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Historical notes on the sport of swimming in Pinar del Río

Apuntes históricos sobre el deporte de natación, en Pinar del Río

Notas históricas sobre o esporte da natação em Pinar del Río

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Swimming was born from the need that human beings have had to adapt to the environment that surrounds them, and one of them is the aquatic environment. If it is taken into account that the surface of the planet is made up of three-quarters of water, it is understood the importance and the need for humans to adapt to this environment. (Álvarez de los Reyes, 2008).

As a sport, swimming has always been one of the most striking and exciting sports in the history of the Olympic Games (Barcaz & Sánchez, 2022); in Cuba, it was introduced with the arrival of the Spaniards, and was practiced by some sailors and few settlers who lived near



the coasts and rivers. In 1854, the swimming pools of the Havana seawall were built and despite being public, bathers were discriminated against based on their skin color and sex (Herrera, et al., 2011).

As a sport, it began between 1905 and 1909; and in 1910, the first swimming exhibition was held in Varadero. Among the first official competitions, and before the creation of the Athletic Union, were the Varadero competitions, which, starting in 1914, they became an additional spectacle to the major national rowing regattas.

In its beginnings it was a very exclusive sporting activity, since the main practitioners came from private clubs such as the Habana Yacht Club, the Varadero Nautical Club and the University of Havana as the first to participate in competitions of the Amateur Athletic Union, which alternated in the top places since 1922, when practitioners of the Vedado Tennis Club were added to the list of winners.

From that era, swimmers of the stature of Leonel "Bebito" Smith Polo, Pablo La Rosa, Cosme Carol, and Manuel del Valle emerged, winners of the first and second Central American and Caribbean Games, held in 1926 and 1930, in Mexico and Cuba, respectively. Of all of them, Leonel Smith was considered the greatest figure in Cuban swimming for his outstanding results in those years as a swimmer in the 100 m, 400 m, 1500 m freestyle, as well as in the 4x100 m relay. Starting in 1932, he dedicated himself to teaching children in this sport. His main contributions as a coach were in 1976, at the "Camilo Cienfuegos" sports center in the capital, where he applied advanced swimming teaching methods to groups of children from a few months old to up to six years old, helping them adapt to the aquatic environment.

Cuba triumphed at the 4th and 5th Central American Games in 1938 and 1946, in Barranquilla, and at other events in 1943, 1944, and 1945, thus dominating the Caribbean region. After these years, Cuba barely made an appearance internationally. Two athletes participated in the 1948 London Olympics and the Helsinki and Melbourne Olympic Games, but without standing out. At the 1959 Pan American Games in Chicago, 12 athletes of both sexes participated for the first time, the largest participation of Cuban swimmers in an international event.



With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, one of the first measures taken was to break the exclusivist and discriminatory nature of this sport. Private clubs were converted into working-class social circles, to make way for mass participation of the people in these facilities (Herrera, et al., 2011).

In 1961, the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education, and Recreation (INDER) was created, which met the growing needs of swimming development in Cuba. Beginning in 1963, the First School Games were held in the Olympic-sized pool at the Sports City, and the program began to expand with the creation of swimming schools in every province, the annual School Games, and various national and international competitions.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the best sporting results for Cuban swimming, with notable figures such as Mario González, gold medalist at the 1991 Pan American Games in Havana; Rodolfo Falcón and Neisser Bent, protagonists of the greatest success in the history of Cuban swimming, silver and bronze medalists respectively, in the 100 m backstroke, at the Atlanta Olympic Games, 1996; Marcos Hernández, bronze medalist, in the 50 m freestyle, at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, 1999; Imaday Núñez, at the Olympic Games in Sinney 2000 and Athens 2004 and bronze medalist, in the 50 m breaststroke, at the World Cup in Belo Horizonte; and Hansel García, silver medalist in 50 m and 100 m, at the IV Pan American Games, in Guadalajara 2011 and finalist at the Olympic Games in London, 2012 (López, 2015).

Lorenzo Pérez Escalona, winner of several medals in various international competitions, including the Paralympic Games in London in 2012 and Rio de Janeiro in 2016, was highlighted .

Overall, Cuban swimming has not demonstrated the development and international competitive results enjoyed by other sports; this has been due, among other factors, to insufficient implements and infrastructure, which has not allowed for the widespread participation that would consistently guarantee high-level athletes.



This problem is not foreign to the province of Pinar del Río, which is the focus of this article. The history of swimming as a sport in this province dates back to January 1959; Orlando Juaquín Haces Germán played a significant role in this development, as one of its founders and one of the authors of the first swimming textbook in Cuba.

The first swimming school in Pinar del Río was the one in Mariel (a territory belonging to the province in the former political and administrative division of the country), in La Puntilla, created on February 14, 1963. The enrollment was made up of athletes from Pinar del Río and Mariel, and included among the first athletes Tomás Haces Germán and Pedro Betis (Perruchin) who had the opportunity to participate in an international event, and Ramón Wimill was his first coach, this school was operating until 1967-1968.

These first athletes who graduated from high school completed their training at other centers, such as Tomás Haces Germán, who did so at the Manuel Fajardo Higher Institute of Physical Culture and later became a coach for the national team.

In 1967-1968, the Cayo Coro school was founded, directed by Roberto Licourt, who later graduated from the first graduations of the Nancy Uranga Romagoza School of Physical Education and later served as Provincial Commissioner of this discipline for a long period. He also served as a swimming coach at the first swimming pool in Pinar del Río, located in the area now occupied by the Hotel Pinar del Río. During those years, he trained at the Cayo Coro school and at Las Canas beach, using the piers as a reference point.

Furthermore, the athletes of this sport, enrolled in the Sports Initiation School (EIDE) of Pinar del Río (created by ministerial resolution in 1963, which was located in the old "Ateneo Deportivo"), practiced (along with the rest of the aquatic and nautical sports) in the boarding school "Pablo Castro Barceló" in the town of Navarrete in Bahía Honda, which belonged to the province. Its fundamental objective was based on grouping and training students from primary and secondary education with the necessary requirements to serve as a quarry for future athletes, from their preparation and participation in the National School Games .



Later, the Degree in Physical Culture was started, which provided greater preparation to coaches, dedicated to the preparation of this discipline. At the end of the 70s (1979), the EIDE of Pinar del Río (which since the 1967 - 1968 academic year was named "Ormani Arenado Llonh", in honor of the Pinar del Río martyr who fell in combat in the actions of March 13, 1957), moved to a modern facility located at Km. 1 ½, detour to the central highway, on land adjacent to the city, which had several swimming pools for the preparation of athletes in this sporting specialty.

The first graduation of swimming coaches was held at the Nancy Uranga Romagoza Physical Culture Faculty, with Mercedes Miló Dubé as one of the instructors. Ramón Wimill and Ramón Licourt graduated from the program and were able to complete a specialized course in Germany.

Among the first specialists who graduated in the 1982-1983 academic year and who worked as teachers of this discipline were Jesús Benítez Llanes (deceased); Juan Rene Ballart Herrera (currently retired); Orlando Joaquín Haces Germán; Andrés Junco and Ramón Licourt. Tomás Haces Germán (currently a member of the International Amateur Swimming Federation (FINA) and international referee) and Mercedes Miló Dubé, who had already completed the course a year earlier at the "Manuel Fajado" Higher Institute of Physical Culture, worked as teachers of this specialty.

The province has participated in every School Games since their inception in the swimming discipline. The best results were achieved by athletes from the municipalities of Mariel, Bahía Honda, and Pinar del Río. At the 1990 Junior School Games, Pinar del Río won a silver medal in the 100m breaststroke with Adrián Gutiérrez, one of the leading athletes of that era in the province.

In the 2000s, the first Provincial Swimming Academy was established, located in the pool of the Pedro Téllez Polytechnic. With the creation of this school, the sport's results improved at the national level, winning several medals at the School and Pioneer Games. These results led to the recruitment of several athletes from the school categories to the Marcelo Salado



National Swimming School; among them Yunaisy Rodríguez, Yanet de la Caridad Rodríguez, and Dainel Bustamante (Coco), who were members of the national team.

Additionally, the April 4th Cup was created in the province, an annual event that contributes to the development of this sport, although the province is currently not among the top in the country in achieving success in this sport.

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