



April 28<sup>th</sup> 2009

## Tournament Report: 2009 ALBA Games, April 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> 2009

By: Niall Brooks, NAWIRA Administration Officer

### Background:

Over 1,500 athletes from 25 countries converged on Cuba to participate in the 3<sup>rd</sup> ALBA Games. The intention of the Games is to foster friendship, cooperation and integration through 30 sports and a wide range of cultural activities. Cuba hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> Games in 2005 in which 707 athletes participated, and Venezuela hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2007. The various sports were played throughout each of the 14 provinces of Cuba, including for the 1<sup>st</sup> time, Rugby Sevens in the region of Granma.



*Hundreds of locals turned out to witness the 1<sup>st</sup> International Rugby tournament to be played in Cuba*

Originally, a number of national teams from South America were set to participate in the Sevens Tournament, though one by one dropped out leaving five teams, namely Cuban national team, Mexico national team, Dog River Howlers (a Canadian team, which included past, present and possible future sevens players), Cuba Sporting School (a Cuban sports school with players from countries around South America) and the regional rugby team of Granma.

### Structure Tournament:



*Cuba National Team*

The tournament consisted of 5 teams (see above) who each played one another on Day 1 with the top 3 each playing for the Cup on Day 2 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> playing each other for the right to play the 3<sup>rd</sup> team on Day 2 for the plate. The matches were all played under and in accordance with the IRB Laws of the Game and Regulations. Matches were refereed by two Canadians (Todd Van Vliet and Roellie Cronje) and by Chukin Chao and Juan Carlos of Cuba.

Local officials acted as assistant referees and in goal / 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>. Niall Brooks (NAWIRA Administration Officer & Tournament Director) acted (with the permission of the local organisers) as Match Commissioner (MC) and provided guidance as and when needed throughout the weekend. Chukin Chao, was of great assistance during the managers meeting and

throughout the weekend with providing translation services and in organizing the tournament. The two Canadian referees, jointly acted as head officials for the tournament.

### **Facilities:**



Due to the distance and time it took to get to the venue (i.e. a 1 ½ hour flight and a 2 hour coach journey to the hotel, followed by a another 30 minute coach journey from the hotel to the pitch), followed by a subsequent managers meeting, it was not possible to inspect the pitch and facilities no-one had any real idea of what to expect. The pitch was a converted soccer field, in very poor shape with a large amount of small stones, debris and specs of glass.

Even after two sweeps of the pitch by all the players there were still large amounts of small stones etc on the surface. With the knowledge that rugby was going to be played not matter what, the MC personally spoke to the players and management of the teams and appraised them of the state of the pitch (which was there for everyone to see and inspect) and appraised them that if they as individuals did not wish to play for safety reasons, then their decision would be totally respected and if they did play it was entirely at their own risk. Needless to say, everyone played.

As one would expect in Cuba, the provision of medical services both at the tournament and local hospital was excellent. There was an ambulance, two doctors and a host of medics pitch side. Two injuries required hospitalization, though none were due to the state of the pitch. One Cuban player damaged his ankle in a tackle and a Mexican player broke his finger, which within one hour of entering the hospital has been operated on and pinned – at no charge.

The posts were converted soccer posts with single bed mattresses wrapped around to provide effective post protectors. Each team had their own changing room and shade together with a plentiful supply of ice and drinkable water. NAWIRA also provided 17 rugby balls for the tournament. A PA system was in use and manned throughout.

### **Opening and Closing Ceremonies:**



The opening and closing ceremonies were a sight to behold. They consisted of speeches by local dignitaries, government sport officials and a pledge from the Cuban captain. In addition there were walk bys with flag bearers, dance performances by local children and medal presentations. As one would expect it was very well orchestrated. Unfortunately no-one had told the organizers that the free fall parachute display would have been better at the commencement of the tournament rather than half way

through a match. The 9 parachutists who landed on the pitch resulted in a 15 minute half time (“skydivers stop play!”)

## Tournament Results:

### Day 1:

Granma 0 Cuba National Team 20  
Cuban Sporting School 5 Mexico 29  
Dog River Howlers 35 Cuban national Team 0  
Granma 5 Mexico 28  
Cuban Sporting School 0 Dog River Howlers 47  
Cuban National Team 7 Mexico 7  
Granma 0 Dog River Howlers 35  
Cuban Sporting School 7 Cuban National Team 21  
Mexico 5 Dog River Howlers 26  
Granma 14 Cuban Sporting School 7



*Cuba National Team v Mexico*

### Day 2:

Dog River Howlers 26 Mexico 0  
Granma (i.e. Eastern Cuba) 7 Cuba Sporting 0  
Mexico 0 Cuba National 26  
Granma 24 Cuba Sporting 7  
  
Plate Final: Mexico 33 Granma 0  
Cup Final: Dog River Howlers 26 Cuba National 5  
(HT Score: 12-0)



*Winners: Dog River Howlers from Canada*

### Positions:

Gold Medal - Dog River Howlers (from Canada)  
Silver Medal - Cuba National Team  
Bronze Medal - Mexico



*Mexico player receives his bronze medal*

The standard of play by the Cuban players got better as the tournament progressed. In phases they showed very good sevens skills and their athleticism was excellent. With more coaching and further development of the player base, there is no reason why Cuba cannot be a force to be reckoned with in the region, especially at the Sevens game, where their physical and athletic ability will enhance their game.

Cuba also has a referee in Juan Carlos (ex Cuba captain) who NAWIRA should (if feasible) consider expending development funds on. When asked he stated that travelling outside of Cuba (e.g. to the NAWIRA 2009 Sevens), should not be a problem, if invited.

### **Development of Rugby in Cuba:**

There is vast potential for rugby in Cuba. Obviously the inclusion of rugby in the Olympics would be a huge boost, however even without it's inclusion, Cuban rugby appears to possess the commitment, dedication and passion to grow the game in the country. That said, like many small developing Unions, most of the workload falls on one or two persons, in this case Chukin Chao, who worked tirelessly to make the tournament a success. The inclusion of rugby sevens in the ALBA Games (note: some matches were televised) has raised awareness of the sport in Cuba.



*Match Officials*

When asked whether the authorities would be able to provide a suitable, good quality playing venue, should NAWIRA wish to host a tournament in Cuba, officials responsible for rugby in Cuba stated that a high quality sports complex would most likely be made available. With the above in mind and 2010 a year when NAWIRA is schedules to host a men's 15 a-side tournament, NAWIRA should consider hosting the event in Havana (if the tournament is split into a north & south competition).

Cayman, Bahamas, Jamaica, Mexico all have direct flights into Cuba and Bermuda would be able to travel via Toronto.

Rugby in Cuba would certainly benefit from more development initiatives and exposure to non Cuban rugby competition, matches and coaching etc.

### **Summary:**

The ALBA Games was a unique experience, the first international rugby tournament to take place in Cuba and a very enjoyable occasion. The local organizers were very proud to host the event and could not go out of their way any more to make everyone feel at home and for the tournament to be resounding success. The lack of quality facilities was easily compensated by their tireless work, passion and commitment shown. The success of the tournament also was in no small part to Karl Fix and the Dog River Howlers from Canada, who showed the true spirit of rugby throughout, both on the field and off it. Visits to the local orphanage and the donation of an abundance of rugby equipment for players and clothing for players and non players, brought a humanitarian element to the trip. Cuban Rugby was extremely grateful that NAWIRA / IRB were able to have a presence at the tournament and I believe would welcome being brought into the NAWIRA rugby family. Thanks must also go to Miguel Carner and the Mexican team who by their commitment to the tournament were part of its success and certainly will have found it a useful development opportunity for their own national team. Likewise the two Canadian officials who participated (at their own expense) were excellent in their ongoing "tutoring" of the local officials throughout.