

Vicenç Rodriguez, Barcelona Dragons

By Tracey Reavis



The kids in the stands are doing what kids in the stands do after every game. They're dangling T-shirts and programs and pictures over the railing, waiting, hoping, to get their favorite players' autograph. These kids all want one man, No. 46, Vicenç Rodriguez, the Barcelona Dragons only native Spaniard player. Rodriguez happily obliges, crossing the field in the cavernous Estadi Olímpic to greet them before heading into the locker room. His thick, bear-claw of a hand clamps completely over those of his young fans when he reaches to shake them. But the 6-2, 248 pound Rodriguez is gentle enough, smiling, and signing and chatting up everybody in Spanish, Catalan or English.

"I like to say hello to the crowd and sign autographs or take pictures with the people who ask," says the 25-year-old Rodriguez, now in his third season with the Dragons.

Big game. Autograph seekers. Media crush. Seems like Rodriguez is livin' la vida loca. Step outside of the stadium though and things look slightly different. We're talking Spain, and the NFL Europe League. And Rodriguez is only one—albeit the best—of roughly a whopping 500 people playing football in the entire Catalan region of the country. In the U.S., five hundred people in every high school play football. But in Barcelona, soccer is king. If you don't play for FC Barca, you might as well be on the international toenail clipping team. *What's his name? He plays for who?*

"They don't know what they're missing," says Dragons head coach Jack Bicknell, who's been with the team since its inception 10 years ago, and has watched Rodriguez improve every season. "He can block, he can catch and he's smart. And the things that we can't coach, like speed and toughness, he's already got. This

guy is a player. If they had a clue, they would all be amazed."

Marvel at this. Rodriguez didn't play organized football until he was 18, and that was with a club team in his hometown of Vilafranca del Penedès. That same year, while playing for the European Junior Championship team, one of the coaches, Juan Jimenéz, got his first glimpse of Rodriguez. "You could tell he was the most talented player on the team," says Jimenéz, who at the time was also the national coach of the Dragons. "Everybody thought he was special."

Its seven years later and that special player is the starting tight end on a professional football team. Rodriguez didn't have a personal coach, he didn't have the latest training equipment and he didn't have a high level of football to use as reference to measure his progress against. What he did have was perseverance and a passion for the game. He watched videotapes of NFL games whenever he could. His workout routine was the same every day: two hours running track, then a 30-minute break before spending another hour and a half lifting weights. Five days a week. On Saturdays, Rodriguez and his best friend, Johnny Guasch ran routes and practiced catching. He played with the Vilafranca Eagles for four seasons, then was selected in 1998 to participate in the Dragons Prospects Program. A year later, Rodriguez made the Dragons' practice squad, while finishing his last semester at the University of Barcelona, where he studied chemistry. Last year, he was a full-fledged member of the team.

This season, Rodriguez impressed more than a few scouts during the March training camp in Tampa Bay, and there was talk that he could someday become the first native Spaniard to play in the National Football League. An ankle injury in the season opener has limited his play though, and maybe the invite to summer camp will have to wait another year. But Rodriguez is close. There's an NFL rule where one of the eight national team players on the roster has to be in the lineup on every other down played. This doesn't apply to Rodriguez because he's earned a spot as a starter.

"There's nothing in Spain that matches what he'd have to do every day in America to get where he is now. Nothing," says Sam Rutigliano, the former head coach of the Cleveland Browns, who is in his second season as an offensive assistant with the Dragons. "He only plays 14 weeks of the year with NFL Europe, which is the only

time he gets real NFL football expertise. And, he's had to overcome two barriers—understanding English, and then understanding football jargon. If he grew up playing in the U.S., he'd be in the NFL now."

Marvel at this. In 1975, Vicenç Rodriguez is born, and no one in Spain is even playing football. There's no Pop Warner, no junior high school, no high school and no college football. And no Sunday afternoon game to catch on TV either. Yet, seven years later, while watching his first football game, Super Bowl 16—the 49ers were thrashing Cincy, Joe Montana on his way to winning his first MVP—Rodriguez liked what he saw.

"I remember the first time somebody threw me a football, it was easy for me to catch the ball," says Rodriguez, who played soccer and basketball when he was younger. "And when I started to play the game, I felt really good. I thought it was something I could be good at. I said this is the game for me."

Rodriguez' hometown, Vilafranca del Penedès is 30 kilometers southwest of Barcelona. The city is in a region of Spain best known for its wine and champagne production, which is why there are acres of vineyards carpeting the landscape as the train approaches it. In the center of Vilafranca there's an interesting wine museum housed in an historic 12th century building. What the city doesn't have is a "Welcome to Vilafranca – Home of Vicenç Rodriguez" sign in the train station. But many of the 30,000 residents know who he is. Walk 10 blocks from the station, down a street called Hermenegild Clascar, and there's a gym where Rodriguez trains five days of the week during the off-season. Here they know him very well.

Inside Gimnas Squash 21, there are many signs of the hometown hero. Autographed Dragons' 1999 and 2000 team posters hang high on a column next to the weightlifting equipment. On another wall is a picture of Rodriguez on a local basketball team. In the office, Ferran Mendez whips out the registration card completed when Rodriguez first came to the gym in 1990. It was here also, on the night Rodriguez got the news he'd made the Dragons team, where they celebrated, with a dozen or so bottles of the local bubbly.

"Vicenç is a person who perseveres. He pushes himself and is strong psychologically," says Mendez, who is also a friend of Rodriguez' and the one who organized the

cava and cookies celebration. "Everybody feels that after so many years of training, for him to make the team, it's well deserved."

His friends swear off the field, Rodriguez is a normal guy who just happens to play for Barcelona's professional football team. Rodriguez still lives at home with his parents. He works in the off-season because the Dragons don't pay him much money. Anybody who plays American football in Barcelona knows about Rodriguez, but he can walk down the street almost anytime and be as invisible as the person wearing the Dallas Cowboys jersey. He wouldn't have it any other way. Which is probably why it's just as well he's not caught up in the craziness of playing that other kind of *fútbol* in Spain.

"His relationship with people, his family and friends, is the same as it was before," says Guasch. "He doesn't go around introducing himself as a player with the Dragons. He's absolutely doing what he wants to do with football. He's happy with the experience because he loves the game."

It's game day again on Montjuïc, the same mountain where the world's attention was turned to during the 1992 Summer Olympics. Rodriguez has been at the stadium for about an hour. He's listened to his Joaquin Sabina CD and he's relaxed and unwound. But even as he begins his warm-up stretches, the intensity and excitement that comes with game day preparation starts to build. He can't wait to get on the field and start banging. This is what all the work is for. This is where it can take you. Right to the mountaintop.

"When I start to play football here, the equipment you had to use was very expensive. I wore the same shoes, the same gloves for the whole season," says Rodriguez. "And now I go to my room and I have seven pairs of shoes and a lot of different gloves and a lot of all the stuff I need." Then he adds an English expression he's just learned. "I've come a long way."

From playing football on dirt-surfaced soccer fields to the interview requests that now come regularly from the Spanish media. They want to talk about his chances of going to the NFL and the U.S. Rodriguez knows his football journey may have miles to go, but he is also realistic. He knows there are other, good players in the league who won't be on NFL rosters this fall either. He

has to keep working. He has to be productive. And he has to be lucky.

“In all my life I try to go step by step and only look at the next step, not three or four more, you know,” he says. “It’s like a dream for me to be here with the Dragons. And right now that is the most important thing.”

Just as important as his awaiting fans.

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