



## **Sports, a Right of the People**

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For some years now, Cuba has been undergoing an exodus of great proportions. Unlike other similar events, in this case the escape is gradual, and not measurable in time and space like its predecessors of Camarioca, Mariel, or Guantánamo. During fiscal year 2022, which ended on October 1, a total of 224,607 Cubans entered the United States through its land borders, according to official figures released by the Department of Customs and Border Protection. This figure does not include those who have arrived by sea during the same period.

Nothing new, but surprising in this new modality. One of the most persistent phenomena in the more than 60 years of dictatorship has been emigration. It is such a persistent phenomenon that it has not been possible to stop it in any way, neither by the regime nor by any of the countries where Cubans go in search of, essentially, freedom. Some destinies change, others like the United States remain unchanged with the passage of time; but what endures, inexorably, is the desire of Cubans to leave their country in search of essential conditions for human existence that they evidently do not find in their own homeland. This is not a typical or exclusive phenomenon of Cuba, but a tendency common to all dictatorships, especially those of communist ideology.

Tyrannies generate exiles as a natural result, whatever their bias or ideological label.

There is a peculiarity that stands out within this new modality: it is the exodus of athletes. According to sports journalist Francys Romero, in the last three years more than a hundred athletes have left Havana, ranging from Paralympic athletes to champions or Olympic stars of the stature of Juan Miguel Echevarría, Ismael Borrero and Andy Cruz. The spectrum of disciplines in which the so-called "deserters" compete ranges from taekwondo to baseball, through rowers, runners, jumpers, volleyball players, basketball players, pentathlonists. The most notorious of these cases occurred in October 2021, when 11 members of the baseball team to the U23 Pan American Championship, held in Sonora, Mexico, opted for freedom, in the largest mass desertion of players from the Island abroad. The Cuban team was cut in half.

In the most recent case, four rowers left a training camp in Mexico this November, continuing the pattern of massive escapes that decimate the regime's sports delegations. There are already nine escapees in November and 53 who have done so during 2022, which has not yet ended. Neither perks such as the gift of vehicles, nor stipends for medalists in Olympics and world championships, nor the possibility of contracting in foreign leagues – through Cuban state entities – have been able to stop the stampede. Nor have the well-known statements of officials and official media describing them as traitors, nor the threat of the aberrant punishment of preventing them from reuniting with their families for a period of at least eight years.

There are many elements to be taken into account in relation to this particular exodus, which allow us to evaluate not only the current state of Cuban society, but its repercussions in the future. In the first place, it highlights the fact that high-performance athletes have always been seen as a privileged sector within the population, with access to perks that, although in other countries do not mean anything as they are accessible to any worker, in Cuba they represent climbing a step above the daily misery in which the regime has submerged the

people. A car, a color television, or even a piece of clothing from a recognized brand. When athletes escape, the message to the ordinary Cuban, who has no relatives or any other ties to the ruling leadership, is that there is no way to thrive on their own within the system.

Another significant fact is the age range of those who drop out, which in the case of baseball reaches 14 years of age. When a country's future escapes, the present is totally meaningless. These leaks are just another variant of the great popular discontent, which also appears in protests over blackouts or any specific circumstance, but ends in cries of "Freedom" and "Down with the Dictatorship." Remember that sports were always used by the system to project an image of power and invincibility to the population, whether or not the athletes were aware of it. The very term coined for those who choose to be free and masters of their careers: "deserter", implies this vision in itself, being it a military classification, which implies that athletes are considered soldiers of the dictatorship.

Sports were never a right of the people, as the propaganda of the system falsely announces, but a subconscious vehicle of mental subordination. With this situation reversed from inside to outside the country, sport is now a vehicle of mental insubordination. People admire those who manage to escape, and applaud a new batch of exiled athletes who become increasingly vocal against the situation in which their countrymen live under tyranny. It is an extremely powerful dynamic, since athletes have always been essentially predecessors of today's so-called *influencers*, long before the existence of the Internet.

The issue goes far beyond the escape itself. The current mass "defections" of athletes represent a fracture within one of the pillars of the system, embedded within the citizen mentality. By deciding to be masters of their own destiny, they disprove the mythology of invincibility of the system by reversing in their favor one of the three great fallacies of the system: sports, health and education. They tell ordinary Cubans that sports, or any other activity, is a right of the people when they exercise it themselves, so they provide an example of

empowerment, and what can be achieved by breaking with established frameworks. It is an act of defiance, which is nourished by, and at the same time influences, the great demonstrations of rupture with the current state of affairs on the Island. The rules of the game are changing.