

Luiz de Oliveira - Coach of Joaquim Cruz and 800m Coaching Legend Dies

The worldwide family of Athletics is deeply saddened to learn that Luiz de Oliveira, the globally renowned and respected Brazilian coach, died in Doha, Qatar on 30 June, 2021 at the age of 73. He had been coaching in Qatar, when in November, 2020, his deteriorating health required heart surgery and the removal of one kidney. He was subsequently on haemodialysis, awaiting a possible transplant, when he succumbed to his failing heart and kidney.

Luiz Alberto de Oliveira was born on 11 February, 1950 in south-eastern Brazil, in the megalopolis that is the Municipality of São Paulo. He was recognised from the very earliest days of a coaching career that spanned five decades, as one of the world's leading experts in the middle-distance events. It was said that he was a 'coaches coach' and became one of the pioneers of coaching athletes from a multitude of nations, from his home country, alongside those from many other nations.

This multi-national approach was highlighted in a 2003 World Athletics website article, titled, '*Luiz de Oliveira - 800m Coaching Legend*'. The opening paragraph set the tone with, "*World Championships without national quotas or national identities has been an oft-discussed topic among athletics aficionados. And if such a utopian idea ever comes to pass, one coach is already well positioned for it, with almost as many national flags flying in his group as there are athletes.*"

This World Athletics article went on to recognize de Oliveira's direct impact over his long career on so many World Athletics' Areas, in particular, South America, NACAC and Asia. This impact was on both athletes and coaches from all the Member Federations within those Areas and, in addition, globally. It was for this reason that he was dubbed here with a novel title, "*De Oliveira certainly has become an "Entraîneur sans frontières", a "Coach without borders".*" And those frontiers were not just the ones marked by political borders but included the very frontiers of training and performance.

As a boy and teenager, Luiz Alberto de Oliveira was a fine soccer player but on leaving high school he had to decide between soccer and studies. He wisely chose studies in the teaching of basketball, soccer and track & field at the University of San Carlos, where he excelled in courses on scientific training methods.

Leaving San Carlos in the early 1970s, de Oliveira started coaching children in soccer, basketball and athletics. In the basketball group he couldn't help but notice a tall, skinny 12-year-old boy who could move with speed and ease in all the running activities they did while training for basketball. But the shy young boy was reluctant to leave his beloved basketball for the sake of athletics and just running. De Oliveira was persistent, however, and after enjoying immediate success at 800m and 1500m, the young Joaquim Cruz was persuaded.

By the age of 15 Joaquim Cruz had benefitted from de Oliveira's coaching, achieving personal bests of 1:51 for 800m and 48.7 for 400m. He was clearly a prodigy and after setting a junior (U20) world record of 1:44.3 min in 1981, received a scholarship offer to study and compete for Brigham Young University in Utah, USA. Running had now become the 'passport' for both de Oliveira and Cruz, his young charge, to learn English and to study and compete in the United States. Their stay in Utah was short-lived and they moved to Eugene, Oregon and the University of Oregon, drawn initially by the prospect of treatment for Joaquim Cruz's chronic achilles tendon injury. By now, de Oliveira and Cruz had formed a remarkable symbiosis that was to remain throughout their lives.

The University of Oregon accepted de Oliveira into their post-graduate program, in addition to accepting that he continue to coach Cruz, who would be a "walk-on" on the Oregon team. For his part, Joaquim Cruz learned English and entered the undergraduate program, and the move immediately paid off on all sides, as he won the 1983 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships over 800m. Cruz also competed in the inaugural IAAF World Championships in 1983, winning the bronze. As a coach with a strong temperament and unparalleled ability, Luiz de Oliveira was responsible for Olympic champion Joaquim Cruz's entire career, taking him to Athletics' greatest glory, Olympic Gold, in the 800m at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, followed by an 800m Silver medal four years later in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. When he retired from competition in late 1996, Cruz had run 800m in under 1:43 on six occasions and once under 1:42.

The Oregon Circuit

One of Luiz de Oliveira's enduring legacies lies in his 1982 design and creation of the 'Oregon Circuit', that is widely utilised around the world today, as a demanding, integrated and productive conditioning activity for all runners. The Oregon Circuit melded his belief in circuit training without equipment and fast running. Early In 1982, the Adidas Oregon Trail had been completed in Eugene, as a purpose-built, wood chip, runners' trail, comprising a 1000m loop, a 1200m loop and a one-mile loop. This was ideal for de Oliveira's vision and he had permanent markers placed every 100m around the 1000m loop. His original 'Oregon Circuit' consisted of his squad undertaking nine exercises, interspersed by 100m sprinting to the next 'station', rest at the end of each 1000m loop, and repeat.

During this time, numerous other athletes from Brazil joined de Oliveira's Eugene training group, including José Luiz Barbosa, who was to become a four-time World Championships 800m medalist, and 800m Olympian, Agberto Guimarães. These were added to with US and Canadian athletes such as Mary (Decker) Slaney, Ocky Clark, Claudette Groenendaal and Ranza Clark. All of whom thrived under Luiz de Oliveira's tutelage and guidance.

In 1989, de Oliveira moved his training group from Eugene to San Diego, where he successfully coached through the 1990s and into the new millenium, and another squad move to Tucson, Arizona. An opportunity to coach in Qatar in the 2000s meant that he had direct impact in the Asia Area, producing 400m and 800m champions. When the 2016 Olympic Games were awarded to Rio de Janeiro, it was natural that the Brazilian Olympic Committee would seek to involve their greatest distance coach. A prophet in his home country once more, Luiz de Oliveira was appointed as National Endurance Coach, actively overseeing the preparation of Brazil's distance athletes for their forthcoming 2016 Olympic challenge.

Recently, Joaquim Cruz and José Luiz Barbosa, both coaches now, in California, organised fund-raising for de Oliveira's medical bills. They posted this fitting tribute to their long-time friend and coach, "*Luiz de Oliveira's innovative training techniques have made an indelible mark on the sport of track and field. Luiz treated his athletes like family and helped us reached goals we never could have imagined would be possible. We both qualified for and represented Brazil in the 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996 Olympic Games. We owe our athletic careers to Luiz de Oliveira.*"

Track and field coaches are rarely wealthy in the financial sense and in a Sports Illustrated article, Kenny Moore noted that de Oliveira, "... has never taken a penny to coach, counsel or represent Cruz or any of his other athletes." If, however, you recognise the intrinsic value that lies in the depth and loyalty of inter-personal relationships and contributions to global coaching, then from his many long-term coach-athlete relationships and from his shared innovations, Luiz de Oliveira was, indeed, an immensely wealthy individual.

The worldwide family of Athletics passes on its sincerest condolences to Luiz de Oliveira's family and friends.

Personal Note: I first visited Eugene, Oregon in 1973, returning in 1975 to study for a Master's degree in Biomechanics at the University of Oregon, while coaching and then, staying to coach. In 1982, I resumed postgraduate studies and was accepted onto the Doctoral program in Social Psychology of Sport and additionally, onto the Master's program in Sports Psychology, within the Psychology Department. It was at this time that I first met Luiz de Oliveira, when he arrived in town to coach and study. We enjoyed several classes together for our post-graduate degrees at the University of Oregon and we shared coaching experiences as we coached our training squads side by side at Hayward Field and on the 'Adidas Oregon Trail' (known locally as 'The Amazon Trail', since the Amazon Creek runs alongside the trails). We always kept in touch over the years and would meet often at major Championships and Games. I knew that his health was for a while not so good. But, it was still such a shock to learn of his passing. We all know he was a great coach, with a fierce loyalty to friends and family that was fully reciprocated. Luiz and I supported each other through our careers and we both gained wealth, other than financial, from our coaching. It is such a shame that he could not receive a kidney transplant in time.

Peter John L. Thompson

13 August 2021