

# Nx

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Meet The New Contenders

ERIK PEREZ

## Goyito Power

For Erik Perez, wearing the mask of a *luchador* is no gimmick. It's a point of national pride.

By JUAN CARDENAS Photography by JAMES LAW



**E**rik Perez doesn't remember the first time he put on a *luchador* mask. He's worn them since he was a little kid in his native Monterrey, Mexico. He grew up going to watch the high-flying, masked *lucha libre* wrestlers perform in matches at the Arena Solidaridad and the Arena Coliseo with his father and three brothers. Perez, like so many kids growing up in Mexico, was entranced. Ironically, he connected the most with a black-masked character who styled himself as a ninja in the ring and performed under the name Octagón. Before long, Perez would find himself competing inside the Octagon, walking out in his own signature mask. But several obstacles stood between him and his eventual place in the UFC's bantamweight division.

Everything works two ways in Mexico. Growing up in Monterrey, Perez witnessed firsthand as the successes of the second-richest metropolis in the nation were violently overshadowed by the drug wars. Perez remembers, "Eight or 10 years ago was when it started. I lived it myself; I have friends who are not with me anymore. It was hard. I went to train every day just hoping to get back and find my family was okay. But you need to stay focused in the good stuff."

"Goyito," a nickname based off of Perez's middle name Gregorio, always had the heart

of a fighter, just not the body. Small in stature and a bit chubby, Perez was picked on as a child and had a nose for trouble. His parents diagnosed the problem by enrolling him in Sanshou. "There I was taught to respect my opponent," Perez says. "You could say that I quit being a troublemaker by learning how to fight." More than that, Perez found his calling.

At the age of 16, without knowing the language, without having any family and with just a few dollars in his pocket, Perez set out for Albuquerque, New Mexico, to seek out famed MMA trainer Greg Jackson. "Because of the UFC, I knew about Jackson, and it's been clear to me since day one: if you want to be the best you need to train with the best." Like so many apprentice *luchadores*, Perez ended up living in the gym at first, fighting and working to pay for his training. Perez moved forward with basically his one and only asset: his heart to fight. "Mexicans are natural fighters; we don't give up," Perez states. "I don't give up. Ever. That is why I'm so into *lucha libre*. Every *luchador* is like a superhero, or even better. They overcome whatever life throws them and without any super power—just their hearts."

His life entered a repetitive cycle of sleeping on the floor of the gym, working in the gym, and training in the gym. He could not have been happier. ☺

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“Living there, training, sleeping there; many of the fighters at Jackson’s are from out of town, so we became our own family. We love each other,” he says. “Whenever one of us is up, there is pressure on all of us. If anyone loses, everyone shares the pain. It’s like the iron-willed mother who prepares their sons for everything. The more we love, the more we kick each other’s ass. Whenever I know one of my training partners is going to fight a powerful striker, I hit them harder to prepare them for that moment.”

Even while training in New Mexico, *lucha libre* still played a significant part in Perez’s life. Skam-13, a *luchador* based in Texas worked with him on his wrestling but, above all, talked him into the true nature of a *luchador*: respect and humility. “He changed my life,” Perez says.



Perez made his Octagon debut in June 2012 on the *TUF 15* Finale, beating John Albert when the referee stopped the fight due to a verbal submission. Goyito followed up that performance with a blistering 17-second knockout over Ken Stone at UFC 150. But there was still something missing, something bigger that Perez needed to get out. “A *luchador* has a heart so big that he can fight for many,” Perez says. At UFC 155, Perez walked to the Octagon in his own signature *mascara* as his own *luchador* character “Goyito Power.” For Perez, the walkout honored the *lucha libre* tradition and became a symbol for all Mexicans and Latinos fighting their own battles, away from their homes and families. “I’m in love with the sport,” he says. “I am so happy. My family is far away, but they know I’m doing what I love.” ◻

## Masked Men

ERIK PEREZ ON THREE LUCHADORES WHO HAD AN IMPACT ON HIS LIFE

### OCTAGÓN

Rising to prominence in the 1980s, Octagón was a famous *técnico*, slang for a “good guy” as opposed to the more villainous *rudos*. “He was an acrobat and had this ninja attitude. My dad took me to see him. I used to pretend I was Octagón at the end of every fight.”

### EL SANTO

This iconic wrestler jumped from *lucha libre* to comic books, TV, and movies to become a national phenomenon: “All Mexicans watched his movies since we were little children. And we all wanted to be El Santo.”

### SKAM-13

“This is the fighter that taught me much about life and changed my attitude,” Perez says of the Texas-based *luchador* who instilled a sense of humility in him.