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The Mouthpiece

Remembering My Brother—Francisco “El Niño Azteca” Rodriguez

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Besides my father’s eulogy, this is probably the most difficult composition I have crafted because it entails embarking upon a painful journey in an attempt to help others empathize with how you feel about a fallen member of your family. It is a tad less heart rendering when an elderly member makes the transition to the squared circle in the sky, but when a young vibrant



Picture: 8countproductions.com

star that shone so brightly for twenty-five years is extinguished before its time your head swells with sorrow and you can only think about the loved ones left behind. I belong to an esteemed, sizeable family with countless brothers and sisters I have never met.

I am a practitioner of the sweet science, identifying myself as a boxer first despite the protracted lull since my last fight. Boxing is my pedigree and every gladiator who dons the gloves and enters the squared circle is my brother and sister. All fighters have a bond that is predicated on heartfelt respect knowing that we participate in the purest form of competition. Unless you have looked an opponent directly in the eyes before trying to separate them from their senses during battle only to hug them at the conclusion of officiated war, it will be tricky for you to understand the consanguineal bond forged between boxers and why part of us died on November 22nd.

Today in Chicago at Woodlawn Cemetery they laid to rest my brother, Francisco “El Niño Azteca” Rodriguez who succumbed to head injuries sustained in his match on Friday, November 20th at The Legendary Blue Horizon for the vacant USBA junior-featherweight title against another brother, Teon “The Technician” Kennedy. Kennedy won the championship as the bout—a mini-war waged at a frenzied pace—was stopped in the 10th round. Rodriguez, who became unresponsive, was rushed to Hahnemann Hospital where he died two days later. I knew that I should have been at The Blue, but I had a prior commitment ringside covering the Dee Lee Promotions, Inc. *Fall Brawl* at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City.

The abolitionists will once again rear their ugly heads touting boxing as barbaric. They all suffer from selective amnesia forgetting that boxing is just a blip on the radar of sports-related fatalities. Let's not open the books on high school football, basketball, track & field, skiing and cheerleading. Yes, cheerleading. I could easily mount my soapbox, but I want to focus on remembering Francisco.

Boxing is a dangerous sport and Francisco's death forces us to question our own mortality. However, like many fighters, I am more comfortable in the ring than walking down the street. Similar to Francisco, I would rather die doing something I love then live a banal existence working a job that I hate.

It was comedian Redd Foxx who had a friend who loved smoking but was persuaded to quit by his family. He stopped smoking one Friday and by Saturday he was dead—"he got ran over by a tobacco truck." Moral of the story—live your life.

Our fallen brother lived his life pursuing his dream—a world championship. He started boxing by following in the footsteps of his father, Evaristo, who is also his trainer. And, Francisco excelled as an amateur winning a 2001 National Golden Gloves Championship in addition to capturing five Chicago Golden Glove Championships. He turned professional in 2005 and had a huge following in his hometown of Chicago with his ring walks being legendary, featuring a full percussion band. Francisco had seventeen fights, winning fourteen, losing three and scoring eight knockouts.

Having lost my father tragically in August 2008 allows me to understand the pain that the Rodriguez family is feeling. His father and brother, both of whom were in his corner, could blame themselves believing that they could have changed the outcome, but they have to come to terms that this was simply fate. They did nothing wrong.

Teon Kennedy may blame himself for fighting so hard, but he also did nothing wrong. Kennedy showed his respect for Francisco by training hard and regularly running the long 8.5-mile circuit on East River Drive which starts at the Art Museum. Many mornings at sunrise I have passed Teon running solo in the opposite direction preparing for battle.

Teon, you honored Francisco by fighting with all your will and skills. You continue to honor him by staying the course to accomplish your dream of becoming a world champion. He understands.

I have played it over in my head many times and thought that I would first honor Francisco by writing this article. I don't want anyone to ever forget the fighter who made his first trip to Philadelphia, ran up the steps of Art Museum à la *Rocky*, and fought his last bout at The Legendary Blue Horizon. I want all to remember that even though I never met Francisco, everyone said that he was a great human being with a big, generous heart.

Even in death, Francisco still lives. His organs were donated to five individuals, including his uncle who was on the waiting list for a kidney. If you have read this far, I want you to do something meaningful. Francisco is survived by a wife and 5-month old daughter. A young girl will grow up without her father. Let's help make sure that despite the absence of her dad she will

have the funds to ensure that a college education will be guaranteed. Unlike other professional sports, there are no pensions for boxers.

Therefore, I am asking everyone reading this article to donate one dollar, the cost of a cup of coffee to:

**The Francisco Rodriguez Fund – c/o National Republic Bank of Chicago
1201 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607
Telephone: (312) 738-4900**

Please pass this article to all of your friends and encourage them to do the same.

Let's remember Francisco as the wonderful person he was, living life with passion while following his dreams. Rest in peace my brother.

Continue to support the sweet science and remember, always carry your mouthpiece!

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