosta would not have been able to represent his country, because he had the misfortune of being born and competing in the era of Mijain López. In Chile, he is the star. Nor would Loren Alonso, who now wears the Azerbaijan jersey, have been able to make it to the Olympics, because “La Sombra” La Cruz, whom he defeated (that is sport) *“is the best of all time,”* as he admits. Today, for some, there seem to be no ties: loyalty is for the best or juiciest offer. But the “leap” hurts more when the person who leaves is the first figure of a sport, the person in whom his country placed its hope, after years of effort and invested resources. Sometimes the reason is money, even if it is translated as “a better life.” Judoka María Celia Laborde, who is part of the American

team, confesses it without shame: *“In Cuba, we do not have so many things,”* she explained to USA Today. *“Even if you are a world champion or an Olympic champion, there are problems with everything: food, medicine, the basic things that athletes need. I said to myself: Well, maybe if I compete for another country, I can have a better life. And also, I will be able to help my family,”* she added.

The explanation is horrifying —let’s ignore for now “the detail” that she claimed citizenship of the country that causes these shortages in hers, with a ruthless blockade—, because it forces me to look closely at my own people, those who despite everything, stay here to represent their country, and receive the love and admiration of their own. Leuris Pupo, for example, who has participated in seven Olympic Games and was Olympic champion in London 2012 and runner-up in Tokyo 2020 (2021), has had to train most of the time with pistols without bullets. Each of our athletes shares the daily hardship that we all suffer, the same ones that our doctors, scientists, engineers, teachers, technicians, intellectuals from the most diverse spheres endure...They are the ones that we could classify as VIPs in our society, even if they do not display thick gold chains around their necks. Yes, Bayer pays a lot more than the CIGB, or the Finlay Institute, but could we have created three effective vaccines to save thousands of people from Covid-19, if our scientists had opted for “a better life”?

This Olympics, like all others, has revealed or confirmed the existence of great champions, but time will sum it up in one name: Mijain López, the only athlete in the history of the Olympic Games to have won five consecutive Olympic titles in the same individual sport specialty. His last gold medal brought with it another feat, that of being the oldest wrestler in history to achieve it, at almost 42 years old. I had the privilege of being part of the Cuban civil society delegation that attended the People's Summit in Lima in 2018. At that time, he was "barely" a three-time Olympic champion. One day, while we were having breakfast at the hotel, he confessed to us that the physical pain never left him.

When he became a four-time champion, he thought about retiring, but no one could beat him and they convinced him to continue to Paris. He

fought against time, against weight, against pain. Anyone could have doubted, many did, but he did not. Cuba had bet everything on its fifth gold medal, and yet, would anyone have dared to say that silver or bronze meant defeat? That big, fearsome-looking man is a noble man who never went overboard in victory, nor humiliated his opponent. Yasmani, on the Chilean side, received his advice as if he were still on his own. With all the solemnity of which a Cuban is capable, he left his shoes in the center of the mat, a tribute to Paris, which had witnessed and supported his last fight. As he left the arena, he was escorted, on one side, by his current coach Raúl Trujillo, only small in size, who cried like a child; on the other, by Héctor Milián, the first Cuban Olympic champion in Greco-Roman wrestling in Barcelona 1992.

What can Cuba give him in return? Mijain comes from Herradura, a town in Pinar del Río. He is an idol there, in his province, and in the entire country. The Yara movie theater in Havana was filled with young people who enjoyed his victory on the big screen. Wherever he appears, he will receive the affection of his people, those who followed his career, those who trusted he would win. No one will question whether he lives better, because he deserves it. He will not be rich, in the way a “winner” is conceived in the culture of having, but he will have “a good life,” according to other parameters. This is Cuba’s first gold medal in this Olympiad, but it is the decisive one, the one that declares us winners. Hopefully others will come, but if Mijain did his job, we did. This is Mijain’s Olympiad, Cuba’s.

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