Written by David A. Avila
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Yet another fighter from the Riverside area of California makes his main event debut when Michael “Lil Warrior” Franco meets Juan Beltran in a junior featherweight match on Saturday.

Franco, a bantamweight, moves up in weight to fight Beltran (19-12-3, 11 KOs) after nobody wanted to fight the Riverside boxer on Saturday, May 30 at American Sports University in San Bernardino, California. The afternoon fight card begins at 3 p.m. and is being staged by Two Feathers Promotion.

Though fighters from the Inland Empire have been arriving rapidly in the past 10 years due to its population boom, usually the fighters are driven by hard times and lack of money.

Not Franco.

“I just like boxing,” says Franco, 21.

First there was Shane Mosley, then Joel, Antonio and Julio Diaz, Mark Suarez, Timothy Bradley, Josesito Lopez, Dominic Salcido, Chris Arreola and here comes Franco.

It had to happen when there are more than 33 boxing gyms (Editor Note: Holy smokes! That is a cluster!) in a 50 square mile radius. The area is becoming a boxing factory. Boxing is especially contagious in Riverside, the largest city in the Inland Empire.

And every so often a boxer arrives who is not deprived economically or socially, though it’s not common at all..

Fighters like Marco Antonio Barrera emerged from Mexico City from middle class parents working in the film industry. Azumah Nelson came from royalty in his native Ghana and back in the early 1900s New York’s Bennie Leonard hid the fact he was a boxer from his own family. But these instances are rare.

Franco is attempting to join that exclusive club.

He eats, drinks, and breathes what many professional athletes call the hardest sport.

“I’ve played baseball and football until I was 15,” Franco says. “I like sports.”

Like many Latino families, the Francos would gather around the television set to watch Julio Cesar Chavez or Oscar De La Hoya. It was a family ritual throughout the years.

“One day my father asked me if I wanted to go to Willy’s (Silva) boxing gym in Mira Loma,” said Franco. “I was like 12 or 13.”

The boxing bug hit the Riverside youngster hard. Soon he was engaging in amateur bouts or sparring against professionals in trainer Silva’s now defunct gym. In a matter of two years, he dropped all of the other sports to concentrate on the sport many call the sweet science.

“Boxing is a year-round thing. All the glory is on you and all the failure is on you,” says Franco excitedly. “I love the competition, you know. Going in there and having your will tested against another man’s will. There is nothing else like it.”

It didn’t take long to discover that the Riverside youngster had superior strength and heavy punching power in his 126-pound frame. Now, at 118 pounds, he’s even more of a physically imposing force in the bantamweight division.

Riverside’s Franco mowed through amateur competition. But while sparring against seasoned pros, some of them world champions, he realized that dedication and willingness to compete with superior boxers resulted in big rewards.

“I sparred Israel Vazquez, Vic Darchinyan when I only had a couple of pro fights. It was intimidating,” Franco says of sparring with the two world champions. “With those guys if you leave your right hand (guard) down Vazquez will hit you with the left hook. He’ll expose you.”

Al Franco, father and trainer of Michael, says they regularly travel to the Wild Card Boxing gym in Hollywood or the Maywood Boxing Gym to find sparring.

“You learn by sparring better guys than yourself,” says Al Franco.

The Franco family now lives in the High Desert but works together to insure that Michael Franco can concentrate on his boxing career. The father says that discipline has always been one of his son’s greatest strengths.

“He’s very disciplined. Nobody has to tell him what to do,” says Al Franco, who is heavily involved organizing the fight card at the Fox Theater. “Even when he was younger he had a lot of self-discipline.”

Young Franco plans to use that discipline and desire toward capturing a world title someday, though the odds are against him.

“That’s my goal, to win a world title,” Franco says.

Several other Inland area fighters are on the fight card, including Anthony “Baby Assassin” Villarreal of Perris. Tickets are still available for the American Sports University fight card located at 374 Court Street in San Bernardino. For more information (909) 889-5555.

All U.S. military servicemen will be admitted for half price.

**Timothy Bradley**

Palm Spring’s Timothy Ray Bradley will be defending his WBO world title but his promoter is looking for the best and most lucrative fighter. “We wanted Joan Guzman but the WBO wouldn’t sanction that fight,” said Gary Shaw, who co-promotes Bradley. “We’re looking at other options. Maybe someone like Nate Campbell.”

**Flyweight world title fights**

Two flyweight world titles were decided on Tuesday when Japan’s Daisuke Naito (35-2-3), the WBC titleholder, beat China’s Xiong Zhao Zhong (12-2-1) in Japan by unanimous decision. In another flyweight contest, Thailand’s Denkaosan Kaovichit (47-1-1) defended his WBA version against Japan’s Hiroyuki Hirataka (17-8-1) by split decision.

**Kauffman**

Undefeated heavyweight prospect Travis Kauffman (16-0, 13 KOs), who often trains in Riverside, faces Livin Castillo (14-6, 9 KOs) on the main event in Reading, Penn. on Saturday. Kauffman has sparred many times with Chris Arreola. “He’s a real good fighter,” said Henry Ramirez, who trains Arreola.

**Fights on television**

Sat. HBO, 9:45 p.m., Andre Berto (24-0) vs. Juan Urango (21-1-1); Alfredo Angulo (15-0) vs. Kermit Cintron (30-2-1).