

# FROM SUCCESS TO SIGNIFICANCE

*Two Decades After His Lifecycle Revolutionized the Fitness Industry, Augie Nieto '80 P'08 Faces His Biggest Challenge: A Race Against ALS*

BY BLYTHE BERNHARD

When a pair of dumbbells disappeared from the Claremont McKenna College weight room in the late 1970s, an enterprising freshman launched a fitness revolution.

Augie Nieto '80 worked in the gym and felt responsible for the stolen weights, so he helped raise \$46,000 for new exercise equipment. The student-athlete's passion for health and fitness led to a class project—starting a community strength-training gym.

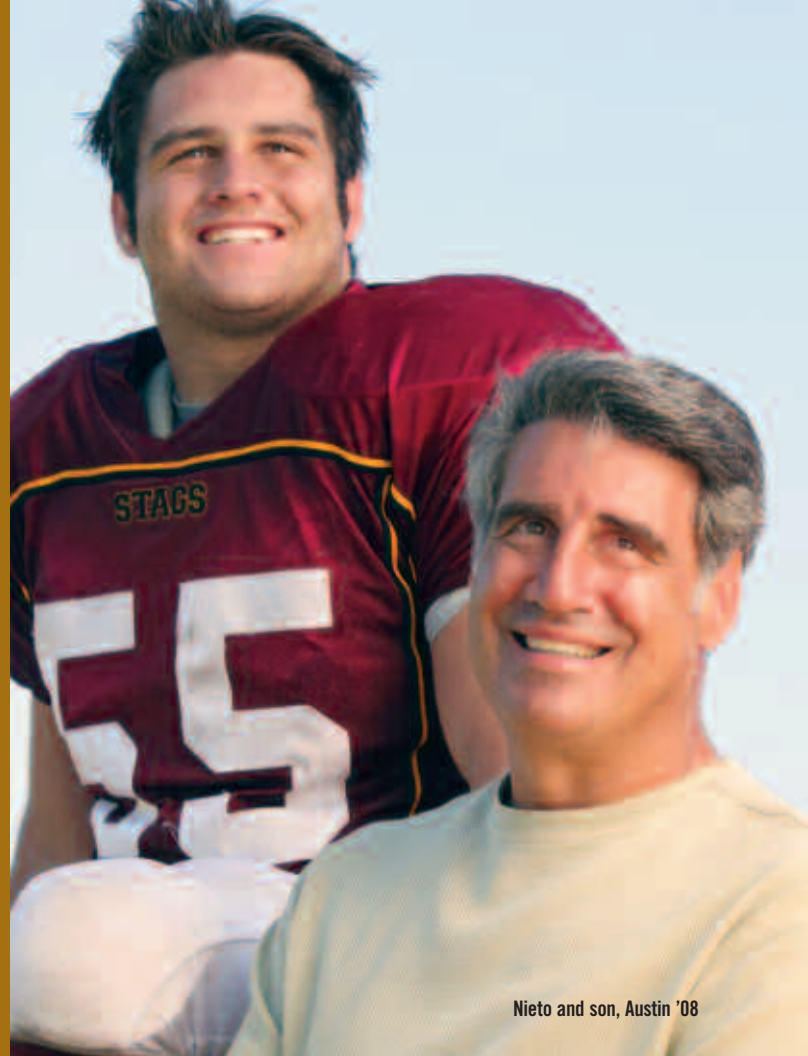
“I was just that kid who found exercise as his fantasy, his religion, his way of being,” Nieto, 47, says. “Once I did, I wanted to spread the word and take this to every corner of the world.”

Nieto, who went on to create Life Fitness, now has focused his entrepreneurial and leadership skills on a much bigger challenge—beating an incurable, devastating disease.

About 18 months ago, Nieto noticed a subtle weakening when he lifted weights. Soon his right arm began twitching, and shaving the right side of his face became difficult. In March 2005, Nieto visited the Mayo Clinic for a four-day evaluation.

The grim diagnosis: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. The progressive disease attacks nerve cells and gradually robs patients of their voluntary muscle control. People with ALS can expect to become paralyzed, unable to speak and eventually unable to breathe. The disease does not affect brain function. More than 5,600 Americans are diagnosed with ALS each year, usually between the ages of 40 and 70. There is no known cause or cure.

The irony of his muscle-wasting disease is not lost on the fitness titan. But exercise will help keep him alive, Nieto says, and the endorphins will help him cope. Today, Nieto works out an hour each day and maintains normal mobility. He created his own drug regimen with the help of doctors after trips to six university clinics nationwide.



Nieto and son, Austin '08



Nieto donated six elliptical cross trainers produced by his new company, Octane Fitness, to the College in October.

“I can’t go through life thinking that what I have can’t be beaten,” Nieto says.

To beat his disease, Nieto will deploy every business skill he has. Selling, branding, cause marketing. Calling on powerful friends, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Trustee and Rep. David Dreier ’75 to promote stem cell research.

“Augie Nieto’s determination to find a cure is inspiring to me,” Dreier says. “I share his belief that expanded research opportunities will yield great advances for people with ALS, diabetes, cancer, and other diseases. This effort will require a unique partnership of public and private concerns. I salute Augie for his drive, dedication, and perseverance as we strive to conquer ALS.”

That perseverance comes naturally to a businessman who always believes in what he is selling.

“This is a business problem,” Nieto says. “I believe there’s a cure, and I don’t take no for an answer. This is no different from when I knocked on people’s doors and tried to sell them a Lifecycle. I believed they needed it.”

In 1977, Family Fitness Centers founder Ray Wilson pitched his Lifecycle—a bright yellow stationary bike—to Nieto. The young entrepreneur immediately recognized the bike's potential and bought the marketing rights. After graduation from CMC, Nieto traveled the country in a motor home to sell the Lifecycle. He sold just 11 bikes in nine months.

Undeterred, Nieto and Wilson founded Lifecycle Inc. and shipped the bikes free to 50 health-club owners. Soon, the bikes popped up in clubs nationwide, and fitness fanatics lined up. By the time Nieto graduated in 1980, the company's profit hit \$500,000, and the cardiovascular craze was born.

Norm Cates of *Club Insider News*, a fitness-industry publication, calls Nieto “the Henry Ford of the exercise industry.

“Without Augie Nieto's work on Lifecycle, 25, 30 years ago, the

health-club industry clearly wouldn't be what it's like today,” Cates says.

Nieto sold Lifecycle when revenue reached \$7 million a year and continued to run the company as it morphed into Life Fitness, one of the world's largest makers of fitness equipment. Under Nieto's watch, revenue hit nearly \$200 million by 1997 before the company was sold again for \$310 million. In early 2005, Nieto was named chairman of Minnesota-based Octane Fitness, which designs and distributes elliptical trainers.

For his latest business partnership, Nieto teamed up with the Muscular Dystrophy Association, which provides research, medical services and education for more than 40 neuromuscular diseases, including ALS, to form Augie's Quest to support ALS research. Soon after, fitness executives donated more than \$1 million at a dinner honoring Nieto with the *National Fitness Trade Journal's*

Lifetime Achievement Award, and Lance Armstrong has signed on for Nieto's next fundraiser, a gala set for March 22. Nieto and his wife, Lynne, are co-chairpersons of MDA's ALS Division.

“Augie has inspired all of us at MDA to work even harder than we do every day to help find a cure for ALS,” said Shannon Shryne, divisional field representative for MDA. “I've worked with MDA for 14 years. Augie is the most dynamic visionary. He has been able to put a face on what we're doing, to really tackle this disease at a new level.”

Instead of motivating sales representatives, Nieto now motivates scientists. In a unique partnership, Nieto will work with ALS experts to decide how the money from Augie's Quest is distributed.

Nieto also recruited advertising executive Jeff Repetto '86 to help promote the quest. Repetto was



Nieto, left, posed with a group of his football pals for his senior yearbook photo. The quote he chose to accompany this photo was from Theodore Roosevelt: “It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena...who errs and comes short again and again—his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

diagnosed with ALS in the summer of 2003 and has since lost all mobility, communicating through eye movements.

“Augie brings an entrepreneurial spirit and more than two decades of business management expertise to the problem of ALS...two things the field desperately needs,” Repetto wrote in an e-mail with the help of his wife, Kathryn. “Just six months after being diagnosed, Augie already has made a major impact on the ALS community through his fundraising efforts—and I know he’s just getting started.”

Dailey & Associates Advertising, where Repetto served as vice president and creative director, has pitched in to promote the Augie’s Quest campaign at no cost. The agency’s clients also include the Los Angeles Dodgers, Ford, and Nestle.

“So many of us here have been touched by the effects of this disease,” said Tom Lehr, managing director at Dailey. “Jeff has been a key person here, a key mentor to so many of our young people and a larger-than-life guy.”

The relationship forged between Nieto and Repetto is a tribute to the power of the CMC network through any challenge, both men acknowledged.

Nieto continues to give back to the College by serving as last year’s National Alumni Fund chair, judging student competitions, and outfitting the school’s fitness center. He’s involved with the athletic department, and proudly watches son Austin ’08 play football for the Stags.

“CMC alumni really try to be excellent in our competitive world,” says Athletic Director Mike Sutton ’76. “It’s been engrained in us, to be engaged and involved, to say, ‘let’s take this challenge on and see what we can do with it.’ That’s Augie.”

Perhaps Nieto’s greatest contribution to CMC is the time he spends mentoring students and alumni. The College attracts motivated, smart

leaders who are looking to make an impact, and Nieto says he loves giving them a boost.

“I was a scholarship kid. I was the beneficiary of people giving me a chance, so I feel compelled to do the same,” he says.

Janet Smith, the Von Tobel Professor of Economics and director of the Financial Economics Institute, invites Nieto to speak to her sports economics classes each semester. He’s taken busloads of students on field trips to meet high-profile CEOs, participate in mock business negotiations, and sit down for dinner with the Nieto family.

“Augie is genuinely interested both in students and in helping us, as professors, make the connection between theory and practice,” Smith said. “He’s taken an active interest in several students’ careers, helping with the launching of their entrepreneurial ventures.”

A.J. Kemp ’02 met Nieto in Smith’s sports economics class. A friendship developed, and Nieto and Kemp would discuss life and business while golfing at Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach.

Nieto helped the young man land an internship at a fitness company in Los Angeles, where Kemp was told he would not be given a company e-mail account. When Kemp asked Nieto for advice, the entrepreneur told Kemp to present his boss with a blank check and declare that he’d pay for the account himself. Always make a personal investment in your career, Nieto said. The next day, the company came through.

“A lot of the business principles I work with today came from Augie,” said Kemp, who now manages a vineyard in Oregon. “I don’t think Augie views himself to have limitations. He requires a lot of you, because he requires a lot of himself—to be diligent, to be giving of oneself and to be entrepreneurial. Having access to a mind like that and being able to forge

a friendship like this is a great gift.”

Nieto explained his motivation in a prescient article he wrote for a business publication five years ago:

“What I learned later in my career is that it’s not the quantity but the quality of the time you spend that matters,” Nieto wrote. “It’s like the last 100 yards of a marathon—the runners are tired, but because they’re near the end, they can sprint.”

Today, Nieto chooses to drink the good wine from deep in his cellar. Each day, he wakes up in his home on the cliffs of Corona del Mar and vows to make a memory with his wife, Lynne, and children Nicole, 22, Danielle, 20, Austin, 19, and Lindsay, 16. Whatever time he has left, Nieto says, is dedicated to them.

In September, the family traveled to Seattle to watch the CMS football game at the University of Puget Sound. Watching Austin play for the Stags is “magical” for Nieto. After the game, he and other alumni rolled out a grill and treated the football team to a post-game barbecue of chicken and ribs.

The entrepreneur and family man has written down how he wants to be remembered: as a good husband and father, a loyal friend, and someone who can be counted on to do the right thing.

Nieto muses that at least this affliction is named for a real hero he admires—Lou Gehrig. He echoes the baseball legend as he stands on his balcony and thinks back on his own life.

“I can look at the ocean,” Nieto says, “and say I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

For more information on Augie Nieto and his battle against ALS, visit [www.augiesquest.org](http://www.augiesquest.org).



Blythe Bernhard is a medical reporter for the *Orange County Register*. She previously profiled Nieto for her paper in September 2005.