

FIU PLAYS ON, IN MEMORY OF FRIEND

Author: GREG COTE, Herald Sports Writer

Ramiro "Toti" Mendez was playing catch with a nephew in his parents' Miami back yard when his heart gave out. The kid who gave his passion to his sport died with a glove on his hand and a baseball at his side.

Friday night, soon enough for the tears to still be welling, Mendez's Florida International University teammates did what Toti would have wanted. They played ball.

With their friend's No. 23 stitched in black on their sleeves, they played their first game since Mendez, only 20, died suddenly Sunday, succumbing to a viral infection.

"The best thing to go on right now is a ballgame, because you can focus on something else," FIU coach Danny Price said. "It's like an escape. Like a release. We need it."

The Golden Panthers played host to Louisiana-Lafayette at Homestead Sports Complex. FIU pitcher Jerry Courtney began the game by striking out the side. The home team soon led on a home run by Miguel Quintana. Then Tino Burgos, batting .150, also homered.

Price had told his team before the game, "Toti can't play for us anymore. But he can play with us." The Panthers were playing like friends who could feel someone who wasn't there, cheering them, lifting them.

"We will play our hardest, praise to him," said Raul Pujol, a teammate of Mendez since their days winning state championships at Miami Westminster Christian. "We will play our hardest to give him respect."

The Golden Panthers would go on to win the game 6-0 Friday night.

No matter, of course. Neither the result nor the crowd (maybe 75 on this night) mattered. FIU didn't need to win one for Toti to demonstrate the depth of its love, or its pain. This was about a team, healing. "We have shed tears, openly. Hugged, openly. There hasn't been a macho guy among us," coach Price said. "We've all been kind of like kickstands for one another. I know I've been propped up. We've leaned one on another."

Thirty seconds of silence in Toti's honor preceded the national anthem Friday. Ramiro Mendez's name glowed on the scoreboard. The American flag flew half-staff as the sun set. Players wrote their friend's number and initials on their caps with markers.

FIU has retired Mendez's number and Friday introduced a perpetual scholarship endowment program in the pitcher's name. "We intend to keep his memory alive long after we're gone," Price said.

The funeral Tuesday at Miami Memorial Park marked the first time most of these young players had buried a friend. The next night, at a previously scheduled FIU athletic banquet, Toti's mother, Maria Suquet, stood and, at times sobbing, bravely toughed through a letter thanking everyone for their prayers and support, and expressing how much her son loved being a part of the team.

``Listening to her," said Price, ``was knife-cutting."

The entire baseball team stood then as one, and Gus Alfonso - Toti's close pal since they were 10 - read a letter from the team. Friday, Alfonso recalled his friend as an eerily quiet batting practice went on. You heard none of the jocular chatter that is rote for such an occasion. All you heard was the ping of ball off metal bats. ``Right now, he'd be out here hitting fungoes," said Alfonso. ``Even redshirted, I could see in his eyes he thoroughly enjoyed just plain being out here. Nobody likes hitting fungoes. He cherished it."

Alfonso called a team meeting Saturday during a road trip in Louisiana. Mendez, who did not travel because he was a medical redshirt, had 24 hours to live. ``I don't know why, but I singled Toti out in that meeting," Alfonso said. ``I said, `This guy comes out here and loves what he's doing but we can't get the courage to give 100 percent?!' I don't know why I singled him out. I don't. I've wondered that a lot this week . . ."

Toti was the joker who kept the team loose, at ease, smiling. The players refer to ``Toti-isms," wisecrack lines that would fly effortlessly off his smirking lips. If the opposing pitcher was throwing in the dirt, Toti would sing out, ``Pickin' worms, kid!" When the catcher missed a ball right on the mitt, a smiling voice would cry, ``Skilllet!"

Mendez knew since the Christmas holidays how seriously ill he was. Knew the infection had targeted his heart. But kept it from his team. ``We hoped he'd be back to play this season. We really did," Price said. ``He was gaining weight, getting his color back . . ." ``He didn't want us to feel sorry for him," said Pujol. ``We never thought it was going to happen like that."

Toti Mendez's passing wasn't marked by a royal send-off that made national news, like that of fellow Miamian Derrick Thomas. In the blur of Marlins and Heat and Panthers, it was even easy to miss the news of his passing. He was just a redshirted player for a college team that draws 75 fans, right? He was more, of course. ``Toti was one of the things that made the world right," Price said.

He was buried in his FIU uniform. And Friday night, his teammates did the best they could to honor him. They didn't need to win. They just needed to play ball, and love the game.

Copyright (c) 2000 The Miami Herald
Record Number: 0004110355