

Badminton offers hope to children of Rio slums



REUTERS, FILE
Canadian silver medallist and occasional tour guide Charmaine Reid

John MacKinnon



FAVALA DA CHACRINHA, BRAZIL / There's a badminton "centre of excellence" in this ghetto in Rio de Janeiro's inner city where kids of all ages in bare feet or flip-flops play on a crude, dusty cement floor in a handmade building.

It's the unfinished dream of a 42-year-old reform-school graduate consumed with the notion he can change a community through sport.

Teacher's vision takes flight in handmade building

The thing is, Sebastiao Dias de Oliveira seems to be succeeding.

The centre — called the Miratus Project — has already developed a national champion, a young woman named Renata Faustino, who grew up in the hillside community of about 15,000, one of about 900 such dirt-poor, often dangerous neighbourhoods in this city of 5.8 million people.

Faustino is good enough to have played against the likes of Charmaine Reid, Canada's Pan Am Games double silver medallist, who is a member of the humanitarian agency Right to Play.

And it was Reid, along with teammate Fiona McKee, who invited a clutch of

journalists to visit Chacrinha, to tour Oliveira's labour of love and learn something about how sport can be a tool of social development.

It was a humbling, unforgettable lesson.

"I've been to 45 countries around the world and I see a lot of different things," Reid said.

"And kids having fun playing badminton, that's the best thing to see.

"I had been to Sao Paolo and met Sebastiao and some of his players and got the opportunity to play some of them. You could tell they want to win and they're fighting out there."

See *BADMINTON* / A13

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John MacKinnon, *The Edmonton Journal*

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A group of 16 or so, some in bare feet, others in flip-flops, moved smoothly through a footwork drill set to Brazilian music -- a badminton ballet. During the drill, they also pantomimed all the shots, the fore- and backhand flicks at the net, overhead smashes.

They played a game with six aside in which the object was to keep the bird aloft for as long as possible. The kids shouted out the number in unison -- they got as high as 48. This was a one-room schoolhouse approach to training, with kids of all ages playing.

Reid, a Niagara Falls native, and McKee, who comes from Calgary, were a hit. They played a little singles, then doubles against a couple of talented teenage boys, then mixed doubles.

Reid also played Santa Claus, reaching into a large gym bag to hand out shuttlecocks, Canadian flags, team apparel and pins. She let the kids play with her silver medals, which were a huge hit.

"You don't need a big space to play badminton," Reid told reporters. "You don't need a lot of money to play badminton.

"You need a racket, shuttles, a net and you can play it anywhere."

OLYMPIC DREAMS

She talked to them about goals, pursuing their dreams, overcoming obstacles. She asked if any of them had dreams. A 10-year-old named Ygor, said he did.

"I want to play in the Olympics and the world championship," the boy said. "I know that the Pan Am Games are on the way to the Olympics and I am already working so hard, my feet are hurting."

That was the concrete floor talking. But the kids' joy was evident. It wasn't hard to see why Ouvaires continued to reach into his own pocket to keep funding his project.

"The intention is not to develop badminton champions," Ouvaires said, through an interpreter. "If that happens, fine, but the intention is to put them into society with skills and hope."

Somewhere along the way, Ouvaires ran out of money.

But a former student who toured the gym presented him with a cheque that Ouvaires promptly handed over to a construction company. Sponsors have come on board to help put up the building, provide equipment and to offer funds for college tuition. One company has pledged to pay for a modern gymnasium floor.

The project has received so much publicity that the municipal government is examining how to find a way to help and to try to replicate Miratus in other favelas. Ouvaires hopes to expand the project to about 2,000 kids, eventually.

Despite the flip-flops and bare feet -- or maybe because of them -- his project has acquired political traction and his wife is beginning to see positive signs, too.

"If my wife doesn't kick me out, I will fulfil my promise and finish our home," Ouvaires said.

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