

Cuba Qualifies for Semifinals

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Cuba got an emotional victory over Mexico, 25-17, 19-25, 10-25, 25-17, 18-16 on Wednesday to qualify for the semifinals of the NORCECA Boys' U19 Continental Championship at the Cox Business Center.

With the victory, Cuba improved to 3-0 and will advance straight to Friday's semifinals. Mexico (2-1) will play in Thursday's quarterfinals against Nicaragua (0-2).

After winning the first set, 25-17, Cuba's mistakes started to catch up with it and it fell in the next two sets before winning the fourth. In the match, Mexico scored 41 points on Cuba errors while committing 21. Cuba led in kills (52-40) and blocks (16-9) while Mexico led in aces (10-8).

In the fifth set, the teams were tied 4-4 when Cuba's attack went out of bounds. Mexico scored on a block, then scored the next three points on two Cuba errors and an ace from Ridl Garay. Cuba did not give up and with Mexico leading 10-6, it served into the net. Cuba's Ismel Palayo took the serve and served for four more points, including an ace, to put Cuba ahead 11-10. With the score tied 11-11, Cuba was given a red card for its emotional reaction to a lost point. Mexico was awarded a point.

The teams traded points. Cuba reached match points first at 15-14 on a block by Luis Barrete and Javiel de Oca; but Mexico got a kill from Bruno Cruz. Mexico took its first match point at 16-15 on a block, but Cuba scored on a kill from Miguel Gutierrez. Cuba scored its final two points on kills by Palayo to take the win.

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"It was a very intense game. The whole game was tight and long," Cuba Team Captain Daikel Fernandez said. "At the beginning, we did not play that good. But then we came back way better in the second and third sets."

Cuba's Gutierrez led all scorers with 24 points on a match-high 21 kills and three blocks. Pelayo added 20 points on 16 attacks, one block and three aces. Rodolfo Rodriguez totaled 16 points on eight attacks, a match-high six blocks and two aces.

Garay led Mexico with 17 points on 10 attacks, one block and a match-high six aces. Bruno Cruz added 13 points on 13 attacks.

Quotes:

Cuba Captain Daikel Fernandez: "It was a very intense game. The whole game was tight and long. At the beginning, we did not play that good. But then we came back way better in the second and third sets. Mexico is very intense in every aspect of the game, especially the blocks. But thank goodness we came back and won."

Cuba Coach Roberto Garcia Garci: "I was expecting the win. But today, we had many mistakes. After tomorrow, it is a new competition. Whether we play the United States or Puerto Rico, we need to make fewer mistakes. Thankfully, we could recover the mental part during the match and I'm thankful that we won."

Mexico Captain Ridl Garay: "We played as we were supposed to play. We played well but it was a tough game. I didn't feel pressure, but I was very excited to play against Cuba because I knew it would be a good game."

Mexico Coach Gabriela Alarcon: "The game overall was really good. I'm not happy that we lost. But it was a really close game. We are already getting ready for the next game against Nicaragua. We will keep positive. We hope to at least qualify for the semifinal."
