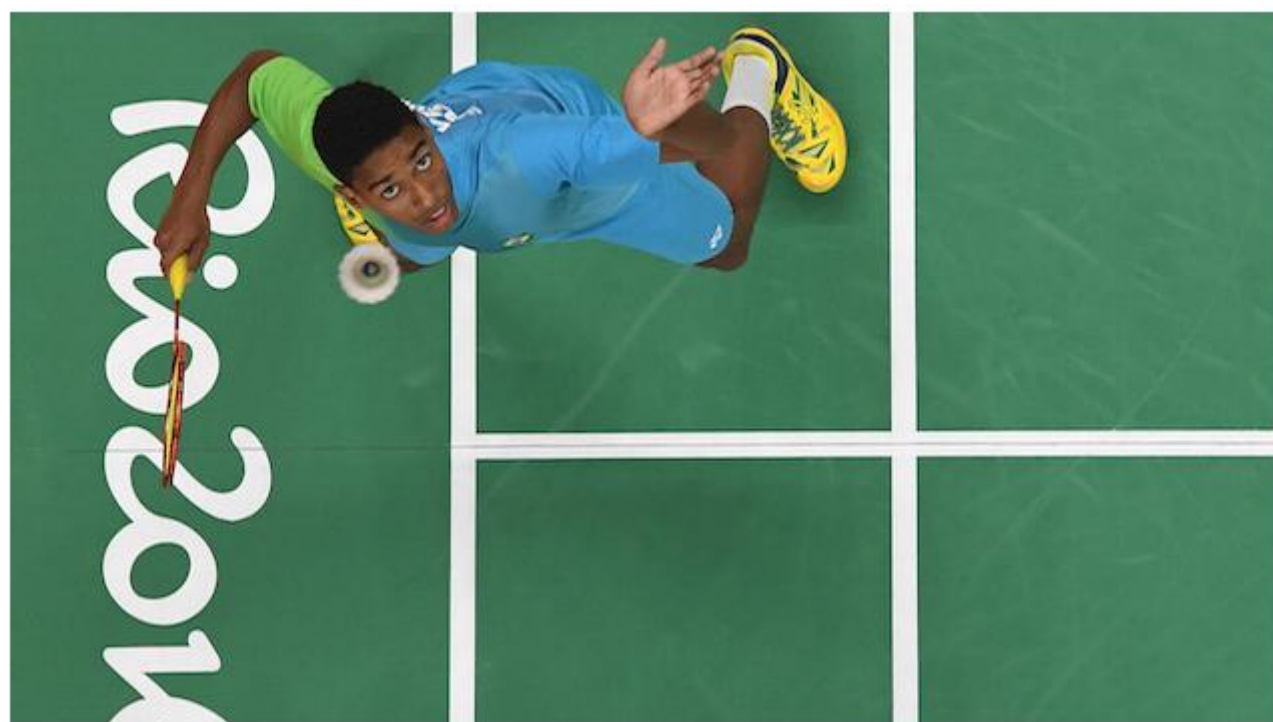


A Hometown Hero Made Badminton Rio 2016's Most Unexpectedly Exciting Sport

Ygor Coelho de Oliveira's unlikely story garnered him a lot of hometown love

By Anna Jean Kaiser | August 30, 2016 | 10:38am

Photos courtesy Getty Images



Brazilian fans love to cheer for the underdog nearly as much as they love to root for their fellow Brazilians. This meant that one of the most passionate crowds at the Games wasn't at swimming, gymnastics or volleyball—it was at badminton, where Brazil was being represented for the first time, by one of the lowest-ranked competitors in the whole tournament.

Ygor Coelho de Oliveira is an unlikely sports hero. He was born and raised in one of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, low-income neighborhoods sprinkled throughout the city where the state often have a minimal presence. His dad, Sebastião de Oliveira, was raised in an orphanage; Sebastião spent his summers collecting recyclables for cash at Rio's sprawling Gramacho dump alongside his mother.

But Sebastião made it out of Gramacho. After he became a high school P.E. teacher, got married and had a few children, he became determined to give back to the favela community that he had adopted as his home.

This is where the story gets peculiar—in soccer-dominant Brazil, how did Ygor’s dad land on a badminton social project? A colleague of his came back from a trip to Italy with a badminton racket. After batting the birdie back and forth, he decided that creating the Miratus Badminton Center would become his destiny.

After many years of hard work, he built a four-court badminton center, attached to his home in the favela. Over two hundred kids from the community pass through there each day, but the center’s biggest success story is Ygor.

Ygor and his father have captured Brazilian hearts — their story has appeared on the nation’s largest television networks, as well as on the likes of CNN, the BBC and in the pages of [the New York Times](#)—attracting throngs of locals to a sport that many Brazilians barely even knew existed.

Even with few regular fans of badminton, the excitement was palpable at Ygor’s Olympic badminton debut. When they announced his name at the start of the match, the crowd went wild —some 50 kids from the badminton school were in the stands, dressed in their canary yellow and green badminton tee shirts. His father, overwhelmed by local TV cameras, had a Brazilian flag draped on his shoulders and a glint in his eye.

“The experience was fantastic, the stadium was packed, all my friends and family were there. I wasn’t expecting it to be so full,” Ygor said in an interview last week.

“I never imagined that the crowd would be this animated. It was the only time that’s happened in my career, or in my life. I’ve never seen a crowd cheering like that for me,” he said, pointing out that when he’s seen big crowds at badminton matches before, although it’s in countries like China and Indonesia, where the sport is incredibly popular—and where the public isn’t rooting for him.

Ygor won the first few points, but quickly fell behind to his opponent, Scott Evans, a 28 year-old from Ireland, who was ranked 23rd at the height of his career. Ygor is ranked 64th. He lost the first set 8 to 21.

For the second set, they switched sides and Ygor began to come back, at one point with a substantial lead. The crowd became electric, cheering for him with the same fervor that they have when rooting for their soccer team. Brazilian flags waved everywhere and chants of Yyygoorrr rang throughout the convention center turned badminton stadium.

Ygor was stronger in the second set. He said that while the roaring crowds made him nervous at first, he was able to pick up some of the positive energy from the crowd in the second set.

After winning a few consecutive points, Ygor clenched his fists and screamed and his teammates from the badminton center, alongside hundreds of fans, loudly cheered and waved Brazilian flags. They were quick to switch to bellowing boos when the point went to his opponent.

Ygor was nearing a win but his Irish opponent was starting to catch up to him. Badminton sets go to 21. The score was 20 to 19, with Ygor in the lead.

On his last serve, the crowd chanted his name and whistled and then went silent as the point started. After a few back and forths, the Irishman's return hit the net and the whole stadium jumped to their feet and erupted in applause.

Ygor had won a set. It was, in all likelihood, the most enthusiastic badminton game ever played in Brazil.

"I thought the building was going to fall down from so much cheering! It was a lot of noise," Ygor said.

It didn't matter that he went on to lose the third set, 8 to 21. Given all that Ygor and his family have overcome, winning that one set was, without a doubt, a standout Olympic moment, and the crowd certainly knew it.

"I'm so happy, many more will come," his father said in the stands after the match, with a huge smile on his face and surrounded by his students. Indeed, badminton players generally have a long lifespan—some of the world's best players are in their 30s. Ygor is only 19. Now he's off to France to train with some of the top badminton players and coaches.

"In Tokyo 2020, I hope to make it past the group stage. If I can pass the group stage, then we'll see what happens," he said.

<https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/08/a-hometown-hero-brought-rio-2016s-most-unexpected.html>