

'All my friends are either in jail... or dead': Boy who dodged bullets in Brazil's toughest ghetto is going for gold at Rio... and learned badminton by SAMBA

- Ygor Coelho de Oliveira learnt how to play sport on the roofs of the favela
- Often forced to run inside when gun battles broke out between rival gangs
- Admits today many of his friends turned to crime - and that 'most' are dead
- But he chose to pursue badminton, and will compete in Games next month

By [MATT ROPER IN RIO, BRAZIL, FOR MAILONLINE](#)

PUBLISHED: 14:22 GMT, 13 July 2016 | **UPDATED:** 18:22 GMT, 13 July 2016

A slum boy who learned badminton in the midst of drug wars and shoot outs has won a place at the Rio Olympics - after using samba to perfect his on-court moves.

Ygor Coelho de Oliveira would play the sport - little known in Brazil - on the top of the roofs of brick shanty homes as he was growing up in Rio de Janeiro.

But he and his family would often have to run indoors and hide under tables when gunfire broke out as rival drugs gangs vied for control of the Morro da Chacrinha favela in the west of the city.



Star: Ygor Coelho de Oliveira is Brazil's top badminton player, but things could have been very different for this boy from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, whose family were so poor he slept in a cot until he was 12-years-old



Determination: Ygor learnt to play on the roofs of the slums, but would often have to run inside when the gangs on the streets below began fighting each other for control of the territory

Encouraged by his protective parents, Ygor dedicated himself to badminton as a way of escaping the fate of many of his friends - who ended up as soldiers for the traffickers.

And even though his family lived in grinding poverty, with Ygor having to sleep in his baby cot until he was 12, he never gave up on a dream most thought was impossible - of one day representing his country on the greatest stage of all.

But not even Ygor ever imagined he might one day play for Brazil in the city where he was born - the Olympic park where he will compete is just three miles from his home.

Speaking exclusively to MailOnline, 19-year-old Ygor said: 'A lot of the friends I grew up with are in prison, and some are addicted to drugs - but most are dead.'

'For boys growing up in a favela, the drugs gangs are a big temptation, for some it seems like the only way to get money and status. But I wanted to do it a different way.'

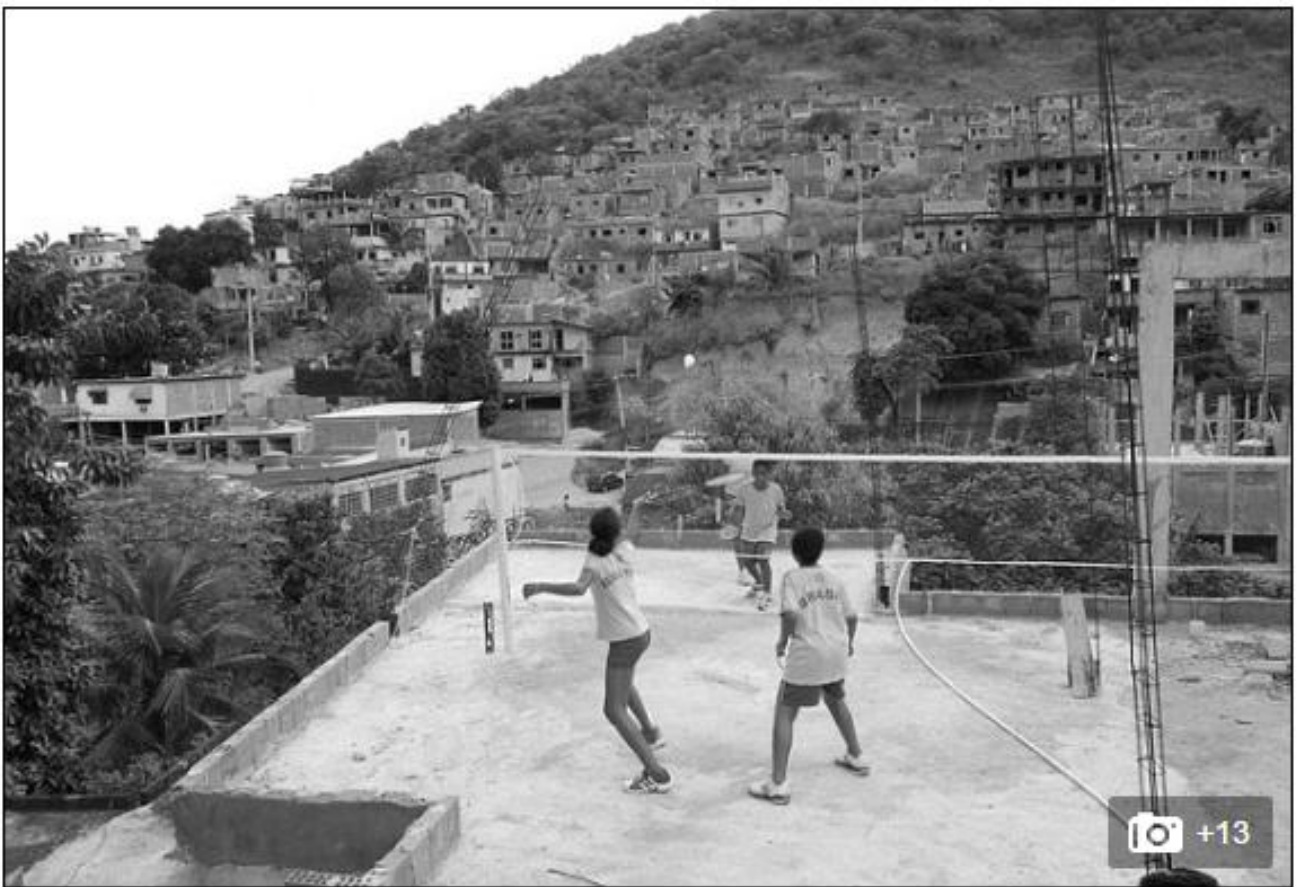
'A lot of my childhood friends were already working for the gangs by the time they were 12 or 13, but many were dead before they reached 18.'

'I remember watching the 2012 London Olympics on TV. I was 15, and dreamed of one day representing my country too. But not in my wildest dreams did I imagine that four years' later I'd actually be doing it, and in the city where I was born.'

'I still can't believe it's happening. The closer it gets, the more excited I am. I can't think about anything else.'



Choices: 'For boys growing up in a favela, the drugs gangs are a big temptation, for some it seems like the only way to get money and status,'; Ygor told MailOnline. 'But I wanted to do it a different way'



Training ground: Ygor's dad set up these nets on the roof, where he would spend hours practising - jumping and diving around, three or four stories up. 'It's a miracle no one got hurt,' he said

Ygor remembered how, despite his parents' efforts to shield him from the reality of the slum, danger and death became part of his life from an early age.

He said: 'Sometimes we couldn't leave home for days because of the gunfights between the gangs, or when the police invaded.'

'Sometimes the local drug lord would send a message to everyone's mobile phones telling everyone to get inside, because the police were on their way and shooting was about to start.'

'It was terrifying. We knew that even inside our house we weren't safe, a lot of people were hit by stray bullets. The shots were so loud it sounded like they were going off in your head.'

'I was always afraid to go off to school in the morning, because I didn't know if I'd make it back alive. It made me even more determined that I'd never join the gangs, and that one day I'd find a way out of here.'

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Ygor Coelho de Oliveira

Even so, the temptation to earn money as a lookout or drugs courier - the first rung of the drugs gang ladder for favela boys - was ever present as Ygor grew up in poverty.

While his friends who accepted the drug lords' offer of work began to take home hefty pay packets, Ygor - whose mum's minimum wage working at a supermarket checkout was the family's only income - lived in a shanty brick shack with a dirt floor, and went to school wearing

He said: 'I was the same as the other boys, I wanted a mobile phone, a video game, to be able to wear cool clothes, things my family couldn't give me.

'My parents couldn't afford even to buy me a proper bed, so I carried on sleeping in my baby cot, and when I grew too big for it they took off one of the ends and put a box so I could stick out my legs.

'After I was 12 I slept on a blow-up bed on top of an old door, propped up on piles of bricks. But I never say my parents complaining, so I tried not to complain as well.'



Difficult: Ygor never wanted to follow them into the gangs, so focused on badminton watching videos online to get tips on how to improve. But then he found himself faced with complicated steps

It was an unlikely sport, virtually unheard of in football-crazy Brazil, which helped Ygor forget his problems and steer him away from the life of crime into which he could have so easily fallen.

Ygor discovered badminton after a teacher at his school visited Italy and saw the game being played, returning with two badminton rackets and a shuttlecock.

When Ygor heard him describing the game, he asked the teacher to give him some lessons, and the two started practising on the beach volleyball courts on the nearby Barra da Tijuca beachfront.

Soon the 12-year-old was playing the sport wherever he could, mostly on top of the roofs of houses in the shanty town as it was often unsafe to play on the streets.

His parents Sebastiao and Carmen, both 50, encouraged him in his pursuit of the game, and now run a project in the favela teaching badminton to other disadvantaged children.

Ygor remembered: 'I would put up a net on the roofs of houses in the favela, and play mostly with my dad because none of my friends wanted to play with me. I'd jump and dive around, sometimes three or four floors up. It's a miracle nobody ever got fell off and got injured.

'Often the shooting would start suddenly, and we'd have to run inside and hide under our table or beds. But when it has stopped I was straight back playing.

'I fell in love with the sport. When I was playing I felt like I was somewhere else, a long way from the favela. I got up early in the morning and played, and as soon as I was back from school I played, until it was time to go to bed.'

When he wasn't playing himself, Ygor was teaching himself how to play better by researching and watching videos about the sport.



Dreams: When Ygor's father heard the Olympics were coming to Rio, he turned to his son and said he should aim to compete - only half joking

As he attempted the complicated foot switching badminton players need to quickly move from one side of the court to the other, he realised that his other passion - for Brazilian music style samba - could help him.

He said: 'It was my dad who came up with the idea of using samba. He began to study the way other badminton players move their feet to switch sides quickly, and saw that it was similar to the way we Brazilians dance samba at carnival.'



Inspiration: But it was after seeing people play at London 2012 that Ygor decided it was what he really wanted

Big break: In 2014 he entered a Brazilian TV game show and won £10,000 - enabling him to spend three months training at a badminton centre in Denmark. When he returned home to the Morro da Chacrinha favela he had climbed 210 places in world rankings, and gone from 17th to 3rd best in Brazil

'He even went into a music studio and recorded samba rhythms that would help me train. After I started using the samba moves, everything changed. I was much more agile and was able to move around the court and reach the shots much more quickly.'

It didn't take long for Ygor to move through the ranks of the small badminton scene in Brazil, and by the time he was 15 he was already competing professionally at home and abroad.

His breakthrough came in 2014 when he entered a Brazilian TV game show and won £10,000 - enabling him to spend three months training at a badminton centre in Denmark. When he returned home to the Morro da Chacrinha favela he had climbed 210 places in world rankings, and gone from 17th to 3rd best in Brazil.

“Boys growing up in Rio's favelas still look up to the drugs traffickers and want to be like them. If me getting to the Olympics means that some of them will look up to me instead, and want to be like me, then I'll be happy.”

Last year, he was invited by Brazil's Olympic Federation to train at their centre in Campinas, near Sao Paulo, during which time he competed in 13 countries and climbed further in the ranks, finally being named Brazil No1 in September.

When last month he was named as the country's hope for an Olympic badminton medal, Ygor became the first Brazilian man ever to compete in the Olympics in the sport.

With less than a month to go before his greatest dream comes true, Ygor said: 'When Rio de Janeiro won the Olympic Games in 2010 I remember my dad turning to me and saying, 'son, you've got to be there!' He was just joking with me, because I'd just discovered badminton and he knew how much I loved it.



First steps: Now, Ygor is set to be the first Brazilian man ever to compete in the Olympics in badminton



Leader: Ygor, pictured with XXXX, hopes that boys growing up in the favela will now follow in his footsteps, rather than those of the drugs gangs. 'Then I'll be happy,' he said

'The penny's only just beginning to drop. I'm trying to stay focused and not get too excited about it, but the fact I'm going to be representing Brazil in the Olympics never leaves my thoughts.

'I think the fact I'm from a favela makes it even more special. I want to show other kids like me that, even though they face difficulties, it doesn't mean you can't dream, or that your dreams can't come true.

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3687061/All-friends-jail-dead-Boy-dodged-bullets-Brazil-s-toughest-ghetto-going-gold-Rio-learned-badminton-SAMBA.html>