

## SPARRING ROLE

**Off the Set, TV Celeb Mario Lopez Lives for Jabs, Hooks, and Uppercuts.**

From playing a high-school jock in *Saved By the Bell* to wowing millions with his dance moves on last year's edition of ABC's *Dancing With the Stars* to hosting Showtime's new mixed martial arts show *EliteXC*, actor Mario Lopez has always taken roles that require athletic prowess. But one of his greatest passions is no act. As an amateur super-middleweight, Lopez is undefeated at 7-0. He proudly says he's been nicknamed "Manos de la Piedra" (Hands of Stone).

A regular at Freddie Roach Wild Card Boxing Club in Hollywood, Lopez calls boxers the "most noble" of all athletes. "It takes a certain kind of man to get in the ring," he says. "You play baseball and football, but you don't play boxing. You fight. You don't necessarily have to be a great athlete, but you've got to be a great warrior."

Former child actor Lopez reenergized his career with the exposure he got from his dazzling displays on *Dancing*, but he leaves all Hollywood trappings at the gym door. He trains three times a week and is treated as Mario the boxer, not Mario the star. In fact, some of his sparring partners, including former world champs Shane Mosley and James Toney, have given him some world-class lessons — and they don't pull punches just because of Lopez's celebrity status. "I can take a pretty good shot on my chin," Lopez says, "but when someone like Toney gives you a good body shot to the kidney or liver, whew, you've got to take a knee."

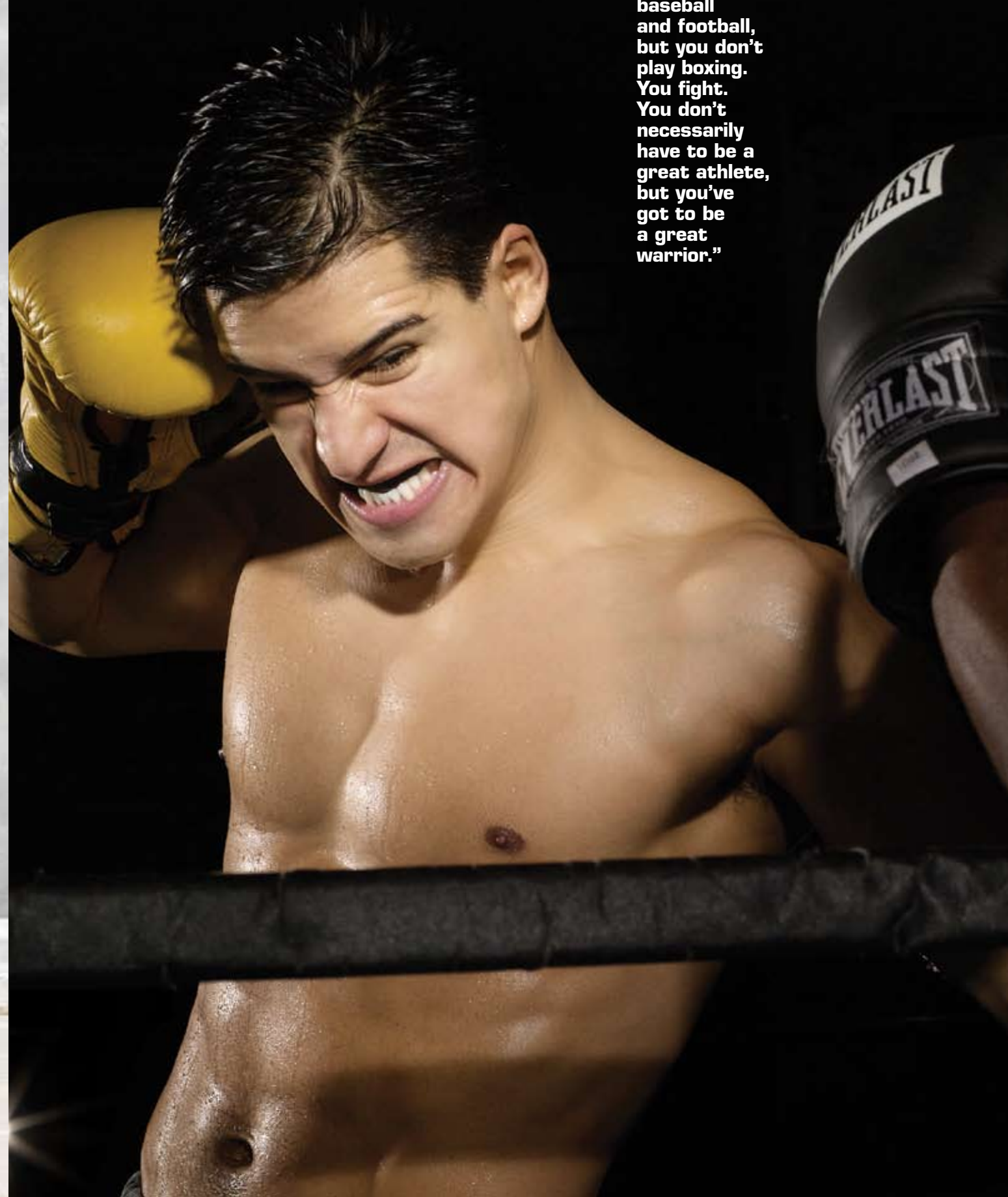
A close friend of boxer Oscar De La Hoya and a fan of legendary Latino boxers Julio Cesar Chavez and Roberto Duran, Lopez describes his boxing style as a cross between a technical fighter with a pretty good defense and an aggressive puncher who likes to work the body a lot. He says he "can adapt and fight from the outside, keeping my fist right in the middle of my opponent's chest and pounding away like a workhorse."

For Lopez, boxing is "great therapy," and he describes the ring as a metaphor for life, where many of the contestants "come from the school of hard knocks." He adds, "There aren't many situations in life where you're face to face with all your vulnerabilities and what you're all about."

— Ashley Jude Collie



PHOTOGRAPHY: LEFT BY BRIAN DAVIS, RIGHT BY JEFFREY VOGELING



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