

Basketball: Cuba beats USA for the first time in more than 50 years

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Havana, February 25 (RHC) - The Cuban men's basketball team gave a dazzling performance in the first window of the AmeriCup 2025 qualifying group D, defeating the United States 81-67 at home.

Before the amazement of around 4,000 spectators gathered at the Havana Sports City Coliseum, the island's quintet outplayed the creators of the sport from start to finish and avenged the setback suffered last Thursday in Florida (100-79), in the most prestigious basketball competition in America.

"We put a lot of emphasis on physical preparation to be able to defend. That was the key and another very important point was the effectiveness in free throws," Cuban DT Onel Planas told the press.

With a tight defence and better efficiency than their opponents, Planas' men dominated in most collective aspects, including field and free throws, the latter with an astonishing 88 per cent efficiency.

Pedro Bombino (19 points) and captain Jasiel Rivero (11 points and 9 rebounds) carried the weight of the island's squad, which had not won against a US team since the Pan American Games in Cali-71.

Now the all-time series between the two sides is 22-2 in favor of the Americans.

RaiQuan Gray shone for the northerners with 17 points, seconded by Jahmius Ramsey (14).

Although the home side always had control of the action, the visitors never let their guard down and both teams played a hard-fought game, to the point that in the second half one player from each team - Marlon Diaz (Cuba) and Elfrid Payton Jr (USA) - were ejected for a scuffle after an action under the boards.

Unlike Thursday's clash, the islanders were in full strength on Sunday, with a frenzied crowd cheering them all the way, congas in the stands and phrases like "Cuba, Cuba, Cuba" and "Cuba camina esto."

With only seven players - four for visa or documentation reasons and another for leaving the team on arrival in Florida - the Cubans had lost a good showing as visitors last Thursday in Osceola 100-79. The continental qualifiers will be contested - between 2024 and 2025 - by 16 teams divided into four brackets. The top three in each bracket qualify for the FIBA AmeriCup 2025, scheduled for Managua, Nicaragua, in August next year. Each team plays each opponent twice in each of the three scheduled windows, once at home and once away.

In the last edition of the most important basketball tournament on the continent (2022), Cuba did not advance past the qualifying round after finishing last in their group (0-6), after losing to Mexico, the United States and Puerto Rico.

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