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## **Sport *a la Tica* and the Absence of Costa Rica in the “Central American Olympics” of 1926**

In 1988 and 1996, Costa Rican swimmers won the first Olympic medals in the country's history. Although Olympic glories have been few for Costa Rica since its first participation, with a single athlete in the 1936 Games, enthusiasm for sport is not new in the nation. Costa Rica sent athletes to the Independence Centennial Games in Guatemala City in 1921, where they won the soccer competition and a number of medals in track and field. Although the nation did not participate in the first regional competition in the Western Hemisphere recognized by the International Olympic Committee, held in Mexico City in 1926. Costa Rican teams have participated in all but two succeeding editions of this festival.

Soccer was introduced in Costa Rica in the late nineteenth century by Britons and by young Costa Ricans who had attended British schools. Baseball was started by American and Jamaican residents in Limon, on the Atlantic coast, and in other areas by Costa Ricans who had studied in the United States. Other sports that developed during the early years of the twentieth century included track and field, basketball, cycling, tennis, and polo. Costa Ricans participated in Guatemala's pioneering multi-sport festival in 1921 and held their own “Central American Olympics” at year-end, 1924. International competition took place in track and field, basketball, and baseball against Canal Zone and Nicaraguan athletes. In 1926, Peruvian, Cuban, Colombian, and Ecuadorian soccer teams visited Costa Rica for matches against several of the principal sport clubs. The Costa Rican club, Herediano, travelled to Jamaica for soccer matches. Women played basketball and a group of *senoritas* got together to organize soccer teams, surely a first for Central America.

Sponsored by the IOC, Central American Games were held in Mexico City in October and November, 1926. Fourteen teams, including Costa Rica, were invited to take part, but only three did-Mexico, Cuba, and Guatemala. Given the high level of sport interest and activity in Costa Rica, the experience and success of Costa Rican teams in international competition, and the country's relative nearness to Mexico, it seems strange that Costa Rica did not send an athletic delegation to the 1926 Games.

Early predictions of financial support for the trip did not materialize. The Congress voted 20,000 colones (5000 dollars) for the athletes, but these funds were withheld. However, benefit events and private contributions could have covered much of the travel expenses. San Jose newspapers were great promoters of sport in the 1920s and they could have conducted fund-raising campaigns. Costa Rican soccer teams had found the resources to travel to other countries previously (Nicaragua in 1920, Guatemala in 1921 and 1925, Jamaica in 1926), and a number of soccer and baseball players could have afforded to make the trip at their own expense. It was not essential to send a large delegation, as the soccer players could have participated in track and field as they did in Guatemala in 1921, and some of them were also basketball players.

El Salvador's excuse for not attending the 1926 festival in Mexico City was insufficient preparation of their athletes. In the case of Costa Rica, the successes of the soccer club Herediano in Jamaica and of Herediano and La Libertad against Cuba's Fortuna in San Jose earlier in 1926 made Costa Rica optimistic about soccer success in Mexico. In addition, Costa Rica had competed reasonably well in basketball and track and field against Canal Zone athletes the previous year. But the Congressman who introduced the bill for financial support of Costa Rica's athletes in Mexico was a member of the opposition Partido Reformista. President Jimenez supported the beleaguered conservative government of General Chamorro in Nicaragua, at least to the extent of placing obstacles in the way of Costa Rican liberals' attempts to aid the rebelling Nicaraguan liberals. Mexico and Guatemala were (clandestinely) helping the rebels, and Jimenez's refusal to send an athletic team to Mexico City signalled the solidarity of the Costa Rican government with Emiliano Chamorro and the Nicaraguan conservatives.