



# RONNIE ORTEGA- ENANO

1990–1993

Life is an adventure in forgiveness.

—Norman Cousins,  
prominent political journalist and author

I first met Ronnie when his football coach decided to have his sophomore team try out for wrestling. I was a first-year coach and needed as many wrestlers as I could get. The sophomore football coach wanted all the kids on the team to try the sport for two weeks; then any who did not like it could quit.

Ronnie was one of those kids that joined after football season. Although he only stood five feet one inch, he had the perfect body frame of a lightweight wrestler. He had short, wavy hair and a contagious smile that was seldom seen. Unfortunately, what *was* seen was the chip on his shoulder and the attitude he carried along with it. He was not Mexican but Puerto Rican, a difference

I found hard to distinguish. He later earned the unpleasant nickname Enano (which means midget in Spanish) because he was shorter than most of the other boys on the team.

He had a hard exterior and a lot of talent that he did not know he possessed. He was born to wrestle. He also had a problems being committed and staying disciplined to both the sport and school. Ronnie always tried to get out of practice by using feeble excuses such as, “I need to go home and wash the dishes.” He had a lot of anger in him. It seemed like every Monday he’d come to school with black eyes, fat lips, and bruises. He had been fighting. When asked what happened, his reasoning was that someone disrespected his mother or kids were picking on him about his height. Whatever it was, he did not have a lot of patience, and he exploded when confronted.

He was not the type who appeared to be in trouble, but he often *found* trouble because he dealt with his problem emotionally. He struggled to maintain the 2.0 grade point average necessary to compete. However, I could see there was more to him than met the eye; aside from so much internal rage, I felt he could do well in school if he applied himself. He became one of the many wrestlers on the team who challenged me and kept me on my toes. I invested a lot of time trying to make changes in his life that he would find positive. I wanted to encourage him to live a better lifestyle.

After I came to know him, I found that in seventh grade Ronnie was convicted of grand theft auto. He stole a car as a juvenile and did some community service. I learned that there were many crimes committed, including a credit card scheme with a friend.

Ronnie was offered a summer job at a hospital through a Red Cross program at the high school. The position gave him access to the database of people who recently passed away. He knew what their illnesses were, what prescriptions they took, etc. He

took their information and sold them to a man who lived in his apartment complex. However, Ronnie knew he was up to something, and soon he began to withhold the information until the man included him. Soon he was a part of an illegal operation. In short, they used the dead person's data to fill out credit card applications, rent an apartment, hook up a phone line with an answering machine, and make sure the phone was manned when the credit card companies called. I was amazed to learn he was capable of concocting such illegal acts.

Ronnie boasted that he could steal a car anytime because he knew how to disarm car alarms. He stole batteries, hubcaps, you name it—he stole it at one time or another before he got into high school. He was a thug and a thief, living the wrong lifestyle and hanging out with the wrong people. Strangely enough, it showed what he *could* accomplish if he set his mind to something, but I wanted him to channel his energies into more positive things.

Ronnie had a couple of brothers, but it did not appear as if they had much influence on him. His father was an alcoholic and was not there for him. He lived with his mother, but home was chaotic and unstable. Ronnie found himself alone on the streets, wandering and looking for something to do.

About midway through that first season, he began to dedicate himself to the sport a little more. Maybe my speeches about commitment and fortitude were starting to take root with him. Although the dedication was not yet what I wanted to see, at least he was in the wrestling room every day, putting forth some effort.

Sure, he still found excuses. One day, he offered a corny pretext to leave. I watched him walk away and did not buy the reason he gave. Something inside told me he would never set foot in the wrestling room again. He was done.

Ronnie did return to the wrestling room a few days later, although over the following weeks his presence was inconsistent. I do not know what it was that kept bringing him back. Maybe

wrestling offered him a safe haven. Perhaps it was a place for him to take out all that anger, hurt, and resentment that boiled inside him. I knew he dealt with some ugly things while growing up, and I think he found a sport in which he could release all the pent-up frustration since he was not good at talking about it.

Surprisingly, Ronnie finished his first year of wrestling on the varsity team. . Many first-year wrestlers ended up on varsity. I started the season with thirty of them and finished with about twenty; my biggest struggle was filling a lineup. Yes, he still got into more than his share of trouble, but by the end of that sophomore year, Ronnie was sold on the sport of wrestling. He continued to train all spring and summer to make himself better.

In my second season as coach, when Ronnie was a junior, we had an improved team. Now we were counting on him to lead the team. He won many matches and placed in tournaments as a varsity wrestler at 112 pounds. The time came to wrestle Huntington Beach High School, the defending league champions, and the school that had beaten us the year before by that infamous score of seventy-two to zero.

Huntington's best wrestler also came in at 112 pounds, and Ronnie went out there and wrestled horribly. I could not understand what the problem was. After the season, I found out he had been smoking marijuana before the match and was stoned on the mat. I do not know if he thought it was something that would help him perform better, but it ended up hurting him and the team a great deal, as we lost the meet by six points. Suffice it to say, if Ronnie had won that match, that would have provided the point swing we needed to tie the team that beat us so badly a year earlier.

He felt pretty awful about losing that match, and even worse about his foolish behavior. I was disappointed with him. Then he presented me with another issue at seventeen years old, he had a severe drinking problem. During our spring break prac-

tice, he and Johnny Martinez came into the wrestling room one day smelling of alcohol. They said they wanted to wrestle me, perhaps believing that the alcohol would make them tough.

I will never forget that day because my feelings were badly hurt. I had grown very close to both of them. I felt like a father reacting to his sons coming into his house drunk and making challenges. I accepted their challenge and called them on to the mat. As I wrestled one after the other, I used legal wrestling moves to afflict some serious pain and anguish. It was the last time they showed up drunk in front of me.

By his senior year, Ronnie had shaped up to become one of the best wrestlers on the team. With his improved training and competition, he was a great asset to the program. Ronnie was my right-hand man and one of the captains of our team that season. He would often assist in my fundraising efforts to support the program. I was organizing a fireworks stand one summer and looked to Ronnie and some other eighteen-year-old seniors for a helping hand. I received no parental support during the first few years of building the program. Therefore, it was up to me and the wrestlers to raise the funds needed to keep the program afloat.

We had a fireworks stand in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Santa Ana. Our first year working the stand, we were lucky enough to fend off the gangbangers and other criminal elements that hovered around the stand, waiting for the moment to seize what fireworks they could get.

However, we were not so fortunate this time. When we showed up to help unload the delivery truck of fireworks, the drivers mentioned how run down and dirty the strip mall was where the stand was located. They voiced their concern for their safety, noticing some local gangbangers casing the stand. The fireworks stands were left unlocked, until occupied with the fireworks and those manning the stands from the organization selling them. These open stands provide shelter for local transients.

I noticed one of those transients left a little “gift” for us in the stand—piles of human waste. Neither Ronnie nor I had the time or resources to clean up this disgusting mess, and since the drivers needed to unload and move on to their next stop, we decided to set the cases of fireworks next to the stand until we had time to clean up the aforementioned gift.

As we stacked the boxes, a gang surrounded us about thirty feet away. I had some suspicion that they might try to rob us but thought it impossible—surely not in broad daylight. Before my next thought, in the twinkle of an eye, they pounced on the boxes of fireworks like a pack of lions on a gazelle. From all sides they rushed us, grabbed the boxes, and fled.

Without hesitation, I pursued one of them across the street, through his turf, thinking of the program and how our fireworks fundraiser was the main source of income for the team. I was enraged with their bravado and could not believe they would steal from a non-profit group.

However, as I raced down the street I suddenly came to my senses and realized where I was. I slowed and watched the thugs speed off with our profits. My life was not worth a box or two of Piccolo Petes and Flashing Fountains. I returned to the stand and told the drivers to load up what was left after the raid.

“Let’s go,” I said to Ronnie.

“You are right, Coach. They’ll be back for more anyway and will harass us all week when we work the stand.”

He would know—he grew up on those cruel and unforgiving streets. I guess if there was any consolation that came from our decision to abandon the fireworks stand was the fact that we never had to clean up those piles of crap.

Santa Ana is an area that caters to the Hispanic culture, especially immigrants who do not speak English. Any time Fourth Street is mentioned, the wrestlers laugh because it is considered a joke. It is where all the wild stuff happens in their neighbor-

hood. Ronnie had described times when he and his friends cruised Fourth Street, teasing and mocking the transvestites. I thought that was the limit of contact with the cross dressers. I later found out, however, that they hung out with the transvestites—their new friends—more often than not.

Ronnie and the guys would meet at one location and hang out together because they had no money to eat out or do anything fun. They had a tough time being entertained. Instead of going home to eat and meeting up again later, they would go to the homes of transvestites. There were different stories from each of the boys, but it became clear that more went on there than I cared to hear about. They engaged in strip shows and flirted with the transvestites for food and money. It was an ugly favor-for-favor arrangement. To hear that these young men would sacrifice their dignity and integrity for some food and a little money shocked me to the core.

Fortunately, I got Ronnie and many of the other troubled wrestlers into the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. FCA is a high school campus ministry. I figured there was nothing else I could really do for them except maybe help them find the Lord. I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, in a single-parent home, but I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior when I was thirteen. My family did not have a lot of money and faced a lot of adversity. I believe tackling those challenges got me where I am today and helped me make the decision to turn my life over to God.

I decided we might never win as a team, but maybe I could get these kids back on track in life. They all had a foundation of religion through Catholicism. They had all been baptized and attended Mass, so the seed had been planted. I just tried to foster it. I took them to church and applied for scholarships to send several of them to FCA wrestling camp in the summer.

They made a sincere commitment then, but I knew putting

them back on the streets of Santa Ana would return them to family problems, gangs, school troubles, and a lot of other different pressures they would have to deal with as kids. Soon they started backsliding from their faith, and it became a constant struggle to keep them focused and on course.

Ronnie emerged as a league champion his senior year and graduated. He went on to wrestle at the local junior college, but the outside influences were simply too strong. He lacked the fortitude and perseverance to look ahead and stay away from all the bad things that awaited him.

In the years following his wrestling career, I made Ronnie my assistant at the high school, hoping that the link to the program might help him keep his life together, but he still struggled with drinking and drugs. He was irresponsible, often not showing up to practice when I needed him.

During his time as assistant coach, Ronnie occasionally borrowed my truck to run errands. However, I found out several years later that he was really using it to heist appliances and electronic equipment at a local variety store. His older brother worked as head of security for a retail chain and allowed Ronnie and his friends to take what they wanted as long as he got a piece of the pie.

My vehicle was an *accomplice* in this illegal activity. Though I forgave Ronnie, it was a shock and a real letdown. When I learned what he had done, it hurt to think he lied and took advantage of my generosity. However, I understood how drugs and alcohol could change a man; addiction supersedes relationships.

I became a little hard on him, and we had a classic love/hate relationship. Sometimes, we could not stand each other for what the other did, but we also loved each other for the endurance and commitment we shared. On one occasion, we were standing outside the 7-Eleven near the school when we noticed a local gang-banger, one of the bad guys from Ronnie's apartment complex, on the telephone nearby. He was not a wrestler, but we recog-

nized him as one of the students from Santa Ana High. Suddenly, a truck pulled up, and three other gangbangers jumped out and pulled him off the phone. Two proceeded to beat the living hell out of him before our shocked eyes, while the other kept a lookout, making sure no one would step in to interfere.

I asked myself, *What should I do. Should I step in? Should I help this kid? Does one of them have a gun? What will I be getting involved in if I step into this?*

When the beating was over, the three guys jumped back into their truck and got out of there, leaving their victim in a bloody heap. I regained my composure, feeling horrible that I did not do anything to help. I immediately ran into 7-Eleven and asked for help. No one lifted a finger because they were afraid to get involved. I grabbed some wet paper towels and cleaned the beaten victim up as best I could.

I asked if he wanted me to call the police or file a report on his behalf as I helped him to his home nearby, but he declined. I also asked if he was in a gang, and he denied it, but it was obvious to me; he was wearing the gang attire.

“I feel awful for not stepping in to help,” I told Ronnie as he looked at me sideways.

“You know, Glabb, that guy knew what he was getting himself into when he joined a gang. You have got to expect that kind of thing when you become a gangbanger.”

That did not offer any comfort, but it sounded like the hard truth. It did not change the fact that I wished I had helped more, even though the kid knew the risks when he signed up for that “team.”

I took a good look at Ronnie. He was a tough kid, streetwise, and in his best moments, sincere, kindhearted, and funny. Yet, he had that explosive streak in him that straddled the fine line between good and bad and contributed to all the pain and suffering he experienced and caused for himself over the years.

Ronnie was molested by a family friend when he was seven

years old, and I knew that lit the fuse that led to all the rage and misery he generally walked into. He admitted that his parents knew it was going on but looked the other way. I imagined that nightmare, to be abandoned like that by the people he trusted the most to protect him.

After leaving the wrestling staff, Ronnie fell off the face of the earth. That was disappointing, maybe because I felt a little abandoned by my friend, but he called me a few weeks later from air force boot camp to let me know that he joined the military. I was a little frustrated because I thought his long-term goal was to be a teacher and a coach. *Had he quit on himself again?* No. I later understood that joining the air force was the smartest move he ever made because it kept him well clear of the drugs, alcohol, and crime that haunted him. That military discipline forced him to get his life squared away and forced him to look inside himself to deal with all of that pain in a constructive manner.

While in the service, he earned his BA in social work and returned to Southern California as a counselor in a juvenile facility. Funny, he is working with kids who are much like he was. He also helped me coach and work with some of the more troubled wrestlers. He is now a social worker and Sunday school teacher in Tacoma, Washington; married with a baby boy. Most importantly, Ronnie got his life right with the Lord again. He now at times counsels me spiritually and quotes Bible scriptures I once taught him. He is not making the same harmful decisions that he made ten years ago, but he has to live with the tough memory of those negative choices. Nevertheless, my memories of Ronnie will never fade.

Ronnie came a long way in his young life, and I am enormously proud of him. I love him like a son, forgive him for his misdeeds, and plan to maintain our relationship for many years to come.

## Reflections on Ronnie

Forgiveness—that’s what Ronnie taught me—only I learned it the hard way. It’s difficult to forgive someone who has lied to you, defied you, and let you down. It really hurts when someone you care about causes you great pain. It was hard for me to forgive him and not hold a grudge, but then I remembered the Bible verse Matthew 18:21. “‘Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (NIV). So I did just that.