

Sport in cuba: since revolution to modern days

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



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Cuba has been recognized by Western scholars for its proficiency in sport, both elite and participatory, despite its small population and limited resources. Cuba's initial change in sporting policy started almost immediately after the political revolution. In January 1959 there was a communist revolution when Fidel Castro overthrown the in-leader Fulgencio Batista. The pre-revolutionary Cuban government did not provide any public support for physical activity with no monies were available and with few coaches and trainers to help Cuban athletes'. Following the Revolution, the US imposed its trade embargo against Cuba. In sport, Cuba almost immediately looked to turn away from paid professionalism as a reflection of the new government's Marxist imperative pushing away from the class system in Cuban sport and as a mechanism of resistance against the American imperialism and zealous individualism. Amateur sports were almost exclusively the domain of the privileged classes. Boxing and baseball were the primary activities of people who played sport. In the years leading up to the Revolution, Cuba had seen some of its top professional athletes leave for the US, which was a massive blow to nationalists as sport was used as forum for national pride. Cuba then turned to the U. S. S. R. as a lifeline for resources, energy and military equipment and to be their closest ally as trade embargos enforces by the US isolated them.

In February 1961, the government established the Institute for Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) and made success in sports competitions. The Cuban sports system has been built up since 1959 is indeed impressive, and it is comprehensive in both mass and elite participation. Competition, success and reward are part of the picture in

Cuba, but INDER's incentives are all lodged within the existing, and developing, structural fabric of Cuban society. The principal ideological commitment of the new Cuban state is to guarantee that every Cuban has access to and have the right to participate in sport as a part of their all-round development and it should be 'right of the people.' Mass participation emphasised all-round education, and the ideological example of its top athletes and later in 1976 it was stated in the constitution that all citizens have access to sports activities.

The Cuban government arguably encourages a more holistic approach to development through sport and INDER balanced two principle tasks of encouraging popular participation in sport, while retaining elite performance. Castro's new government also 'targeted youth as the major instigator of change and expended substantial resources to create a proper "youth consciousness" as the regime's difficulties with drugs, theft, apathy, truancy and defiance among young Cubans continued apace. Cuba's sport programmes for young people are largely based on participation first, but within the hundreds of programmes there are chances for young athletes to be screened and selected for elite training.

Athletes enroute to elite performance have access to top training facilities, but so do others who are not in elite programmes. Cuba has thus emphasized sport not as a tool for development but as a key pillar to its own social development strategies since the 1960s. INDER organised a wide range of community-based youth sport programs in both recreational and competitive fields. Priorities have resulted in estimates that over 90 percent

of Cubans have participated in some form of sport or community-based recreation.

Since the mid-1990s the collapse the Soviet Union in the early 1990s triggered an economic downturn where there was an 85% loss in trade meaning extensive and expensive sports program, could no longer flourish. Cuba was compelled to rely on the charity of other countries, for example Italian government paid the expenses of the Cuban baseball team at the 1996 Barcelona Olympics. Consequently, the government opted to abandon its fundamental revolutionary goals of creating a sports society in which everyone could participate and the talented would move on to better training opportunities were discarded for a new objective of marketing but maintained at least some of the training facilities it had established for the island's best, international-calibre athletes.

To combat this in November 1992, the Cuban government created Cubadeportes to market the sale of athletes, coaches, sporting goods — even baseball cards — internationally. Cubadeportes, the government agency tasked with promoting — and selling — Cuban coaches and athletes around the world. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cubadeportes, INDER's forprofit wing, sold sporting equipment to other Eastern bloc countries. Today, Cubadeportes works with INDER to arrange contracts of Cuban coaches traveling to other nations to train elite-performance athletes. The idea behind these exchanges is that the hard currency gained abroad fund the development of sport programs within Cuba at both the elite and the recreational level 80% of it would go directly to the Cuban government.

Twenty of the countries participating in the 2000 Sydney Olympics had Cuban coaches or trainers in their delegations, for which coaches and INDER would have received significant remuneration. This scheme has enabled 6,300 Cuban coaches to obtain work in more than 110 countries. However in the pursuit for professionalism Cuban athletes was still illegal.

However, it is clear since the turn of the century Cuban athletes, used to be dominant in sport but they won only two gold medals and failed to secure a single gold medal in boxing, a signature sport for the revolutionary regime's athletes. Over the last decade Cuban athletes have been defecting at an unprecedented rate. An important dimension of the revolutionary sports conciencia was the notion that Cuban athletes would shun the riches of a professional career abroad and instead accept much more modest compensation on the island, while basking in the admiration of the Cuban people and its government.

Even during extreme economic crisis, Cuba has proved that resulted in levels of participation and elite success that are enviable by even the standards of rich. Cuba offers a rare case where elite sport development is not only entirely funded by the state but also directly linked through policy and structure to the promotion of sport at the community level.