**True Grit: Cal's Jorge Gutierrez**

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*By Kevin McSpadden*

In Pac-12 basketball, there are always those players that opposing fans can't stand, coaches love, and teammates follow. Jorge Gutierrez is that type of player, and his attitude is a key reason for California’s success this season.

Gutierrez plays with an aggressive, hard-nosed style that frustrates opposing players, forces mistakes, and leaves his body covered in cuts and bruises. If there is a loose ball, Gutierrez is the first person to dive for it. And if there is an emotional play that changes the outcome of the game, you can bet Gutierrez was the source of the emotion.

Gutierrez is averaging almost 14 points a game, 6 boards and 5 assists. He was a breakout player last year, and he has built on that success to become the Golden Bears’ team leader.

Fortunately for Cal, he is also a scrappy hard worker, which adds a lot of grit and toughness to the team. The best part is that Gutierrez’ playing mentality comes naturally, and he doesn’t need to work on being a hustle guy.

“I don’t think anybody taught me that,” said Gutierrez about his energy and toughness. “I am a very competitive person. I take it personally and I don’t like to lose."

At Lincoln High School in Denver, Gutierrez and his team embodied the competitive spirit that is pervasive today. His high school basketball team was engulfed by controversy when they became the victim of a politically motivated tirade against illegal immigration. At the state tournament, people protested whether Lincoln High should qualify and, because he was 18 years old at the time, they even questioned the legitimacy of Gutierrez playing in the high school basketball tournament.

Gutierrez and the rest of his team used this as motivation and dominated on the way to the state championship. They worked harder, played tougher, and hustled more than the competition. Gutierrez said this was a defining experience that showed him hard work can overcome anything and brings tangible rewards.

The way that Gutierrez views life makes it easy to think he is in store for more impressive accomplishments. While playing professional basketball is the goal he is currently striving for, the energy he put into academics will certainly help him achieve whatever he desires.

This fall, Gutierrez finished his senior thesis and chose to study American teaching methods.

“There is not just one way for a teacher to teach a kid, there is not just one way that will work,” Gutierrez said. “We should find different ways for different teachers. Teachers need different ideas for teaching different kids.”

When people who know Gutierrez talk about him, they immediately want to make it clear that he is just as talented intellectually as he is athletically, and it's obvious that Gutierrez chose to become a Golden Bear for a reason.

“I chose Cal because Cal is one of the top schools in the country, and maybe the world, academically," he said. "And that is pretty much what attracted my attention.”

While Gutierrez is an incredibly gritty basketball player and a dedicated student, he finds an emotional outlet in art. When he first got to Cal, Gutierrez wanted to become an art major.

“Art helps me relax," he said. "It helps me calm down a little, it makes me happy and I feel like it helps me balance my life.”

This desire to find balance is important to understanding Gutierrez because it explains how a self-proclaimed “quiet kidder” can switch to an in-your face aggressive basketball player. Gutierrez appears to understand when it is time to switch off his competitive drive and find his spiritual center, which is an important trait for any athlete.

As the Pac-12 Tournament approaches and Cal begins to prepare for its run at the Conference title, Gutierrez is beginning to take his well-known dedication and apply it to team leadership.

“As a leader, I just try to keep everyone on the same page. We are all working for the same goal and if we work together I think we can accomplish whatever we want,” Gutierrez said.

So, what does he think the Bears need to work on in order to win the Conference tournament?

“We pay attention to defense, I think we play well on defense but we are definitely trying to improve a strength,” Gutierrez said.

It makes sense that this Cal team, led by Gutierrez, would be a defensive-minded team. Teams take on the personality of their leaders, and if California tried to be anything but a gritty, defense-first squad, it is certain that Gutierrez would take exception.

Gutierrez is also wise enough to understand that the media may be underestimating his competition in the Pac-12.

“I think any team in the Pac-12 can beat any team in the country on any given night,” said Gutierrez. “I guess we just don’t have that exposure around the country. But I feel like the Pac-12 has very good teams and we can compete.”

Gutierrez beats his opponents by outworking every player on the court. So when he talks about opposing teams, he maintains his respect for their capabilities but exudes a quiet confidence that comes from knowing that nobody is more prepared for the situation.

Whether it is academics, creativity or athletics, Jorge Gutierrez approaches life with the type of work ethic that leads to success. Jorge approaches basketball from a viewpoint that is smart, balanced and motivated.

“Everyday is a great experience. This is my last year, so I really pay attention to every detail," Gutierrez said. "I am not taking any moment for granted."