

Meet the World's Youngest Bullfighter

With no minimum age for matadors, Mexico has children as young as 10 picking up the sword. Can they save a dying sport?

By **TIM PADGETT**

RAFITA MIRABAL'S STATUESQUE POSE MIGHT lead observers to think he is a classical ballet dancer—until they spot the 450-pound bull snorting in front of him. Dressed in a matador's "suit of lights," he coaxes the beast to make two angry passes under his outstretched cape, so close that the horns and snout brush his sequined thighs. But on the third pass, the bull's head slams Rafita's torso and lifts him into the air until he frees himself. Rafita walks away rubbing his hip, more irked than injured. "You let him see your body instead of the cape," says his coach, Juan Ramírez. "The bull learns from your mistakes."

Rafita has a more serious issue on his mind. At this bullfight rehearsal in a private ring outside his hometown, Aguascalientes, in central Mexico, Rafita wants to attempt something he's never done but will have to learn someday: kill the bull. That is what makes bullfighting a life-and-death allegory to its fans. As Ramírez nods, Rafita locks eyes with the animal's, aims his sword between its shoulders and thrusts—only to watch the blade bounce off the bull into the dirt. Mind you, Rafita doesn't lack the courage or the skill. He lacks the height and the heft. Rafita is only 10 years old and weighs 80 pounds.

Rafita is thought to be the youngest *torero*, or bullfighter, in the world. He is also one of the most popular in Mexico. Together with a handful of other child stars, Rafita has reawakened interest in bullfighting when it looked headed for obscurity in Mexico. "I get bored running up and down a field with a ball," says Rafita, the oldest child of a lower-middle-class family. "But if I don't turn just right when a bull is charging

at me—that's more exciting." No exact box-office figures are available, but experts like bullfighting writer Juan Antonio de Labra say kid *toreros* are raising formerly flat attendance at many of Mexico's 300 bullrings. "When a youth has such amazing talent, be it bullfighting or golf," says de Labra, "it's good for the show." The revival comes as welcome news to Aguascalientes, an otherwise quiet provincial capital where bullfighting has long been king.

The sport's revival is not without controversy. The children have sparked an impassioned debate over whether bullfighting is a noble drama that preserves Mexican heritage or a barbaric spectacle that, in the words of animal-rights activist Eduardo Lamazón, "has no place in a society like ours that's trying to modernize." The argument got louder in May after a Spanish child *torero*, Jairo Miguel Sánchez, 14, was gored by a 900-pound bull at an Aguascalientes festival. A horn punctured his lung and plunged near his heart. Local newspapers breathlessly reported that the boy cried out, "Daddy, I'm dying!" as he was rushed to the hospital. (He's now recovering back home in Spain.)

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Toreros must be at least 16 in Spain. That's a big reason Mexico, which has no age limits, attracts young sensations like Jairo Miguel, who was reportedly set to make about \$250,000 this year. Rafita fights smaller bulls, so he earns much less. Still, he was thrown and trampled during his major debut last year, getting a bruise on his face the size and color of a hockey puck.

Critics question his family's judgment. But the boy's hard-working parents compare themselves to others raising a prodigy. "I don't know where Rafita's courage comes from," says his father Rafael, watching the boy perform a few cape passes. "But the more we watch him, the more we know he can handle the dangers. As long as this is his passion, we'll do battle alongside him." ■

Questions

1. What debate has been sparked in Mexico by the emergence of young bullfighters like Rafita Mirabal?
2. How do Rafita's parents respond to critics who question their judgment?