



KICKIN' IT Two-time gold-medal winner Steven Lopez has not lost a match in seven years.

Three for the Gold

Siblings Steven, Mark and Diana Lopez hit the mat for medals in Taekwondo

By Matt Hendrickson

SITTING IN THE BLEACHERS

inside the dingy Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Des Moines earlier this spring, Steven Lopez could barely watch. The two-time Olympic gold medalist in Taekwondo had already qualified for this year's Beijing Olympic Games. But now, watching his younger brother and sister compete to join him on the team, the tension was almost suffocating. History was at stake: If Mark and Diana won their respective matches, the three would become the first trio of American siblings to qualify for the same Olympic Games since 1904. And to top it off, their oldest brother, Jean—the one who trained them, browbeat them and pushed them since they were little kids growing up in Sugar Land, Texas—would coach them in China.

Mark was up first, vying with his close friend and training partner Chris Martinez for the men's featherweight spot on the U.S. Olympic Team. They fought cat and mouse until the final moments, when Mark scored a point with seven seconds remaining in regulation to eke out a 3–2



FAMILY AFFAIR
Mark, 26, Steven, 29, and Diana, 24, are the first trio of American siblings to qualify for the same Olympic Games since 1904.

victory. He was in. One down, one to go.

A few minutes later, Diana stepped onto the mat. She and her opponent, Nia Abdallah, the 2004 Olympic silver medalist, sized each other up, neither wanting to make a mistake that would mean forfeiting a trip to China. At the end of regulation, the featherweight match was scoreless. Overtime. With less than 30 seconds left in the extra period, Diana scored with a right-leg kick to Abdallah's body to win 1–0. Diana jumped into Jean's arms; Steven raised his hands to the sky. All three Lopezes would be going to Beijing.



Mark performs his signature backflip after each win.



Steven, left, is the "Michael Jordan" of Taekwondo.



Diana, right, was the most recent Lopez to make Team USA.

THE STORY OF THE LOPEZ FAMILY'S ASCENT BEGINS

in the same place where many historic events have been sparked: the garage. But instead of banging on drums or building a makeshift computer, the Lopez siblings smashed holes in the walls with their kicks and punches.

Ondina and Julio Lopez had left Nicaragua for New York City before settling in Sugar Land, a booming suburb of Houston. Julio worked in a local architect's office to make ends meet, while Ondina stayed home with the kids. Julio was always interested in Taekwondo—the most popular form of martial arts in the world—and goaded his eldest son into trying it. Jean, then 9, was quickly won over. "Where else can you legally kick and hit people?" he asks with a laugh. "As a kid, that's a dream come true." Jean, 34,

was largely self-taught, practicing kicks while his father held the pads. In the winter, Ondina would run the clothes dryer to help warm their practice space in the garage. Jean watched training videos and entered as many competitions as he could. "He learned by trial and error," Steven, 29, says. "If one kick didn't work,

he'd try a different one. He was the trailblazer."

Steven soon wanted in on the action, and Jean began to train his younger brother. "Given our age difference, we didn't have that much of a sibling rivalry, but anything he did I wanted to do," Steven says. "We loved running around doing flips, kicks and punches and yelling. I competed at a very young age."

Mark, now 26, and Diana, 24, soon followed in Steven's footsteps; by the time they were teenagers, Jean had opened his own training facility and was coaching his siblings full-time.

The trio trains upward of six hours a day, six days a week, but rarely do the Lopezes take a break. "We like to call it active rest," Mark says. "We're always playing something. There isn't much downtime."

TAEKWONDO IS OBVIOUSLY VERY PHYSICAL, BUT its emphasis on discipline and concentration makes it just as taxing mentally. Jean has an innate ability to read his siblings' demeanor and will throw in a soccer match or game of pickup basketball during the week to keep their minds sharp and their workouts fresh. "It's one of the advantages of having your brother as a coach," Diana says. "He knows us so well, he'll pick up on when we're bored or tired very easily."

The group is hypercompetitive, a condition that extends even to the spirited poker games they play together. "Everyone will tell you they've won the most money," Jean says of their games, at which the pot can top \$500. "But everyone knows I win the most."

Steven has won the most of what counts, however:

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Jean, second from right, trains his siblings six hours a day, six days a week.

hardware. He has gold medals from the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney and the 2004 Games in Athens, and he has not lost a single match in competition in the past eight years. Steven is the Taekwondo equivalent of Michael Jordan, hounded by autograph seekers in South Korea and Japan, where martial arts is a prominent sport. And he's resisted the temptation to rub it in his siblings' faces by strutting around the house wearing his gold medals. "Those medals belong to my dad," Steven says. "The sacrifices he and my mother made to ensure we had everything we needed were enormous."

The whole Lopez family will be together in Beijing. Mark and Diana are especially excited to be joining in as participants rather than spectators this time. The thought of walking together in the opening ceremony and competing alongside one another on

the mat sends chills down Steven's spine. "For people who do Taekwondo, it's four years between Olympics; in every other sport you can compete for a championship each year," he says. "I know how much they want it, what it means to them, and I want it so bad for them. Four years is a long time to wait." ●

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FIGHTIN' WORDS The youngest and oldest Lopezes go tête-à-tête about texting



When it comes to technological know-how, is it surprising that the youngest Lopez sibling is also the savviest? Diana swears by the Mobile Web she accesses from her phone. "I'm on it

all the time," she says. "It's the easiest thing to use. It's like having a mini laptop. I travel so much, and my phone works all over the world—it's a great way to stay in touch with my brothers and friends." But when elder states-

man Jean extols the virtues of texting, he is met with a look of mock disbelief from his kid sister. "I taught Jean how to text message," Diana says, laughing. "He doesn't even know the lingo. LOL? He's like, 'What's LOL?' " "Come on," Jean counters.

"It's a whole different language! How can you blame me for that?"

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