

Two Cuban Boxers Ask for U.S. Asylum; Olympians Held by Immigration

The Washington Post

July 02, 1996, Tuesday, Final Edition

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Section: SPORTS; Pg. E01

Length: 561 words

Byline: Athelia Knight, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

Two Cuban Olympic **boxers** met with a **U.S. immigration** official yesterday to discuss their reasons for requesting political **asylum** in this country, according to a lawyer representing the **two** athletes.

Joel Casamayor, 24, the 1992 Olympic gold medalist in the bantamweight division, and Ramon Garbey, 25, a three-time world champion in the super middleweight division, have **asked** to defect to the **United States** because "they would rather die than fight for Fidel Castro," said Al Rogers, the administrative officer of a Los Angeles-based law firm that is representing the **two boxers**.

Rogers said the **two boxers**, who were considered favorites to win gold medals at this summer's Olympic Games, fled a training camp for **Cuban boxers** in Guadalajara, Mexico, early last week. With the help of people in Mexico, Casamayor and Garbey managed to travel from Guadalajara to Tijuana, where they met on Sunday with Rogers and Frank E. Ronzio, the lead lawyer in the case, Rogers said. The people who were helping the Cubans to defect contacted Ronzio's firm -- which specializes in **immigration** cases -- several days ago, he said.

Rudy Murillo, a spokesman for the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service in San Diego, confirmed that the **two boxers** were being detained at an **immigration** processing center near San Diego. However, he said he could not discuss the case.

Top **Cuban** athletes have defected to the **United States** in the past. Pitchers Livan Hernandez, 20, and Osvaldo Fernandez, 27, defected last year, and this spring received multimillion dollar contracts from the Florida Marlins and San Francisco Giants, respectively. Rey Ordonez, a shortstop for the **Cuban** national team, defected while in Buffalo for the World University Games in 1993 and now plays for the New York Mets. More than 40 of Cuba's top athletes defected in 1993 in Puerto Rico during the Central American and Caribbean Games.

Rogers said the **boxers** maintain that back home they have been pressured to sign documents and make statements that would place them as Communists, and that they have refused to do so. He said Castro uses the **Cuban** Olympic boxing team, which won seven gold medals at the 1992 Games in Barcelona. "They do not want to be instruments to be used to support the oppression of **Cuban** people," he said.

After meeting with the lawyers Sunday, the **two boxers** were driven across the border at San Ysidro, where they **asked** for **asylum**, Rogers said. He said no **immigration** official who handles **asylum** cases was available to interview the **boxers** on Sunday, so they were detained at the service processing center in El Centro, which is about 115 miles from San Diego.

Yesterday, Casamayor and Garbey were interviewed by an **immigration** official in a preliminary screening interview to determine whether the **asylum** case warrants parole, Rogers said. Parole status would allow the **boxers** to be free or leave detention pending a hearing before an **immigration** judge on the merits of their political **asylum** case, he said. The parole proceedings will continue today.

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The **boxers** were still in the midst of their interviews late yesterday evening and no decision had been made, Rogers said. If the **boxers** are released, they will travel to Los Angeles, where the law firm is located, he said.

The Cubans will send 160 to 190 athletes to the Games, which begin July 19.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (92%); SUMMER OLYMPICS (90%); SPORTS AWARDS (90%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (90%); LAWYERS (90%); OLYMPICS (90%); TALKS & MEETINGS (89%); INTERVIEWS (89%); BASEBALL (89%); POLITICAL **ASYLUM** (89%); BOXING (89%); US TERRITORIES (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); ATHLETES (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); JUDGES (78%); SPORTS & RECREATION EVENTS (78%); LEGAL SERVICES (78%); IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS (78%); CELEBRITIES (77%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY SPORTS (72%); PAROLE (60%)

Company: **immigration** and naturalization service **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%)

Organization: **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); **immigration** and naturalization service **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); **IMMIGRATION** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%)

Industry: LAWYERS (90%); LEGAL SERVICES (78%); CELEBRITIES (77%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY SPORTS (72%)

Person: FIDEL CASTRO (58%)

Geographic: SAN DIEGO, CA, USA (93%); LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (79%); SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); FLORIDA, USA (79%); MEXICO (93%); CUBA (92%); **UNITED STATES** (92%); PUERTO RICO (79%); CENTRAL AMERICA (76%); SPAIN (73%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (73%)

Load-Date: July 2, 1996