

# It's tougher than it looks

Santa Cruz fights for another world title, takes inspiration from father's cancer battles.

BY MANOUK AKOPYAN

LAS VEGAS — Jose Santa Cruz maintains an exterior image of machismo when he's shouting instructions from the corner of the ring as his son Leo Santa Cruz, a three-division champion, builds on his budding boxing career.

As has been customary for years, on and off the camera, Jose is adorned with his traditional black cowboy hat, leather boots, dress shirt, suit vest, pocket square, bulky gold chains, rings and bracelets and a thick black mustache. He drives around in a Corvette, but his demeanor is so hardened he rarely smiles, even when his son wins.

But beneath the bravado and bold appearance is a man who's masking pain and a broken-down body after battling with myeloma spinal cancer for the last three years.

Jose, 59, now in remission, has needed the use of a wheelchair at their City of Industry gym of late, but come Saturday, he will put aside the morphine that he ingests daily and step into the bright lights of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas to coach his son toward a fourth world title as Santa Cruz (36-11, 19 knockouts) makes his junior-lightweight debut against Miguel Flores (24-2, 12 KOs) for the vacant World Boxing Assn. title. The fight will serve as the co-main event for the Deontay Wilder-Luis Ortiz heavyweight rematch.

"It's been very hard for me and what my dad has been going through with cancer," Santa Cruz said. "He gets happy when I train, but it's painful for me because he's always in pain. I can't really concentrate on training sometimes."

During a recent media day training session in Los Angeles, the elder Santa Cruz ceremoniously held mitts for his son as a mariachi band played in the background. Santa Cruz barely peppered the pads his father was holding, hoping the cameras got the necessary clips they needed before moving on two minutes later.

The relentless and always-swinging Santa Cruz won't be offering the same to Flores. He'll be fighting to inspire his father and challenge his body for the first time above the featherweight division, a weight class that he has campaigned for his last seven fights before vacating a title to further chase history. A champion at 118, 122 and 126 pounds, Santa Cruz is now trained by his brother Antonio, 41, who holds mitts as their father, still the boss of the gym, offers instructions seated outside the ring.

"I'm always in pain from the cancer. I'm not going to give up though. I'm going to give it my all," Jose said as he moved around the MGM Grand on Thursday in an electric scooter. "I'm still the mastermind behind it all. I'm the one telling Antonio

and Leo what to do. Not being in the ring training Leo is actually better for me because I get to see a different vantage point. It's a better view because I get to see the mistakes and correct them. I'm very proud of Leo."

Santa Cruz is no stranger to moving up in weight. For this fight, he's leaning on strength and conditioning coach Andy Aguilar, who's tasked with helping his 31-year-old pupil carry his power to a new division. Santa Cruz has been sparring with much heavier opponents and sucking down extra protein shakes every morning to make sure he molds into his weight.

"We always work hard in the gym so that we can throw a lot of punches in the fight. We want to put the pressure on and give the fans a great fight," Santa Cruz said.

Born in Mexico but now representing Los Angeles, Santa Cruz brings a fan-friendly style to fights. He escaped an impoverished adolescence in Compton, his family struggling to make rent, using candles for light and picking at scraps from the trash to sell later.

Now, Santa Cruz lives in Corona and drives a Lamborghini among a cavalcade of cars because he's been making big money ever since becoming a world champion in 2012. The only hiccup of his career was a loss to Carl Frampton in 2016. Before that fight, Santa Cruz had to deliver the news that his father had Stage 3 myeloma — bone cancer at the spine that would require chemotherapy and surgery. The following year, Santa Cruz avenged his loss and has since been calling for the glamour names in the sport.

"There's a lot of pressure on me because I'm favored against Flores, but I never see myself like that," Santa Cruz said. "He's going to come with everything he has. It's the opportunity of his lifetime."

After cementing his "King of L.A." status with a second win against Abner Mares last year, Santa Cruz started calling out the likes of Gary Russell Jr. and Gervonta Davis for a unification fight. But neither happened, and Davis vacated his title by moving up to 135. Santa Cruz and Flores will fight for that crown.

"I'm really motivated, like this is my first world title," Santa Cruz said. "This is something big for me. It will help me be remembered as one of the best Mexican fighters."

The boxing-obsessed Jose Santa Cruz had dreams for one of his four sons to one day become a world champion when he was taking them to gyms as teens. His youngest son ended up realizing his vision, and will hope to do it four times over.

The father will be in his son's corner again Saturday, ignoring his agony, and wheelchair, to step into the ring and shout instructions.

"He's motivated me to go even harder," Leo said. "He has to live with the pain. My pain is temporary. My goal when I began boxing was just to become a world champion. To be a four-division champion is an even bigger dream."



ERIK VERDUZCO Associated Press

**LUIS ORTIZ**, 40, weighed in for Saturday's heavyweight title rematch with Deontay Wilder almost five pounds lighter than he was in their first fight, thanks to a new team of trainers and coaches.

## Ortiz has slimmed down so much he needs a belt

Boxer is working with ex-BALCO boss Conte to beat Wilder in rematch for title.

BY MANOUK AKOPYAN

LAS VEGAS — Luis Ortiz stripped down to his tights, showing off his newly improved physique. The man nicknamed King Kong pounded his chest after seeing the numbers on the scale: 236½ pounds. The figure did not indicate much change, but the more chiseled frame sure did, from the last time he fought the opponent standing across from him.

The 40-year-old Ortiz (31-1, 26 knockouts) will be fighting Saturday against World Boxing Council champion Deontay Wilder (41-0-1, 40 KOs), the man he momentarily had reeling in March 2018 during the seventh round before being dropped in the 10th.

Near Ortiz stood long-time trainer Herman Caicedo and a new team of technicians who've been recruited to revive the Cuban combatant's body. They are strength and conditioning coach Larry Wade, who is the Nevada Las Vegas assistant track and field coach, physical therapist Jukka Toivala and nutritional advisor Victor Conte, the former BALCO founder who's the proprietor of the Bay Area-based company SNAC — Scientific Nutrition for Advanced Conditioning.

Ortiz, who weighed 241¼ pounds in the first fight against Wilder, said he was gassed and fatigued after unloading an unprecedented barrage in the seventh round, Wilder's most concerning 45 seconds as a professional. But Wilder escaped the close call and recovered to finish the tired and fading Ortiz. At the time of the stoppage, Wilder was up only 85-84 across all three scorecards, and Ortiz feels he let the big win slip out of

his hands.

To fight off Father Time, Ortiz, whose beyond-his-years appearance always has led to questions about his birth certificate, embarked on a path to revitalize his body, packing his frame with more muscle and developing his fast-twitch muscle fibers.

"Victor, Larry and Jukka have been instrumental and indispensable for me in this camp," Ortiz said. "I'm ready, focused and prepared to fight. I feel great and we're communicating well as a unit. I've seen a big difference in my recovery and staying injury-free."

Conte, who spent four months in prison in 2005 for his role shilling steroids in the BALCO scandal involving high-profile athletes such as Barry Bonds, is using his new lease on sports nutrition, and life, by becoming boxing's mad scientist and championing Voluntary Anti-Doping Association's drug-testing program to level playing fields.

Ortiz is not concerned with his connection to Conte, even after twice testing positive for banned substances, once in 2014 for the anabolic steroid Nandrolone, and the other in 2017, which was because of high blood pressure medication that also doubles as a masking agent. Ortiz never attempted to obtain a therapeutic use exemption.

Ortiz brought on one of the most notorious steroids peddlers to his team to conduct comprehensive blood tests and prescribe a unique set of supplements based off that. Conte said he monitored markers of overtraining, blood-oxygen saturation, heart rate, breath frequency, blood flow and hydration. Conte calculated the training-load-to-recovery-interval ratio and determined how to best push Ortiz to the limits. If the enzymes and markers appeared elevated, they cut back and compensated for the oxygen deficit.

Conte said he provided

bedside equipment that "super oxygenated" Ortiz's system by pumping oxygen with a concentrator and special mask to help with recovery. Paired with a SNAC supplement regimen, it led to deep, restful sleep that lowered his heart rate and reduced breath frequency, thus producing more testosterone and releasing additional growth hormones, Conte said.

"We're accelerating healing, tissue repair and replenishing oxygen deficit in half the time," said Conte, who's also worked with boxers Andre Ward, Mikey Garcia and Devin Haney, among others. "We're strategizing by understanding the body and what hormones are being produced, and what acti-

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— LARRY WADE, conditioning coach

vates specific muscle tissue. That way we can make him stronger and faster and burn the fat.

"I'm not a fan of long-distance running. It develops slow-twitch muscle fiber, and that's not what boxers do at all. We instead prefer sprint interval training, reversibility of effort training with resistance bands going in different directions and plyometrics with jumping."

Enter Wade's sprint program to potentially help close the distance to Wilder and quickly get into position in the pocket without getting hit.

"I'm the new stimulus to get him started. I didn't come in and change the world," said Wade, who also has lent a hand to boxers

Shawn Porter and Caleb Plant. "I worked with Herman and made a few adjustments. Luis is a machine, and we listened to what his body was telling us. He's going to look faster and stronger. I think Deontay will overlook him, and Luis will knock him out."

Caicedo added, "We didn't want any 'what if' questions, and to leave no stone unturned. Everyone has put in their two cents into Luis, and we're trying to make a nickel out of it."

Ortiz's renewed approach to training can't improve the strength of his chin against Wilder, who has one of the sport's most devastating right hands. Ortiz was dropped three times before the first fight was waved off. He said he has plenty of motivation going into this fight and wants to further disrupt the already chaotic heavyweight picture by upsetting Wilder ahead of his planned rematch with Tyson Fury on Feb. 22.

"Deontay had his reasons for taking this fight," Ortiz said. "But on Saturday, I'm going to show why that was a mistake. I'm going to be the new heavyweight champion of the world. Being away from my family has been harder than training and dieting. These sacrifices are for a purpose. We have tunnel vision for this goal of beating Wilder."

Ortiz also will be fighting for his ailing 11-year-old daughter Lismercedes, who is battling the painful skin condition epidermolysis bullosa. Among Ortiz's fans in attendance Saturday will be Lismercedes' physician, Peter Marinkovich of Stanford University School of Medicine. The Ortiz family will head home to Miami for a quick retreat before soon meeting with Marinkovich to discuss the next treatment.

With a win, Ortiz would be the heavyweight king. More significant paydays would follow to help him secure the best care for his daughter.

### THE DAY IN SPORTS

## Russia's Olympic status in doubt by WADA finding

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

The chances of the Russian flag flying at next year's Olympics took a potentially lethal hit Friday when anti-doping regulators recommended the country be declared noncompliant for tampering with data that was supposed to help bring the entire cheating episode to a close.

The World Anti-Doping Agency announced its compliance and review committee delivered the recommendation to the agency's executive committee, which will discuss it Dec. 9.

If the executive committee agrees to declare Russia's anti-doping agency noncompliant, it would set in motion a process that could end with Russia being booted from the Tokyo Games.

This marks the latest

chapter in a scandal that began before the 2014 Sochi Games, when Russian officials designed a scheme to allow their athletes to dope without getting caught by substituting urine samples taken after competition with clean ones stored from earlier.

### BASEBALL Yankees won't pay Ellsbur

The New York Yankees plan to not pay **Jacoby Ellsberry** the remaining \$26 million due under his contract, contending he violated the deal by getting unauthorized medical treatment.

New York general manager **Brian Cashman** sent a letter to Ellsberry and his agent, **Scott Boras**, informing them the team converted

his contract to a nonguaranteed deal, a person familiar with the decision told the Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team had not made any public statements.

The City National Grove of Anaheim could be sacrificed so the Angels can build as freely as possible on the stadium parking lot.

The Grove is located on part of the land the city of Anaheim is discussing with the Angels for possible development, according to city documents. The city and the Angels met for their second negotiating session Friday, with both sides hoping to strike a deal under which the team would stay in Anaheim for decades and would build entertainment infrastructure on the parking lot around the stadium.

— BILL SHAIKIN

### GOLF

#### Duncan shoots 61 at RSM

**Tyler Duncan** holed out from the eighth fairway for eagle and wound up with the best score on the PGA Tour, a nine-under 61 that staked him to a two-shot lead going into the weekend at the RSM Classic.

Duncan was at 14-under 128, two shots ahead of **Sebastian Munoz** (63), **Rhein Gibson** (64) and **D.J. Trahan**, whose 63 came on the Plantation Course.

**Mike Lorenzo-Vera** took a three-shot lead after the second round of the season-ending World Tour Championship in Dubai.

Lorenzo-Vera extended his one-stroke overnight lead with a three-under 69

on the Earth Course at Jumeirah Golf Estates. **Rory McIlroy** had only two birdies in a 74 — the ninth worst score in the 50-man field.

**Sei Young Kim** shot a five-under 67 that kept her lead at two shots in the CME Group Tour Championship and moved her one step closer to the richest prize in women's golf.

### ETC.

#### Sandusky gets same sentence

A judge dashed the hopes of former Penn State assistant football coach **Jerry Sandusky** for a shorter prison term, resentencing him to the same 30 to 60 years imposed against him in 2012 for sexually abusing children.

Judge **Maureen Skerda** gave Sandusky what prosecutors and his own attorney described as effectively a life term during a hearing ordered this year by an appeals court.

**Jon Jones** will fight **Dominick Reyes** on Feb. 8 in Houston, according to ESPN. The title bout will headline a UFC pay-per-view event. ... **Floyd Mayweather Jr.** said he's coming out of retirement in 2020, according to his Instagram post. It would be the fourth time the 42-year-old boxer has unretired.

The USC women's soccer team defeated visiting Texas A&M 2-1 in an NCAA second round match. The Trojans will host Santa Clara on Sunday.

UCLA defeated visiting Clemson 5-0 and will host Wisconsin on Sunday.