



## #Olympics

### Edneida Freire's race between the hurdles of the Olympic city

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*In the life of athletics coach Edneida Freire, 51, there is still one race that has yet to be won. The mere mention of it immediately changes the expression on her face. Edneida's big smile turns into indignation when she talks about the closure of the Célio de Barros Athletics Stadium. Home to hundreds of athletes in Rio, it was closed to the public in January 2013. In the Olympic city, the right to sports is constantly being violated by the closure of sport facilities: an unfair competition that puts athletes and trainers on one side and the organisers of the 2016 Games on the other.*



Photo by Aline Furtado

The numerous races, jumps and the obstacles she has overcome are visible on the face and the track record of this former athlete. Born in Manaus (state of Amazonas), she fell in love with athletics while still in school. In 1985, she left her family to begin a new life in Rio de Janeiro (4,374 km away) and to study and pursue her dream of having a career on the tracks.

Edneida and the Célio de Barros Stadium crossed paths some time ago. In 1980, at the age of 16, after breaking her nose and a few teeth just one day before a competition, Edneida earned the title of Brazilian champion of pentathlon in the stadium that she would call home years later.



Edneida Freire is an athletics coach

Her victory earned her a trip to eleven cities in the US and competitions in Los Angeles and Miami. She was also offered bursaries to study physical education in Rio. After finishing university, she began to work on social projects for children and adolescents.

*“I didn’t leave Célio de Barros after that. My whole life in Rio de Janeiro was spent there. I used to say it was my first home. I practically spent seven days a week there,” Edneida explained. She calculates that between the children from the social projects and the Olympic and Paralympic athletes, close to 800 people went to the stadium every day. Training was divided into eight lanes. On January 9th, 2013, people arrived at the “home to athletics in Rio” only to find a padlock on the door. Training equipments, athletes’ documents...everything was left inside and no one was authorised to enter.*

The track Edneida used to train 80 children from 4 to 10 years of age, who she considered her “adopted children”, was destroyed so that the rubble from the works on the Maracanã stadium could be dumped there. Later, it was later paved and turned into a parking lot. Of the old sports centre, only the bleachers remained thanks to court injunctions and because “they served as boarding around the mess they are making”, Edneida denounced.

*“We put up with those kilometre-long holes and the machines. We competed with that wretched dust, because we expected things to get better for us once the works on Maracanã were finished. We would train with the gigantic machines on the track. They squeezed us into funnels. That is what our torture was like. No one wanted to leave because the place was ours”, Edneida explained.*

For her, the closure of the Célio de Barros stadium represents a serious violation of human rights because it was closed with not even a minimum of dialogue. They were all literally “thrown out on the street” and, three years later, athletes, trainers, children and adolescents continue to wander around without a permanent place to go to. At first, the state government offered them the Engenhão Olympic Stadium, the headquarters of the Botafogo soccer team, as a place to train. They spent months competing with the team’s players for the use of the track. On game days, they were not allowed to train. To use the

bathroom, they had to count on the goodwill of the owner of the bar just outside the stadium.

But the Engenhão stadium had to be closed due to structural problems with its roof. Once again, the athletes were left with nowhere to go. Training was transferred to *Quinta da Boa Vista*, one of the public parks in the city.

“With children, it is more complicated to go out on the street and in open spaces. Not only that, but when you throw a javelin, it gets stuck in a tree. We had to call the firemen to come remove a javelin from a hundred-year-old tree. While we were practicing shot put, the ball fell into a muddy hole and we never managed to get it out of there”, Edneida said, as she described the troubles the homeless athletes had to face.

Furthermore, it is impossible for athletes competing at the international level to train in parks without equipment such as starting blocks, tools to measure metres and proper lanes. Edneida stated that a place to train was eventually found, but only for athletes with the top ten times in Brazil. “How am I supposed to explain to a child that he or she aren’t allowed in because they are not good enough?”, the trainer said, as she looks away in silence with tears running down her face.

This is the case of 8-year-old Guilherme Leite who lives in Rio’s north end and has been training at the Célio de Barros stadium since he was four. “If Guilherme lived in any other country that takes things seriously, he would be a child already being prepared to make it to the Olympics”, Edneida affirmed angrily. She describes Guilherme as a boy who, for now, is “only playing with athletics”.



Edneida says she is pessimistic about the state government's promise to rebuild the stadium after the Olympics. The warm-hearted trainer's eyes shine with emotion when she talks about her work with the children, but turn sad when she thinks of how many of them she was not able to take under her arm after the stadium was closed down.

“They could go ahead and build five new stadiums, but the Célio de Barros stadium is part of our historical heritage, which should never be violated. There is life history in there”. When the conversation ended, Edneida wrote “May God be always with us!” on a paper and handed it to the reporter before running off to her next commitment. There is always another training session, even without a roof. As the trainer is familiar with defeat, she knows that the struggle in the Olympic city is a race with hundreds of kilometres of hurdles to overcome.

