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Swing Batter, Swing

By [Joan Tuppence](#)
May 1st, 2010

Gil Mendoza felt the tears well up in his eyes as he sat in the stands in Athens, Greece. He always knew his daughter, Jessica, had exceptional skills when it came to softball, but he never imagined that one day he would be watching her play the sport in the Olympic Games.

"I was so proud," he reflects. "I was so happy she made the United States team."

Jessica Mendoza has given her parents many proud moments over her lifetime. She won a gold medal at the 2004 Olympics in Athens and a silver at the 2008 Olympic Ggames in Beijing, China. She is also a two-time Pan American gold medalist and a two-time World Cup champion. In 2006, she was named as the USA Softball Female Athlete of the Year.

A member of the U.S. women's national softball team and an analyst for ESPN, Mendoza is also a board member of the National Education Association Foundation, president of the Women's Sports Foundation and athlete ambassador for Team Darfur and Right to Play to help children in Africa.

Mendoza started playing baseball when she was 7 years old under the watchful eye of her father. "I grew up on the baseball field," she says. "I played baseball first and then switched to softball."

Gil Mendoza helped his daughter learn the nuances of the game. "I wanted to make her aware of all the things going on on the field," he says. "I have been a college baseball coach and I coached my men like I coached her."

Mendoza was not only a quick study but also a quick-footed player. "She was so fast. She was like a little bomb," her father remembers. "She was like a lion locked up. When you open the door, she was wild."

Karen Mendoza was also aware of her daughter's pent-up energy. "She was a super hyperactive kid," she says. "We had to divert her energy into something positive."

That something positive was sports. When she was 5, Mendoza was playing t-ball with the boys in the neighborhood. "She was a tomboy," her mom says. "The few times I forced her to put on a dress, she threw a tizzy fit."

Mendoza has been playing softball non-stop since the age of 12. "I didn't take a break until I had my baby when I was 28," she says.

At first, her father concentrated on teaching Mendoza and her sister how to bunt. His focus quickly changed when he saw Mendoza hit a home run out of the park. "I discovered she could really hit the ball," he says. She proved her ability to the world when she led her team in batting average on the Bound for Beijing Tour leading to the 2008 Olympics.

By the time Mendoza enrolled in Stanford University, she had already been recognized as an all-star. John Rittman, who served as head coach at Stanford and also national team assistant coach from 2001 to 2008, started watching Mendoza's talent when she was a sophomore in high school. "I knew she was a gifted athlete," he says. "I knew she would be a gifted player one day."

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Mendoza displayed a good work ethic, he adds. "That, coupled with her determination and drive to become better, is what separated her [from other players]. During her freshman year, you would never see her without having her uniform on. She was always going to or coming from practice."

She knew she had to become a whiz at time management in order to juggle classes with conditioning practices and weight lifting. That's when all of that pent-up energy her mother had worried about proved beneficial. "I have never been one to sit around," she says. "I've always been go, go, go."

Rittman could see her determination. "When she got to Stanford, she wanted to explore everything," he says. "She continually has a full plate. She's been able to balance that her whole career."

During college, Mendoza practiced, conditioned or both five days a week. Going into the Olympics, she had daily workouts. "There wasn't much time for time off," she says.

She spent countless hours honing her skills, building up her strength and endurance. It all paid off when the athletic world took notice. In 1999, she was named PAC 10 Newcomer of the Year. The following year she was the conference's PAC 10 Player of the Year.

Mendoza's skills improved once again when she moved to the U.S. national team. "She has continued to get better every year that she has been in that program," Rittman says. "She has great speed and a great arm. She's a great defensive player. She's a player that has all the skills."

She may be no-nonsense during a game, but when she's off the field, Mendoza is happy and fun-loving. "She's extremely intelligent, but at the same time has a goofy side to her," observes Rittman. "She enjoys getting the most out of life."

Mendoza never lets her accomplishments define her. She remains humble and team-motivated. "She has strong core values," Rittman says. "She's never had a big head. She's always looking out for the best for her teammates. As a coach, you have to pinch yourself [when you have a player like Jessica]. You enjoy each day with them."

Appearing in the Olympics was an amazing experience for Mendoza, both personally and professionally. She quickly realized that being passionate about a sport is one thing; being passionate about your country is a far greater responsibility. "You don't realize that until you get to the Olympics and meet other athletes from around the world," she says. "There is this great sense of pride. Winning was the icing on the cake."

She used her Olympic experience as an opportunity to learn about the politics and cultures of different countries. "There are a lot of countries where women don't have the right to play sports," she says. "We take that for granted."

Even though the Olympics present a special type of pressure, Mendoza felt there was more emotion attached to being in the games than stress. "There are so many more people paying attention – the crowd chanting "U.S.A.," people at home watching – and a heightening of pride," she says. "That's the hardest part, trying to control all of that. You can't play softball with emotion. You have to be relaxed to be able to hit and move."

Adam Burks, Mendoza's husband, has never doubted his wife's confidence in her abilities. "She's dedicated, passionate, gracious and hard working," he says.

After the birth of their son, Caleb, last August, Mendoza easily moved back into a schedule that included softball clinics, speaking events and training. When she travels, her son goes with her. "Caleb has his own passport," she says. "He's already accustomed to traveling." Burks is in awe of her ability to balance family and work while also helping others. "It's incredible," he says.

Mendoza tried out for the U.S. national team in early 2010, only four months after Caleb's birth. Her tryouts were memorable. "After a year layoff from softball and having our boy four months earlier, her first at-bat at the tryout she hit a homerun," Burks says. "That was a great moment."

Her celebrity status doesn't faze her, he adds. "She's the same person today



as the person I met six years ago. I am so proud of her because of the person she is and the difference she is making in so many people's lives."

Mendoza's compassion for mankind is another part of her life that brings tears to her father's eyes. "She goes into deprived areas and donates her time to kids who are not as fortunate as she was," he says.

Her mom sees her as a positive role model for young girls. "Jessica is trying to make positive changes," she says. "When she gives clinics, all the girls are sitting there and you can hear a pin drop. They are all focused on what she has to say. I'm amazed at how she can connect with people."

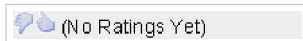
Yolanda Jackson, senior director of athlete marketing and promotions at the Women's Sports Foundation, believes that Mendoza has been a role model for most of her life. "She is a living example of an athlete who can do it all," she says. "She is the 2004 recipient of the Yolanda I. Jackson Give Back Award, which was created by Billie Jean King in 2001 and is awarded to an athlete who has consistently given back to the foundation in support of its mission and goals. As our president, [Mendoza] is the face and voice of the organization."

Mendoza got involved in the Women's Sports Foundation to help young girls recognize both the physical and social benefits of sports. "It gives them confidence and helps them feel good about their bodies," she says. "We are trying to create more positive role models so we can get girls active and happy."

She likes the fact that women's softball highlights real women who have diverse body types and come from diverse groups. These women enjoy the game for its essence, not for a million-dollar paycheck.

She's saddened that softball won't be played in the 2012 Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee made the decision to eliminate the sport in 2005, creating a setback for women athletes. "For me it's so disheartening," Mendoza says. "The Olympics is something you work for every day of your life. That's what makes it so beautiful. It made no sense why softball couldn't be a part of that."

The notoriety Mendoza has gleaned from the sport and her Olympic participation has allowed her to reach out to more people in need. It's not so much about the accomplishments an athlete makes, but more about the path an athlete takes to "pass the torch." "I have been blessed," Mendoza says.



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