

Nov 04, 2016 by *APDS Bloggers*

# The Sporty Spice of Colombia <sup>[1]</sup>

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Even as most of North America was closing out the XXI Winter Olympics by viewing an epic hockey match between Canada and the U.S., America's Southern Hemisphere had already started preparing for their own version of the Summer Olympics. The South American Games, which featured over 5,000 athletes from fifteen different countries, came to a close earlier this week in Medellín, Colombia. The significance? The emergence of Colombian sports diplomacy and its vital role in re-branding the country's image.

Colombia certainly tops the list of countries in need of a brand makeover. To most outsiders, Colombia evokes imagery of dense jungles, impoverished coca farmers, guerrillas, and of course, the drug lord Pablo Escobar.

Despite its reputation, Colombia has undergone an incredible transformation from almost-failed state to one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America. With U.S. assistance, the Uribe Administration's security policies have reduced the capacities and numbers both of guerrillas and paramilitaries while decreasing the level of domestic coca cultivation.

When the Colombian government first approached a marketing consultant about re-branding the country's image in 1996, the consultant's reply was "Don't waste your time." However, when the Colombian government rang him up again in 2004, the result was the establishment of *Colombia es Pasión* (Colombia is Passion). Since its inception, *Colombia es Pasión* has typically relied on tourism and cultural diplomacy as its principle Public Diplomacy outlets.

Until recently, the most recognizable cultural exports from Colombia were art, literature and music: Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez is one of the most well-known writers in the world and Fernando Botero's disproportional "fat" sculptures can be found all the way from Mexico City to Armenia. Colombia is also home to international megastars Shakira and Juanes, who will represent Colombia by singing at the opening ceremony of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Though the Colombian National Soccer Team did not punch their ticket to South Africa, Colombia will host the 2011 FIFA "Under 20" World Cup and intends to make a serious bid for the FIFA World Cup in 2026.

Colombian sports are on the rise as a useful public diplomacy resource. Five-time All-Star Edgar Rentería opened the door to Major League Baseball for his country and recently established the first professional league in Colombia. Juan Pablo Montoya and Camilo Villegas continue to compete (and win) internationally in NASCAR and PGA respectively. Even the former FARC stronghold of Villavicencio has garnered international praise for hosting the annual Cowgirl World Championships. Colombian athletes competing in other countries' professional leagues and the increasing number of international sporting events hosted in Colombia demonstrate the potential sports diplomacy has for re-branding the country.

Colombia put down some serious pesos in hosting the South American Games. The inauguration ceremony featured world-class pyrotechnics and the choreography of Cirque du Soleil director Franco Dragone. Colombian Public Diplomacy efforts during the games were directed at both athletes and spectators in attendance. Entrance was free to all of the events at the Medellín million-dollar arenas and sports complexes constructed specifically for the Games. Particularly clever was the accommodation of international athletes in the same apartment complexes that Medellín has constructed as part of its urban renewal projects. Consequently, all athletes were issued a Metro pass to utilize Medellín's public transport (which include a MetroRail and Gondolas) to commute between the events and their accommodations. And despite an urban terror offensive by the FARC, not one act of violence managed to disrupt the Games in Medellín.

Though this is not Colombia's first time hosting an international sporting event, the South American Games may have been its most important. Less than twenty years ago, Medellín was known as "the most dangerous city in the world," leading global homicides with 381 per 100,000 inhabitants. Hosting international events in Colombia's most infamous city is perhaps the best way of demonstrating the leaps and bounds Colombia has made in recent years to those who continue to doubt its progress. In any case, Colombian sports diplomacy will hopefully function as another cultural commodity in re-branding the country's image and distancing itself from its tumultuous past.

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