

Ana Fidelia: Fidel Castro cried for me

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We arrived at her house around 9:30 in the morning. Ana Fidelia was taking a shower, after her daily run, because, in her opinion, it makes her feel well and prevents diseases. In a room full of medals, trophies and photos with the Commander in Chief, there began the interview, which lasted a bit over an hour and made me hear a fully different voice that could not hide her emotion, since Fidel's name was mentioned. There were tears on Fidel's face the day he decorated her, and there were tears on Ana Fidelia's too, when she referred to Fidel.

-When did a young woman from Palma Soriano manage to become a sports heroine?

After the triumph of the Revolution, under the doctrine of our Commander that sport is a right of the people, there began the possibilities to practice sports, for both health and high performance. I am a result of that well- thought-out, staggered and inverted-pyramid system of our Revolution, like so many thousands of athletes who were attracted through talent selection of Physical Education. It was just in that subject that I started to stand out and the professor took me to the sports area of my hometown, Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba, and they saw

that I was a talented girl. There they started to follow me up and I went through the different schools existing here in Cuba: EIDE (Sports Initiation Schools), ESPA (Higher School for Athletic Improvement), until reaching the national team.

It's necessary to highlight that coming from a sporting family helped me too. My sister was a member of the national basketball team, my brother practiced sports too and my father was a professional boxer in the 1960s. I did not have the chance to see him; his friends told me that he stood out in his specialty, but could not reach a bit further because discipline is fundamental for whatever thing in life.

-And how disciplined were you? When did you understand you had a future in sports?

When I started in sports in my home town, my first trainer, Juan Heredia Salazar, used to go to see my mother every day and told her the conditions that I had and that I had to practice, but when you are a child, you only want to play, since you are still unaware of what you want in the future. So, I used to go to the training two days and missed it three, and my trainer used to look for me and talk to my mother. He told her that I was a talent and that I could participate in the pioneer games, which were held in Hungary in 1975. Participating in that competition and winning the bronze medal was what made me start to become aware of what sports could mean to me, and I focused there until reaching where I reached.

-In 1993, life set you a test that, in my opinion, you overcame by far, and in that trance of your accident, Fidel addressed the doctors and told them to do everything possible to save you and that you meant a lot to both Cuba and him. What does Fidel Castro mean to you?

In my professional and personal life, I have gone through ups and downs, life isn't all roses, and everything you intend to do entails discipline, commitment and perseverance. The people of Cuba and many people in the world know about that fatal accident I had in 1993 with 2nd and 3rd degree burns in 38 percent of my body, and I was always accompanied, since the first hours of my accident by that person who has been unconditional to the human being: our Commander in Chief. He arrived earlier than my mother at "Hermanos Ameijeiras" Hospital, where I was hospitalized. Fidel encouraged me to fight for my life, I am aware that all the Cuban people too accompanied me, followed the news through the media and there were people who showed up at the ward to hear from me, and that was something very positive, which made it possible that I did not die and reappeared like the Phoenix.

Fidel and I are united by many things. Because of my great achievements in sports I was always lucky enough to coincide with him several times: at a

decoration, a welcome to a head of state or accompanying him to the inaugurations of presidents; for example, when Fernando Alfonso Collor de Mello took office in Brazil. And at that crucial moment of my life he played a key role in my recovery, not physically, but psychologically, to fight for my life. Fidel was the medicine that I needed to save myself, he was the doctor who I needed to heal my wounds. According to some of my friends, he said at meeting: she won't die, she and I made a pact with death and she won't die. His help kept me alive to continue contributing achievements to my country. They were tough moments, hard moments, and that made me stronger than I was before and say: I will continue.

In a moment of so many visits that he made to me and I was awake, I told him: Commander, I will continue running, and now, to tell you the truth, I did not know if I was going to run the same way I had done before the accident. But I knew I had strength in my legs to continue representing Cuba, and I did.

I underwent countless reconstructive and aesthetic surgeries at "Ameijeiras" Hospital with great Cuban doctors who saved my life and returned me back to society again. Running again after the accident has been the greatest achievement of my sporting career, having defeated death. That can only happen in a country like ours, where everything is in favor of and for the sake of society, perhaps, in another country I could have lived, but I could have also had to show my credit card to be assisted or to pay out thousands of dollars.

I went every other day to the (operating) room to be cured under anesthesia, and so the doctors performed skin transplants. In the first stage, I remained in the hospital a year and a few months and later I went home on Fridays and returned on Mondays. I had a companion and that undoubtedly costs some thousands and therefore I should always say thank you so much to both Fidel and this people.

-Which was your first participation in an international event?

When I overcame my seriousness in the hospital and could manage on my own, I started to think about running again. I had a very strong rehab program with doctors from the Ameijeiras and the Institute of Sport Medicine and exercised in the morning and in the afternoon, but also when they were not there, I supported myself on my friends who went to visit me so they helped me do the exercises and massaged me, because the scars of the burnt grow during a year and you should always keep exercising so the damaged parts of your body begin to gain elasticity.

Before the accident I had in mind to take part in the Central American and Caribbean Games in Ponce and then I asked the Athletics Technical Commission

to participate. They created all conditions for my training, which was from 7:00 to 10:00 at night, because I could not take the sunbeams. Leandro Civil Jarvés designed a preparation program for me five months before the Central American and Caribbean Games, in which I participated with many limitations, I could not move my arms, my armpits, or my neck and in spite of that, I won the silver medal with 2.05, which meant the gold medal to me, the medal of dignity, of courage, because my race only involved my legs, I couldn't do the required movement for it.

After achieving that result in those circumstances and without the adequate preparation I convinced myself that after the surgery, I would begin my training to see what would happen. And so I did, I underwent surgical operations, which loosed my neck, my armpits, my arms and my hands, because I could hardly close them to grab the weights. When I realized that I could do all those things I told my trainer: let's work, I will not disappoint you and we will compete.

All the tests showed that I really could, I should say that there were many people who believed that I could not accomplish it, so I said that if I could not achieve the required time, I wouldn't participate, because of the prestige I have worldwide. But I was improving in every competition, so much so that I made a mark, which gave me the endorsement to compete in Gothenburg 1995. I also competed in Montecarlo vs my eternal rival María de Lourdes Mutola, she ran 1.57.49 and I (1.57.59), and that made me confident to strive for a medal in the world championship, which final was held on August 13 and I clinched the gold medal. Life gave me the pleasure to thank and congratulate our beloved Commander the day of his birthday with a gold medal for my country, for him and for me. I feel really proud for having given him that present in acknowledgement to all the support I received from him in the toughest moment of my life. One knows people in those circumstances and Fidel was unconditional to me in the moment I needed him. During the period when I was reported as critical every day, he used to go to the hospital, sometimes he went and when he passed through my room I was asleep, because it was the day when they cured me and I was under the effects of anesthesia, even if someone called me I could not reply. He went there many times, when I was already in an open room, and talked to my family, to me and his visit was something very special for me and my family.

-How many Russian female runners were needed to defeat Ana Fidelia?

Imagine that a country can take around three or four runners and there were three Russians who developed a team race in the 1996 Olympic Games and I had to settle for the silver medal, but I can tell you that when they ran individually I was invincible.

-From the point of view of the best athlete of Cuba for several consecutive years, what did Fidel Castro mean for Cuban sports?

Fidel means a lot for Cuban sports, since he was young, Fidel loved sports and practiced different games at the university. He played basketball, over there I have a photo of him winning the 800 meters, he also run 1500. In the few hours that he had to rest at midnight, he used to go to the Sports City (Ciudad Deportiva) to play basketball in a sort of guerrilla warfare with players from the national team and the game was never over until he picked the victory, he disliked to lose in anything.

Fidel has meant a lot for all the results of the Cuban sporting movement, he has been the main promoter of all the achievements of our sporting movement. He is not physically today, but he is still present, because his example is alive, his legacy is alive in our country, his deed is intact.

-Of the moments of satisfaction experienced with the Commander, which is the one you remember the most?

I remember them all, they are all very beautiful and have a great meaning, but the one that marked me the most and the one that makes me cry whenever it comes to my mind, and I cry because it moves me to remember that he is a person of flesh and blood, with feelings towards any human being, although he/she does not belong to his family, happened in 1993, after I returned from the Central American and Caribbean Games at the Universal Hall of FAR (Revolutionary Armed Forces), which brought together all the delegation that participated in Ponce Games and he decorated me with the Order of Sporting Merit. It seems that when he saw me, he was very sad because of the conditions in which I competed, he gave me a hug and when I went to my seat I turned around and saw tears running down his face and that's the moment I keep with more affection, to see that he cried for me.

-Does your name have any relationship with Fidel or is it chance?

No, it's no coincidence: my mother named me Fidelia because of Fidel. I come from a purely revolutionary family, we have a humble origin and my grandmother, my mother and my aunt were always closely linked to the causes of our Revolution.

Translated by Jorge Mesa Benjamin / CubaSi Translation Staff
