



KICKIN' BACK

Siblings fight, but few mix it up quite like the Lopez brood. As tykes, they practiced their scissor blocks and strangle punches in a garage in Sugar Land, Texas—amid boxes, tools, oil slicks and Mom's laundry. Then dad Julio, a huge martial arts buff, would gather the troops and take them to a kung fu matinee.



These days, Steven, Mark and Diana are kickin' it to the top of tae kwon do, following in the footsteps of big brother Jean, a four-time national team welterweight. In fact, if all goes as planned at the U.S. trials on May 20, the young trio will become the first family members ever to comprise 75% of an Olympic squad.

Steven, 21, is the composed one—his quiet resolve bolstered by an unbeatable front leg. Marky, 18, is the showboat—an All who stings with a signature back flip. Diana, 16, is the talker—precocious, inventive and the fiercest competitor of the bunch. All three represent a new flavor of tae kwon do, attracting new fans to the sport while abandoning some of its stiffer formalities. They don't even bow to Jean, their instructor, though they readily kiss his cheeks, as is customary in Julio and Ondina's native Nicaragua.

The 26-year-old Jean finds himself on the sidelines because only two men's and two women's weight classes will compete for each country in Sydney (Steven is a featherweight, Marky a flyweight). But Jean's studio, Elite Tae Kwon Do, trains six of the 20 remaining Olympic hopefuls. And his mere presence at a fight is enough to intimidate most any Lopez opponent. "They set the standard in every competition," says Jason Torres, an Elite disciple and Marky's main rival. "The name Lopez is synonymous with tae kwon do." —URSULA LIANG

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AHOY!
 Star-class sailors mind the tides at the world championships in Annapolis, Md. (And yes, it is an Olympic sport.)

An artistic and ► technical whiz, Ruiz is the most decorated U.S. diver since Greg Louganis.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Who says divers should quietly exit the pool? Mark Ruiz comes out kicking and screaming
 BY ANNE MARIE JEFFORDS

TIGER WOODS DOES IT. Michael Jordan did it midair. It's the fist pump—the universal sign for "God, I'm so good"—and Mark Ruiz has turned it into an art form. Bursting through the surface with his fists flying, shouts of "Yes!" filling the air, the 21-year-old diver is pure Latin fire in a sport in which emotion is about as common as a belly flop.

There was much to celebrate in April after Ruiz won the springboard, platform and synchronized platform with David Pichler at the U.S. indoor nationals in Minneapolis. Ruiz has been a crowd fave since taking bronze at the 1994 Olympic Festival, where he whooped it up in the pool after nailing his final dive and earning a pair of 10s. "They had never seen divers do that kind of stuff," he says. "I can't help it. That's just who I am."

Ruiz was no bigger than a water bug when he started diving off tree branches in his native Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. His mother, Lydia, wisely enrolled him in lessons, and by age 10 he had become the youngest member ever of the Puerto Rican senior national team. In 1992, after attending a U.S. camp, he convinced Mom to sell her beauty salon and move with him to Orlando. Dad John, though divorced from Lydia, eventually followed suit, as did Mark's older sister, Gisselle. (Older brother John-Erik stayed behind.)

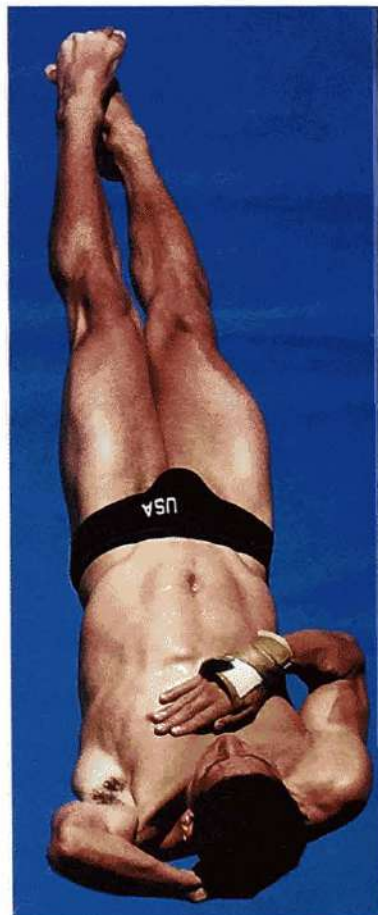
During his first few years in Florida, Ruiz spent as much time trying to tame his emotions as he did diving. Frustration in some of his early meets hurt his concentration and cost him higher marks. But by the time he teamed up with coach Jay Lerew in '96, the teen had struck a successful balance. "He can be a handful in practice," Lerew says, "but when he focuses that emotion in competition, he is awesome."

Witness Ruiz's stunning triumph at the '97 Hungarian Grand Prix in Austria, where he became the first American in five years to beat defending Olympic champion Dmitry Sautin. The Russian Sautin dives with expert precision but little artistic flare. Ruiz, much like the great Greg Louganis before him, possesses the rare combination of breathtaking grace and impeccable mechanics. "Mark is technically much better than me," says Louganis, who was on hand at the Sullivan Awards in early April to applaud Ruiz as one of the nation's top amateur athletes.

Ruiz's 16 national titles still pales next to

Louganis' unfathomable 47. But not even Louganis can boast of the feat Ruiz pulled off at last year's indoors, when he matched his idol's '88 sweep of the boards (including the two-meter), then added a fourth win in the synchronized event (which debuted in '95).

And anyone who saw Ruiz's gold turn at the Pan Am Games—where a perfectly executed reverse 3½ somersault with a half-twist tuck sent him into spasms of joy—knows that anything is possible for The Fist. Making the U.S. squad in June should be cake; besting Chinese divers Tian Liang and Xiong Ni for Olympic gold would be surprisingly sweet. Whatever happens, know this: If Ruiz nails a dive for a medal Down Under, the celebration will begin before he surfaces.



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