

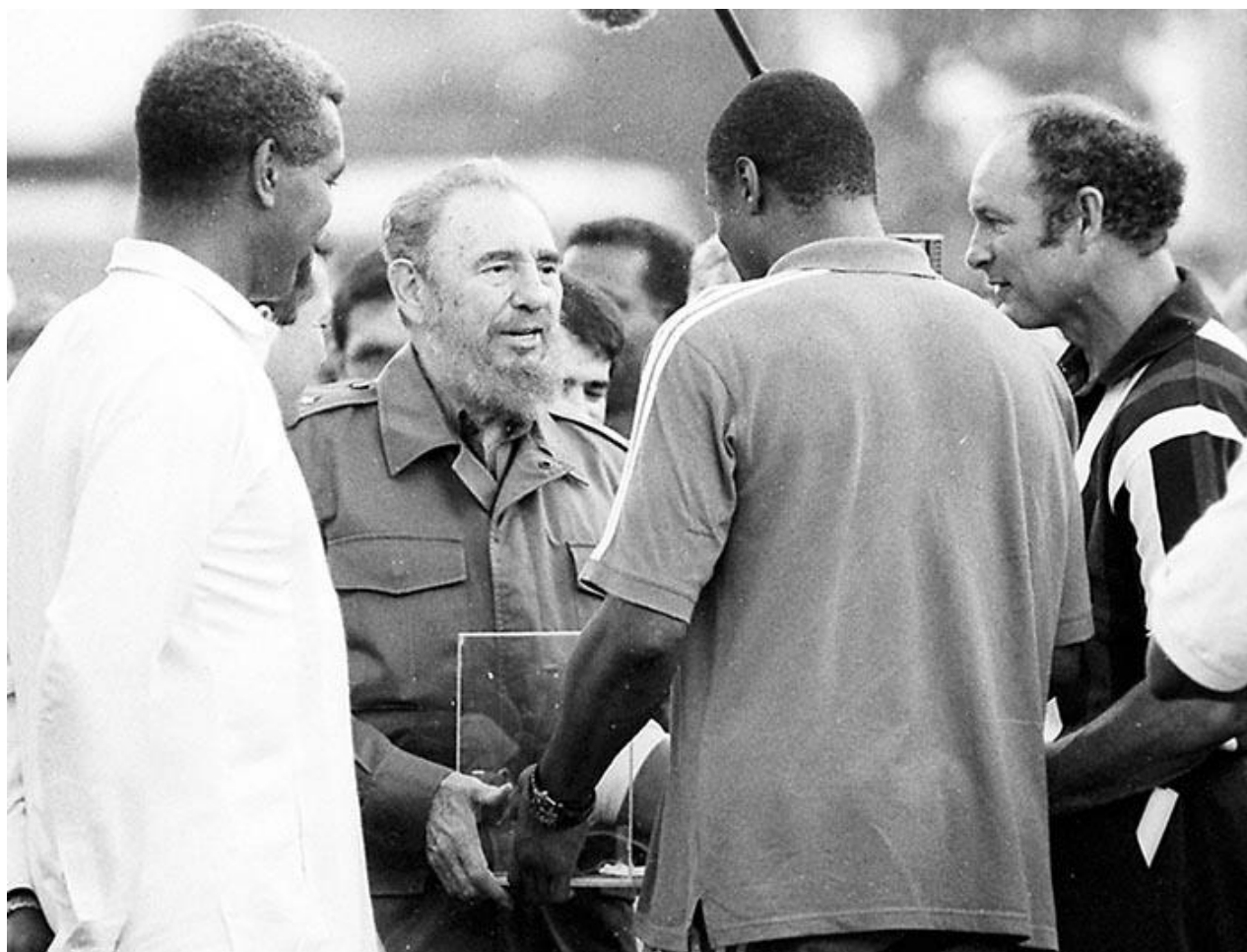
[The Revolution's Olympic champion](#)



There is no stadium large enough to contain his immense humanity, tempered in sports as well as struggle. At the University of Havana he was practically an Alberto Juantorena, running the 400 and 800 meters, as the Gentleman of the Track did in the Montreal 1976 Olympics.

Nor would his sensitivity fit within a coliseum, regardless of its capacity or dimensions. His spirit, harbored within a body that never gave up, made him an undefeated champion in all battles.

At Belén College, he showed himself to be a great player on the basketball court, passionate and precise, and he was seen scoring a few goals on the soccer field as well. Havana's Latinoamericano Stadium saw him outfitted in a baseball uniform; he was a fan of deep sea fishing and swimming: his love of mountain climbing not only developed his physique, but helped him when he wore olive green, and became the unstoppable leader of one of the world's most humane works: the Cuban Revolution.



Fidel not

only admired athletes, but shared their concerns, as well.
Pictured with boxers Teófilo Stevenson and Félix Savón, and runner Alberto Juantorena.

Perhaps no one faced Fidel the athlete like Gilberto Suarez. Born in Jamaica, he was the rival who found himself - at 17 years of age - in an improvised boxing ring in his native Birán, facing an opponent who would later become an astute guerrilla leader. Suarez dodged several blows and showed off the skills with which he made his living. He landed a hook and put an end to the bout, but never knocked Fidel down. Suarez went on to become a true champion of Cuban revolutionary sports, one of the great conquests achieved with the leadership of his teenage "adversary."

He graduated as a teacher, taught singing, sports, and English, a reflection of a people who took Cuban sports to a world class level, precisely because their leader appreciated the value of this social pursuit. On November 19, 1961, the

Comandante en Jefe said: "Sports not only helps physical health, not only helps develop character, not only helps shape men of strong bodies and spirits, but also encourages the people, entertains the people, and makes the people happy."

He was himself an example. "No one knows how useful sports - exercise - is in life, and we have experience with this. We had the opportunity to practice sports and it helped us in many stages; the sports we had practiced helped us in the most difficult moments of the revolutionary struggle, when we had to live in the forest and when we had to make a great physical effort," he stated in September, 1964, when he also said, "Sports and physical education will take nothing away from studies, but will rather strengthen the academics of students."

Thus a world power was built. When physical education and sports reached only .25% of the population,

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in March of 1961, he said, "Sports is an activity that will be popularized and generalized to reach a dimension that many cannot even imagine now."

On January 22, 1993, a domestic accident left champion runner Ana Fidelia Quirot with life-threatening burns over 40% of her body. Fidel was among the first to arrive at Havana's Ameijeiras Hospital that day, for the first of what would be 20 visits. He wouldn't leave. She told him, "Comandante, I will run again." And he always answered, "First, most importantly, is your life; you will survive."

Not a single day passed that he didn't interrogate doctors about her progress, and his "namesake," as he called her, not only survived, but came back to win two gold medals in the World Championships of 1995 and 1997, always saying, "I was named Fidelia for him; he is my inspiration."

Omar Linares, who many consider the best Cuban baseball player ever, recalled last year on the November 29 Mesa Redonda television program how Fidel supported him through his father's illness, "He took charge personally. I was very moved by that gesture, and at the same time I had the opportunity to experience his great sensitivity." On the same show, we heard boxer Armandito Martínez tell a story about a fight the judges took from him in Canada, "I wanted to die, but when Fidel met us at the airport, he said I had fought like a champion and should feel like one, raising my arm in victory."

Three-time Olympic Heavyweight Champion Teófilo Stevenson once recalled that, during a period when he was losing motivation, Fidel took a personal interest in his recovery, saying, "From then on, I became a better human being."

Volleyball player Mireya Luis met Fidel at only 15 years of age, upon the team's return from the Pan American Games, where they had soundly defeated the U.S. After a knee operation, he came to visit her in the hospital several times, telling her she would bounce back. The captain of the "Morenas del Caribe" answered with three Olympic medals, two World Championships, and four World Cups.

Journalist Mario Torres produced a thick book, *Fidel y el Deporte*, which includes the Comandante's fundamental thinking about sports within the Revolution, as well as the basis upon which, and reasons why, Cuba became the sports powerhouse it is today, with our trademark passion and commitment, as was seen in the Cuban athletes competing in the Central American and Caribbean Games, this year in Barranquilla.

He connects the altruism of those who gave their lives in the struggle with the positive results of practicing sports in terms of the people's personal development and education. Just months after the triumph of the Revolution, April 1, 1959, Fidel insisted, "When all youth find in their city, town, or neighborhood, an appropriate place to develop physical abilities and devote themselves to practicing the sport of their choice, we will have fulfilled the wishes of all those who have made this Revolution."

He illustrated his favorite quote, "All the glory in the world fits inside a kernel of corn," his humility, and admiration for sports heroes, saying to a group of athletes on October 22, 1973, "If had been born in this era, you know what I would like to be? An athlete."

To Cuba's athletes, Fidel dedicated a Reflection on August 24, 2008, entitled

"A gold medal for honor," and his people have awarded him one, too, as the Revolution's Olympic champion.

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