

Olympics

This badminton academy in a favela will give you hope for the Rio Olympics

By **Dom Phillips** July 26 

Quite a racket in one of Rio's favelas



In poor community, badminton offers kids an escape from crime.

RIO DE JANEIRO — With rackets in hand, the dozens of teenagers on the courts of Miratus badminton school began moving in unison when Sebastiao de Oliveira switched on the samba.

He blew a whistle, shouted: “Level two!” and as the music blasting from speakers quickened, their steps, skips and shuffles kept pace. They added shots and parries, sidesteps, and shimmies — intricate, controlled movements set to a samba beat.

As crime concerns, political instability and doping scandals taint the landscape

of the upcoming Rio Olympics, the scene at Miratus paints a different picture: of sport's transformative power to bridge economic chasms and offer respite and purpose to those in desperate need of both. De Oliveira has conjured such results by bringing an aristocratic game to this country's poorest population.

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The results are more than aspirational: While Miratus provides an alternative to the crime that is both a lure and a threat, the school also has produced Brazil's first two badminton Olympians.

De Oliveira, 51, founded [Miratus](#) in 1998, here in the favela called Chacrinha. Favelas are low-income communities made of rudimentary, hand-built houses that are home to almost a quarter of Rio's population. De Oliveira wanted to offer opportunities to the local youth here, and he did so through a game "Badminton used to be for the rich elite," de Oliveira said. "I made it favela."



Pedro dos Santos outside the gated neighborhood after badminton class at Miratus. (Lianne M Milton/For The Washington Post)

'Here I could do my plan'

De Oliveira's mother worked as a live-in maid to Afranio da Costa, a sport shooter who in 1920 became the first Brazilian to win an Olympic medal. Da Costa, later a supreme court judge, did not allow children to live with his domestic staff, so when de Oliveira was 7 years old, he was sent to live in a notoriously tough children's home.

"It was very difficult," Sebastiao said. "You had every chance of becoming a delinquent."

His mother then became a garbage picker at an enormous dump in Rio called Gramacho, sometimes taking Sebastiao with her to help out as she pored through refuse that could be sold and recycled. The dump, which has since closed, was the setting of the [Oscar-nominated documentary "Waste Land,"](#) about Brazilian artist Vik Muniz and the works he produced with scavengers there.

De Oliveira qualified as a body-shop mechanic, and later became a sports assistant at a prestigious, and free, state-run high school. One day, while riding the bus, he met his future wife, Carmem Lucia, who lived in Chacrinha. Instead of moving her out of the favela when they were married, de Oliveira moved in.

"It was here I could do my plan, and help other people," he said.

His initial idea was a swimming project for local youth. He was given some land, recruited help, borrowed shovels and picks, and built the center with his bare hands.

"I would have died to do this project," he said.

He decided badminton was a cheaper, more flexible sport for favela youth. The empty pool became its first court. Now Miratus is housed in a big, blue building with photos along its back wall documenting its construction. Around 200 regular students play badminton every day.

In that converted pool, de Oliveira's son, Ygor Coelho, started playing badminton when he was just 3 years old.

“It was a natural thing for me, like a game for a little child,” he said. “I was smaller than the racket, so my father cut it to my size.”

Sixteen years later, Coelho will join women's competitor Lohaynny Vicente, 20, as the host country's entrants in the 2016 Olympic badminton tournament.



Sebastião Dias de Oliveira, center, founded the Miratus badminton academy in 1998. (Lianne M Milton/For The Washington Post)

The beat goes on

Watching the 2012 London Games, Coelho became convinced he could represent Brazil when his country hosted the Games four years later. But by 2014, he was ranked just 11th nationally — and needed to be first to qualify. That year, at age 17, he won \$12,000 on a television game show and spent the money on a three-month training camp in Denmark, the European country challenging Asia's domination of the sport.

“There were a lot of players; there were different styles of play that enabled me to evolve,” Coelho said.

His father was blunter.

“It was when he stopped being a boy and became a real man,” de Oliveira told “Fantastico,” a Brazilian television show that has tracked his son’s progress.

By September 2015, Coelho had clawed his way up the rankings, and when he won a tournament in Sao Paulo, he officially became Brazil’s No. 1 player. He lay down on the court and punched the floor with glee before running to embrace his father.

Later that month “Fantastico” filmed him on his birthday meeting China’s two-time Olympic singles champion Lin Dan, who wished him many happy returns — in Portuguese.

The Brazilian badminton team’s Portuguese coach, Marco Vasconcelos, praised Coelho as a player.

“He has a lot of potential,” Vasconcelos said. “He is very persistent, dedicated; he is very focused. He is one of the best of the players we have in Brazil.”

Coelho’s development can trace its roots to “Bamon,” a training technique his father developed at Miratus that uses samba’s syncopated leg and feet movements as a more engaging alternative to jumping rope.

“It helps in the movement, coordination; it helps when you have to recover balance,” Coelho said.

As negative story lines gather around the upcoming Olympics like ominous clouds, Coelho has a different view from the ground.

“The majority of Brazilians think it will be bad,” Coelho said. “That is not my opinion. I think it will be a success.”

His hope is that the Games’ true legacy will be in persuading more young people in his country that sport can have a positive influence in all areas of their lives.

“Sport teaches you to be a better person,” he said. “It teaches you to lose and to win.”



Crislane Bittencourt, 18, warms up to samba music during badminton class at Miratus. (Lianne M Milton/For The Washington Post)

Offering an alternative

As much pride as there is in producing Olympians, de Oliveira’s real mission at Miratus is to serve a much wider population. In addition to badminton training, the school also offers theater workshops, English lessons, a computer room and free classes to help pass the entrance exam for Brazil’s federal universities.

“Before, I used to hang out in the street doing nothing,” said Crislane Bittencourt, 18, who has played internationally with Miratus. “Then this became my second home.”

Many favelas around Miratus are run by gangs. Gunfights are common, students said. In May, [a 16-year-old woman was gang-raped in one favela nearby.](#)

For children from these neglected, underprivileged communities, the drug trade can seem to offer a seductively easy route to money, power and status. But life expectancy is short.

“We in society have to get there before the drug trade does, to take care of these children,” de Oliveira said.

His work has drawn notice. In 2010, Miratus secured some of its funding from an American non-profit group called [Rise Up & Care](#), a group that puts money into established projects in developing communities worldwide.

Back then, Ygor was “just a little kid, dreaming of the Olympics,” said Kirk Bowman, a professor in soccer and global politics at Georgia Tech, who runs Rise Up & Care with Jon Wilcox, a banker from Orange County, Calif.

Brazilian filmmaker Katia Lund, a co-director of the hit film “City of God,” is making documentaries about the Rio projects she works with, including Miratus, which will be shown in Rio on Aug. 6.

“The news from Brazil is like the seven plagues,” Bowman said. “But there are positive stories as well, especially in the favelas.”

De Oliveira pointed to Luan Bittencourt, 15, whose whiplash returns were dominating the hard, fast game of men’s doubles that followed the samba training session. Crisliane’s cousin, Luan has competed at tournaments in Peru and Mexico.

His father is imprisoned in Sao Paulo after being apprehended with a friend in a stolen car. Seeing his father in jail spooked him.

“You feel alone, outside society, [when] you see the bars,” Luan said.

From jail, his father watched his son the badminton player give a television interview and came away impressed — and hopeful.

“He told me not to follow the same path as him,” Luan said, “to carry on with sport and be someone in life.”