

Sanchez's dream is everyone else's Nightmare

Written by Ralph Gonzalez

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It makes one wonder what drives a fighter like Diego "The Nightmare" Sanchez. He fights with the intensity of a tsunami inside the octagon where he overpowers and smashes his opponents. In the process of his destructive path he leaves men cut and beaten to a bloody pulp. Men with skills and qualifications like his last victim Karo Parisyan. Parisyan, a highly regarded martial artist, was supposed to be Sanchez's stiffest test. The Armenian-American had scored wins over Nick Diaz and this year's "The Ultimate Fighter" winner Matt Serra. Parisyan was on a roll and Sanchez was the pebble that would throw Parisyan off course.

The twenty-four-year-old from Albuquerque, New Mexico took the fight to Parisyan from the start and never relented. He grounded and pounded Parisyan in a classic confrontation that showcased Sanchez's intense style.

The win was a loud statement to MMA fans: There's a Nightmare in your future.

Parisyan put up a valiant effort but just couldn't match Sanchez's ground skills and super stamina. "It was a great fight. Karo was probably my toughest opponent to date. I was in fantastic shape and I had no quit in me," remembers Sanchez.

Sanchez, undefeated in seventeen fights, will be tested yet again on Wednesday night when he takes on the very tough Joe "Diesel" Riggs (28-8) from the Marine Corps Air Station in Miramar, California. A special card presented by the UFC for military personnel which will be broadcast nationally on Spike TV.

Riggs is considered talented but Sanchez sees some cracks in his game. "Riggs is a strong wrestler and a good striker. I do feel he has some weaknesses. I think his mental strength is questionable. I don't think he'll be able to handle the pressure," said Sanchez. Call it cockiness or confidence, Sanchez tells it like it is. Or like he thinks it ought to be. Sanchez can't help it. His surroundings programmed him to fight and to never surrender. Ever.

Sanchez is a homegrown Albuquerque product who was influenced by his tough "vato" uncles who instilled the spirit of the Chicano street warrior in the kid who grew up as an only child. Even then, he usually found himself surrounded by family. "I had a lot of cousins growing up. I had a lot of uncles who were these real tough guys who grew up very poor which made them hard and they were guys who had a lot of pride in themselves," said Sanchez. "I took on that type of mentality and my cousins would advise me to stay clean and focus on my football or my wrestling. They helped pave the way to where I am now." With his family's help, he eluded the gang life and survived high school where he managed to keep a 3.0 grade point average.

He's a long way from his days as a star wrestler at Del Norte High School. His memorable triumph on Spike TV's first installment of "The Ultimate Fighter" made him an instant star. Since then, his impressive wins and relentless style has convinced many that Sanchez is the future of MMA. Trainer Rob Garcia feels that his charge is ready for a title shot right now. "Diego's been

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ready for a title shot. However in MMA there are so many diverse styles that you have to train in several different disciplines. We want Diego to be well versed in all those styles so that when he wins the title, he hangs on to it for a long time," Garcia said. Garcia has impressive credentials with a client list that includes former world champions Terry and Orlin Norris. In 2000 he was hired to be the conditioning coach for boxing's biggest star: Oscar De La Hoya. Garcia's approach to training is considered unorthodox in the industry. He makes sure Sanchez doesn't get too comfortable with his surroundings and sparring partners. Sometimes their training takes them to Miami or Albuquerque. Sometimes out of the country.

Sanchez recently spent a few months in Mexico City training with former boxing prodigy Francisco "Panchito" Bojado. "I trained with Panchito Bojado for a year straight. In fact I was recently in Mexico City training with him for a few months," Sanchez said. The trip had a profound effect on him. "It was a humbling experience for me. It's a hardcore gritty and grimy city. The biggest city in the world. There are areas that are very poor," remembered Sanchez. "It made me appreciate what we have here in the .U.S. I got to work on my Spanish and saw a lot of different things. I remember being in an old cab and seeing a guy walking on the street without shoes. It made me think a lot about what's important."

Yet the question remains: What drives this force of nature? "Family and the will to win and the fear of losing. I look at every fight as if my life is on the line. And it is," Sanchez said. "If I lose then I'll be letting a lot of people down. That's why I'm always improving as a fighter. Anyone can get into the octagon and fight. That's easy. The hard thing is to fight smart and be strategic."

Although he feels ready for a title shot, Sanchez and company are smart enough to pace MMA's new wonder kid. "I'll fight for the title whenever we think we're ready. My time will come," Sanchez said. "I think I'd like to fight Matt Hughes first. That would be a great fight. I'm looking to get a title shot by the end of 2007."

It looks like "The Nightmare" is just getting started.

Check out Diego Sanchez vs. Joe Riggs on Spike TV on Wednesday December 13. Also on the card: Jeff Joslin vs. Josh Koscheck and Drew Fickett vs. Karo Parisyan.