



Dad, Me, and Muhammad Ali: A Father-and-Son Story

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Youngsters learn early that there are three primary responses to fall back on when they've done something wrong. For example, if a boy were to break his father's favorite sports souvenir, he could lie, keep silent, or confess and take the consequences.

Young Jo-Jo didn't have a choice. While tossing a ball with his younger sister, he shatters the glass frame and tears an autographed picture of former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Jo-Jo's mother hears the commotion. "Felix Joez Rodriguez, what happened here," she asked. For some reason my mom always yells my full name when she is upset with me."

Later, Jo-Jo finds himself "...really surprised and relieved that Dad hadn't yelled or punished me." He feels especially bad when he learns that his father received the autographed picture when he was in the fourth grade. "It was one of the greatest gifts I've ever received."

Jo-Jo decides to make amends. He learns that Ali will appear at a New York City bookstore to meet with a select group of 200 fans. Jo-Jo persuades his mother to bid for tickets but they do not win. He calls the bookstore to see if there is another way to get tickets. There isn't, but the owner promises to put him on a waiting list. Like most youngsters, Jo-Jo is impatient, calling the store repeatedly. Finally, the owner says, "You didn't quit, and because of your determination, I'm going to give you my ticket."

The day arrives and Jo-Jo's father is wonderfully surprised at his son's thoughtfulness and initiative. In a well-written segment sure to intrigue young readers, the two set out from Connecticut for the short train ride to New York City. The two miss the first train but catch the next one. When they meet the former champion, Ali is gracious and friendly. He even signs one of their keepsake books and poses for a picture.

The story provides good lessons about responsibilities, big and small, and about living up to obligations. Traits that are evident in Jo-Jo's behavior, and in his father's dedication, skill, and passion to be a good parent. While the book includes anecdotes from Ali's youth and career, there is little about his religious conversion, and the explosive public reaction to the boxing great's Vietnam War draft refusal. Also, with the popularity of mixed martial arts and other sports, youngsters may need an explanation of boxing's popularity fifty years ago.

Rodriguez was raised in a home without a father's steady influence. He now works for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, and is involved in the local Hispanic coalition, youth leadership programs, and serves as the Waterbury police commissioner.

The book is short, opening with a father-son visit to Yankee Stadium, but the primary focus is on the bonding adventure that begins after Jo-Jo damages the treasured photograph. There are ten chapters, plus several testimonials about the book from famous people like Alvin F. Poussaint, MD, Rosario Marin, former US Treasurer, and Angelo Dundee, Ali's legendary trainer. Rodriguez also includes a bibliography, a list of Ali's boxing accomplishments, and a quiz based on the book that will allow a young reader to become an "Aliologist." That is, an expert on Muhammad Ali.

GARY PRESLEY (July 22, 2011)

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