

Cuba, the Island of Olympic Champions

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

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Before 1959, Cuba had a modest record of five Olympic medals, four of them gold, won in Paris in 1900, Saint-Louis in 1904 and London in 1948. At the time, sport was far from being a government priority, and the island's few sports facilities were mainly concentrated in the capital and reserved for the bourgeoisie. The vast majority of the population was thus excluded from any access to sporting activities.

With the arrival of **Fidel Castro** to power, the revolutionary government introduced a national policy of social inclusion, universalizing access to education, health, culture, leisure and sport. In 1961, the National Institute of Sports, Physical and Sports Education and Leisure (INDER) was created, launching a nationwide sports development program, with a policy of identifying the best talent. Free public infrastructures, accessible to the greatest number, were built throughout the country, and physical and sports education was taught in every school on the same footing as any other subject. Sport thus became a people's right, and ceased to be a privilege reserved for a minority.

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

For political reasons, Cuba did not take part in the 1984 Los Angeles or 1988 Seoul Olympics. After a long absence of 12 years, the island triumphed at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992. Despite the serious difficulties caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the island won a total of 31 medals, including 14 gold, 6 silver and 11 bronze, ranking fifth in the world, just behind the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the United States, Germany and China.

In 1996, at the Atlanta Olympics, Cuba, hard hit by the disappearance of its historic Soviet partner and the resurgence of Washington's economic sanctions, continued its momentum and achieved remarkable results, despite the "Special Period of Peace". With a total of 25 medals, including 9 gold, 8 silver and 8 bronze, the small Caribbean island climbed to 8th place in the world rankings, behind the USA, Russia, Germany, China, France, Italy and Australia.

The Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Olympic 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 2008 Beijing Olympics, Cuba won 30 medals (3 gold, 10 silver and 17 bronze) and 15 medals (5 gold, 3 silver and 7 bronze) at the 2012 London Olympics. Finally, at the 2016 Rio Olympics, the island won 11 medals (5 gold, 2 silver and 4 bronze), while its record at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics is 15 medals (7 gold, 3 silver and 5 bronze) and a remarkable 14th place.



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Cuba Leads Latin America in Olympic Medals

For the period from 1896 to 2021, Cuba ranks first in Latin America with a total of 235 medals, including 84 gold, 69 silver and 82 bronze. The island has no rivals on the continent. Brazil, a demographic behemoth with a population of over 200 million, ranks second with 150 medals. Argentina ranks third with 77 medals. Mexico is fourth with 73 medals, and Colombia is fifth with 34. If the number of Olympic gold medals is divided by population, Cuba, with its 11 million inhabitants, ranks first in the world.

Boxing is Cuba's king sport, with no fewer than 78 Olympic medals, including 41 gold, 19 silver and 18 bronze. Boxing legends Teofilo Stevenson and Félix Savón wrote the history of the noble art as three-time Olympic champions. Above all, they made their mark by refusing astronomical sums of several million dollars to turn professional. Stevenson was offered the sum 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 to meet Stevenson, one of his favorite boxers. Felix Savón, for his part, was approached by the famous promoter Don King for a fight against Mike Tyson, then at the height of his powers, in exchange for a \$10 million purse. His response was identical: "I would never trade the love and affection of my people for all the millions in the world".

Cuba has won 45 Olympic medals in athletics, including 11 gold, 14 silver and 20 bronze. Wrestling and judo are the island's third and fourth Olympic sports, with 27 medals (11 gold, 6 silver and 10 bronze) and 37 medals (6 gold, 15 silver and 16 bronze) respectively. Greco-Roman wrestling legend Mijaín López has won four Olympic gold medals and is in the hunt for a historic fifth title.

For the Paris 2024 Olympics, Cuba is entering a modest delegation of 61 athletes (27 women and 34 men). It is true that the flight of athletes to other countries with greater resources has seriously damaged 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. In fact, no fewer than 21 Cubans born and raised on the island will be defending the colors of fourteen other flags (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, USA, Canada, Turkey, Chile, Puerto Rico, Azerbaijan, Poland, Brazil, Belgium, IOC). But Cuba, the island of Olympic champions, accustomed to adversity and which has made resilience second nature, as usual, will proudly defend the colors of its flag and its people.

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