Junior welterweight Francisco "El Gato" Figueroa was working as a child care counselor in a residential treatment facility in the Bronx, New York, when the boxing bug bit him. It was September 1999 and he and some friends were watching the Oscar De La Hoya-Felix Trinidad bout on television.

Although Figueroa had never boxed before, he was a sensational athlete who had excelled at wrestling in high school. When a friend suggested that he had the natural tools to become a boxer, the then 22-year-old Figueroa made his way to the nearby Morris Park Gym, where he trained with a wise old sage named Andy Martinez, who Figueroa described as looking "exactly like Mickey in *Rocky*."

Nine months later he won the 147 pound novice New York City Golden Gloves title. He also picked up the nickname "El Gato," which means "The Cat" in Spanish. Figueroa was the only fighter quick enough to catch the gym's mascot. Martinez christened him with his new nickname after explaining, "In order to catch a cat, you have to be a cat."

After just two-and-a-half years as an amateur, Figueroa had won a slew of titles and tournaments but, citing the politics of the game, opted to turn pro.

Although he is generally regarded as a hot prospect with a 12-2 (10 KOs) record, the now 27-year-old Figueroa says he still has to endure the cruel nature of boxing politics.

"As a pro, your success is more about politics than your skills," said Figueroa, who manages himself but is promoted by the Rochester, New York-based Ron Resnick.

Figueroa was scheduled to fight at the Amazura Ballroom in Queens on December 29th, but the fight fell out two days prior. However, he is too solid of a pro to dwell on the disappointment of it all.

"I just minimize the disappointment," he said. "I was born with a positive outlook. All I have to do is keep doing what I'm doing, and good things will come."

While Figueroa, who was born in Spanish Harlem and raised in the Northeast Bronx, says he was born with a positive outlook, his eternal optimism was honed in the small town of Troy, Vermont, where he spent 11 summers – from the ages of 6 to 17 – when he was young.

Sent there through the Fresh Air Fund, he was hosted every one of those summers by the Morrissette family, who taught him more about life than he could have ever imagined.

"I learned moral structure, proper English, became an altar boy, and was taught how to work for my money," said Figueroa. "I can't thank the Fresh Air Fund, the Morrissette family, or my mother enough. I am so grateful to my mother for loving me enough to send me there. It

changed my life for the better."

"You can't help but believe in Gato, because he truly believes in himself," Resnick said. "This kid is ready for television. He is made for television. There are so many good bouts for him out there, but nobody is willing to fight him."

"Right now I'd take anyone from the Top-6 to the Top-20," said Figueroa, who also works as a personal trainer at the Printing House Gym in downtown Manhattan. He then listed four of the more well-known prospects in his red-hot division.

"Mike Arnaoutis: I've heard good and bad about him, but have never seen him fight. I'd take him (a fight with him) in a minute."

"[Dmitriy] Salita: He's big in New York, but not big nationally. If he still has a belt, any belt, I'd take him, too." Salita currently wears an NABA belt.

"Paulie [Malignaggi]: He's a good friend, but he tires out at the end of the rounds. I'd love to fight him."

"[Jeffrey] Resto: I'd love to fight him, too. He's got big balls. I admire his balls. He's a *real* fighte r."

Amazingly, Figueroa doesn't sound the least bit arrogant when talking about his place in the division. The way he sees it, he earned the right to be supremely confident. In his toughest fight to date, he got off the canvas twice in the tenth and final round to last the distance with hard-punching Francisco Rincon, then 8-1 (4 KOs), in Poughkeepsie, New York, in November 2004.

"Nobody else was willing to fight a guy like that," said El Gato. "That loss taught me that when you get stunned, don't act like a bully. If you need to put on the track suit, put on the track suit. Boy, did that guy hit hard! Whoo-wee."

Figueroa calls his other loss, a four-round decision to Troy Wilson in Atlanta in August 2003, an outright robbery.

"I don't even count that as a loss," he said. "Anyone who saw the fight would agree."

Figueroa is next scheduled to lace them up in February, probably in Rochester where he has already fought twice. After that, he hopes he gets the opportunity to show the world that he is a force to be reckoned with in what is arguably boxing's most talent-laden division.

"Once people see me fight, the doors will open," he said. "Once the doors open, I won't be able to be ignored."

(Visit El Gato's web site at www.gatofigueroa.com and the Fresh Air Fund's web site at www.freshair.org

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