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Written by Ralph Gonzalez
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Bullying exists in every facet of our society. Its impact can have a detrimental effect on its victims.

In some cases, it can also help shape a destiny.

For Omar Figueroa Sr., bullying forced him to learn to defend himself from those who would torment him because he was a first generation Mexican immigrant from Tamaulipas.

But this isn't the anti-immigrant story one might expect. "It wasn't the white American population coming after me, it was my own people," Figueroa Sr. stated of his experience growing up in Raymondville, Texas. "They would call me a mojado (wetback) and punch me. Eventually I had to learn to fight back. It was the worst thing that ever happened to them."

He wasn't about to let his son, Omar Figueroa Jr., face the same fate. He would learn to fight early. "I taught him just in case," Figueroa Sr. stated. "Thank god he never had problems."

Twenty-two year old Figueroa Jr. is now an undefeated lightweight with fourteen wins, eleven knockouts and one draw. He tends to be more philosophical about the situation: "If it wasn't because of the bullying, we wouldn't be here now."

The Weslaco, Texas native's stock recently soared with his impressive sixth round stoppage over the highly regarded Michael "The Artist" Perez. It was a fight that boxing insiders felt would propel Perez, also an undefeated pro and former national golden gloves champion, into contender status on his way to becoming the next Puerto Rican sensation.

Omar Sr. had terrible doubts. "I didn't want to take the fight. But Omar Jr. has a lot of pride and didn't want to say no because of the boxing rivalry between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans," he remembers. "I told my son that I consider this guy a great fighter. A ten. And he said, 'I don't care'."

"I knew I was the underdog," said Figueroa Jr. "But my dad and I know what I'm capable of. I never doubted I was going to win. And I knew I would win by knockout."

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While many young fighters often display such bravado, having spent three weeks sparring against the late and legendary Edwin Valero couldn't help but boost his confidence. "That was awesome. He's the hardest puncher I've ever been in the ring against. I've sparred with heavyweights and this guy punched harder."

Before his passing, Valero, an undefeated champion with a 100 percent knockout ratio, had requested that Figueroa Jr. travel to Venezuela and help him train for a month in preparation for a match against boxing superstar, Manny Pacquiao.

Figueroa Jr. walked away from the Valero experience with some important lessons. "It made me appreciate what it takes to be a great fighter. His conditioning was insane and off the charts. After sparring with Valero, getting in the ring with any other fighter is easy."

Although they knew he could hang with the best, fighting Perez was still a tough decision for Omar Sr. "We took the fight. But in my mind I was thinking, Is this too early? On the other hand, I was thinking about Valero and the great feedback he gave me about my son."

What transpired on Showtime's ShoBox card was a classic match up between two talented and hungry fighters. Perez came out firing but Figueroa had an answer for everything. Ultimately, it was a relentless body attack that forced the Puerto Rican to succumb. "Besides the body shots, he realized he couldn't hurt me with anything he threw," Figueroa Jr. said.

His brutal body attack was no secret to Omar Sr. While training for Perez, the feedback he received from trainer Joel Diaz re-affirmed his belief. "Joel was telling me, your son hits harder than anyone to the body. I knew if he landed enough of those shots, Perez would eventually break."

It was before the sixth round that Perez's people finally threw in the towel. Showtime boxing analyst Antonio Tarver commented on Figueroa's impressive work. "It's been a long time since I've seen someone commit to the body like that," he said during the broadcast. "That's a great way to get to the next level."

But Figueroa Jr.'s game isn't perfect. Omar Sr. admits there are times when his son takes risks which leave him open. "That's my baby in the ring and this is a sport where the less punishment you take, the better, so I tell Omar to cover up. But he says 'it's okay'. Let them hit me so I can hit them back even harder."

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The machismo is very much a part of the sport. "I have to prove that when I'm in the ring, I'm the alpha-male," Figueroa Jr. said. "I love competition and I have to prove I'm the best at whatever I set my mind to do."

A four-year letterman in baseball and record holder of several track and field records, he chose boxing for its individualistic nature. "When I'm in the ring, it's all on me," he said. "That's what I love. In the ring, it's up to me. I love the pressure, the anxiety, everything. It's exciting."

Currently promoted by Golden Boy Promotions, his sights are set high. "I want a world title because if I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it big," said Figueroa Jr. "I look forward to tougher competition. I can't wait. The only road to greatness is to defeat the best and that's what I plan to do. My journey is just beginning."

On Youtube: Omar "Panterita" Figueroa Jr. vs. Michael "The Artist" Perez.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHkBZTyjmrI>

{youtube}hHkBZTyjmrI{/youtube}

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