
Para-Dreams Come True

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSi

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Cuban para-athletes are beings of light. They laugh, joke, and enjoy every sporting challenge. They have come to Paris to give their best, to deliver their best marks, even if they do not always reach the podium. A conventional high-performance athlete may believe that his triumphs depend only on him and his coach, he may imagine that he owes nothing to society. This is not the case with para-athletes. Their lives were marked by an impediment, and sport, more than a stage for competition, is a path to self-realization. The rescue of their lives by the society in which they live is not greater, but it's more visible.

These days they have infected us with their joy, in the great and small wins. Noraivis de las Heras, a medallist in shot put and disc throwing in previous Paralympics (2004 and 2016), arrived in Paris this time about to turn 60 and took home an eighth place and the Olympic Diploma, with her best mark of the year. She does not hesitate:

"Staying among the best for so long is also a sign of my effort and that of my coaches, for which I'm very grateful, as I am to Fidel for this beautiful work that allowed us to succeed in sport and in life." With a very short career, of just one year, Lidia Montes de Oca, a social worker from the Santiago de Cuba municipality of Segundo Frente, and a taekwondo paraathlete, is enjoying her fifth place. Although she lost, she did not give in easily. Her opponent's coach admitted that he had to change his strategy in the face of the Cuban's combativeness, and his pupil, to make a maximum effort. "For me, being here is already a medal," she declared. In swimming (S6), Leonardo Pérez, Rio Paralympic champion in the 100 metres and bronze in the 400, was unable to do so this time, and finished seventh. "These Paralympic events are a great sporting celebration," he said, "all of us who are in this movement dream of being present, these are my fourth games, which will be the last in swimming." Then he surprised his interviewers: "I am thinking of going to Athletics, in the throwing sports."

Eight days before his competition, Ulicer Aguilera suffered a torn muscle in his left leg. Doctors and his will made it possible for him to participate. And he won the bronze medal in javelin, with the best throw of his life. "I didn't care about the consequences, if I had to go to Havana in a wheelchair I would do it, but I had to compete for that people who were waiting for him and always thank him," he said afterwards. In the Paralympic weightlifting, Pablo Ramírez won the silver medal. "I'm very satisfied with the work we have done to get to this moment. There was a lot of pain and sweat to get this result." He then thanked his coach, the Cuban people, and Fidel "who left the

legacy of sport in Cuba.” I will only mention a few names of those who, although couldn’t climb to the top of the podium, fought hard with their bodies and minds to get the most precious medal, always with two sides: self-recognition, which is usually accompanied by the recognition of the people.

But I must also talk about the gold medalists. Yunier Fernández, for example, a table tennis player, who persisted again and again and in his third Paralympic Games conquered the top. “Give me my flag, damn it,” he exclaimed when he felt victory in his veins. “This medal is also Rieldis,” he said, referring to his coach, and added: “I think of the Cuban Revolution that has allowed me to represent my country, and thanks to Fidel I have fulfilled a dream.” Guillermo Varona had won the world title in javelin throwing (F46) this year and in these, his first Paralympic Games, he surpassed the current record holder in his specialty to run off with the gold medal.

Robiel Yanquiel Sol Cervantes, who holds the Paralympic world record in long jump (T47), revalidated the title he won in Tokyo. At 21 years old, he dreams of more, he sees no limits; if he doesn’t see them, there aren’t any. He wants to jump over eight meters: “I don’t see it as a barrier, but as a mark that can be surpassed at any time. (...) The future goals are to continue reaping successes, to improve myself every day and to try to go as far as possible in terms of titles and marks.” But humility is part of his greatness, and he knows who he is, what Omara Durand represents. That’s why she declared, with admiration: “Carrying the flag alongside this phenomenal athlete is a great pride, I have always dreamed of this.” Of the six gold medals that Cuba won, Omara contributed three, to complete eleven for life. A photo defines her: her head held high, her beautiful face contorted by tears, the medal on her chest. “Our tears are of emotion, of joy, of nostalgia, because it’s what we’ve done all our lives, but we are going to take other paths and surely life will reward us the same,” she said minutes later.

In February 2018, I included Omara Durand in a survey for outstanding young people from different professions that was published on Cuba Socialista magazine. At 25 years old she was already a multi-champion, but her career was as young as she was. Now that she is retiring from active sport, and she’s a legend, I reproduce fragments of that conversation:

Do you think that your generation is depoliticized? Has the concept of enemy become blurred in the political imagination of youth?

My generation is not depoliticized, at least not completely. I think that some of us are very clear, sure and prepared and we show it when we have to give an immediate answer. Each one of us, from our positions, defends the Homeland in the best way possible.

Although there’s a political attempt to improve relations with the United States, we young people are also clear about what that country has meant for Cuba throughout history and what we still have to do today to survive, advance and move forward despite the abuses of the blockade imposed for so many years, without caring about the consequences that this economic siege brought with it.

How do you perceive the interrelation between socialism and patriotism?

I belong to a part of the youth that’s well located in the historical moment it lives. Patriotism and socialism cannot be separated, they are closely related. We support socialism and we love our socialist homeland. If we feel what patriotism is, and we embrace it, then we are already doing socialism.

How do you see the so-called “historical generation? What legacy does the life and work of men like Che and Fidel leave in you?

Great men like Fidel and Che belong to that generation, who are examples to follow for all the people of Cuba, Latin America and the world. From my position as a Cuban Paralympic athlete, I will always defend their achievements, their ideals and their principles, which I also make my own, representing my country with dignity, saying no to dirty tricks, no to doping and no to any scourge that wants to convince me not to represent with dignity at some point the Bayamo anthem, the lone star flag, the shield of the royal palm tree, the people of Cuba. Furthermore, I’m proud to honor the ideals of these two men who made it possible for me and all Cuban Paralympic athletes to have the opportunity to be what we are without being looked down upon or criticized, or discriminated against by society.

The questions transcended the sporting sphere, they delved into her status as a citizen, but she did not avoid any of them: her answers were clear and strong, like her smile of a full woman. In a different society — proud of its

differences — that has to overcome great obstacles, our Olympic athletes also represent us: they embody resilience, the will to win, and victory.

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