

Fitness Mogul is Leading a Quest for ALS Research

by Jack Williams

Ever since he began equipping gyms with the revolutionary Lifecycle, Augie Nieto has been one of those big wheels of business who keep the fitness world spinning. But as he clings to his life by the most fragile of threads, struggling to comprehend a fatal muscle-wasting disease, a more profound legacy is taking shape. Nieto, 48, is at the forefront of a fundraising tsunami that's attacking ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease) with the same fury it has unleashed on him. He knows there's no cure. He knows there's no way to stop it, slow it down or reverse the damage. "So the fundamental issue for me," he says, "is let's find out what causes it - the work no one likes to do." With what he calls a Manhattan Project revisited, Nieto is spending whatever time he has left pumping energy into fundraising and rallying the scientific community to save future generations. "Half of the people diagnosed with ALS die within 18 months," said Nieto, who has known he has the disease since March 2005. "What motivates me is not my hope that I will find a cure for myself. What motivates me is being a good role model for my family, showing how you deal with adversity. "I don't think you have a better legacy in life." Meanwhile, he's charting an agenda he hopes will yield \$12 million by next year for ALS research and identify the cause of the disease. (For details, log onto www.augiesquest.org). Part of his quest involves promoting stem cell research. Another part involves more than 2,000 health clubs nationwide. If a member donates to Augie's Quest, the club offers a free personal training session. While he may be a poster boy for his cause, a model patient who has used his influence and wealth to consult the world's most esteemed experts on ALS, Nieto can't deny his diminished capacity. Nor can he ignore the irony of his changing role. "My goal in my companies (Lifecycle Inc., Life Fitness and more recently Octane Fitness) has been to help the unfit become fit," he said. "Now, I'm dealing with a muscle-wasting disease." ALS attacks nerve cells and gradually robs patients of their voluntary muscle control. More than 5,600 Americans are diagnosed each year, most of them between ages 40 and 70. Nieto noticed the first symptoms when he began losing strength in the gym. Then he noticed muscle tremors. A visit to the Mayo Clinic, where he has regularly gone for comprehensive physical exams, confirmed the worst. "I went through a series of a tests and they said it's either ALS or MS (multiple sclerosis). With ALS, there's no 100 percent proof you have it. It's really a process of elimination." Always a model of fitness, Nieto has added 10 pounds to his 6-foot-1 frame since his diagnosis with the approval of his physician, weighing in at a toned 215. While he continues to lose strength in his upper body, "My lower body probably has 80 percent of its horsepower," he said. Each day, he devotes an hour to exercise at his Corona del Mar, Calif., home overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Cranking up an elliptical trainer to Level 14, he burns 1,000 calories in 48 minutes. "I've run 21 marathons," he said. "I have the ability to get in a zone, to enjoy it. It's an endorphin high for me, working out." There's a Zen-like pace to his life, driven more by focus than a sense of urgency. "I taste wine differently, I interact with people differently," he said. "I also have less time for non-important things. I believe my mind has been enhanced by the deterioration of my body - like the blind man who can hear better. "I'm focused more intensely today than I've ever been in my life, but I don't feel like I have to do something because of my limited time. There's one thing you must put in perspective: If you live every day like it was your last, you're going to wake up with a hangover in the morning." If Nieto sounds like a man serenely coming to terms with his fate, it is due in no small part to his track record of effecting change - in himself and in the fitness industry. It started in his youth, when exercise helped him redefine a 5-7, 250-pound body. It continued at Claremont McKenna College, where he played football and began flexing his entrepreneurial vision. When Family Fitness Centers (now 24-Hour Fitness Centers) founder Ray Wilson showed him the newly developed Lifecycle exercise bike in 1977, Nieto immediately recognized its potential. By the time Nieto graduated from college in 1980, a company he founded with Wilson had turned a \$500,000 profit. In 1997, he sold his company, then called Life Fitness, for \$310 million. But the only numbers that interest Nieto these days are the ones he's counting on to fuel his fundraising quest. "We've already raised \$4 million, and we'll have \$4 million more by September," he said. Meanwhile, he'll savor every taste of life. "No wine in my cellar is off-limits," he said with a smile. Copley News Service