

How a favela kid became Brazil's top badminton player

SPIRIT OF HUMANITY

Ygor Coelho de Oliveira, whose father started a badminton program to help kids in a rough neighborhood, is Brazil's first male Olympic badminton player – and an ambassador for the power of hope and hard work.

By **Whitney Eulich**, Correspondent ▼ | AUGUST 13, 2016

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Courtesy of Miratus | [View Caption](#)

MEXICO CITY — Samba dancing may not be the traditional way to train for badminton. But then again, most everything about Brazilian Ygor Coelho de Oliveira's Olympic story is unconventional.

Like many Olympic athletes, he started young – at the age of three. There, the similarities end.

A kid from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro – slums better known for drug trafficking and poverty than Athenian models of athleticism – Mr. Coelho grew up in a badminton program created by his father.

As Coelho developed his own athletic prowess, even using the quick, rhythmic samba to speed up his footwork, he also mentored younger players to focus on sport and school rather than getting involved in criminal activity.

Now, as Brazil's first-ever men's Olympic badminton player, he hopes his message will resonate far beyond his own community.

“It doesn't matter what is your social class, or where you are from, you can achieve greatness,” says the lanky, 19-year-old.

Badminton is such an obscure sport in soccer-crazed Brazil that many kids in the program joke that they have to use cellphone videos to explain it – the rackets, the birdies, the moves – to friends.

In 1998, when the Olympian's dad, Sebastião de Oliveira, started his badminton program, Miratus, it was little more than a dirt court in his backyard. Since then, the elder Oliveira has made badminton a central part of Chacrinha, a community of sweeping, informally-built redbrick and corrugated metal structures on the western edge of Rio.



Ygor Coelho de Oliveira plays badminton on the dusty foundation of the Miratus school in 2006. A decade later, the building – and players like Mr. Coelho – have risen to new heights.

Today, students gather on bright orange badminton courts in their yellow-and-green jerseys and swing their rackets while zipping their feet to a samba beat. They learn through a training program created by Oliveira that incorporates five levels of samba, as opposed to the more traditional jumping rope. And students compete all over Brazil – and the world. There are roughly 200 kids who show up to play on a daily basis.

Coelho's hard work and drive are what qualified him as Brazil's No. 1 player in 2015. But his journey to this Olympic moment is deeply intertwined with his father's story.

The elder Oliveira grew up in a poor children's home while his mother served as a live-in maid for a wealthy member of Brazil's military government. Later, he would spend his holidays helping her as a trash collector in a local junkyard. But he was determined from a young age to make something of himself – and give back. When he was 16, a “very special” professor told him, “you spend all of your time planning and you forget to learn. I want to find you a course of study,” Oliveira recalls.

That attention motivated him to study physical education, and to realize the importance of a caring adult role model in the lives of at-risk youth.

“With my limited resources I wanted to [help] people so they could have the type of success, the type of security that I had,” Oliveira says. The badminton school, which he constructed by hand with the help of family and friends, “was made with love,” he says.

“You go into the favelas and it's chaos,” says Kirk Bowman, a political scientist at Georgia Tech and co-founder of Rise Up & Care, an American NGO that gives funding to established projects like Miratus in poor communities around the world. “But you walk into [Miratus] and it is order and purpose and happ[iness]. It's a totally different world, and it's no wonder that these kids, their grades improve, relationships in the family improve. They have role models and are achieving goals at a really young age.”

Coelho has lived it. Growing up, he watched peers not just fall in with the “wrong” crowd, but die because they felt their only options were drugs or crime.

“In our community there are two paths, that of drugs and then the positive path. That can be the path of sports, work, or school,” he says. “I’m an example of someone ... who works to stay on the positive path. That can change a life.”

He’s become a role model within the community, showing just how far a kid from the favelas can go. And now he, along with female badminton teammate Lohaynny Vicente, is making history for Brazil at the Olympics.

Kids here “look at my son and they see he is a champion. They find hope in these examples.” says Oliveira. “If they don’t [identify with someone like Ygor] they identify with traffickers.”

The past year has been a whirlwind of travel and qualifiers for Coelho. He is ranked 64th in the world – a significant improvement over his 77th -place ranking this time last year, though still nowhere close to medal contention. But he’s his father’s son, and he’s motivated more by setting a positive example than bringing home hardware.

“I think it’s important [to give back to the community],” he says. “[Miratus] doesn’t just form champions in sports, but also in life.”

In recent years, Miratus has incorporated programs that reach beyond badminton, giving classes on topics including computers, accounting, English, and theater. They hope to introduce even more.

“If you work a lot, a lot, a lot,” Coelho says. “You can reach your dreams.”