

by Roberto Méndez Rodríguez*

A few years ago nobody dared to imagine that the traditional Asian and European empires would tremble in the face of an intruder, which today is a candidate for consideration as one of the best women's judo team in the world: Cuba.

The performances of the Cuban judokas in recent Olympic, world and regional events are marking the beginning of a new era for the Cuban school in this discipline.

Regional tournaments were already being held in Europe in the 'sixties, and in 1983 Cuba formed its first national team to take part in the Panamerican games in Caracas, Venezuela.

The position of the Cuban women was further consolidated at the 1999 class-A tournaments in France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Hungary and Tunisia, attended by the leading female judokas. These results, along with the technical ability of the athletes, have a reason behind them: coach Ronaldo Veitía and his team of experts and specialists. This well-built man, a former national athlete, has brought new training methods designed specifically for men to the

The coach:

Ronaldo Veitía's

women's branch of the sport. In this way he manages to reconcile the combative nature of Cuban women with the strength that is required for this tough sport.

"The first thing to do was to change the opinion that exercises for men made women lose their femininity. It is amazing how many of them can now bench-press 90 and even 110 kg. No one had ever imagined that a woman could climb a rope using only her arms; today all of them do it as a regular part of their daily physical training", Veitía explains when describing his style of teaching.

A Belgian coach asked to see the planned training venue for the team, and was astonished to find only a bar, a rope, a ladder and a triceps-building machine. All of this equipment was set up outside, under a tree, in natural surroundings

Veitía was there, discussing plans for his group's next phase. *'Members and leaders of teams from Japan, Korea, France and other strong judo nations with a lot of economic clout have also expressed surprise at the level of our team. We have always insisted that the secret lies in the planning, frequency and scientific focus of the methods employed',* stressed Veitía, who has coached the women's judo team since 1986, when they had not even won a Central American or Caribbean title.

It has always been said that it is harder to work with women in sport. Ronaldo Veitía has also experienced this, but he has the satisfaction of having obtained very good results at competitions and in personal relations with his pupils.

His path since his departure from active sport has been marked by continuous success, first with children at the School for Sports Initiation at Martires de Barbados, which for ten consecutive years held the title of Champion of the National Schools Games. This was followed by a technical



Ronaldo Veitía (right) with his technical group.

venture in Mexico, where he gained his first experience working with teams of the so-called weaker sex. Upon his return, he was faced with the choice of either returning to grass-roots coaching or trying his hand at high-level performance.

His involvement in the women's national judo team triggered a series of victories that elevated him to world status. It comes as no surprise that all the countries excelling in this form of combat always wish to compete against Veitía's pupils.

An example is the traditional invitation to the Fukuoka



Ronaldo Veitía with his pupil Legna Verdecia.

Cup in Japan, toward the end of each year, when Asian experts and athletes follow the progress of Cuban women's judo.

At the last World Championships, they won one gold medal and three silver medals; with this same record, they would have triumphed at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in 1996 in Atlanta, where they were runners-up, with one gold, one silver and three bronze medals. Veitía's dream is now Sydney.

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Olympic Quiz*

Questions

1. Five women have won 10 or more Olympic medals. Can you name them?
2. 14 women have won five or more Olympic gold medals. Who were they?
3. Which woman has competed in the most Games of the Olympiad?
4. Which woman has competed in the most Olympic Winter Games?
5. Which two women spanned the longest time between their first and last appearances at the Olympics.
6. Up to 1998, there have been nine nations whose women have won more medals at the Olympics than their men. Who were they?
7. Who was the first woman to carry the Olympic Flame into the stadium at the opening ceremony of the Games of the Olympiad?
8. Who was the first woman to light the Olympic Flame at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games?
9. Who was the first woman to pronounce the Oath of the Athletes at the Opening Ceremony of the Games of the Olympiad and of the Olympic Winter Games?
10. Who were the first two women members of the International Olympic Committee?

*Compiled by Bill Mallon, vice president of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH).