



# In Rio Slum, a Gleaming Hotbed of ... Badminton?

An Olympian got his start at a facility hand-built by his father.

By DAVID SEGAL JULY 26, 2016

Children dancing to samba music during a break at the Miratus Center in Chacrinha, a favela on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The center uses samba to teach badminton. Dado Galdieri for The New York Times

RIO DE JANEIRO — One of the world's most improbable sports centers is a hulking, light-blue building on a mud-caked alley in Chacrinha, a favela on the western outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Inside are four gleaming, regulation-size courts for badminton, a game that until recently few Brazilians had ever heard of, let alone played.

This is the Miratus Center, and on any given afternoon, about 200 local boys and girls will train there, dressed in matching yellow and green shirts. For the best of them, 19-year-old Ygor Coelho de Oliveira, this is not just his home court; it is his home. Or rather, the courts and his home are parts of the same structure, both hand-built by his father, Sebastiao, a physical education teacher and a self-trained carpenter. Open the window in his second-floor living room, and you are looking directly down on the courts.

"I wanted to take full advantage of the view and see what's happening," the elder de Oliveira said. "It's like watching television for me."

His son is lean, perpetually upbeat and on the verge of making history. Come August, he and another Miratus player, a 20-year-old woman named Lohaynny Vicente, will be the first Brazilian badminton players at an Olympics. Currently, de Oliveira is ranked No. 62 in the world while Vicente is 72nd, which is astonishing when you consider how difficult it is to improve without regular pummelings by a community of superiors.

Then again, the men's and women's draws at the Games are each composed of just 38 players. These two have gained entry to the sport's most prestigious tournament courtesy of a little-known benefit of hosting the Games: Spots are set aside for athletes from the host country as long as they are reasonably competitive. De Oliveira is more than good enough to meet the standard, as is Vicente, but to call him a long shot for a medal would be generous. And this makes him part of an unusual subset of people now being celebrated by the Brazilian media — athletes with inspiring back stories who are definitely going to lose.



SPORTS OLYMPICS 2016 | By NEIL COLLIER, SHANE O'NEILL and THIAGO DEZAN | 2:18

## Brazilian Badminton Sways to Samba

The Chacrinha neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro is home to Brazil's first Olympic badminton player. His father, Sebastiao de Oliveira, explains how he introduced badminton to the community using samba. By NEIL COLLIER, SHANE O'NEILL and THIAGO DEZAN on July 26, 2016. Photo by Thiago Dezan for The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »

[f](#) [t](#) [Embed](#)

“We don’t want to humiliate anyone,” said João Pedro Paes Leme, the director of sports at Rede Globo, Brazil’s biggest television network. “But at the same time we want to point out the people who are producing the best efforts of their lives to be here. Even they know they are not going to win a medal. Their medal is to compete in the first round. And some of those stories are more popular with viewers than stories about gold medalists.”

The focus on people like de Oliveira is compelled by simple arithmetic. The country’s Olympic delegation is 450 athletes strong. Brazil’s Olympic committee has set a goal of winning between 25 to 30 medals in Rio. Were



Globo to focus only on winners, it would cover less than 10 percent of Brazilian participants. So in addition to features about Olympic heroes from around the world, as well as in-country contenders, Globo is broadcasting tales that could be labeled “Uplifting Narratives of Imminent Defeat.”

It is a genre perhaps unimaginable on United States television, which will follow Olympic underdogs as long as they might sink a fang into some precious metal. The more you know about Ygor de Oliveira, the more that seems like a shame — mostly because if we never met him, we would never meet his father, who made a very peculiar dream come true through sheer force of will.

## The Man Behind ‘the Project’

Sebastiao de Oliveira is 51 and looks a lot like Danny Glover during his “Lethal Weapon” days, minus the mustache. He is the coach at Miratus, as well as its architect and builder, so he usually has children in his wake, directing them through a mix of shouts, hand gestures and charisma. Considering that he is the mind and muscle behind this quixotic venture, de Oliveira comes across as a surprisingly reasonable man, and never more so than when he describes the genesis of what he calls “the project.”

Raised mostly in an orphanage in Rio, he saw his mother during vacations when the two would scavenge for recyclable material at what was then the world’s largest garbage dump. (That dump, Gramacho, the setting for the 2010 documentary “Waste Land,” has since closed.) Many years later, in 1998, a colleague at the high school where de Oliveira teaches handed him a badminton racket, bought during a trip to Italy.

“I said to him: ‘Is this for tennis? A tennis ball will go right through this,’” de Oliveira recalled, speaking through an interpreter while sitting in the cafeteria that he recently added to the center.



SLIDE SHOW | 11 Photos  
An Unlikely Olympic Story

Dado Galdieri for The New York Times

There is no ball, his friend explained. There is a birdie. Let's try it.

Without a net, the pair volleyed back and forth, on a beach. De Oliveira was smitten.

"The sport chose me," he said. "I knew right away that this is what I had to do with the project."

The project until then was a swimming pool, which he was digging next to his home. Like many favelas, Chacrinha is a kind of off-the-grid shantytown, at once neighborly and dangerous. The pool would be a community center and a path for children whose first opportunities had long come from drug traffickers in search of new recruits.

He ceased work on the pool and started building a badminton court, by himself, with whatever tools he could find. Everyone, including his wife, thought the concept ludicrous. *Badminton?* In a favela? There were just a smattering of courts around the country, most of them in posh places, like country clubs.

But de Oliveira was going to single-handedly create Brazil's only hot zone of badminton talent. He started with a single outdoor court, made of asphalt,

on which children played barefoot. Dozens of others started showing up, and he commenced the 17-year effort to build an ever-expanding indoor facility.

“All the money I’ve made in my life, I put into this center,” he said. “I built the thing with my money, with my sweat, my blood.”



Sebastiao de Oliveira training children at the Miratus Center, which he built. “The sport chose me,” he said. “I knew right away that this is what I had to do with the project.” Dado Galdieri for The New York Times

He did get a bit of help. After articles appeared in the Brazilian news media, a man from Switzerland visited and later sent birdies, clothes and rackets. Some nongovernmental agencies sent construction materials. In 2007, de Oliveira revived his scavenging skills to pick up materials discarded after the Pan-American Games in Rio. His home was a construction site for years.

“My family went through a lot when I was building this center,” he said. “The floor of the house looked like the street.”



# Teaching Through Samba

The payoff, measured by titles, began in 2006. Miratus players have since won 68 medals in Pan Am Junior Championships, 22 of them gold, and more than 30 titles in the youth portion of the South American Youth Games.

How did de Oliveira come to teach a sport he first encountered as an adult? He paused for a moment and then stood up. He lifted one foot and then put it down. Then he lifted the other and put it down. Then he repeated this, very slowly.

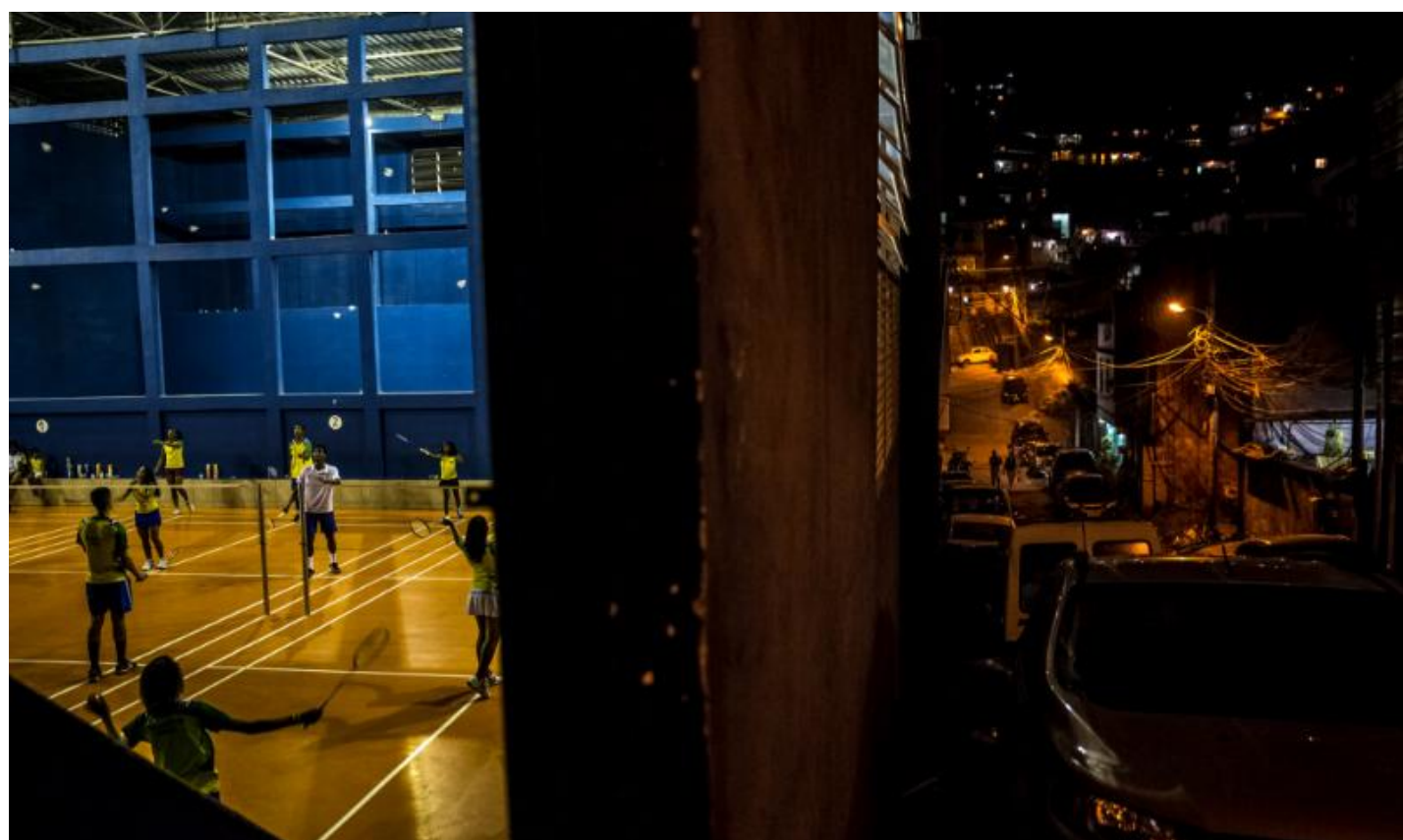
“What am I doing right now?” he asked.

Lifting your feet up and down?

“Actually,” he said, “I’m doing the samba. That was Level 1. This is Level 2.”

He moved his feet a little faster.

“This is Level 3,” he said. His sneakers were now a squeaking blur.



“Initially, I got some jump ropes, but the kids didn’t like them. So I decided I would teach them badminton through something I knew and they knew — the samba.”

This idea begged for elaboration.

“Let me show you,” he said.

At that, he walked down the stairs of the cafeteria, to the courts. About 50 children were there. They went quiet, huddled around de Oliveira and then scurried into position, setting themselves up in evenly spaced columns on both sides of the nets, three columns per court. Huge loudspeakers sat on the floor, and soon the music started, a slow samba beat with a melody that de Oliveira, the ultimate do-it-yourselfer, had written.

Rackets in hand, the children began marching in place, rhythmically. At intervals, with a whistle to signal each change, they switched, in unison, to a different and more complex exercise — stepping side to side and pantomiming overhead slams, lunging forward and swatting a backhand, and so on.

The 20-minute sequence culminated with children lobbing birdies over the net to someone else, who would catch it, wait for the beat and then lob it back. The only sounds were the whoosh of birdies sailing in identical arcs and a slow, delicate instrumental of piano and drums. It was a spectacle of military precision and uncanny beauty, as well as pathos. Some of these children were wearing flip-flops, and all of them came from a place largely written off by the middle and upper classes of Brazil, a country where growing up in a favela is a black mark as permanent as a tattoo. But here they were, dancing, lobbing and excelling in a setting that urged them to aspire.

“My dream is that someone who grew up in a favela and trained in a favela could inspire other kids in favelas,” de Oliveira said. “I want to highlight success rather than crime.”

## Learning From YouTube

De Oliveira knows that the best chance to achieve this dream now rests in the agile hands of his son, who has a toothy smile and a vicious overhead. Ygor's Olympic nod, along with the irresistible home-court angle of his life, has turned him into the face of Miratus, and Globo has visited to film him a number of times.



A banner featuring Ygor Coelho de Oliveira, set to be one of Brazil's first badminton Olympians, hangs near the Miratus Center. Dado Galdieri for The New York Times

Although a student of the samba school of badminton, he learned much about the mechanics of the game — above-the-waist stuff, like the swing — from YouTube videos of the sport's superstars. His only sustained brush with strong competition came in 2014, when he spent three months in Denmark, a powerhouse of the game, with money he won at a tournament.

"I started here," he said of his time in Denmark, signaling his skill level by placing a hand at shoulder height. Then the hand soared above his head. "And I ended here."