

# The Ideology of Cuban Sport

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## Introduction

The Cuban regime rejects the neo-marxist argument that sport promotes elitism and anti-collectivist ideas. Indeed, the Cubans view sport not only as beneficial for health and discipline, but also as an activity which can contribute to the formation of the new (Communist) man. Like the workers' sports movements between the world wars, the Cuban leaders believe that the context, not the nature of sport, determines its effect on the population.<sup>1</sup> In a Marxist state, the Cubans argue, everyone has, and should have, the right to participate in sport as a part of their all-round development. Thus, the Castro regime has promoted mass participation, emphasised all-round education, and the ideological example of its top athletes. From the Cuban point of view, Cuba's international "superstars," trained in special sports schools, are not the products of elitism, but reflect the improvements brought about by the revolution, particularly the increased access to sports activities.

## Sport: A Right

The principal ideological commitment of the Cuban state is to guarantee that every Cuban has access to sports activities. An important step in this was to ensure that workers had time for recreational activities. In 1966, this was guaranteed in labour legislation. Workers were given the right to paid leisure time and also vacations with pay.<sup>2</sup> The right of all citizens to have access to sports activities was stated clearly in the 1976 Cuban Constitution:

*Article 8: The Socialist State*

- b) as the power of the people and for the people, guarantees that no-one be left without access to studies, culture and sports;

*Article 38:*

- i) the state promotes, foments and develops physical education and sports in all their forms as a means of education and contribution to the integral development of the citizens;

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1. E. Wagner, "Sport after Revolution: A Comparative Study of Cuba and Nicaragua," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 1 (1982): 65-73; J. M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin, 1984), p. 14.

2. J. A. Bustamente, "Our Labour Legislation," *Granma Weekly Review*, 30 Oct. 1966, p. 2.

[and]

*Article 51:*

Everyone has the right to physical education, sports and recreation.

Enjoyment of this right is assured by including the teaching and practice of physical education and sports in the study programs of the national education system; and by the broad nature of the means and the teaching placed at the service of the people, which makes possible the practice of sports and recreation on a mass basis. . . .<sup>3</sup>

These laws, and the abolition of entry charges for sports events in March 1967,<sup>4</sup> signified the longstanding official policy of the Cuban leaders. This policy of sport for all, was intended to ensure equal opportunity for all Cubans, to diversify the sports activities available, and to increase awareness about the availability and benefits of physical activities. When the *Instituto Nacional de Deporte, Educación Física y Recreación* (INDER) was established in early 1961, a participation campaign was simultaneously launched. The campaign was said to have five basic principles:

- D) the elimination of exclusive sports, the elimination of the practice of limiting athletic activities to a sports elite;
- 2) the institution of a system of selection with equal access;
- 3) an emphasis on territorial, rather than team allegiance;
- 4) the integration of sports administration, and;
- 5) diversification of the activities available. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Sports participation on a mass basis was to be promoted so that it would become a tradition.<sup>6</sup> Sport was designed to encourage Cubans to participate not just in sport but in all activities. Mass participation is the primary ideological commitment in Cuba in the area of sports.

[S]ports development cannot and should not be measured by the results of international events. by the medals won or the victories achieved. These results will always be consequences. The main cause, the fundamental objective, is a greater participation by the people.<sup>7</sup>

In order to guarantee mass participation, the Cuban state utilizes the pyramid theory, which originates not from the writings of Marx, Engels or Lenin, but from the Olympic philosophy of the founder of the modern Olympics, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The basis of this philosophy is that mass participation will produce world class athletes, and that international success will encourage, in

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3. "Constitution of the Republic of Cuba." *Granma Weekly Review*. 7 March 1976. Special Supplement. pp. 2-11

4. "Free Admission to all Sports Events." *Granma Weekly Review*: 19 March 1967. p. 3.

5. J. González Barros. "On Sport." *Granma Weekly Review*. 26 Jan. 1969. p. 8.

6. A. Pérez Herrero. cited in S. Barros. "2nd National Workers Games Inaugurated." *Granma Weekly Review*. 25 May 1975. p. 3.

7. J. García Bango, "The Cuban Revolution Experiences in the Development of Physical Education, Sports and Recreation," *Granma Weekly Review* 10 Sept. 1972, p. 8.

turn, greater participation. In Cuba, this pyramid system is combined with a linear progression from local to national level. The ideal of this approach is to make certain that all citizens have access to sports, and therefore, an opportunity to demonstrate and pursue their sporting abilities as part of their all-round development.

*Sport and Human Development.*

*All-round Development.*

Karl Marx attacked the dualism of his era. People he said, were intended to be whole beings. Neither mind nor body was more important, although rationality did, and should, dominate human behaviour. Both mind and body had to be developed equally, with prejudice against neither. This all-round development included gymnastics for physical development.<sup>8</sup> The socialist nations adhere to this position and view sports and physical education as major contributors to the physical side of human development, but not at the expense of developing the mind.

Cuba's leaders also hold this attitude, and view sports, as all culture, as having a major role in the formation of well-rounded people.

The development of sports is present in the very essence of the Revolutionary ideals, with the purpose of putting all material and cultural resources at the disposal of the entire population in order to shape the integral man.<sup>9</sup>

The importance which Cuba's revolutionary regime places on all-round development has resulted in an ideological commitment to both education and sport: "education and sport are regarded as pillars of the Revolution and neither must be developed at the expense of the other."<sup>10</sup> This attitude to development ensures that even in the special sports schools, talented athletes must study and work, not just concentrate on sports. Cuba's ideological position is that a champion athlete is not a champion unless she or he is also a good student, a good worker and a good revolutionary.<sup>11</sup> The island's best athletes are meant to be examples of ideological awareness and of the potential for all-round development.

[P]hysical education and sports constitute means for obtaining an integral formation, that harmonizes the potential of human nature in order to develop citizens who are strong physically, mentally and morally. These citizens must always be willing to give the best of themselves for the benefit of society, progress and the well-being of humanity, with the most profound internationalist spirit and free of all individualism and selfishness.<sup>12</sup>

The first sentence of the preceding statement might have come from any

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8. K. Marx, cited in J. Riordan, "Sport and Communism." in *Sport, Culture and Ideology*. ed J. Hargreaves (London, 1982). p. 214.

9. *Cuba '67 Image of a Country* (Havana, 1967). p. 323.

10. R. Pickering. "Cuba." in *Sport Under Communism*. ed. J. Riordan (Canberra. 1978). p. 167.

11. F. Castro, cited in J. and P. Griffiths, *Cuba: The Second Decade* (London. 1979). p. 254.

12. García Bango. "Cuban Revolution," p. 8.

socialist nation. The remainder of the statement, however, has a distinctly Cuban flavour in its emphasis on internationalism and a collectivist spirit. These commitments are crucial components in the character of the new man—the communist man, free of capitalist values—which Guevara sought to develop as a necessary addition to the development of communist structures under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Not only the state, but also the people, should move towards communism. To do one without the other was pointless.

*Sport and the New Man.*

The creation of the new man in Cuba is a goal which was, and is central to the revolution. Both education and sport had essential roles in this. Marx stated that leisure time is the time “for education, intellectual development, the fulfillment of social functions, for social relations and for the free exercise of physical and intellectual forces.”<sup>13</sup> In Cuba, this leisure time is considered vital for developing communists: “free time will be instrumental in forming the social outlook of the new man; a man capable of living in a communist society.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Fidel Castro’s followers, the attitudes of the communist man, which could be promoted via sport, include modesty, brotherhood, internationalism and a cooperative spirit. Sport had to be uncorrupted by capitalism—profit from sport was in opposition not only to worthwhile sport, but also to building a communist society.

We want clean, pure sports, in which the masses participate. We encourage sports activities as an instrument for forging the new man of the Communist society.<sup>15</sup>

[and]

[S]ports. . . are. . . ‘an essential component of the communist training of our new generations. Sports will never become a tool for deformation. [or] chauvenism . . . Rather, they will always be a positive factor teaching modesty, brotherhood and internationalism.’<sup>16</sup>

Sport and revolutionary commitment would be united, according to the Castroist ideology. The sports champions had to be dedicated revolutionaries and behave as such, as an example to all. Similarly, revolutionaries had to participate in sport. They had to develop intellectually and physically. Castro stated, on one occasion, that he “. . . did not know a young revolutionary who was not a sportsperson.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to emphasizing all-round development and ideological awareness, Cuba’s efforts to create the new man, placed particular emphasis on collective attitudes, especially among the young. In pre-schools teachers (and

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13. K. Marx, cited in R. P. Pereira. “Leisure Time and Recreation,” *Granma Weekly Review* 23 Oct. 1966. p. 2

14. *Ibid.*, p. 2

15. Editorial. “Our First Gold Medal.” *Granma Weekly Review*, 19 June 1966. p. 3.

16. L. Orlando Dominguez, “Sports in our Country are an Integral Part of our People’s Education,” *Granma Weekly Review*, 21 Sept. 1975. p. 9.

17. F. Castro, cited in E. A. Wagner, “Baseball in Cuba.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 18 (Summer 1984): 117

parents) are advised to encourage children to take part in group activities in order to learn to respect others.<sup>18</sup> Physical exercise is encouraged in groups, not just to create selfless attitudes, but also to aid physical development.<sup>19</sup> Separation from others was to be used as punishment, thus collective activities were to be sources of pleasure and praise, thereby encouraging a cooperative outlook.<sup>20</sup> Sport and physical education were given a major role in ideological development, especially among the young, the new men of the future generation. However, sport was also seen as an important part of physical growth and discipline.

*The Value of Sport.*

We must consider sports as having a complementary role in our lives; not fundamental but very important.<sup>21</sup>

Apparently, the Cubans do not consider sport to be a basic *need*. Nevertheless, the Castroist leaders obviously view sport as important, attributing sport with worthwhile *values*. Apart from its role in all-round development and in the creation of the new man, the revolutionary leaders attribute sport with an important function in ensuring the health and happiness of the Cuban population.

[W]hat counts most in our philosophy is not a new record, a gold medal but the general health of the people, the harmonious development of all the potentialities inherent in our people.<sup>22</sup>

The valuing of sport for fitness in Cuba extends to attributing sport with a capacity for mental rehabilitation in cases of mental illness.

[P]hysical activities in groups produce better social adjustment, give a deeper dream and sleep, reduce anxiety, and help moderate rehabilitation.”

General health and fitness was considered vital for developing identity of both a national and personal nature. According to John Griffiths, sports, especially in schools, can combat alienation and the division between physical and mental labour.<sup>24</sup> It would indeed be significant if sport in Cuba has been given a role in breaking down the division of labour, which in Marx and Engels’ views, helps to recreate class divisions. However, while sports may be used to help combat the division between physical and mental *activities*, it seems rather optimistic to claim that this extends to the corresponding labour divisions. The Cubans do, however, perceive sport as a valuable activity in the development of the revolution in terms of teaching discipline and determination to citizens. Sport is said to aid in the formation of these elements of a person’s character,

18. M. Leiner with R. Ubell. *Children are the Revolution : Day Care in Cuba*. (Harmondsworth. 1974). p. 48.

19. J. Griffiths, *Cuba*. p. 252

20. Leiner, *Children are the Revolution*. pp 48. 20.

21. J. Llanusa. “Speaks From the Cane Fields About Sports.” *Granma Weekly Review*. 17 April 1966. p. 10.

22. R. R. Aguilera, “A Sociological Profile of Educational Sport in Cuba.” *International Review, of Sport Sociology* 2 (1973): 121

23. Directors of a psychiatric hospital in Santiago de Cuba. cited in Wagner, “Baseball in Cuba.” p. 118.

24. J. Griffiths, *Cuba*. p. 247.

and discipline and determination are regarded as vital for the economic development of Cuba.

[T]he systematic practice of sports and physical education aid in the formation of the personality and of a strong character that is needed to face up to all the obstacles and difficulties involved in overcoming the deficient structure of underdevelopment.<sup>25</sup>

[and]

[S]ports are a means of developing discipline. education. health and good habits. Sports are an antidote to vice.<sup>26</sup>

The values that the Castroists have attributed to sport are traditional, reminding one of the values held in nineteenth century public schools in Victorian England. For the Cuban leaders, this is not an anomaly. Neither is their support of sport as important in combat training and in increasing workers' productivity. Marx, in one of his few statements on physical activities, also noted the role of sport in raising productivity levels.<sup>27</sup> Attributing to sport these traditional uses and values, in opposition to the New Left critiques of sport as a counter-revolutionary form of amusement, is not contradictory to the Marxist society, in the opinion of the Cuban leaders, because it is the *context* of sport, not the *nature* of sport which governs its effect on participants and spectators. Sport is not regarded as something fluid, but it is believed to have values which are good when sport is removed from the corrupting influences of capitalism.

### *Integrating Sport and Revolution*

The Castroist leaders view sport as a crucial part of the revolution. The practice of sport, according to the Cubans, is governed by the nature of the society: "the extent to which sport can be practiced . . . and the results of this practice are conditioned by the social structure backing them."<sup>18</sup> The Castroists believe that the good values of sport and success in international events are accentuated in a revolutionary society.

[T]he possibilities for the development of physical education, sports and recreation are subordinate to the concepts of man and society; to economic, political and social structural changes;"

[and]

Only with a revolutionary concept of sports, as an instrument of education and culture, as an instrument of the people's welfare, health and happiness, can sports yield its best fruits?

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25. García Bango, "*Cuban Revolution*," p. 8.

26. F. Castro Ruz, cited in J. Griffiths, *Cuba*, p. 248.

27. K. Marx, cited in J. Riordan, "Sports & Communism," p. 214.

28. Aguilera, "Educational Sport in Cuba," p. 119.

29. García Bango, *Cuban Revolution*, p. 9

30. F. Castro Ruz "Sports an Instrument of the People's Education, Culture, Health and Happiness," *Granma Weekly Review*, 3 July 1966, p. 7.

The Cuban leaders do not believe sport can be open to everyone in non-communist societies. Under capitalism, argue the Castroists, sport is corrupted by the profit motive and the resulting exploitation of the masses, as in pre-1959 Cuba.

*Pre-Revolutionary Cuba through Revolutionary Eyes.*

According to these Caribbean leaders, sport in Cuba before the revolution, because of its capitalist setting, was discriminatory, a privilege, not a right. As a consequence of the capitalist environment, and also because of professionalism, Cuba performed poorly in international sports, except baseball. Teofilo Stevenson captured the Cuban view of capitalist sport: "sportsmen in the west [under capitalism] are a commodity."<sup>31</sup> Sport, declared Castro, became entertainment and business for the rich in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Athletes, he said, were pieces of merchandise and sport was degraded by gambling and drugs.<sup>32</sup>

*The Revolution as a Setting for Sport.*

Soon after coming to power, the Cuban revolutionary regime banned professional sport, gambling, and later gate charges for sporting events, as well as making sports facilities open to all Cubans. The Cubans claim that sport is not an instrument of politics, but the exact reverse. The revolutionary state is the instrument of the people, and, therefore, of sport. Progress in Cuba as a consequence of the revolution, made possible improvements in sport both in the level of participation and international performances. Juantorena, the well known Cuban runner, expressed this belief in the need for a revolutionary setting for sports progress:

it is necessary to think of the revolution as having created everything including our victories in sport. The revolution created the necessary conditions, health care and facilities.<sup>33</sup>

By making sports available to all, argue the Fidelistas, sport can develop properly-uncorrupted-and consequently standards will improve.

*Sport: A Vanguard Force.*

As a result of the Cubans ideological argument that sport is shaped by the type of society it occurs in, Cuban successes are important. Sport became an example of the progress of the revolution-a vanguard force as Barros calls it.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the athletes had to present themselves as revolutionaries, as an example not only to other Cubans, but also to other nations, especially third world nations, and most of all to other Latin American countries. The Cuban baseball player, Alarcón, expressed the attitude which Cuba's leaders hope to

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31. T. Stevenson, cited in S. Freeman & R. Boyce, *Behind the Scenes of Sports: Sports Behind the Iron Curtain* (Sydney, 1980). p. 73

32. F. Castro Ruz, cited in Pickering, "Cuba." p. 152; F. Castro Ruz, Main Report to the First Cuban Congress. *Granma Weekly Review*, pp. 1-8.

33. A Juantorena, cited in T. Slack, "Cuba's Political Involvement in Sport Since the Socialist Revolution." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 6 (1982): 57.

34. Barros, "Cuban Revolution." p. 9.

develop in all Cubans, when he stated, after he was incorrectly said to have defected from Cuba, that:

if one day they should say that I have left Cuba, this will only be true if I have become a guerilla in Latin America.<sup>35</sup>

Sport is regarded as a vanguard in the revolution, not just because it allegedly proves the progress which the revolution has brought to Cuba, but also because the athletes represent the ideal of revolutionary consciousness and all-round development. Sport is a vanguard in, and for the revolution.

### *Conclusion.*

Cuba is ideologically committed to mass participation in sport for the purposes of health and all-round development. Sport also reflects and encourages the ideology of the Cuban Revolution through promoting collectivist ideas and the development of the attitudes of the new man. Cuba's leaders maintain a belief in many traditional values of sport, including health, discipline and character building. Competition, despite the neo-marxist arguments against it, has not been eliminated in Cuba; it is in fact, viewed as the life-blood of sport.<sup>36</sup> The Cubans sought to change the context of sport not its nature. Sport had to be integrated into the revolution and fulfill the role of vanguard for the continued development of the revolution.

### *The Problem of Elitism.*

Cuba's ideal of a marxist society, which should be egalitarian, freed from the division of labour and any form of elitism, either unnatural (privilege, power, wealth or status) or natural (ability). Cuba cannot yet hope for all of these ideals, as it must concern itself with providing basic needs. According to Engels, only when production satisfies basic needs, can people have the opportunity to freely develop and exercise their physical and mental faculties.<sup>37</sup> In sport, Cuba has at least begun to combat the division between physical and mental activities by preventing any one individual from dedicating all or none of their time to physical activities. However, because the athletically talented in Cuba receive privileges such as special training, extra food, and better housing, the Cuban state is creating a sports elite—a meritocracy—in contradiction to the marxist ideal. These athletes, however, cannot function as a class in the marxist understanding of class. They cannot pass on their sports privileges to their children, nor can they *control* the distribution of wealth or goods. However, the athletes do have interests to protect, which may place them in conflict with the majority of Cubans.

Although Cuban athletes do not appear to have entered into political power as much as their Soviet or East German counterparts, Stevenson was elected to the

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<sup>35</sup> Alarcon, cited in J. Llanusa, "Llanusa Reports to the People on Fifth Pan-American Games," *Granma Weekly Review*, 27 August 1967, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Pickering, "Cuba," p. 158.

<sup>37</sup> F. Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1968), p. 426.

“People’s Power” national assembly of Cuba. The ideal of sport for all is compromised by the existence of a natural elite—the sports meritocracy. The special privileges for top athletes, particularly if they can be passed on to the athletes descendents, may represent a serious threat to the ideal of a communist society. The sports elite certainly operates in opposition to the development of egalitarian attitudes, even if it is true that international success encourages greater participation in sports activities.