

Veteran turns to powerlifting after service

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Former U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Tony Rodriguez gladly shares stories about how he fractured a rib and his shin while on a tour of duty in the Philippines during the late 1980s.

Then there was the time he broke his hand while working as part of a special operations unit in Florida during the early '90s.

A few years later, on a top-secret mission in England, he took an elbow to the mouth and busted a tooth, had his shoulder popped from its socket and “shredded” the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee, which required surgery and a pair of titanium bolts to repair.

The injuries were not sustained in combat, however, as one might assume. Rather, they resulted from the years Rodriguez spent training and fighting as a martial artist while stationed around the globe with the Air Force.

He eventually discovered the sport of powerlifting, in which he has been ranked a national champion several times over.

According to the website [powerlifting watch.com](http://powerliftingwatch.com), 45-year-old Rodriguez is currently ranked No. 1 nationally in the Masters-division deadlift category for men age 40 to 44, having pulled up a 606-pound barbell during the Amateur Athletic Union Powerlifting Federation’s North American Championships in July.

The Las Vegas resident also is ranked fifth nationally in the Best of the Best Top 20 Masters deadlift category, after lifting 629 pounds during a competition in 2011.

He won his first AAU world championship title in 2006. He followed it up with five additional titles and earned championship belts for dominating the 100% RAW Powerlifting Federation’s competitions from 2009 through 2012 and the Natural Athlete Strength Association federation’s contests in 2010 and 2011 while competing in the 181-pound weight class.

Dubbed “Mr. Muscles” by fellow lifters, Rodriguez claims to have owned other world-, national- and state-level powerlifting records, including several specific to Nevada. He displays a few of his awards at L.A. Insurance at 3109 N. Rainbow Blvd., where he works as an agent.

“I love the excitement, the thrill, and I’m competing against myself,” he explained of his interest in the sport. “It’s nice to be on all these lists, but I like to see if I can get stronger than I was before” with each competition.

His workout schedule is “intense,” he said, noting that he spends several hours at the gym up to five days per week while training for competitions. He also maintains a strict diet and vitamin regimen.

Despite the physicality of powerlifting, “It’s a mental game,” he explained. “If your mind’s not there, your body isn’t either. ... If you’re not 100 percent focused, you’re not gonna get your medal.”

Rodriguez credits his nearly 12 years in the military for introducing him to powerlifting, as well as for teaching him the discipline the sport requires.

Born in the Dominican Republic, he was raised on the mean streets of East Flatbush in New York’s Brooklyn borough. As a kid, he traded punches with local hoodlums.

“They picked my pockets and took my money,” he recalled. “You had to fight. There was no other way.”

As punishment for his behavior, Rodriguez said his father — who had boxed while serving in the Dominican Republic army — forced him to study the dictionary and read encyclopedia volumes.

By high school, Rodriguez had turned his life around: He wrestled on his school’s team and, at age 16, graduated with honors. He was awarded a scholarship to Pace University in New York, which he turned down to join the Air Force.

“I just wanted to get out of Brooklyn and to see the world,” he said of his decision to enlist. “I wanted to do something with my life.”

He spent his first year of service in Biloxi, Miss., studying aviation electronics. In 1987, he volunteered for a two-year stint in the Philippines working on defense systems aboard F-4 aircraft.

While stationed there, Rodriguez began studying a form of martial arts called kuntao, training six days per week and fighting in street and amateur bouts when he could.

His biggest battle in the Philippines, however, was a fight for his life. While on duty, Rodriguez came down with pneumonia and developed scar tissue in his lungs.

Following a short assignment in South Korea, he spent four years in Florida working as an avionics repairman. He was part of a special operations unit that oversaw electronic warfare systems on AC-130 gunships and MH-53J helicopters. He also assisted with routine maintenance of the aircraft.

“We helped change tires, we washed them, we cleaned them,” he said. “We would strip them down to the bolts and repair all of the rust and then put everything back together.”

In 1989, he was sent to Panama for two months following the U.S. invasion of that country. After completing assignments in Alaska and California, Rodriguez became part of a special operations unit that went to El Salvador in 1992, which he recalled as a “dangerous” place to be during that nation’s civil war.

The plane in which he arrived was fired upon, he said, and pilots were forced to perform a combat dive maneuver “because (the rebels) were shooting missiles at us.”

That summer, Rodriguez was selected to participate in an intelligence mission in England for which he received top-secret clearance to work on systems specific to reconnaissance aircraft and at special compartmental information facilities (called SCIFs).

All the while, he continued his martial arts training. In England, where he practiced a discipline called muay thai, he made his first foray into powerlifting.

“I didn’t know I was that strong. You don’t know you can pick up 600 pounds until you pick up 600 pounds,” he said. He soon began entering competitions hosted by English powerlifting federations.

In the fall of 1993, Rodriguez was deployed to the Persian Gulf following Operation Desert Storm, where he worked supporting reconnaissance aircraft.

Although the combat had ended by the time he arrived in the region, he said residue that lingered in the air and in structures from the numerous oil fires that had burned during the war took its toll on his health. He spent two days in a hospital on base in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, while battling an infection in his scarred lungs, which had suffered bronchial damage.

Upon his return to England in 1994, Rodriguez was offered a medical discharge by the Air Force. He declined, opting instead for an assignment in Louisiana working on B-52 bombers. While there, he earned a degree at the Embry-Riddle Aeronautics University campus at Barksdale Air Force Base.

In 1997, Rodriguez concluded his military career with an honorable discharge. He moved to Las Vegas the following year, and in 2006 began competing “nonstop” in state and national powerlifting competitions here, as well as in California and Arizona.

However, another severe lung infection — a reminder of his military service — has sidelined the father of three from competition since July.

He declined an invitation to participate in the prestigious United States Powerlifting Association’s Olympia contest that was recently held in Las Vegas and was unable to defend his 100% RAW world championship title at a competition here last month.

While on the mend, Rodriguez continues to train. He also coaches Natural Power Las Vegas, a local powerlifting team. Instead of competing at powerlifting tournaments, he most recently has served as a judge at area contests. He said he hopes to be well enough to compete again early next year.

Despite his injury, “I will not stop (powerlifting),” he said. “I think if I stop, I’ll die.”