

This Rio favela is a hotbed of badminton

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Sporting excellence: Children practise badminton moves choreographed to samba music at the Miratus school in Chacrinha favela in Rio de Janeiro; (right) Ygor Coelho de Oliveira, the school's star player. —PHOTOS: NYT

One of the world's most improbable sports centres is a hulking, light-blue building on a mud-caked alley in Chacrinha, a favela on the western outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.

This is the Miratus Centre, 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, Sebastião, a physical education teacher.

Qualifying for Olympics

Come August, Ygor Coelho and another Miratus player, a 20-year-old woman named Lohaynny Vicente, will be the first Brazilian badminton players at an Olympics. He is part of an unusual subset of people now being celebrated by the Brazilian news media — athletes with inspiring back stories who are definitely going to lose.

Sebastião Dias de Oliveira (51) is the coach at Miratus, as well as its architect and builder. 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. Many years later, in 1998, a colleague at the high school where Mr. de Oliveira teaches handed him a badminton racket, bought during a trip to Italy. "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. The pool would be a community centre 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?

But Mr. de Oliveira was going to single-handedly create Brazil's only hot zone of badminton talent. He started with a single outdoor court on which children played barefoot. Dozens of others started showing up, and he commenced the 17-year effort to create an ever-expanding indoor facility.

"My dream is that someone who grew up in a favela and trained in a favela could inspire other kids in favelas," Mr. de Oliveira said. "I want to highlight success rather than crime." Mr. 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 de Oliveira's Olympic nod, along with the irresistible home-court angle of his life, has turned him into the face of Miratus.

He learned much about the mechanics of the game — above-the-waist stuff, like the swing — from YouTube videos of the sport's superstars. Nobody seems to have explained to him that just participating in the Games is triumph enough, and he said he would like to get to the quarterfinals. But if these Olympics do not work out, he is young and confident enough to predict that there will be others. — New York Times News Service

A training centre started by self-taught trainer Sebastião de Oliveira aims to produce professionals

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/this-rio-favela-is-a-hotbed-of-badminton/article8926155.ece>