

THE 'SYDNEY 2000' SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME, A REAL CHANCE FOR OLYMPIC SUCCESS

My country, Colombia, is experiencing times of economic and social anguish and violence, just like many other countries. For this reason, sport is not a national priority. Meeting the demands of top-level sport remains a very difficult challenge, despite huge efforts both by athletes themselves and the NOC. So how can a Colombian remain competitive and fulfil the requirements of top-level sport, particularly in a sport such as fencing, which is dominated by European countries?

After twelve years in France, where I have spent most of my sporting and professional career, I returned to my homeland in order to pass on my experiences as a top-level sportsman and sports psychologist. At the same time, I was determined to continue competing at the highest level and to qualify for the Olympic Games for a fourth time. However, I quickly realized that fencing facilities in Colombia were still too inadequate for me to achieve such a goal, with a desperate shortage of specialized equipment (only two pistes for more than forty fencers), scoring equipment was twenty years old, and very few fencing masters were sufficiently trained to top level.

by Mauricio Rivas*

I was visited by my fencing friends from other countries just before the World Cup in Bogota and seeing my training conditions left them speechless. During my previous time in France, training for the Seoul 1998, Barcelona 1992 and Atlanta 1996 Games, I had made use of excellent facilities ideal for Olympic preparation

(top-level fencing masters, high-quality training opponents, superb sports equipment, etc). In particular, I realized how detrimental such a lack of facilities could be and how difficult it was to remain competitive at the highest level.

The situation was not made any easier by the extremely tough selection criteria laid down by the International Federation. Only two places were made available for the whole American

continent, based on individual world rankings (using the best seven results from the 17 World Cup events on the calendar). Already I could see my chances of qualifying for the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in 2000 fading away, until my NOC decided to submit my name for the 'Sydney 2000' scholarship programme for athletes. The application was accepted!

The scholarship enabled me to enjoy the comforts that top-level sportsmen require. I was helped by an experienced coach thanks to the Cuban Fencing Federation sending someone with excellent credentials. I was also able to train with high-quality opponents in France, Cuba and Germany, where I was warmly welcomed in a spirit of sportsmanship and international cooperation.



Mauricio Rivas (right) during his match against Australian Nick Hefferman at the Sydney Games.

Olympic Solidarity

This is very important in a combat sport such as fencing, particularly since there are very few top-level fencers in Colombia. Without the help of Olympic Solidarity, which covered most of the cost of my participation in the qualifying competition, all my efforts would have been in vain.

The scholarship enabled me not only to qualify for the Games in Sydney, but also to remain competitive, since I managed to reach the last sixteen, as I had in both Seoul and Atlanta.

If top-level sport is, in accordance with the Olympic ideals of competition and democracy, to offer every person maximum opportunity, athletes must be guaranteed a basic level of facilities to help them improve their performance. At a time when economic and social differences are becoming increasingly obvious in Olympic sport, I have seen, having received a scholarship from

Olympic Solidarity, that this scheme offers athletes a genuine chance to prepare for, qualify for and succeed in the Olympic Games.

However, the Olympic Games are by no means just a personal event, especially in my country. It must be recognized that sport, or rather we sportsmen and -women, have a social function, which is to transmit a positive, hopeful image to our fellow citizens. In our modern society, dominated by instant success, easy money and the balance of power, and where there is little room for the disadvantaged, it is vital, among other things, to pass on values such as the need to work for success, respect for rules and opponents, and the possibility of improvement through one's own efforts. These ideals, transmitted through sport, are a way of telling our young people that they can distinguish

themselves and gain enormous satisfaction by working very hard and making the most of their own abilities.

The 'Sydney 2000' scholarship programme also sends a message of hope to young athletes who often give up competing before they have even matured as sportsmen and -women because of a lack of funds. They can rest assured that they do have a chance of remaining truly competitive. Certainly, the feeling I had during the fifteen months of preparation for the Olympics was that I was being supported in a practical way.

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OLYMPIC GAMES

Participation and Olympic medals at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta in 1996 and the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney in 2000 were

the topic of a study carried out by Nikolay Gueorguiev, available from the Olympic Museum Studies Centre in Lausanne.

Research was also conducted into medals and diplomas obtained per continent at the last Games in Sydney. The results are as follows:

Continent	Gold medals	Silver medals	Bronze medals	Total number of medals	Diplomas (Finalists placed 4th to 8th)
Africa	9	12	16	37	68
America	56	56	67	179	243
Asia	52	44	51	147	209
Europe	167	162	174	503	835
Oceania	17	25	20	62	87
Total	301	299	328	928	1442