

Brazil badminton ace makes journey from favela to center court

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For Ygor Coelho de Oliveira, the distance from his home in a Rio slum to the Olympic badminton stadium is less than 10 miles, but the journey took years of determination from an entire family.

Born in a favela in western Rio de Janeiro and trained in the badminton gym his father built, the 19-year-old Olympian played for years on the international circuit to qualify for the Rio Games, fighting injuries, financial barriers and self-doubt.

His Olympic debut was the first time he had ever played an elite badminton match in front of a home crowd - and it was quite a crowd.

Hundreds of friends and neighbors decked in yellow and green came to see him play at center court, making the trip from the Chacrinha favela, one of countless Rio shantytowns plagued by poor public services and violence among warring drug gangs.

They led ear-splitting cheers from the top of the packed stands, chanting his name, singing patriotic songs and electrifying the cavernous badminton arena.

"I've never seen a badminton crowd like that anywhere in the world - and it was for me!" said Oliveira. "I did everything I could on the court to give back what the fans gave to me."

Nerves got the better of the young athlete in the first set, but he settled down and took the second from Ireland's Scott Evans, kicking off delirium in the stands.

Even after Evans clinched the third set, Oliveira walked off the court smiling at the standing ovation and proud of what it meant to be there.

"If I managed to make it out of Chacrinha, just think what the other kids in my community - or in any community - can do, in sport and in their lives," he said.

On Sunday, Father's Day in Brazil, he shared a moment with his dad, Sebastiao Dias de Oliveira, who built the Miratus badminton center as a social project for Chacrinha and then watched his son vault into the sport's top tiers.

"I thanked him for never giving up on me," said the younger Oliveira, reflecting on how his father invested savings in the young athlete's training before they could get sponsorships.

"We could have given up, and I considered it several times," he added. "To thank him on Father's Day, in the middle of the Olympics, was a special moment."