

## **Olympic Brotherhood: The Birth of Sporting Bolivarianism**

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In August 1938, with the participation of Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela, Colombia organized the first ever Bolivarian Games. The Games were a milestone for Bolivarian sports and the first time that a country of the region hosted an international event of such a magnitude—18 disciplines. In this paper, I discuss the way in which the Games were promoted with a discourse based on “building confraternity and mutual understanding” amongst Bolivarian nations. I argue that the *Bolivarians* became a *place* where athletes, promoters, administrators, journalists, officials, and the public in general exchanged ideas, imaginaries, and representations about their countries and cultures. I show how, as a display of these nations’ “development,” the Games carried on an image of progress and modernity that aspire to be at the bases of the region’s cultural and political integration during the twentieth century.

### *Promoting Sporting Friendship*

The idea of organizing the Bolivarian Games was first publicly presented during the 1936 Berlin Olympics when Alberto Nariño Cheyne, the founder of the Colombian Olympic Committee, proposed at the *Olympic Congress* an athletic tournament between the “countries liberated by Simon Bolivar,” which he considered “sister nations.” Nariño claimed that at the core of the Bolivarian Games there was a “philosophical and historical idea” connected to the Liberator and his ideals.<sup>1</sup> The International Olympic Committee accepted Nariño’s proposal, and Bogota, Colombia’s capital, at the time celebrating the 400th anniversary of its foundation, was selected to host the Games.

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<sup>1</sup> Super User, “Historia,” *Historia Organización Deportiva Bolivariana*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.odebolivariana.org/index.php/institucion/historia>.

Alberto Nariño Cheyne was an important social agent of the field of sports in Colombia. He was a recognized sports practitioner, coach, teacher, organizer, promoter, and bureaucrat. Often described as Colombia's "Coubertin," Nariño Cheyne was the "motor" of the country's Olympic movement. He admired the Baron's teachings and in many interventions during his prolonged public life he praised Coubertin as someone who deserved the world's "admiration and respect."<sup>2</sup> A member of the country's elites, he was a direct descendant of Antonio Nariño—one of Colombia's independence movement forefathers. Although the origin of Nariño's idea is unknown, and there is no empirical evidence to support any interpretation, it can be safely assumed that he was inspired by Mexico's *Olympic Society*.<sup>3</sup> In 1924, this organization, directed by Alfredo Cuellar and Enrique Aguirre, with the support of president Plutarco Elias Calle, *invented* the Central American and Caribbean Games as a way to improve the quality of sports in the region—becoming the oldest games of such a type in the world.<sup>4</sup> (Invented Tradition – Hobsbawn and Ranger) Nariño Cheyne and many of the Bolivarian Games' advocates knew the impact the Central American games had for the development of sports in that region. Thus, they wanted to replicate the process considering that sports were "a politics of humanity, racial redemption, individual strength, and collective training," which constituted "the best school for the cultivation of democracy in the region."<sup>5</sup>

At first, the allocation of the Games was received with caution by some cultural and political sectors in Colombia. Not only the pertinence of having a sporting event at the center of the capital's anniversary was questioned, but also there was some anxiety regarding the lack of

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<sup>2</sup> "Inicio sesiones la asamblea olímpica," *El Tiempo*, Jul, 1, 1938, 7.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.coc.org.co/wp-content/uploads/Alberto-Nari--o-Cheyne-1937-1945.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Historia de los juegos deportivos centro americanos y del Caribe: 1926-1978* (Habana: Comité organizador de los XIV juegos deportivos centro americanos y del Caribe, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> "La emoción bolivariana," *El Tiempo*, Aug, 3, 1938, 4.

infrastructure and experience organizing these types of events. In a way, what some sectors of civil society argued was that the country needed to carefully prepare to defend the “honor of Bogota and its youth.”<sup>6</sup> The city, and the country, needed to display an image of order, progress and modernity. There was no room for failure, especially since general perception was that “only few collective manifestations” could capture “the essence of *the time* as well as sports do.”<sup>7</sup>

Since organizing an event of such a magnitude was considered a complicated enterprise, the Colombian Olympic Committee had to secure the support of local and national authorities. The Colombian government, the governor of the department of Cundinamarca, Bogota’s Mayor’s office, and the National Commission of Physical Education, all decided to fully back the games, which they saw as a perfect opportunity to place the country at the center of sporting activity in the region. A commentary made by the COC’s directors to newspaper *El Tiempo* in January 1938 said, “[n]obody, not even those who don’t understand sports, doubt that the Bolivarian Games will have an exceptional importance for our country.”<sup>8</sup> It was obvious that sports were connected to the social and political discourses circulating in the country and the region at the time, so acknowledging that the Games were ‘more than play’ was pivotal for their cultural, social, and economic success.

The government’s support materialized on July 12 of 1937, with the signing of decree 1288, by which the Colombian government created the Organizing Committee (OC) of the Bolivarian Games—sometimes also referred to as the Pro-Bolivarian Games Board. The Committee was directed by three members appointed by the Minister of Education, the Governor of Cundinamarca, and Bogota’s Mayor. Among its most important tasks were the promotion of

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<sup>6</sup> “Las Olimpiadas Bolivarianas en Bogota,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 18, 1936, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “Gran importancia tendran los juegos bolivarianos de 1938,” *El Tiempo*, Jan, 2, 1938, 6.

the games both in Colombia and abroad, the organization of the Colombian Olympic Team, and the supervision of the logistics and infrastructure for all the events.<sup>9</sup>

The efforts to advertise the Games both within and outside Colombia constituted an expression of the maturity of the sports field in the country. Several agents and institutions needed to prove they had enough preparation to organize a regional event successfully, so it was important for them to have a “cosmopolitan” and open attitude capable of expressing the ‘universality and modernity’ of the games. For example, the Committee’s president Jorge Zalamea Borda, an expert *sporting “technician,”* believed that the Bolivarian Games were “helping to build American confraternity by making a true work of rapprochement and mutual understanding.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he argued that “[i]n the past, these tropical countries, isolated from each other, only shared their sentimentality and historical origins. Today, the exchange of teams and athletes has been more effective to make the countries know each other. [...] Many people in Bogota don’t know who the Peruvian politicians are [...] but they do know who the last one hundred meter race winner is.”<sup>11</sup>

Promoting the games outside of Colombia was a necessary measure to ensuring the presence of all the countries invited to participate in Bogota’s event. Transporting large sports delegations was a complicated and onerous task that required the full determination and planning ahead of the six national governments involved. After being commissioned by the Organizing Committee, Alfredo Gomez Venegas—A former sports editor of *El Tiempo*, and a well-known sportsman—traveled to Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela with the aim of

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<sup>9</sup> Decree 1288, Jul, 12, 1937, por el cual se crea la Junta Pro-juegos Bolivarianos y se determinan sus funciones, Presidency of the Republic of Colombia.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Los juegos bolivarianos,” *Cromos*, Aug, 20, 1938, n.d.

publicizing the Games and confirming each delegation's attendance.<sup>12</sup> Gomez's evolved into an ambassador of the Games, solving problems, and assuring governmental support in all Andean countries invited to attend the competition.<sup>13</sup> Gomez's intervention was essential for convincing the Panamanian government, which on July 7 of 1938, just a month before the games, accepted Colombia's invitation: "The Panamanian government just confirmed that a delegation of 11 women and 15 men will travel to the games via Buenaventura."<sup>14</sup> Gomez personally traveled to the isthmus where he helped sporting circles to raise funds to pay for the delegation's travel expenses. Gomez also meet with Peruvian president General Oscar Benavides who was "highly interested" in Bogota's games, and the overall development of sports in Colombia.<sup>15</sup> Once all countries accepted Colombia's invitation, what I describe as the Organizing Committee's *sporting diplomacy* began to focus on the final composition of the delegations. The number of athletes was important to prepare the logistics in and out sporting venues. In the end, the number of competitors in each delegation was: Bolivia 80, Ecuador 120, Panama 25, Peru 119, Venezuela 100, and Colombia 250.

To contribute with the promotion of the games both in Colombia and abroad the Committee created an informative bulletin, which was published at least five times before the beginning of the tournament. Describing the bulletin's importance, newspaper *El Tiempo* said: "[the bulletin] offers all Bolivarian countries a reliable testimony of what has been done and how truly gigantic this Games will be."<sup>16</sup> For example, the fourth bulletin, published on May 12 of 1938, contained an editorial note discussing the Games' importance, a report written by Gomez

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<sup>12</sup> "A. Gomez Venegas hara una jira (sic) por varios paises bolivarianos," *El Tiempo*, May, 9, 1938, 13.

<sup>13</sup> "Para venir a Bogota, Peru exige ayuda en la parte financiera," *El Tiempo*, May, 9, 1938, 13.

<sup>14</sup> To get to Colombia the Panamanians had to travel by sea to the port of Buenaventura, in the Colombian pacific. From there, they traveled by land to Bogota where people received them "not as visitors, but as South American brothers [...]" "Panamá confirmó su intervención en los Juegos Bolivarianos," *El Tiempo*, Jul, 7, 1938, p 16.

<sup>15</sup> "El atletismo y su participación en los juegos bolivarianos," *Cromos*, May, 28, 1938, n.d.

<sup>16</sup> "Gran importancia tendran los juegos bolivarianos de 1938," *El Tiempo*, Jan, 2, 1938, 6.

Vanegas narrating his trip to the Andean countries, articles explaining the Games' program, blueprints of the basketball court built at the site of the National University, and regulations for some of the competitions.<sup>17</sup> Other than the bulletin, the Games' Organizing Committee also published regulations, primers, booklets, and posters. The posters, designed by Colombian painter Sergio Trujillo Magnenat, were authentic pieces of art representing each one of the disciplines present at the Games.<sup>18</sup>

Another way in which the Organizing Committee tried to promote the games abroad was during the selection of the coaches and athletes who would represent Colombia in the Games. Hoping to develop the nation's sports to a level never seen before, the OC hired, for the first time, international coaches in different disciplines. Mexican Jose Martinez Ceballos organized and directed the games, Chilean Erasmo López coached both the women's and the men's basketball teams, North American Alexander J. Harty coached track and field, and Argentinian Fernando Paternoster, who later was recognized as one of the great driving forces of Colombian soccer during the 1940s, managed the soccer team. Colombian sporting circles praised the hiring of international coaches and the open and collaborative approach that the Organizing Committee had since its inception.<sup>19</sup> To select the athletes, the Committee organized public trials for almost every sport competing at the Games. Open to all the aspiring candidates, these trials were held in Bogota. After the trials, the members of the Committee and the coaches collectively selected the athletes. All the Colombian athletes with some experience competing at the international level were part of the delegation.

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<sup>17</sup> "Ayer circulo el cuarto numero del Boletin de los juegos para agosto," *El Tiempo*, May, 13, 1938, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Sergio Trujillo Magnenat and Germán Rubiano Caballero, *Dibujos de Sergio Trujillo Magnenat* (Bogotá: Biblioteca "Fundación Centenario del Banco de Colombia," 1977).

<sup>19</sup> "Por primera vez se contratan entrenadores extranjeros," *El Grafico*, Dec, 24, 1938, 565.

During the month of July, 1938, the excitement about the games began to grow in all the countries invited to participate. Bolivarian discourses circulated among journalists, sports enthusiasts, aficionados, and athletes. Mario Gandasegui, a member of the Panamanian delegation and a journalist, claimed that the “first Bolivarian games will for sure be a complete success” and a festival of regional solidarity and friendship.<sup>20</sup> Julio Casañas, the president of the Venezuelan delegation, declared that the team’s main goal was to “bring together the Colombian and the Venezuelan youth.”<sup>21</sup> Casañas was described by the press as an “apostle” of Venezuelan sport and a key player in the promotion of international tournaments in the Andean region. Questioned about the Venezuelans visit to Bogota, Casañas said “we are here answering a call that we considered noble and of great transcendence for our diplomatic relations with Colombia. We are here not to win medals, but to build friendships.”<sup>22</sup>

#### *The Games and their meanings*

The games were inaugurated in front a crowd of more than twenty thousand people on August 5, 1938. During the ceremony, the delegations from the “six Bolivarian republics” intervened in the opening parade, marching “military style” and making the Olympic salute. After a presidential radio speech and an air show, the Olympic flame entered the stadium in the hands of a young military cadet who lit the cauldron to inaugurate the Games. In an very archetypical way, the ceremony mirrored others seen by Colombian athletes and sports leaders abroad, especially in Berlin, 1936, where the Nazis displayed their strengths as a way of masking their problems and anxieties. Very masculine and militaristic, the ceremony was praised as a

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<sup>20</sup> “El Peru conquistara la mayoría de los trofeos,” *El Espectador*, Aug, 1, 1938, 8.

<sup>21</sup> “Venimos a dejar amigos antes que conquistar campeonatos,” *El Espectador*, Aug, 1, 1938.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

celebration of Colombia's and Bogota's progress "Foreign and national visitors will go back to their places of origin with the satisfaction of having seen Bogota's advancement."<sup>23</sup>

The Bolivarian games, happened at the same time that a transfer of presidential power between incumbent president Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo and the recently elected Eduardo Santos, both Liberals although representing different factions within their party.<sup>24</sup> In consequence, the games were inaugurated by Lopez Pumarejo and closed down by Santos. Both presidents offered different narratives about the games and their meaning. During the opening ceremony, the achievements of the city, the country, and the "revolution on the march" were highlighted. The closing ceremony was focused on the idea of the "future" and the promises of a more healthier sporting nation.

For a period of two weeks, six hundred and ninety-four men and women competed with great success in 18 sports. The most popular events during the games were track and field competitions, soccer and basketball. Other disciplines like swimming, fencing, and cycling also enjoyed exposure in the printing press and attracted decent crowds. The games were radio broadcasted in the first continental emission originated from Colombia, and the people from the six countries followed the action live. Sports were the most "successful method of recognizing each other," and radio's immediacy allowed the listeners in six countries to hear about themselves, but also about the others.

During the closing ceremony, which took place August 22 at the *El Campin* stadium in Bogota, again the athletes from the six participant countries—Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela—marched past in front of twenty thousand spectators including politicians,

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<sup>23</sup> "La fiesta del centenario," *Cromos*, Aug, 19, 1938, n.d.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia: Colombia 1930-1954* (Bogotá: CEREC, 1987), 273. "Inauguración de los juegos bolivarianos," *Cromos*, Aug, 19, 1938, n.d.



journalist, government officials, members of the armed forces, and international dignitaries.<sup>25</sup> It was a celebration of sporting bolivarianism never seen before. First, the presidents of the national delegations, the members of the organizing committee, the members of the Colombian Olympic Committee, and the president of the republic walked around the field in direction to a stand where the six national flags and the Olympic flag were. At the rhythms of the national anthems, the president of each national committee lowered his flag as a sign of respect and fraternity.<sup>26</sup> Dirt collected at the “celebrated fields of emancipation” in Caracas, Potosí, Santa Marta, Pichincha, and Junín, was used to extinguish the Olympic flame after the director of the organizing committee, Jorge Zalamea, officially declared the games closed.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the president of the republic gave a farewell speech saying: “[The games] have made us all proud and signal the beginning of Colombia’s sporting development.”<sup>28</sup> The president continued saying that sportsmanship and fair play were noble values worth of promoting, especially among the popular classes who were ready to “worship [sport] in all of its manifestations.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he claimed that the games gave Colombia the opportunity to display, in front of “their brothers,” the “unity, vigor, health, strength, and courage” of its peoples.<sup>30</sup>

### *Modern Games – Modern Countries*

Since their inception by Alberto Nariño Cheyne, the Bolivarian Games were imagined as a place for the “[s]incere and cordial rapprochement of America’s youth.”<sup>31</sup> Bringing together, for the first time, more than 600 athletes from six countries, the games had an undeniable

<sup>25</sup> “Film de la clausura de los Juegos Bolivarianos,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 8.

<sup>26</sup> “Habla el jefe de la delegación del Peru,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 13.

<sup>27</sup> John Lynch, *Simon Bolivar: A Life*, First paperback edition (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2007). “La clausura de los juegos Bolivarianos,” *Cromos*, Aug, 27, 1938, n.d.

<sup>28</sup> “El discurso del presidente en la clausura de los bolivarianos,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 13, 1938, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> “Los juegos han hecho conocer mejor a Colombia,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Los juegos bolivarianos se continuarán haciendo,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 6.

transnational effect and accomplished their internationalist goals. In fact, it was in Bogota where representatives from the six nations created the Bolivarian sports zone and institutionalized the celebration of the games every four years. The andean sports zone, was conceived as a transnational sporting area in which Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela would exchange sporting values and capitals.<sup>32</sup> The organization of the Bolivarian Games did not aspire to compete with the Centro American and Caribbean Games or the South American Games as the most significant regional competitions in Latin America. Instead, what the organization wanted was to celebrate the countries' brotherhood and shared historical origin with "healthy and masculine competition."<sup>33</sup>

Journalists and commentators depicted the Bolivarian Games as a "historic moment" in which Colombian's "enthusiasm, courage, and patriotism" had been most effectively displayed than ever before.<sup>34</sup> According to them, the country was gaining a "privileged international position, since the games provoked "sensational stir in all south American countries."<sup>35</sup> International competition was a medium for identification and self-affirmation. In a way, journalists were recognizing the way in which the Games boosted the nation's sports at the national and international level.<sup>36</sup> By the end of the Bolivarian Games, Colombia was first in the medal count, which contributed to feed the media narrative of courage and patriotism. Nevertheless, the performance of the athletes was remarkable, and the hopes to have a modern and competitive sport grew, even though the country was only "starting to live its international sporting life and was totally unexperienced."<sup>37</sup> As described above, the sporting success, and the

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<sup>32</sup> "Los juegos bolivarianos se continuaran haciendo," *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Mike Forero Nougues, "El basquetbol colombiano se ha aprestigiado internacionalmente," *El Gráfico*, Aug, 13, 1938, 906.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> "El deporte colombiano reachaza la indisciplina," *El Tiempo*, Aug, 17, 1938, 9.

<sup>37</sup> "Final de la olimpiada," *El Tiempo*, Aug, 21, 1938, 4.

numerous victories of Colombian athletes during the Bolivarians was widely recognized by people all over the country, “More than the victories, which can be attributed to the personal desire and the ability of the athletes, what is remarkable [in this games] is the growing interest that people now has for sports.”<sup>38</sup> Transcending class, gender, and social barriers sports were perceived as truly national and a place for self-identification, especially when the teams representing the country were wining. However, as in the case of soccer, when failure appeared, it was the “non-patriotic, unhealthy, nonsense of regionalism” the one to blame.<sup>39</sup> (sports as a trope of the good and the bad)

### *Conclusion*

Right after the closing ceremony, athletes, organizers, and members of the press rushed to analyze the games and their overall impact for the region. These social agents celebrated things like the spectator’s impartiality, the Bolivarian spirit of the athletes, the camaraderie of organizers and administrators, and the way in which the “Games placed [the participants] among the cultured nations in the world.”<sup>40</sup> In the end, the social, cultural, economical, and sporting success of the games made sporting enthusiasts believe that a truly permanent transnational and Andean sports movement was possible.<sup>41</sup> Although the games were not celebrated during the second world war, and were held only once in the 1950s, since 1961 have been continuously celebrated every four years.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> “Colombia ha podido tener mejor representación,” *El Grafico*, Aug, 20, 1938, 958.

<sup>40</sup> “Los progresos deportivos alcanzados por Colombia,” *El Tiempo*, Aug, 23, 1938, 7.

<sup>41</sup> “La clausura de los juegos Bolivarianos,” *Cromos*, Aug, 27, 1938, n.d.