

Gilbert "El Nino" Melendez
1997-2000

"Everything else is a game, people want to call everything else a sport, Basketball is a game, Baseball is a game, now wrestling that's a sport.

-Gilbert "El Nino" Melendez

As I sat in the arena full of screaming fans, my stomach churned and I wondered why. Why did I feel so nervous? I have seen him fight live before and never felt this way, however this time he was fighting for the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) world title at 155lbs. He wins, he will be the number one fighter in the world. It took me a few minutes to realize I was genuinely nervous for Gilbert and for the biggest fight of his life. Now I understand why his mother won't sit next to the cage and watch him fight, she waits till afterward to view the recording.

He grew up watching boxing with his dad, but in 1994 when he saw his first Mixed Martial Arts fight, UFC 4, with Dan Severn (All-American Wrestler) verse Royce Gracie (a Black Belt in Jiu Jitsu) he was hooked. Severn was the first real wrestler (two-time NCAA all-american) to fight in the UFC and although he lost to Gracie, Gilbert was impressed with his stamina and tenacity. He thought, "those wrestlers are the toughest guys out there, I've got to be a wrestler." Gilbert grew up playing the typical sports football, soccer and baseball. He wrestled around with the neighbor kids in his backyard like all boys do in their youth, but never actually competed in any official wrestling tournament. When attending middle school, he participated in an after school wrestling program. Mr. Young, his PE teacher, organized the practices for about six weeks and at the end of season hosted an intra-district middle school tournament.

His father was a spectator that day, which was a rarity in Santa Ana. Most parents usually do not attend such events. Mr. Melendez was friendly and introduced himself one day, with Gilbert at his side. There was genuine respect and class in both of them. It was obvious that Gilbert had the potential to be a champion. They lived conveniently a few blocks away from Santa Ana High, so I thought I could enjoy seeing Gilbert wrestle on our team. I soon found out that he was scheduled to attend another high school in the same district, even though his parents graduated from Santa Ana High School. It looked as if he would be an opponent. Gilbert attended the other school during his freshman year, but unfortunately, his first year of high school wrestling was not what he expected. He had a desire to train, to put in the extra time on the mat needed to be a champion. However, when the 6th period wrestling class would end the wrestling room doors would close. His mother shared with me how it broke her heart to pick him up after school some days, seeing the dejected look on his face because all he wanted to do was practice a little bit longer, work a little bit harder in the sport he grew to love. Knowing our program left the wrestling room doors open after school and trained year round He decided to attend Santa Ana High School to wrestle. It was a great compliment to our program, and it was a first for me to meet a young man who actually wanted to attend a rough and tough school to wrestle. Fortunately for the both of us, Gilbert's father supported his son's love of wrestling and, of course, wanted to see him excel. With his parents' blessings, Gilbert enrolled at Santa Ana High.

I had Gilbert and some of the other wrestlers over to my place for a get together close to Halloween time. We ate and watched "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." All was going well and everyone was having a goodtime until I went to the bathroom. When I started teaching at Santa Ana, I was new to Hispanic culture and had little understanding about the way of life in Latin America. So you can understand my shock and disgust when I first noticed used toilet paper in the waste basket. I first saw this on a team trip to Washington State when some of the kids used my mother's restroom. She pointed it out to me, I was in shock, but she understood something I didn't and made no big deal of it. However, I could not contain myself and confronted the kids on the trip and asked that they please, please flush their toilet paper. With a bewildered look on their faces they complied. I found out later that it is a common practice and a must in Mexico to throw used toilet paper in a trash can or in the corner on the floor in the restroom. I am told that the plumbing in Mexico is ancient and the pipes too small to handle waste and toilet paper together. A concept I still can't wrap my head around. Therefore, when I saw this practice of throwing toilet paper in the waste basket at my apartment I went a little ballistic on the guys. I think they get a kick out of seeing me "Wig Out" as they call it. I thought I made this clear to the team not to do this so I guess Gilbert found the conversation I had with them about this habit a little entertaining and humorous. Looking back it was probably funny to watch me repulsively over react and dry heave while discussing the matter with the kids. Gilbert told me he went home that night and knew this was the place to be...Santa Ana Wrestling.

Due to district transfer rules, Gilbert was unable to compete at the varsity level, but he spent his sophomore year training with seasoned champions like José Leon and Tony Perez who assisted in his development. He was full of fortitude, fight, and had the drive necessary to succeed, rare qualities not often seen in a young man.

Gilbert had a fantastic and successful junior year. He was an unknown in Southern California wrestling, however it did not take long for him to make his mark, He won the league title, placed second in the CIF Championships and then an impressive third place finish at the Masters Meet. Gilbert wrestled well and was a match away from placing in the state meet. It was remarkable to see the improvement he made in just a little over a year's time, but not surprising, Gilbert's work ethic was a cut above most wrestlers I have coached. He looked forward to a spectacular final season and sailed through his senior year especially, as he was ranked one of the top four wrestlers in the state at his weight as well as one of the top 25 wrestlers in the country. It was exciting to watch him wrestle, and I felt confident that he would place in state for Santa Ana High School.

As coaches we get excited to know in the upcoming season we have an athlete or two that could have tremendous success or a team that can go the distance and win it all. But after 30 years of coaching I hold out little hope when I think a kid or my team will have a great year. Disappointment has stuck the program too many times with unexpected season ending injuries, ineligible wrestlers, or kids who just flat out quit. Thus, ultimately changing the outcome of a programs season. Tragically, toward the end of Gilbert's senior year he broke his elbow during warm-ups before league finals. However, he kept on fighting, for fear of his dream being taken away. He wrapped his elbow up, wrestled, and won the league title. He kept his suffering to himself. When the team finally found out the extent of his injury and that he would need surgery we were all shocked. It was grossly unfair. He asked his orthopedic surgeon if he could wrestle the last three weeks of the season and then get surgery with bewilderment the doctor said yes.

With a heavily padded elbow and gruesome pain, Gilbert competed in his postseason qualifying tournaments. He placed second in the CIF Championship, which qualified him to the Masters Meet. Incredibly, with a broken elbow Gilbert beat a wrestler that day who had beaten him by 8 points earlier in the season. On a few occasions I have seen my wrestlers compete with more intensity and mental toughness injured than healthy. I guess for some they know that their injury has put them at a disadvantage in the match, therefore they find some kind of inner strength or determination deep down inside and use it when they go into battle to prevail over their opponent. He finished sixth at the masters meet thus, qualifying for the State Championships. It was the most inspirational sight, seeing him wrestle with one arm.

In the first round of the state meet, Gilbert drew one of the top ranked wrestlers in the state, and with guts and fortitude still intact, he beat his opponent; but that was when the pain and fatigue finally kicked in, and he lost the final two matches of his high school career. In fact, his last loss at state was to a kid he defeated the week before at the masters meet. He walked off the mat like a man, with a stoic countenance and his head held high. Once out of spectators' view, he collapsed into his father's arms and cried. I felt his pain. Gilbert did not place at state as we had all hoped, but he contributed much more to the program than he will ever know.

His story endures to this day. I use his experience as a benchmark for guts, determination, courage, and dedication when wrestlers complain about pain or fatigue during practice. No doubt, Gilbert Melendez wrestling with a broken elbow will be told in the wrestling room for years to come.

He underwent surgery to repair his elbow and moved on to wrestle at San Francisco State University for a few years. He gradually became disheartened with his college wrestling team. They did not have the same work ethic as the Santa Ana wrestlers. In college, he met fighter and team mate Jake Shields. Shields told Gilbert he was a fighter which Gilbert had a hard time believing him and decided to call Jake Shields out thinking this fight will be a quick, easy win. Jake pretty much whipped up on Gilbert and since then he has been a Jake Shield's disciples. Shield's introduced Gilbert to Cesar Gracie and the world of mixed martial arts (MMA), a full-contact combat sport that allows a wide mixture of fighting styles. With Gilbert's aggressive style of fighting, he shot up through the rankings rather quickly. He began fighting for the WEC (World Extreme Cage fighting) and became the promotions first ever light weight champion. With an 8-0 start he began fighting under the Strikeforce banner. He also made some appearances as a Pride FC fighter, Japan's largest organization, He fought six times in front of the Japanese and they are the ones who gave Gilbert the Nick name "El Nino," meaning storm, for his relentless, never ending ground and pound game he plays in the cage.

His first career loss came to Mitsurio Ishida, a Japanese Shooto fighter and a month later he suffered his second loss to Josh Thomson. Frustrated with his two recent losses, Gilbert changed up his game plan and decided to open his own gym for a place to train. Before that, he found himself driving all over San Francisco doing his jiu jitsu workout here than driving across town over to work on his boxing and then off to the next gym for some wrestling work outs. His new game plan worked and in 2009 he avenged his losses to Ishida and Thomson within a four month period. A feat few professional MMA fighters have accomplished. In 2011, Zuffa, a parent company of the UFC bought Strikeforce the company Gilbert fought for. This merger now gives Gilbert the opportunity to fight in the UFC and prove to all the skeptics that he is one of the best 155lb fighters in the world. In no time Gilbert was given a chance at the title shot against

than current lightweight champion Benson Henderson. Gilbert has somewhat the same style of fighting as Henderson does. Both are great wrestlers and have a vicious ground and pound game, Without a doubt it was going to be a brawl. As I mentioned in the first sentence of this chapter, I was nervous and anxious watching this mighty fighter, who had no fear, walk into the octagon. To think only 10 years prior he was a lean, lanky curly haired kid who just wanted to wrestle competitively in college. In a rugged, closely contested battle Gilbert lost, though the fans thought otherwise. He fell short of wrapping that belt around his waist, but with his determination still intact, he did not skip a beat and continued to train for his next fight.

Gilbert's next bout came just six months later against twelve year veteran of the UFC Diego Sanchez. Gilbert and Diego have similar styles of fighting and fans were looking forward to a battle and did those two ever deliver. Hailed as one of the greatest fights in the history of the UFC both men put on a memorable performance. The third round had them both exchanging punches back and forth to the face and head neither backing away. Melendez out striking Sanchez, but Sanchez charging in like a bull asking for more. It was a Mexican World War, a fight only believable when seen live or on the big screen. Gilbert won the fight and no doubt the respect of fight fans around the world and proved that he is one of the best lightweight fighters to ever enter the cage. With The Sanchez fight being the last on his contract carried over from Strikeforce to the UFC, Melendez was now in negotiations of a new contract. As they say to make a long story short the largest MMA company in the world gave Gilbert what he wished for becoming one of the sport's most compensated athletes. In his new deal, in addition to his salary, he was able to receive a small percentage of profits for his fights shown on pay per view (a service people pay for to watch live events in their home) and he landed a part as a coach on the reality tv show "The Ultimate Fighter." The show features pro MMA fighters living together in a Las Vegas, Nevada home, and follows them as they are coached and trained by more experienced fighters and compete against each other for a prized contract with the UFC. Not only is he a force to be reckoned with in the Octagon but he's also a smart businessman who fine tuned his new contract to make both parties happy, as well as owns and manages a successful MMA gym in San Francisco called the "El Nino Training Center."

Melendez has an incredible tolerance for pain as noted earlier of him wrestling in the last 4 weeks of his senior season and the high school wrestling state championships with a broken elbow. He claims that the training room is the furnace where an athlete is forged and made tougher and stronger. Though "El Nino" is a great fighter, what I love about him most is that he always gives our program some of the credit for where he is today. He texted me once after a fight and told me, "I am the man I am today because of Santa Ana Wrestling." What more would a coach want to hear from an alumni. He is one of the first professional athletes that has come out of Santa Ana High School in the past two decades. About once a year he stops by the wrestling room to work out with the team, coach the kids, sign autographs and share his story of how the sport of wrestling changed his life. He encourages our young wrestlers to dream big, work hard, and never forget where they came from: Santa Ana. As a coach, I couldn't be prouder.

Reflections on Gilbert

Nothing has inspired me more as a coach than watching Gilbert wrestle four weeks into the post season with a broken elbow. This experience helped me realize two things. One, some

athletes have the mentality to dig deep within their heart and mind and find a way to compete no matter what adversity stands in their way. However, the second thing I realized is that it's very rare to have an athlete like Gilbert on your team and that most kids today do not have the mental toughness to push back the pain or injury they've been burdened with and step back on the mat. This is where I fail as a coach, thinking that every wrestler on my team can forge themselves into a Gilbert Melendez by the time they're a senior. Can some of my wrestlers get tougher mentally as they evolve in the sport? Absolutely, but few and I mean very few wrestlers have inside them, a switch that when turned on changes them into Superman. However, when you do get an athlete like that in your program it's a glorious feeling.

