

## Robert Guerrero: Ghost Haunts the House

Written by Steve Argeris  
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Robert Guerrero grew up the middle of five brothers, so he knew a thing or two about punching above his weight.

“I’ve got two older and two younger brothers,” Guerrero said. “They’re spread from their 30s down to 11 years old. Just growing up with all those brothers, it’s everybody competing against each other. I’m grateful I had two older brothers to motivate me, trying to keep me on the right path.”

Brothers or not, Guerrero turned 22 on Easter Sunday and is already something of a veteran. Nearly a member of the 2000 Olympic team at 16 years old, he lost in the trials to eventual bronze medallist Clarence Vinson, and turned professional soon after. Already 15 fights into his professional career, he has his first belt, the North American Boxing Federation 126-pound title.

He is currently creeping into the top 10 of the alphabet soup ratings, coming in at No. 10 on the IBF and No. 11 on the WBO lists, and has his eyes on the big names in the division - Juan Manuel Marquez, Manny Pacquiao, Rocky Juarez, Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera – who he hopes to fight someday.

But for now, with a fight with Adrian Valdez Friday night on Showtime at the Palace Casino in Lemoore, Calif., Guerrero finds himself poised at the peak of his potential.

“I’m enjoying it,” Guerrero said. “I’ve been moving along pretty well, getting up into the rankings. Everything’s moving along smooth. It’s hard work, a great management team and a good promoter. They’re getting the job done. They’re getting me the right fights I need to elevate my game.”

Although Guerrero has a veteran team - trainer John Bray, managers Bob Santos and Shelly Finkel, and promoter Goossen-Tutor - he is taking charge of his own career as a fighter. Unlike others who prefer to know as little as possible about opponents until they get into the ring, Guerrero watches hours of fight films as he prepares for each bout.

“I like to look at tape,” Guerrero said. “Don’t get me wrong, I have a lot of faith in John Bray getting it done. But I see it as part of my job to watch these guys, study them, see what he brings to the table. I don’t like to just get into a ring with a guy and turn to my corner and say, ‘John, what’s this guy going to do?’ It’s about picking up any little weakness I can pick up on, any bad habits. It might take just one little thing to make a difference.”

Commenting on Valdez, also a southpaw, Guerrero said “He’s a good, solid strong fighter. He comes to fight every time in that ring. He’s going to be ready. I did all my research on him, all my studying. I’ve been in with southpaws before.”

Guerrero made the decision to turn professional at 126 pounds. He could have gone in at his

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amateur weight of 118 pounds, but he figured that since he was nearly 5 feet 10 inches tall and 18 years old, 118 pounds was not going to be a weight he would be able to make forever, so he entered the professional ranks as a featherweight and has weighed in between 121 and 130 pounds ever since.

“I could’ve fought at 118 as a pro,” Guerrero said. “I said to myself, ‘I’m 5-9, why tear my body apart to make a weight that I’m probably going to end up leaving in a year and a half.’ So I decided I would fight at 126, make a big dent, get into the rankings at 126, and hopefully fight for that world title.”

Guerrero is a sharp, working-class fighter, with a father who is a fence contractor and a mother who was a homemaker. He grew up working for his father, and first entered the ring as a grade-schooler. He quickly earned his nickname - The Ghost - because “By the time I’m done hitting, the kid looks to hit back, and I was gone, off to the side, and they kept saying, ‘Man, you’re like a ghost.’”

Guerrero, despite turning professional at a young age, has a work ethic and focus that he attributes to his father and family.

“Every summer I was out there working hard for my father,” Guerrero said. “I was out there to learn to work, experiencing a daily job, and it really taught me a lot, taught me a lot about self-discipline being out there. He taught me to do what I’m doing in boxing, and it gave me that work ethic in boxing, because he showed me you’ve got to work hard no matter what it is . . .

“My older brothers, they boxed amateur. That’s the farthest they got. They fought a few national tournaments. They did the Pop Warner football, high school sports. Now they’re working their daily jobs - one’s a body shop custom painter and one went into the fence contracting business - and they’re doing real well. That’s the way my father raised us: You want those nice pair of shoes? You gotta learn how to work for them.”

His family also instilled a deep sense of spirituality, something he carries with him and mentions every chance he can.

“Everything I do in boxing it’s because of Jesus Christ and my beliefs in Him,” Guerrero said. “I really believe if it wasn’t for Jesus Christ, I wouldn’t have the talent. I wouldn’t be in the positions I’m in right now. That’s why I exalt God so much. I want young people to know it’s a big deal for me.

“The main point is that I’m a big believer in Jesus Christ. That’s one of the biggest things on my webpage—bible passages on every page. The thing I love to do with my career is really exalt Jesus Christ. Being on TV, radio shows, that’s one of those things I like to do. Let everybody know I’m a big believer . . .

“It made me grow a lot, making the 2000 trials,” Guerrero said. “It’s only the top eight that make it there. For me to be one of them at 16 years old matured me a lot. It showed me I have the God-given ability and skills to compete with these older, experienced men. That’s one of the

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confidence-builders in the amateurs I had was making the trials.”

The decision to turn professional early, rather than wait for the 2004 Games, was easy.

“With the plan of turning pro right after the trials, the idea was to turn pro and by the time the 2004 Olympics come, I’ll be in the position of fighting for the world title,” Guerrero said. “Everything’s been going so good. Everything’s flown, great management, great promotion, they have put me on the right track.”

He soon moved to Los Angeles to find better sparring, but Guerrero always will be a Bay Area fighter. Yet his hometown of Gilroy is well removed from the big city lights, 33 miles south of San Jose. He feels like he had the best of both worlds, growing up near enough to San Jose and the rest of the Bay Area to take advantage of it, but far enough away to relish his downtime when he’s back from training in Los Angeles.

“Gilroy, it’s a small, small town, maybe 40,000 people,” Guerrero said. “It’s also a farm town, so it’s real quiet. A lot of country land, it’s nothing close to the big cities, but it’s real close by and being right there by San Jose. I grew up going to the gyms in San Jose, going out to dinner out there. It’s a nice town to grow up in.

“I can say I’m a small town guy. I loved being in a small community, but when I’m out training, it feels like I’m a big city guy, just working out and working. I made that transition.”

Guerrero thought about college, but harbors no doubts he has made the right decision to fight fulltime.

“The position I’m in right now, you can say one out of a million guys are in that position,” Guerrero said. “I’m doing what I’ve loved to do since I was nine years old. It’s incredible how far I’ve made it coming out of a small town. I don’t really feel like I’m missing out on anything. The level I’m at in my career, that my high schoolmates that are in college or finishing college, well, I feel that I went through a boxing college.”