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FROM GIANT-KILLER TO GIANT?

Tournament karate fighter John Natividad struggles to turn a meteoric rise into permanent stardom

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says a former national champion, but "We will get there someday."

WHEN I'M HOT, I'M HOT! But when I'm not...

A new star of the tournament circuit struggles to overcome the inconsistency which has seen him beat the superstars and lose to the neophytes

By Bob MacLaughlin

JOHN NATIVIDAD'S BIGGEST NIGHT in tournament karate—perhaps one of the biggest nights ever enjoyed by any tournament fighter—started very slowly. In fact, it almost didn't start at all.

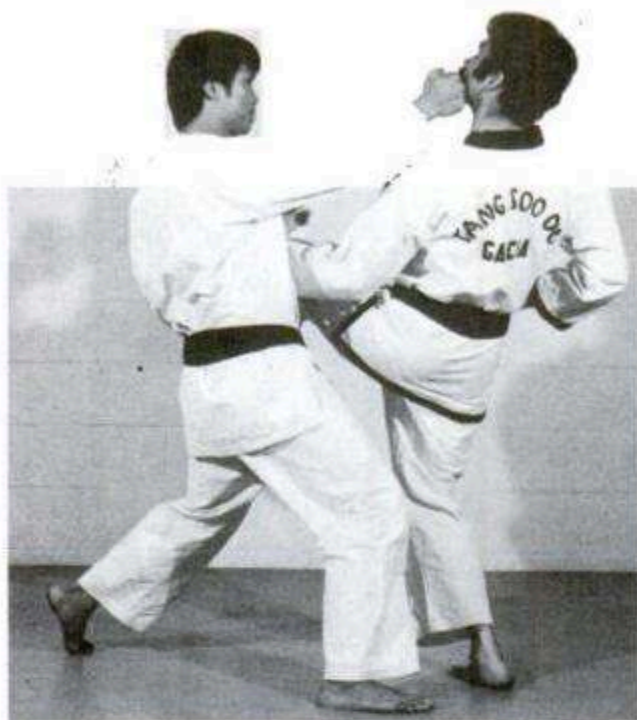
The scene was the Elks Club in Long Beach, California, site of the 1971 U.S. All-Star Karate Team Championships. Some of the finest competitors in the country were meeting to see who would bag the coveted winner's trophy. Natividad was there as a representative of the Chuck Norris Studios. He wasn't really on the team, though. He was merely an alternate, standing by in case something happened to one of the first-string fighters.

Sure enough, just as if it had been willed by a script from an old B movie, one of the first-stringers injured his arm early in the competition. Natividad, the hitherto unknown player waiting on the sidelines for his big chance, was called upon to substitute. His first opponent was to be Fred Wren, the bearded Texan who is a familiar face on the BLACK BELT YEARBOOK Top Ten. Natividad's teammates gave him a quick briefing of what he was up against and, in doing so, scared the wits out of him.

"They kept telling me that Fred Wren was super good, super fantastic," Natividad recalls. "They had built him up so much I thought, 'Wow, this guy's going to be all over me.'"

Indeed, Wren did come out in his characteristic blitzing fashion, but the charged-up substitute was ready. Fighting what he still calls his "hardest and best fight," Natividad stunned the heavily favored Wren, 5-1.

Then, after beating Frank Ramirez and before beating Victor Moore, John got ready to battle Jerry Piddington, a



good friend and a fighter he had faced several times before in green belt and brown belt ranks. The tang soo do stylist waited in the ring, watching his opponent walk toward him down the darkened aisle through the smoke and the crowd. Suddenly, when the approaching figure neared the ring, Natividad's jaw dropped. It was not Piddington at all—it was Joe Lewis, the superstar, the one man every tournament competitor dreams of beating!

"I sorta felt my heart stop," says Natividad. "I was saying, 'Wow, this is my big chance—what am I going to do now?' I'd seen a lot of guys get psyched out by him. I just had the idea in mind I wasn't going to back up from him. I was just going to turn on. I had no intentions of beating him in the first place. I just thought I could give him a good run for the money. But that was one of my best days. Every time he moved, I hit him. He was surprised I had beaten him. He stood out there for about two minutes just shaking his head."

Within only a few hours, Natividad had gone from bench-warmer to giant-killer—just like in the movies. His teammates pounded him on the back, carried him from the ring on their shoulders and shouted his name as far as their hoarse voices would carry.

THE PRICE OF OVERCONFIDENCE

John Natividad's worst night in karate, eight months after his best, also came in Long Beach. The place this time was the beach city's spacious arena overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and the event was the 1971 International Karate Championships. Hoping to advance from giant-killer to giant, Natividad set his sights on the grand championship title held by none other than

Lewis. But the fairy tale was over. To his bitter disappointment, Natividad never got to fight that grand title match. He was beaten in the eliminations by a young competitor whom he had never heard of before.

"I got overconfident," says Natividad, recalling that he was looking past his opponent to the finals. "I tried to outclass him. He didn't do anything but stand there and punch."

John Natividad is an enigma. He is capable of beating karate's top stars one week, then turning around and losing to inexperienced neophytes the next. Some days, his techniques are flawless. Other days, as he openly admits, he can't do anything right. In short, he suffers from acute inconsistency.

"I've seen John look fantastic," says one of karate's most famous fighters, "but I've also seen him look awful."

"He's got the best overall techniques in the country," says another karate great. "No one has the arsenal he has—being able to use each hand and each foot equally well. No one else has got that—nobody!"

Part of the inconsistency may be the pressure that goes with suddenly rocketing into the spotlight from nowhere. "I did something," says the 25-year-old native of Hawaii, "and now I have to stay up there and keep on doing it. Your name gets around the circuit—like a gunfighter—and everybody's after you, ready to knock you off." Another factor may be that he still hasn't had a great deal of tournament experience. Most competitors who reach the top of the heap are experienced veterans by the time they get there. Few of them are overnight successes.

A MATTER OF FATE?

The reason Natividad himself gives for his inconsistent performance is a simple one. "When I'm on, I'm really on. When I'm off, I'm really off." The way he sees it—and there are many who disagree—this on-off syndrome is strictly a matter of fate. On any given day, in any given fight, he either "has it" or he doesn't.

Natividad has been "on" enough times during the past year to be named to the No. 7 spot on the **BLACK BELT YEARBOOK** Top Ten. He tied with his student Darnell Garcia for first place in the middleweight division of the National Black Belt Championships in New Mexico before losing to Mike Warren by one point in a sister tournament, the National Grand Championships, later that night. Against highly touted Texan Roy Kurban, Natividad won once and lost once in two close battles. He won often at local tournaments in California, where he now makes his home, and fared well as a first-string member of the Chuck Norris team.

Born in the 50th state, the dark-complected, ruggedly handsome karateka was raised on Maui until he was halfway through high school. An all-around athlete, he was particularly interested in football and also briefly participated in boxing ("I didn't like that too much—too many head raps"). When he was 17, John moved to Germany with his family. At an American school in Stuttgart, he continued to play football and enjoyed the frequent road trips to games in such classical German cities as Munich. Upon graduation, he set out by himself to see the world, going first back to Hawaii, then eventually on to California.

Today, Natividad still has a touch of the wanderlust, which may be one of the reasons he likes competing on the tournament circuit and will travel nearly anywhere to fight as long as it's financially feasible. He likes the countryside and submits to an occasional urge to drop everything and go

someplace where he can look at flowery pastures and hills. He dreams of someday buying a small farm and spending the rest of his life there.

Natividad's approach to karate is equally pastoral. Unlike many tournament fighters, his interests in the art go beyond the physical aspects. He derives great satisfaction from practicing kata and is deeply fond of the intangible rewards of teaching. One of his motivations for competing in kumite, he says, is to help maintain an aesthetic quality in the karate that is presented to the public.

"I'll be in tournaments a long time," he says, "because the public sees a lot of fighters who are out there strictly for their own benefit, for winning a trophy. The art is beautiful. If you handle it as a beautiful thing, it can be very, very impressive. When you see someone out there who is flawless, it makes the art a little better."

At 5-11, 175 pounds, Natividad is stockily constructed and could easily pass for a pier-six brawler. But he is surprisingly agile, and to many his kata is as impressive as his ample bag of kumite techniques. "It's completely different than fighting," he says of kata. "When you're fighting, you have somebody else to blame your faults on. But when you're out there for kata, you're by yourself and you have got to just do it."

There is a practical side to Natividad, however, a side which realizes he cannot travel whenever the spirit moves him or buy that farm in the country unless he earns some money first. He also has three kids to support.

In order to provide for these things, he keeps a schedule which has got to complicate the matter of his inconsistency even more. It goes something like this:

Mondays through Fridays, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., he works out at the Norris dojo in Torrance, where he is program director. From 5 p.m. until 10 p.m., he teaches classes there. From 11 p.m. until 7 a.m. he works in computer processing for a local firm. Grabbing a bite to eat on the way, he then hurries to El Camino College, south of Los Angeles, to attend classes (he's aiming for a degree in psychology) from 8 a.m. until 10 a.m. After that, he goes home, sleeps for five or six hours, then somehow manages to drag himself out of bed again and repeat the cycle. Saturday mornings he's at the dojo at 10 and spends the day teaching and working out. Sundays are used for getting ready for Mondays. ("A lot of people tell me I do too much—I'm always on the go.")

ENTER THE OPTIMIST

Despite the fullness of this schedule and the fact that he occasionally feels downright exhausted, Natividad believes his remarkable routine has little effect on his inconsistency, or lack of it. "Somebody once said you have two beings inside of you," he explains philosophically. "One that always wants to be on, another that's a slower pace of yourself." It all depends, he claims, on which one has the upper hand on a given day and which one is coordinating his movements. "If your timing is one second off, you'll lose."

One of those who disagrees with this assessment of fate as the key factor in a fighter's being on or off is Chuck Norris himself, Natividad's employer and sensei. Norris wandered into the Torrance dojo one day not long ago when Natividad was sitting in his office discussing his ups and downs.

"Yup," said Norris when informed the topic of the moment was inconsistency. "That's the downfall of most fighters—up one day, down the next. You've got to learn to keep yourself emotionally up all the time."

FAKE FRONT KICK TO HIGH ROUNDHOUSE

Natividad (on the left in these photos) is considered by many to have the best arsenal of techniques of any tournament fighter now competing. Here, against Darnell Garcia, he executes his fake front kick to high roundhouse. In Photo 1, he faces the opponent, maintaining high eye contact. Then (2) he initiates the front-kick motion by dropping his eyes to a low target. When the opponent's attention and defense drop, leaving the head unguarded (3), Natividad turns his hip and brings his ankle up and out (4), then completes the roundhouse.



Natividad flashed a meek smile which indicated he had heard all this before. Norris—rated one of the great tournament competitors of all time—continued. "I think it's determination," the BLACK BELT Hall of Fame member said with irrefutable conviction. "It's going in with a die-fighting type of attitude. That's why I could never fight in the studio but in the tournaments I'd do better. If I was going to lose, I was going to lose fighting."

The contrast between Norris and Natividad as they appeared together in that room makes for an interesting and revealing comparison. Both men are approachable, affable and obliging. They both smile a lot, too. But while Norris talks rapidly with an animated emphasis on the points he wants to drive home, Natividad speaks slowly, perhaps with less assuredness. Norris is an optimist—life is what you make it. When he speaks to you, his eyes appear to dance briskly in



FAKE FRONT KICK TO SIDE KICK

Facing the opponent as he did when he started the fake front to roundhouse (1), Natividad begins his front-kick motion (2), but this time opponent keeps his guard up, looking out for the roundhouse. Natividad keeps his knee and ankle inside opponent's guard as he lifts his knee up (3). Then, when his foot has penetrated opponent's defense, he turns his hip into position for a side kick (4) and completes the side kick to the unprotected target (5).



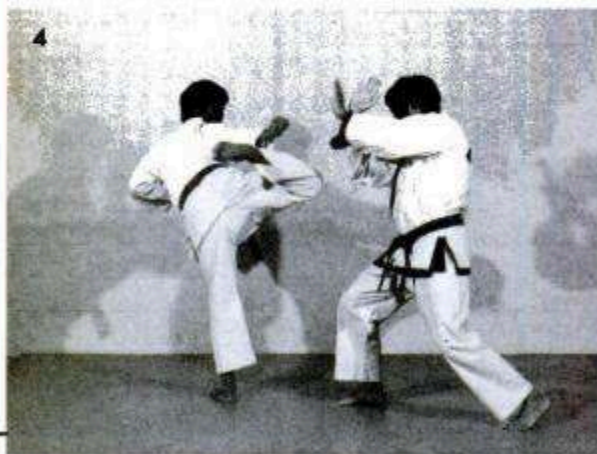
tight circles (though they never stray from their target), and you find yourself almost falling into a trance. Natividad, on the other hand, is the fatalist—what will be, will be. He is comfortable to be around, easy-going and rather gentle, but his mind sometimes seems to be someplace else. He is shy, particularly on first acquaintance, and has a kind of an aw-gee-shucks manner about him. Both men are refreshingly candid.

Norris was asked if his gung-ho type of determination lessened any during the latter stages of his career. "No," he said reflectively, building up to another conviction, "I think it strengthened. As the years went by, I wasn't in the shape I was in in my prime ('65, '66 and '67). In '68, '69 and '70, I think what kept me going was my determination."

Leaning back in his chair, Natividad looked at his sensei with a noticeable admiration, though obviously not buying

FAKE HIGH ROUNDHOUSE TO LOW ROUNDHOUSE

Natividad faces his opponent, who assumes a right-leg-forward stance (1), and brings his leg up into kicking position (2), keeping his eyes high so as to also keep his opponent's attention and defense high. Then (3) Natividad brings his knee up as high as possible to make it look like he is going to kick to the head. As the opponent raises his guard to protect his head (4), Natividad rolls his hip into a side-thrust position while keeping his leg in the roundhouse position. The kick is then delivered to the open rib area (5).



Norris' philosophy as a workable one for himself.

"It's a matter of attitude," the dojo-chain owner went on. "You can be up or down, depending upon how you want to think. If you say, 'Well, I'm down,' then you're going to be down. If you say, 'I'm going to be up,' then you'll be up. It's a matter of auto-suggestion, really."

After a brief pause, Norris suggested anyone could talk himself into anything if he really wanted to and gently nudged

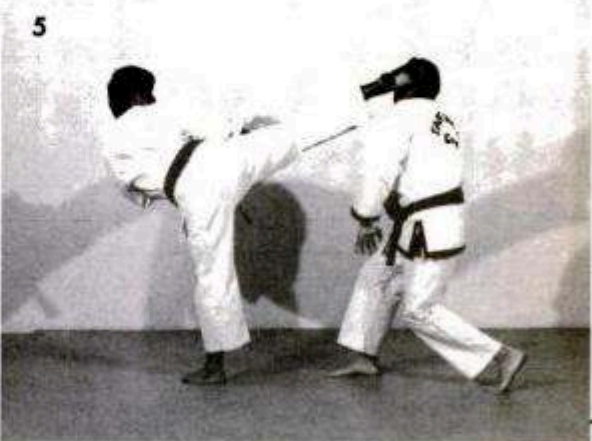
the point of the statement toward Natividad. "He's got to take the fight to his opponents," the tang soo do instructor explained to the third party in the room. "With John's ability to score almost everytime he attacks, he should use that asset. It's like I tell him, 'All you gotta do is go on 'em.'"

Norris interrupted his whirlwind lecture on the power of positive thinking to go wrap up some last-minute details for an intra-school tournament scheduled the following day. After he



FAKE SPINNING BACK KICK TO ROUNDHOUSE

Facing the opponent, who again is in a right-leg-forward stance (1), Natividad goes into motion for the spinning back kick, lifting his knee high (2). When the opponent drops his guard to jam the kick, Natividad stops his body motion but allows his hip and leg—tucked in close—to continue coming around (3). When his hip has reached the proper position, he delivers the roundhouse (4 and 5).



left, there was about a minute of silence and those who remained seemed to be overcome by a feeling of "wow!" Finally, Natividad broke the repose, confirming what was already pretty clear. "It's a different process," he said simply.

Indeed, it is a different process—that of the optimist compared to that of the fatalist. But who's to say a person should be one way or the other? Perhaps if Natividad were to become an optimist, he'd still suffer from his recurring case of

the blahs. Perhaps if Norris were a fatalist, he'd still overflow with enthusiasm. It's a moot question.

What is certain is that John Natividad has developed—through a combination of heredity and sweat—what is perhaps the finest array of techniques on the tournament scene today. When you hear people talk about unlimited potential, he's the guy they're talking about. If he should ever fulfill that potential, he'll no longer be the giant-killer. He'll be the giant.

