



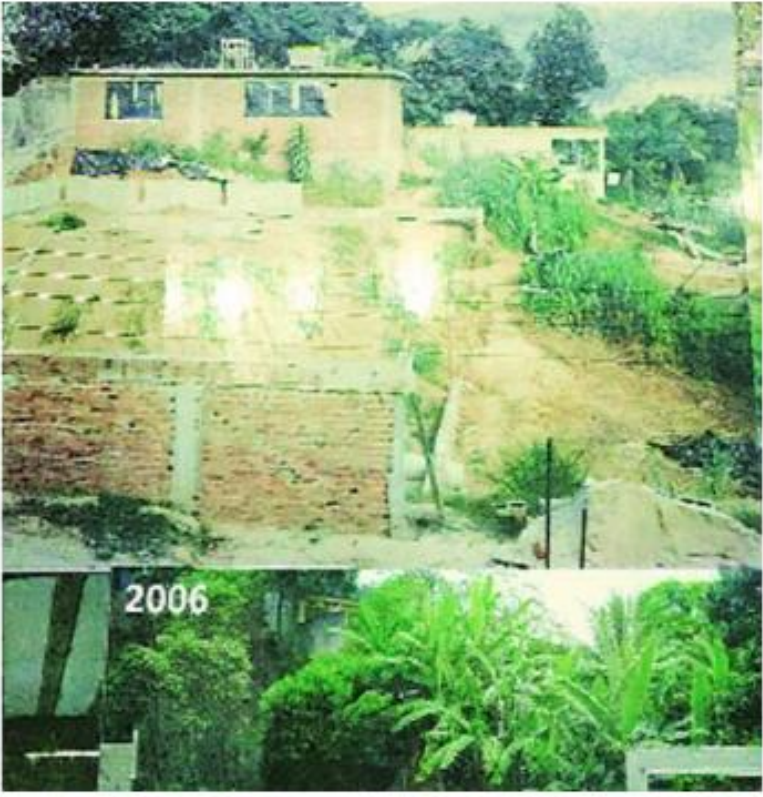
INDIA AT RIO SCHEDULE MEDALS TALLY THE INDIAN OLYMPIANS VENUES

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Rio 2016 Olympics: A favela where birds of feather flock together

At a Rio slum, samba keeps badminton alive, distances youth from drugs and sees a father shape his son's Olympic dream.

Written by **Shivani Naik** | Rio De Janeiro | Updated: August 4, 2016 6:13 pm



Sebastião Coelho de Oliveira along with son Ygor at his badminton academy situated atop a hill in a Rio favela. (Source: Express Photo by Shivani Naik)

Like snowflakes falling off a inky blue sky. It's what the shuttlecocks look like against the ink blue backdrop of the high wall, when sent into a high serve in unison to the slow-stop beats of the samba sound. Imagine 50 badminton players tilting their lithe bodies to the zils of the tambourine, launching the feathered birds

into high arc in sync and stopping as statues at the next percussive pause. The end product is a man of 19 years from the heart of Rio's slums, beginning to believe that one day he can beat badminton's Metronome of a hulk – Chen Long.

Badminton was too mechanical, it had gotten far too robotic and formulaic, its execution and pattern, tenor and tone way too automated for someone from Brazil to heed to it. But Sebastião Coelho de Oliveira, a physical education teacher from Chacrinha, a favela fringing on Rio de Janeiro, thought he could break down the movements involved in badminton, just like he could deconstruct the city's passionate dance, the samba and put it together to form jogo bonito without a ball in Brazil, just as the country had won the right to host the Olympics.

A Brazilian man, who'd returned from Italy brought back the slender stemmed racquet for Sebastião and taught him rudimentary shuttle. He also mentioned in passing that pros used skipping ropes to get better at the sport. Sebastião who began coaching kids from the neighbourhood shanties started observing drop-outs as soon as the monotonous skipping was insisted upon. He had to jazz up badminton coaching, and he knew nothing could salvage it better than the Samba.



On the eve of the Rio Games, his son Ygor Coelho de Oliveira has qualified as Brazil's Olympic entry – and not by using the host-nation card. He ranks in the 60s, is a Pan Am champ and reckons the samba-styled training – trainees practice everything from net-taps to backhand smashes to tunes of the samba – will go a long way in genuinely launching a legit counter to what's become the assembly style of playing from Asia.

“You will think I'm joking or arrogant. But one day my boys and girls will start beating Indians in badminton. And yes we can beat China,” Sebastião says with a voice that has the boom but not the bravado. “I know we can't beat them at their style – they've learnt it for 100 years. But you'll soon see us succeeding,” he challenges.

It started as a good old favela social responsibility project on the Chacrinha hill. This is no Mussourie, nor Malabar Hill. In Rio, only the very desperately poor start building houses on climbing hilly inclines. “It started out because I found kids had nothing to do in the favela. Or they had only bad things to do in the favela,” Sebastião says, hinting at the grim state of affairs in Rio where drug-related crime consumes millions of childhoods in these poor 'hoods.

It didn't need to be badminton – the sport was incidental when the friend returned from Italy. Sebastião had dug a swimming pool where he planned to train children. But once he started, he was hooked to the idea of producing shuttle champs. Though his first words when he was explained the rules was, “Bad-what?”

Sebastião loves studying movements; samba came naturally to him, and he reconfigured sport and dance to blend into each other, and altered badminton footwork on the court making it the most natural thing for kids from a Rio favela. It meant they weren't learning an alien sport, but simply selecting a clutch of its movements drafted straight into badminton.

Indonesians often come to India and cluck in disapproval at how unnatural and faulty Indian footwork can tend to be. It's laboured and as if on rote. Nothing effortless about it. The Brazilians from the club Miratus might not have the whole bag of wristy tricks that the East Asians and Danes have, but they know how to put one foot in front of the next – and then the lateral variant, so crucial to badminton.

It wasn't easy in the poor shanty town – despite funding from supporters who liked the idea of keeping the kids off the streets, keeping them occupied.

Shuttles were sewed back into shape and glued back from disrepair, racquet gutting was manually strung even as group training sessions took off in a big way, though the city seems to have woken upto this gem in their midst only when the Rio qualifications happened, and NYT came knocking on the door.

Ygor started grooving and smashing at age 3 – his racquet chopped down in size for him to be able to hold. “I like challenges. When I won gold at school, I wanted the state medal. Then the Pan Am juniors title, and now finally I want to soon win a Grand Prix Gold,” Ygor states. If it wasn't for the unconventional ways the 19-year-old would've been just another player trying his luck travelling the world. But he believes his father's onto something big – a scientific, physiological breaking down of movements to put together a unique style.

He's trained in Denmark prior to this, gone to the Youth Olympics where he gave an almighty scare to the Chinese entrant, and recalls telling Michelle Reid, a celebrated player of Canada in 2007 that one day he'd be an Olympian. He speaks excitedly about Hans Kristin Vittinghus, the young Dane and “India's golden boy K Srikanth” whose attacking movements he idolises, and Japanese maverick Kento Momota – as men who will ensure that Tokyo Olympics hardly looks like China's cakewalk. “It's gonna be tough for them next Games. There's all these challengers. And then there's me,” he says with confidence. The me in question boasts a good defense – all that quicksilver footwork, and an indulgent if intelligent trick shot. “Samba's all about improving agility. Up until now the East Asians had it better than everyone else. We'll start challenging them now,” he remarks.

It all sounds dreamy and faintly ridiculous – up there on a Rio hill, the Minarus academy built on a slope, the addictive strains of the musical drums and teens and children dancing with their twinkle toes pointed, all the grace and natural striding

lulling you into thinking the robotic fitness-obsessed slugfest of a sport that badminton's become with its hour-long matches can swerve into a delicious to watch, art. It shouldn't surprise anyone that the country's going in pursuit of playing the most beautiful form of badminton.

Home to Jiu Jitsu, an indigenously rejigged martial art, host to Campeonato Carioca of 30 years ago 'Doctor Socrates', a country that keeps searching for 'ginga' individual flair in football that a 17-year-old Pele had against the monotonous Swedes in 1958, and a city that steals its moments of blissful happiness amidst crime and grime, it is no surprise that samba-plus-badminton is threatening to start producing upstarts who shake the world order.

"When I see movement, I can deconstruct it and teach it. I can simplify Samba step by step and badminton is just the next challenge," Sebastio says. He waves off following a single format – the Chinese way or the Danish way – to ape success, and believes it'll be no fun to beat them at games that are second skins to them. "I've tried not being too influenced by any particular style. I want to develop our style that can beat the rest. The Olympics is my laboratory, I'll watch top players for the first time, and pick what I need from each game," the coach declares. "Samba's rhythm. Badminton's going to get very sassy," he jokes.

He's also working on deception that stems from the fingers and unconventional grips that can suit strong Brazilian palms, not relying on the wrist at all. You'd be mistaken in thinking Miratus is just a social project, content in giving kids some distraction while they grow up into employment and jobs.

This favela club is talking evolution in a sport it didn't know 10 years back. Ygor's fellow team-mate Lohanny Vicente has also made it to the Olympics, and will in fact open her Games against India's Saina Nehwal. "While we're at it, we'll also teach everyone to dance and smile," he laughs. Somehow the thought of Lin Dan breaking into a shoulder rolling, hip swaying jig makes for a very happy thought.

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