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Cardio Secrets

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Fitness visionary Augustine Nieto pioneered indoor cardio. Then last March he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. Now, the real work begins.

Augie's QUEST

AUGIE NIETO IS QUICK TO TELL PEOPLE that he feels like the luckiest person on the face of the earth. If that line reminds you of somebody else, it's more than a coincidence. In March of 2005, Nieto was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. One of a group of neuromuscular diseases, ALS gradually disables its victims, leaching strength from nerves and muscles, progressing to the point where the sufferer eventually succumbs to respiratory failure. Commonly, those with ALS die three to five years after diagnosis.

Faced with a debilitating, incurable disease, Nieto, a 47-year-old husband and father of four, did what came natural to him: He looked at the bright side. "I'm just happy that it wasn't Liberace who first got this disease," he quips.

Nieto is a legend in the fitness world. While most of the 43 million health club members in the U.S. may not know his name, he's influenced their lives. It was Nieto who first saw what nobody else did: gyms full of exercisers training on indoor cardio. In 1977 as a mere 19-year-old, he doggedly scoured the country, trying to

sell health clubs on a new invention called the Lifecycle. It may seem incredible today, but back then, gym owners were skeptical that their clients would peddle a bike going nowhere as a way to lose weight. After some early setbacks, he sent the invention to clubs nationwide. A revolution was born.

Today, the charismatic Nieto is taking that same indefatigable spirit and entrepreneurial zeal to his fight to find a cure for ALS. He's developed a sophisticated marketing approach to funding research while raising awareness of the disease. The result is "Augie's Quest," a foundation within the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) that's dedicated to finding a cure for ALS.

A fitness professional struck down with a neuromuscular disease is an irony that Nieto would prefer to exploit than dwell on. "I don't know why this happened," he says of his diagnosis, which isn't known to be hereditary. "But I have an opportunity to be a good role model to show others how to handle adversity. I'm in a unique position to do something positive."

Since ALS is relatively rare, striking only about 6,000 Americans per year, it receives less attention than other neuromuscular diseases. Nieto is fixing to change that and he's off to a characteristically successful start. He's networking with some of the fitness industry's brightest minds to help support Augie's Quest. For starters, his peers and friends kicked in to deliver a \$1 million check to him on Sept. 8 at an emotional tribute dinner to Nieto. While some fundraisers are shakedowns, this was a love-in. "I was taken aback by the response from the industry," he says, gratefully.

How, Nieto has teamed up with IHRSA to help expand the reach of Augie's Quest. "We're going to have grass-roots programs in health clubs and other events," he explains.

Count on Nieto to remain hopeful while he keeps fighting. "I really am lucky," he says. "I've had an incredible life. Now, I have a new calling. This is a unique time in science, and we have an opportunity to develop dramatic breakthroughs for ALS and other neuromuscular diseases. We'll never give up."



For more information or to make a contribution, visit www.augiesquest.org.