

# CBC IN BRAZIL | Brazil's first badminton Olympian dances samba in practice

'I paid attention very hard' as a child to Canadian Olympian Charmaine Reid

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## About The Author



**Susan Ormiston**  
Senior correspondent

Susan Ormiston's career spans more than 25 years reporting from hot spots such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, Haiti, Lebanon and South Africa.

■ Video by Susan Ormiston

"I believe," scream 100 kids from a Brazilian favela watching their hero take centre court at Rio de Janeiro's Olympic badminton venue.

Ygor Oliveira, 19, is Brazil's first player in Olympic badminton and the pride of Chacrinha, where poor kids have almost no access to organized sport, let alone badminton.

But Ygor's father, Sebastiao Oliveira, through sheer determination and passion is changing the lives of a whole generation growing up in the favela.

### ■ Brazil's boy wonder comes out of the blue into the gold

He built a first badminton court. "I dug 190 three-metre holes [for the pilings] without the help of a digger." Now with four courts, Oliveira coaches 200 players from ages four to 20 in his own Brazilian way.

Every day, at practice he turns on the music; his proteges know what to do.

Wielding badminton rackets, they dance the samba, darting and flicking imaginary birdies, practising their agility on the court.

Most badminton players jump rope for fitness, says Oliveira. But the kids found that boring, so he had to be creative to keep them interested.

"They're vulnerable children, they don't have any opportunities," he says.

"Money isn't everything, sometimes, it's just attention. Here they get attention, they are pressured, and that's why they're growing."



Sebastiao Oliveira watches his son Ygor compete in badminton at his first Olympic Games. (Susan Ormiston/CBC)

Oliveira is part coach, part teacher, part-time dad to all of them.

In Rio's sprawling, violent and drug-ridden favelas there are plenty of vices to tempt young Brazilians. Oliveira is convinced if he can't reach the kids — especially the boys — by age eight, the drug traffickers will recruit them, for good.

Oliveira himself grew up in Funabem, a notorious Rio orphanage. His mother worked as a maid for Brazil's sports minister and lived on his property. But as Oliveira tells it, she wasn't allowed to have her children with her, so he ended up at the orphanage.

When he was 18, a teacher inspired him to make something of his life. He did, becoming a physical education teacher. Now he's made it his lifetime goal to pull other poor children up, to give them a chance at a better future.

Seventeen years ago, he came up with a plan to build a swimming pool in the favela. But after a colleague introduced him to badminton, he switched plans.

"When I played it, I realized it could be a much richer tool than swimming, because badminton is much more entertaining. You can play with family, you can exercise, you can play if you're thin if you're fat, tall, short, doesn't matter."

Once the fledgling badminton program was underway it attracted the attention of Canadian Olympian Charmaine Reid. In 2007 after the Pan Am Games in Rio, she visited the favela. Ygor was just 10.

"I never knew what Olympics were. She was the first Olympic player I met in my life," says Ygor, "I paid attention very hard."

"I have to say thank you Charmaine because she inspired me."

Ygor was ranked 62nd in the world coming into these Olympics, so a podium finish wasn't within reach. But, the measure of his success goes far beyond medals.



Ygor Oliveira and Charmaine Reid, the Canadian badminton Olympian who met Ygor in 2007 when he was 10. (Charmaine Reid)

To the kids at the badminton club, he's a star.

"They look up to me and this is fantastic because there are two ways in the favela, the drug traffic or the good way, the sport, the study. So it's good for me to know that I am a good example."

At the courts on the weekend, it seemed Ygor Oliveira was the only player. The arena reverberated with the shouts of "Ygor, Ygor". Between cheering him on and booing his opponents, the kids from Chacrinha willed Ygor to win.

"It's like, we come from a poor community, he practises where we do," says Anna Carolina Morais, bouncing in her seat in the stands.

"So we're all part of the same person, it doesn't matter if he's the best or the small one, we send our love to him."



A boy listens to instruction at a badminton club in the Rio favela Chacrinha. (Marie Claudet/CBC)