

The Rise of Modern Sport in Guatemala and the First Central American Games

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Guatemala's tradition in "sport" goes back many centuries—to the Mayan court ball game and, during colonial times and the first 70 years of independence, bull and cock fighting and horse racing. However, organized modern sport in Guatemala arose in the 1890s and began to expand and thrive in the early twentieth century.

The Guarda Viejo Tennis Club was founded in 1895, and over the next few years there appeared additional sport clubs, some with diversified interests and others specialized in cycling, riding, polo, tennis, and roller skating. Many clubs were formed as much for social as for sport purposes.

Guatemalans returning home after attending school in England introduced soccer to their friends, and in 1902 they formed the Guatemala Foot-Ball Club. In 1904 three more soccer clubs were founded, and the first tournament was held to compete for the Central American Cup. Invitations to participate in this tournament were sent to the other Central American republics, but no favorable replies were received. Young men who had attended school in the United States brought home their love for baseball, and several baseball clubs were active by the early 1900s.

Some of the important personalities in the development of Guatemalan sport were foreigners (especially British, American, German and Central American) employed in commerce and agriculture in the country.

In 1898 the dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera decreed that the end of the school year in October would be celebrated annually in a “Festival of Minerva”, dedicated to the young students and their teachers. Almost from the beginning these festivals included sport activities, and by 1917 the *Minervalias* had expanded from one to five days of activities that included soccer and tennis matches; foot races and *carreras de cintas*; fencing, boxing and wrestling; and gymnastics demonstrations. The other major sporting event of 1917 was a five-day program to celebrate Estrada Cabrera’s birthday. It included soccer matches, horse racing, bull fights by amateurs, and an acrobatic demonstration.

A series of earthquakes began on Christmas Day of 1917 and by early January, Guatemala City was largely destroyed. Playing fields became filled with shacks and tents of the homeless. At the end of 1918 the country and region were trying to survive a major influenza epidemic, and the congregation of people for sport or any other purpose was discouraged.

However, in 1919 activity in soccer, baseball, tennis, and golf surged back with renewed vigor in the capital, and soccer and baseball teams also existed in a few other areas of the country. The major newspaper of the capital, *El Diario de Centro-América*, suggested the inclusion of “Olympic Games” as part of the celebration of Estrada Cabrera’s birthday, and the 4-day program that was held included soccer and baseball matches, track and field events, and an 18-mile bicycle race, along with bull fights, *carreras de cintas*, and an “acrobatic circus”.

The *Diario* then proposed that more “Olympic Games” be held during the Christmas celebrations at year’s end, and they eventually took place on three days of the first week of January, 1920. This meet consisted of track and field, Greco-Roman wrestling, and tug-of-war. It was the first of a series of annual competitions that became known as the National Athletic Games. Participation was restricted to members of sport clubs, and the clear winner was the Hercules Sport and Social Club.

In April of 1920, after twenty-two years of dictatorship, Estrada Cabrera was overthrown and Carlos Herrera installed as president. With the rise to power of Herrera’s Unionist Party, the movement toward federation of the five Central American republics received encouragement, and in 1921 the pact of union was signed by El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Nineteen twenty-one became the greatest year in Guatemalan sport history. A swimming race was held in Lake Amatitlán and the second National Games were expanded to include cycling, freestyle wrestling, and fencing. It was decided to hold a multisport international competition in Guatemala City as part of the centennial celebration of Guatemalan and Central American independence. El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama were invited to participate in these first Central American Games. All sent delegations except the latter two. The Games were held over the period, September 11-18, 1921, and included track and field, baseball, soccer, tennis, and swimming. Most of the medals were won by Guatemalan athletes.

The plan was for future Games to be held periodically on a regular basis, the second in El Salvador in 1923. However, in December of 1921 the unionist government of Herrera was overthrown, Guatemala withdrew from the federation, and the 1923 Games were not held.