



Staff Sgt. Joe Guzman helps Spc. Alex Love warm up before a fight at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program)

WCAP Boxing Coach Says Success Is Possible Through Good Leadership

By Pablo Villa — NCO Journal

As a troubled youth, Staff Sgt. Joe Guzman says leaders and mentors changed his life. And now, after 16 years in the Army, he is changing the lives of others.

That's clearly evident in his current role as assistant coach for the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program boxing team at Fort Carson, Colo., where since 2008 he has helped mold elite Soldier-athletes vying for a berth on the U.S. Olympic team. The task comes after his own five-year stint as a Soldier-athlete in which his work ethic and prowess inside the ring earned him a spot as one of the WCAP boxing team's captains.

But it wasn't always easy for Guzman.

"I'm that story of the young Mexican kid who was doing all the wrong things," Guzman said after a recent morning workout at the WCAP boxing facility.

"It's not how all Mexican or Hispanic kids who join the Army get here. But that was my way out. Sixteen years later, here I am."

Guzman is a shining example of how Hispanics and other minorities can live out their dreams in the Army. As the nation celebrates National Hispanic Heritage Month — from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 — he hopes his story can inspire youngsters of all races and backgrounds to forge ahead in the chase of their aspirations even when the obstacles in front of them seem insurmountable. The biggest factor in overcoming those hardships, Guzman says, is heeding the knowledge and advice of leaders be they in the Army, in schools, in churches or at home.

"We work with recruiters throughout the United States," Guzman said. "I go to different high schools to give talks. I might be talking to a school of 3,000 peo-



Staff Sgt. Joe Guzman, from left, Spc. Alex Love, Spc. Rianna Rios and Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program)

ple and I guarantee you there's a handful of Hispanics, boys and girls, in there. I tell them the same story. I tell them, 'Listen, I'm a perfect example that if you toe the line, you stay disciplined, you stay consistent, you finish school, do all the right things, you can get to your dream.'"

Overcoming obstacles

The annals of U.S. Army history are laden with significant contributions by Hispanics dating back to the Revolutionary War. Today, about 20 percent of the force — both enlisted and officer ranks — are Soldiers with a Hispanic background, according to U.S. Census Bureau data for fiscal year 2013.

Nationally, the Hispanic population in the decade before 2010 grew 43 percent, compared with 10 percent overall population growth. That makes for roughly 54 million people in the country who identify as Hispanic. About one in four of those — 23.5 percent, according to Pew Research Center data — live in poverty. Guzman grew up as part of that statistic.

The Eloy, Ariz., native was one of six children living

with a single mother. It was easy for him to run afoul of stated rules and, with limited supervision, he took advantage of it.

"I was one of those juveniles out there getting in trouble," Guzman said. "I was doing all the wrong things, hanging out with the bad crowd. I was doing whatever I wanted, and that was the wrong answer."

His mischievous ways were curtailed at age 12 after a chance meeting with a neighborhood kid.

"I remember being at my friend's house," Guzman said. "It was a hot summer day. We were just sitting there and a little kid came by. He said, 'Hey my dad's starting a boxing club. You guys want to try it?' I said, 'I'll try it, I'll do it. I'm not doing anything else.' From that day I started working out at the trailer park on the front porch, punching his dad's hands, learning the combinations, jump-roping, shadow boxing. I moved from there to the city when it opened up its own gym. Then from that to a bigger gym where we were able to put in a boxing ring. From there to the fire station."

Guzman took part in the practice of pugilism off and on until he was 18. Although at the time he didn't think

it would define his life, he did credit it with keeping him from veering too far off course.

"I boxed off and on from 12 to 18," Guzman said. "It kept me from getting too out of hand."

A fighter turned warfighter

Eventually Guzman had an epiphany. He watched as friends and acquaintances succumbed to the perils of drugs and violence. Some of them were strung out. Others were starting to serve prison sentences. Guzman didn't want any part of it.

"I said to myself, 'You know what? That's not what I want,'" Guzman said. "I didn't want to follow in the footsteps of some of my friends."

Guzman said stories from a friend who joined the Navy and advice from his mentors persuaded him to join the Army upon graduating from high school. He says it was this guidance that shaped his outlook on the importance of good leadership, a notion he would eventually adopt and exemplify.

"I was fortunate enough to always have good mentors," Guzman said. "I had teachers, some of my mother's friends, police officers, guidance counselors — they saw something good in me. They always talked to me and always gave me good advice."

Guzman didn't have a phone number for the Army but knew the toll-free number for the Navy.

"I remember the commercial — 1-800-GO-NAVY," he said. "So I'm talking to a Navy recruiter and he says, 'Man, why you calling the Navy?' But he had a good friend who was an Army recruiter. So he gave me his number and next thing I know he's knocking on my door."

Joining WCAP

Guzman completed basic training at Fort Knox, Ky., and was a 19D — cavalry scout — stationed at Fort Polk, La., before earning his sergeant stripes and deploying to Iraq in 2004.

While in Iraq, Guzman rekindled an interest in the sport of his boyhood and was amazed that there was a place in the Army where he could continue to partake in it.

"I read about the WCAP program in a Soldiers magazine while I was in Iraq," Guzman said. "I was like, 'Wow!' When I saw that, I familiarized myself with the program and I kept following it. There's articles in there like every other month."

Then, fortuitously, Guzman received orders to Fort Carson. While signing in at the welcome center, he asked a fellow Soldier on duty if he had heard of WCAP.

"He chuckled," Guzman said. "And he said, 'Man, I just left the program.' So he gave me a coach's phone number and I called."

The coach in question was Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette. Leverette is the current WCAP head boxing coach and was then an assistant coach under Staff Sgt. Basheer Abdullah, a four-time U.S. Olympic Boxing coach.

"He told me a little about his background so we invited him in to spar," Leverette said. "He showed us something."

After dispatching the team's super heavyweight in sparring, WCAP coaches drafted a memorandum to have Guzman released from his unit and attached to the post boxing team where, if he found success, he could earn a spot with the WCAP team. Guzman didn't disappoint. In his first year as an Army boxer, he won the All-Army competition and made it to the quarterfinals of the U.S. Nationals in the heavyweight division. An invitation to WCAP soon followed, and Guzman spent the next four years finding success in the ring. Despite being undersized for the weight class at 5-foot-10 and 218 pounds, Guzman gave taller fighters — including 6-foot-7 Deontay Wilder, the current WBC world heavyweight champion — problems with his aggressive, come-forward style.

Guzman became a three-time All Armed Forces champion and won a silver medal at the 2007 World Military Championships. He qualified for the Olympic Trials in 2008, but his career was cut short by a knee injury.

"I remember we were running and I felt something pop," Guzman said. "I had a torn ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) and MCL (medial collateral ligament). I've had a couple shoulder surgeries, too. I'm one of those athletes that's smart and knew when to walk away."

By 2008, Guzman was a two-year staff sergeant and at a crossroads. But Abdullah gave him a chance at something that would allow him to become the figure he had once relied on for advice and guidance.

"Coach Abdullah saw something in me," Guzman said. "He gave me a chance. He allowed me to come in and coach."

A rewarding transition

Though Guzman was overjoyed to still have a hand in his beloved sport, he struggled with his leadership role over the fighters he was only recently flinging fists with.

"It was easy transitioning to coaching, but it took me about a year to make that transition," Guzman said. "I remember the day I was selected to coach. Then, about two weeks later, the athletes were still calling me, 'Guz,' or, 'Hey, G.' Coach Abdullah called me in, and I already knew where he was going. I stopped him and I said, 'Coach, I got it.' So I got the whole team together, formed them up and I broke it down to them. I said, 'It's a struggle for me, too. I'm still trying to get myself together, too. It's no longer G, it's no longer Guz — it's coach.' That was hard for me. I was stuttering, I was nervous."

But since then, Guzman has been unshakable. He has proven his mettle as a molder of fighters and remained on the staff when Leverette took the helm as head coach after Abdullah's departure.

"Everybody's got to have their offensive coordinator," Leverette said. "You, alone, can't do it all. He's my offensive coordinator. This program might be good but it wouldn't be great like it is now without him. He's definitely been that right-hand man. I don't mind giving him the opportunities that he's been getting because he's right there, he's got that Olympic caliber. He's on the Olympic level with the coaches."

That was no more evident than in 2012 when Guzman was named to the staff of the 2012 U.S. Olympic team.

"It was big. I was proud of myself," Guzman said. "I started coaching in November 2008. I had only been coaching four years, and I got selected to the biggest stage in amateur boxing. I wasn't a credentialed coach, but I was a trainer. I was still part of the staff. I was definitely proud of myself."

Now, as the 2016 Olympics inch closer and as Leverette nears retirement, Guzman is poised to take over the program that has helped him live out his dream.

"Coach Lev and I have talked. He's told me I'm next," Guzman said. "I'm ready. I feel confident. If they say, 'Hey, it's your time.' Then I'll go."

But whether or not his name is called, Guzman is happy to serve the program in any facet. He said he doesn't crave the limelight. He merely wants to guide his fighters toward success the same way his mentors did when he was younger.

One of those is Spc. Alex Love. Love just missed making the 2012 U.S. Olympic team. Since then, she has been racking up wins as she prepares for a run at the 2016 team. Guzman traveled with her to the 2014 World Boxing Championships in Jeju City, South Korea.

"Coach Guz is great," Love said. "He knows what he's doing. He knows how to get the best out of us."

That effort being put on display is plenty satisfying for Guzman.

"I've got the athletes up front, and I'm way behind," Guzman said. "I'm just doing my job. My reward is their success. When I see them on a medal podium and I hear my national anthem being played, that's my success."

"But it's a struggle. When you're making weight you've got to cut out a lot of stuff. You've got to live right, eat right, stay disciplined. That goes into being a Soldier. All of these athletes are mentally and physically strong. If this is what you want to do, then you have to make sacrifices. Our main mission in the World Class Athlete Program is to make the Olympics. Everything is said to them at the beginning; they know what's coming. It's different for different athletes, but we make the atmosphere here to help them succeed."

Great leadership

Though Guzman delights in the chance to be a leader in the gym, he concedes it's important to be a leader in other capacities, particularly as an NCO.

"I remember when I first came in the Army, I was cutting a lot of grass and doing police calls. That's not what I signed up for," Guzman said. "Then I made my stripes and everything changed. I want to be a good sharp leader because your Soldiers under you, they look at you. If you're doing the wrong thing, then obviously you're setting them up for failure because they're going to do it, too."

He said his time in a combat MOS showed him the importance of reading manuals and taking drills seriously. It's just as important to follow that notion in WCAP despite the perception that the program merely entails heightened physical training.

"Sometimes we have athletes that come out of basic training so it's very important to have NCOs here who create that type of good leadership," Guzman said. "Everyone's different. Everyone has their own style. But we all put our heads together and lead us in the same direction. It's important for these young Soldiers to read their manuals, stay up on their soldiering. We put that together for them because boxing won't last forever. You might get hurt, you might have to leave. So we don't want to set you up for failure when you leave here, go to another unit and you don't know anything. They'll say, 'Where did you come from? Oh, WCAP?' We don't want that. So it's not just boxing, it's all the sports. When I say that, I'm speaking for all the sports. That's how we work."

That constant work at leadership is Guzman's way of giving back and showing his appreciation for the leadership figures that prodded him to not give up on himself at a time when he needed it most. That is why he has embraced it and always has it on his mind in the ring, on post and in the schools he visits. He knows there might be a handful of people listening to him who might be looking for that snippet of advice to heed.

"The big thing to me is telling them that no matter how bad it seems, you just follow your dream," Guzman said. "Sometimes it might be challenging. Sometimes it might take saying, 'Hey, you know what, I can't hang out with you guys anymore.' It might take you moving on and joining the military. That was my way out. I was fortunate to have the mentors that never gave up even though I was in trouble, doing all the bad things and known as this negative kid. These mentors I had, they saw something in me and they never gave up on me. So I tell these kids to follow their dreams. Obstacles get thrown at you. That's life. But what are you going to do? Are you just going to stop, give up, turn around, go back and keep doing the same thing? Or are you just going to bum rush that thing and continue on toward your goals?" ■



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