

Sports Diplomacy

David L. Carrasco, From Borderlands to Bridges **BY DAVID CARRASCO**

THE WASHINGTON STAR SPORTS EDITOR OPENED the letter from far-off Caracas, Venezuela, that had just arrived by diplomatic pouch. Entitled “A Very Sad Day,” the piece was penned by my father David L. Carrasco, the American University basketball coach who was touring Latin America as a sports diplomat for the U.S. State Department that summer.

The letter soon appeared in the newspaper under the headline, “Carrasco Has Compassion for Caracas Youngsters.” His poignant story of a Venezuelan playground scene ties coaching youth to international diplomacy, sports in Latin America to poverty, sadness, compassion and perhaps even social change.

“Today I call it a ‘Very Sad Day,’” Carrasco wrote. “When I arrived at one of the recreation centers in Caracas, there were about 75 kids waiting for me to start the class in basketball. Keep in mind that these recreation centers are not like the ones in Washington D.C. or Montgomery County with good facilities and plenty of equipment and sufficient instructors. Here, these kids are real poor and they wear very old clothes that are dirty and torn and many of them have holes in their shoes or no shoes at all. These kids come from shacks with dirt floors and leaky roofs and no water or lights. Just nothing. They need these recreation centers because at least they can wash and bathe.”

The letter stated there was only one old rubber basketball and the boys were having fun playing and learning some athletic drills Carrasco was teaching. Then the ball went over the fence, hit a sharp stone and flattened out. The Venezuelan kids turned to look at the coach.

“...the kids just stood and stared at me with big, wondering eyes. I called them together and said,

‘I’ll be back tomorrow and I’ll have a new basketball with me.’

If you could have seen the looks on their faces when the ball collapsed you would have agreed with me that it was ‘a very sad day. Tomorrow, I promise, will be happier. Coach Carrasco.’”

From his work as a sports diplomat in Latin America, Dave Carrasco came to think of sports as an “international language.” Sports were played all over the globe and enabled kids to reshape their aggressions into exercise and games. But for this Mexican-American from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, sports were more than just exercises in competition. Sports were a means through which social equality could be played out. When he was interviewed for a 1968 essay on the Mexico City Olympics in the *New Yorker*, Carrasco said,

“The United States should get more involved in youth programs abroad. Sports are very important for Latin America—for developing leadership. They are about the only field here where the opportunities are the same for all growing youngsters, regardless of their heritage. Furthermore, they bring people from isolated parts of a country together so they unify that country” (P. 80, “Letter From Mexico.”)

Sports are, in his words, “opportunities.” With good coaches, adequate equipment and a decent place to play, sports could level the social playing field and help people make positive connections. In Latin America, he also experienced at first hand that sports were connected with culture, politics, national identity and friendships. Sometimes, as he learned the hard way, sports were overwhelmed by local rivalries and international/Cold War political agendas. What

he did with this knowledge was to develop a moral vision that sports should be used to help people excel in competitive situations—and especially for those who had been denied practice fields where they could develop stronger bodies and more competitive minds.

MAN FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Carrasco’s ability to connect with people from different classes, races and places came from growing up in an international setting, but not one that people value as a training ground for sports, diplomacy and cultural richness. He was a “Tex-Mex,” a “border man” from the Segundo Barrio of El Paso, Texas, literally within a stone’s throw of the Chamizal, that piece of Mexican land that had moved to the U.S. side of the border when the Rio Bravo changed its course in the 19th century. He took his toughness from the streets of south El Paso, where he was a feared boxer and all-star basketball player, to Mexico where, before he was 20 years old, he starred for the national Mexican basketball team, the “Chihuahua Dorados,” in the 1938 Central American Games. His 6’4” size—along with his shooting ability and play around the rim—led to his nickname *El Cocotero*—“the Coconut Tree Jumper.”

After World War II, we moved to Maryland, where he became a championship basketball coach at the high school and college level. Reflecting his growing vision of sports as a leveler of race and social stratification, his American University basketball teams were the first college teams in the nation’s capital to be racially integrated. His example and message were that sports and education, athletics and social justice, games and race were intertwined. But he never left



Left: Front page of the sports section of *Diario de México* shows Carrasco with Mexican coaches; right: U.S. postage stamp in commemoration of the 1968 Mexico Olympics.

his U.S.-Mexico border past behind and the U.S. State Department, learning of his coaching credentials, language abilities and cultural knowledge, sent him to Latin America to conduct clinics aimed at helping Latin American coaches improve their skills. He toured Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina and Mexico, spending longer periods in Mexico and Ecuador.

EL PÍCARO JUGADOR MEXICANO
When the Confederación Deportiva Mexicana invited Carrasco to help improve the country's coaching staffs beginning in 1963, he ran a series of coaching clinics in Mexico City and formed strong friendships with successful Mexican coaches Carlos Bru and Constancio Córdova. The growing Mexican teams' enthusiasm to improve their basketball coaching techniques was evident in a photograph that appeared on the front page of the sports section of the *Diario de México* on July 4, 1963, five years before the Olympic Games. The photo shows the very tall, smiling Carrasco holding a basketball tightly in his hands, surrounded by some of the 57 Mexican coaches who had been brought into Mexico City from towns and cities throughout the republic to train for a month with him.

One of the Mexican coaches is also gripping the ball as though Carrasco is either handing it off or the two are in contention for it. They are staring approvingly into each other's eyes. The other coaches are crowded together like a team, leaning into the center of the picture—smiling or looking intently at the scene. Their hunger to learn and his ability to teach are well stated in the accompanying article.

“De todos los entrenadores que nos han visitado, con el fin de impartir sus conocimientos a los manejadores mexicanos, él que ha dejado una fructífera semilla es sin duda, David Carrasco.

“De ascendencia mexicana, él lleva sangre nuestra en sus venas y la facilidad de entenderse. Fueron factores determinantes, para poder apreciar en todos los sentidos, los amplios conocimientos que posee y poder captar dichos conocimientos para ser aplicados a nuestros basketballistas.

“Carrasco, conocedor de nuestro medio, ya que fue integrante de los Dorados de Chihuahua, puso el dedo en el renglón, respecto a las fallas y falta de progreso del mismo.” (*Diario de México*, June 1963).

Instead of receiving the usual norteamericano to impart superior knowledge to Mexican basketball coaches, they now

welcomed a Mexican-American who shared their language and blood, which enabled them to grasp and apply what he was teaching. Another full-page newspaper spread entitled “Un Gran Coach David L. Carrasco Un Enamorado del Baloncesto Mexicano” has him telling the coaches that “El Jugador Mexicano es muy ‘pícaro’ pero sin fundamentos.” Carrasco praises the hustle and craftiness of the athletes he was training but pulled no punches in challenging them to practice intensively if they wanted to compete internationally—especially for the Olympic Games.

MEXICO '68: SPORTS OLYMPICS, CULTURAL OLYMPICS

The 1968 Olympics marked a glamorous achievement for Mexico in what was called *El año de México*. Even though that triumph was overshadowed by the tragic and unforgettable events of the October 2 Tlatelolco massacre, Mexico staged a very successful Olympics games and Carrasco played a notable role on both the athletic and cultural sides as the U.S. Olympic Games Attaché. Mexicans put enormous effort in hosting the 19th Olympiad, making it a return to Greek ideals (of celebrating body and soul together) and an innovative international

cultural and sports event.

There were many “firsts” in the Mexico City Olympics: the games took place at the highest altitude of any games in history; it was the first time a so-called developing country hosted the Games; they were the first games held by a Spanish speaking country; first games ever held in Latin America, to be only now followed by Brazil in 2016; first games at which there was a significant African presence in men’s distance running, which they came to dominate; first time El Salvador, Guinea, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay and British Honduras (now Belize) participated; and a first when a powerful living symbol for Mexico appeared for the first time in Olympic history, when a woman, Norma Enriqueta Basilio de Sotelo of Mexico, ran the Olympic flame into the Olympic stadium and up a long stairway to light the Olympic cauldron and inaugurate the 19th Olympiad. For the first time in Olympic history, a Cultural Olympics were held. As U.S. ambassador to Mexico Fulton Freeman said at the time, “Mexico has reached back into history and paralleled the athletics with culture in the Cultural Olympics.”

Carrasco’s assistant attaché at the U.S. Embassy, Malcolm Butler, noted that “Mexico used the Olympics to put itself on three maps—the sports map, the cultural map and the geo-political map as an international destination. They used the Olympics to show the world that their entire culture was rich and thousands of years old.”

But it was a Mexican genius, the architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez who, as president of Mexico’s Olympic Organizing Committee, was the visionary force linking the Cultural Olympics to the Sports Olympics and thereby put another face of Mexico on the extravaganza. Mexican officials correctly understood that Mexico would not be a leading competitor in the sports competition and therefore added the Cultural Olympics to help the country stand out as a successful host of the Games. In spite of Mexico’s vigorous attempts to make the Cultural

Olympics a major part of the Games, a number of countries were slow to respond and contribute their best cultural representatives. Ramírez Vázquez asked the U.S. Embassy to use its influence to help motivate a stronger international participation. Carrasco’s language skills and cultural knowledge were called upon and his efforts resulted in a decisive improvement in cultural contributions.

Outstanding among the twenty events of the Cultural Olympics were the International Festival of the Arts (U.S. participants included Van Cliburn, Alexander Calder, Martha Graham, members of the Newport Jazz Festival, Merce Cunningham, Duke Ellington and Orchestra, the Tijuana Brass). David Álvaro Siqueiros’s gigantic stone mural at the National University (UNAM) was refurbished, as well as a mural by Diego Rivera on the façade of a movie theatre on a major thoroughfare, Insurgentes Sur, which became the site of the weight lifting competition. One “event” that left an enduring mark on Mexico was the International Meeting of Sculptures which placed 21 major sculptures in prominent places throughout Mexico City including Alexander Calder’s 70 foot high “Red Sun” which greeted visitors to the Olympic Stadium. The stadium also had a mammoth mural by Diego Rivera constructed on its side.

DIPLOMACY, SPIES, DIALOGUE

But all was not culture and friendship in the months leading up to the Olympics because Cold War politics had infiltrated Mexico’s greatest sports festival from both the Soviet and U.S. sides. Carrasco was deeply troubled when, after accepting in 1967 the position as cultural attaché for the Olympics, he learned that a C.I.A. agent named Phillip Agee was to be assigned as one of his assistants. When he realized that his own credentials as a legitimate sports figure were going to be used, in part, as a “cover” for Agee’s clandestine activities in Mexico City, Carrasco struggled with whether he should resign the job. In 1968, only a few in the United States understood just how destructive the CIA had been to politi-

cal movements in Latin America. When Agee later wrote his highly controversial exposé *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, he both praised Carrasco’s leadership during the Olympics and made an extra effort to state that Carrasco “had no connection whatsoever with the Agency.” The Agency justified Agee’s assignment because, in part, Soviet coaches (clandestinely accompanied by Soviet intelligence operatives) had been welcomed by the Mexican sports agencies to help coach some of the Mexican athletes and teams believing it would improve Mexico’s medal count. Partly to counter these influences the United States had also supplied coaches and a kind of spying competition went on alongside the sports training programs.

Race and politics infiltrated at least two public events during the Mexico City Games. In the months leading up to the Games, the Mexican Olympic Committee was troubled by the rumor that African American athletes might boycott the Games to protest human rights abuses in the United States. Carrasco investigated the rumor and learned that some African American athletes were politicized about the long history of racial abuses inside and outside of American sports practices but that they were planning to compete. The meaning of the rumor became clear when Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medalists in the men’s 200-meter race, took their places on the podium for the medal ceremony wearing civil rights badges and black socks without shoes. As the Star Spangled Banner played they lowered their heads and each defiantly raised a black-glove fist. Assistant attaché Butler happened to be sitting about 40 yards away and remembers the scene.

“This act left many of us in the stadium breathless. I remember thinking that these people are really putting it on the line and will likely get thrown out of the games. Many Mexicans felt the same way about their courage and the punishment that was to come.”

Another tie between sports and political diplomacy was made evident at

the Olympic Village where the athletes from the different countries lived. Malcolm Butler summarizes the scene he witnessed.

“You see, Mexican athletes were proud that the Cuban athletes were part of the Mexico City games even as the U.S. was in a powerful Cold War conflict with Cuba. But their pride was not because they wanted to defy the U.S. as some people thought. Mexicans saw the Olympics as the setting where Americans and Cubans could get to know each other, talk and compete fairly against each other. I remember one day at the Olympic Village that some U.S. athletes went out of their way to greet and talk with the remarkable young Cuban runner Alberto Juantorena. This amiable exchange attracted onlookers and we could see and feel, in a palpable way, the pride and satisfaction that some Mexican athletes felt at the opening of this friendly dialogue between Cubans and U.S. athletes.”

Here was a Mexican moment when sports and Cold War politics were beaten out, if only momentarily, by athletes in dialogue.

GUNS AND BASKETBALL IN ECUADOR'S GEO-POLITICS OF SPORTS
Not all sports involve athletes in dialogue though. My father learned this two years before the Olympic Games when he became director of the Peace Corps' Physical Education program in Ecuador. He always took a disciplined approach of combining craftiness and physical conditioning with his teams, but the first time he refereed a game between teams from rival parts of the country, he found this approach was not quite enough. In the dressing room following a wild first half of verbal attacks on players and referees, Carrasco asked the Ecuadoran referee about a plan of escape if things got worse. Unzipping a concealed pants pocket, the Ecuadoran reached in, taking out a handgun, and told Carrasco “aquí lo arreglamos”—we can fix it all with this.

Another sports event reveals how intense basketball rivalries got in Ecuador. In 1966, the Peace Corps worked with

high schools throughout the country to organize the first national high school basketball tournament. The tournament was held in the port city of Guayaquil with teams coming from all over the country for the three day tournament. National television and radio stations emphasized the intense rivalries between coastal and sierra peoples. As fate would have it, the championship game was played by teams from the coast and the interior—Guayas from Guayaquil and Pinchincha from Quito. Right before tip off, the local referees became intimidated by the crowd's insults and jeers and fled the stadium. Carrasco and one of the Peace Corps Volunteers ended up refereeing the game. A company of Ecuadoran soldiers came into the building and circled the lower section of seats with rifles strapped to their shoulders. When the visiting school, Pinchincha, won by a single point, the losing hometown crowd flew into a rage and the Guayas officials who sponsored the tournament fled the stadium.

It was left to the Peace Corps representatives, to the delighted players and fans who had stayed behind, to hand out the trophies. Good intentions and good sportsmanship, as Carrasco learned, are sometimes trumped by geopolitical realities of rivalries and distrust. Yet my father never stopped trying to be an effective sports diplomat and a catalyst for social change through sports.

PLAYGROUND MAN

When my father was inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame at American University in 1994, I learned more about the results of his compassion for playground kids. A number of speakers at the Hall of Fame banquet described how they first met him and how he changed their lives.

One multi-sport all-star stood up and said, “My first memory of Coach Carrasco was at a playground at Sligo Jr. High. He was the biggest, strongest looking man I ever saw and he organized us into teams and taught us how to play together.” Another star player, now a successful coach, reminisced, “We were a bunch of

kids running around at Pine Crest playground one summer when this big man showed up with baseball equipment and organized us into a game. After that first day, he was our coach and we had the best summer playing ever.” An All American basketball player recounted, “We were black high school kids playing ‘make-it-take-it’ over in the neighborhood and here comes this *big* man, who didn't look black or white, over to the sidelines to check us out. At the break he called us over and told us that if we wanted to play college ball in the area and stay near our families, he would help us out. And he did!”

Others followed and the theme was the same. Playground ball with Carrasco started them on the path to becoming competitive athletes. As did those kids in Venezuela, they had all met him as boys on poor or working-class playgrounds. Looking back over his life that night it was clear to me that these shared achievements were rooted in those *fructíferas semillas* and *pícaro* lives in the borderlands of Latin America. And it became clear to me that as a man from the borderlands, he embodied the best of sports diplomacy—the ability of sports to create bridges between people and cultures and foster social change.

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