

WORK

to

LIVE



Few athletes work harder (or dream bigger) than the Latino immigrants of New York City's legendary WEST SIDE RUNNERS.

They all wake early.

By 6 a.m., Cesar Estevez is starting his eight-miler at Forest Park in Queens, New York, the prelude to the eight hours he'll spend on his feet as a barber. Roberto Puente is gearing up for the first of eight 400-meter repeats at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. He won't bother to shower afterward since his work as a welder keeps him sweaty all day. Domenica Ramos is finishing up a 20-minute yoga session in her Harlem apartment. She'll feed her 5-year-old daughter, then strap her into a running stroller for a quick workout before starting her double shift as a restaurant server. Rene Cuahuizo is already working, unloading 50-pound boxes of produce, meat, and poultry at a food market in Midtown. After nine hours—or 12 if the place is packed—he'll run six miles at 6:30 pace in Central Park.

The club has always been one of the city's most competitive—WSX members have won 14 men's and four women's team titles in the New York City Marathon. While it does include more than 20 male Ethiopians capable of running a sub-2:15 marathon, the majority of the club's 235 active racers are still working-class Latino immigrants. These are the athletes who routinely dominate their age groups in local events—guys like Estevez, 57, who runs a sub-39-minute 10K, and Puente, 32, who can clock a 1:13 half marathon.

They run fast by doing what busy, motivated runners have always done—by cramming training around the rigors of their daily grind. But the daily grind for these four athletes often entails unpredictable hours and unreliable meal breaks. It means being on their feet all day, doing hard, physical, sometimes dangerous work. Yet Estevez, Puente, Ramos, and Cuahuizo all manage to rack up serious mileage and impressive PRs, and they all plan to line up on Sunday, November 1, for the New York City Marathon. Getting to the start—and reaching their target times—won't be easy. Success means doing their best with the time they have. This summer, we spent a day following each of them to see how they do it.

All four of them belong to the West Side Runners (WSX), one of New York City's oldest running clubs. Formed in 1975, the team was initially composed of upper-middle-class, white professionals with a few African-Americans. The first two Latino runners joined in 1979. Word spread, and by the early '80s the composition of WSX—by then more than 100 strong—was mostly Latino, says Bill Staab, president of the organization since 1978.

LIVE

to

RUN



By SARAH GEARHART Photographs by ROBERT WHITMAN

Roberto PUENTE

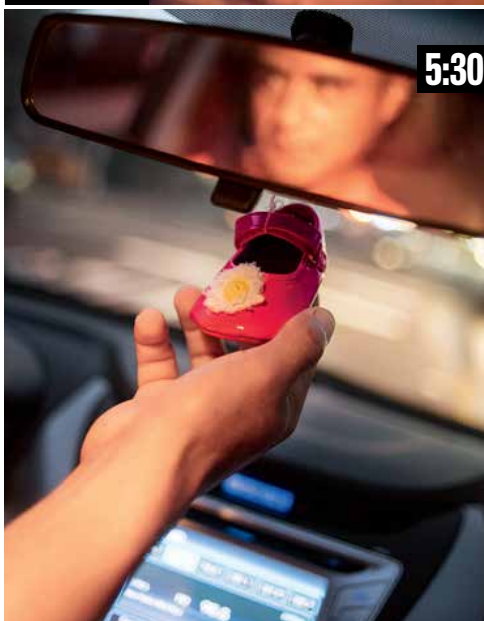
32, Queens, welder
From Quito, Ecuador
Arrived 2005

PUENTE'S FOREARMS are peppered with white scars from flying sparks. He's a welder, and the job makes him sweat so heavily he looks like he's been sprayed with a hose. But he's used to hard work. After his dad died of cancer when he was 13, Puente dropped out of school and worked construction to support his family. He moved to the U.S. in 2005 to live with an uncle; shortly thereafter, he lost two brothers in Ecuador, one to suicide, another to a car accident. Directionless, he started drinking until his uncle, a runner and member of WSX, threatened to kick him out. "He was very angry with me," Puente says. He eventually came around; he joined WSX, got a job, and started running to work, 11 miles round-trip from his apartment in Queens to Brooklyn. He hadn't been much of a runner in Ecuador, but once he started, he was soon racing—and winning. In January, he ran the Fred Lebow Manhattan Half Marathon in 1:13:44, finishing fifth overall and first in his age group.

Puente works eight hours a day, five to seven days a week, depending on the job. But every morning, he gets up at 5 to chip away at another very big job—running 2:30 on November 1. He ran his first marathon in New York in 2006, finishing in 2:54 on little training. He dropped out of subsequent attempts in 2007 and 2008 with severe muscle cramps. His goal time is bold, he admits, but he's a better, more focused runner now. "If you say you can, you can," he says. "You have to keep that in your mind. Be positive, always."



5:00 AM



5:30 AM



6:10 AM



12:38 PM



7:30 PM



8:15 PM

5:00 A.M. Puente wakes and puts on running clothes. He packs his backpack with the breakfast and lunch his wife, Sylvia Zamora, prepared for him at 4 a.m.

5:30 A.M. Leaves the house and gets into his blue 2011 Hyundai—the first car he's ever owned—for the 40-minute drive to Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. His 2-year-old daughter's small pink shoe hangs from the rear-view mirror. Before Yerenne was born, life wasn't great, he says. "I spent money on things I didn't need, mostly alcohol. Now I don't drink at all," says Puente. He brings her to every race. Before he steps to the starting line, he kisses her cheek and tells her, "You're my good luck."

6:10 A.M. Arrives at the park. Today is a speed session. Puente trains up to 90 minutes each day before work. He averaged 60 miles per week in July, and 100 in August and September.

7:50 A.M. Changes into dry clothes, then drives to Yonkers to his job as a welder at Hughes Iron Works. "I don't have a place to shower. It doesn't matter because I'm going to get sweaty and dirty at work."

8:05 A.M. Pulls work clothes from the car's trunk, including a safety jacket and mask to protect him from sparks. "What I do is very dangerous," he says. "If I continue to do this, in five years I'm going to feel pain in my bones. But for now I do it because I get high pay." Puente makes \$30 an hour.

10:24 A.M. Takes a break to guzzle water; he still hasn't eaten anything. He thinks about Yerenne when he works. "I never imagined I'd have a daughter. I never imagined I could love a child so much. I'm doing this job for her future."

12:00 P.M. His lunch break is 30 minutes. Puente walks to a grocery store down the street to buy green grapes

and VitaminWater to supplement his lunch of beef, potatoes, and yellow peas.

12:14 P.M. Returns from store. Usually he eats with his coworkers, but today he sits alone next to his toolbox.

12:38 P.M. Back to work. Puente enjoys physically demanding work and seeing his hands black with grease.

4:32 P.M. "This is crazy," he says as he emerges from the work area drenched in sweat. "We had a large job." He thought he would finish a couple hours earlier so he could pick Yerenne up from the babysitter and spend more time with her. He sees her about two hours a day, in the evening.

4:44 P.M. Pulls up to an ATM to get cash for the \$8 bridge toll. He rubs his right eye as he enters his pin. "Sparks flew into my eye today. It can't not happen. The metal burns the mask."

6:05 P.M. Relaxes on the couch for a couple minutes. His living room sports 37 medals, 15 plaques, and 11 trophies. Many of them are age-group awards. An ex-girlfriend threw several of his awards in the garbage while Puente was at work one day. She didn't support his running, so he took a two-year break from the sport in 2009.

6:38 P.M. Picks up his daughter before driving to Williamsburg to meet his wife, who works at a cleaning-supply store.

7:30 P.M. A couple times a week, he runs a second training session on the McCarren Park track in Williamsburg. Sylvia and Yerenne cheer for him from the sideline.

8:15 P.M. Spends time with his wife and daughter in the apartment. There's no sit-down family meal. Dinner for him is usually a glass of water and a piece of fruit.

10:00 P.M. Lights out.

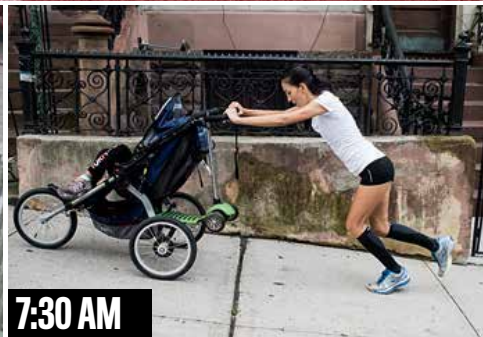
Domenica RAMOS

32, Harlem, server
From Milagro, Ecuador
Arrived 2001

TO SUPPORT HERSELF and her 5-year-old daughter, Gabriela, Ramos works double shifts six days a week at an Italian restaurant on the Upper West Side. She started running in 2013 to deal with the stress of being a single mom. At first, she ran with her sister Daniela, pushing Gaby in a running stroller for a few miles at a time; a year later, Ramos joined her sister as a member of the West Side Runners, and the pair ran the 2014 New York City Marathon in 3:33. She trained for this year's event while pushing Gaby.

Ramos came to the U.S. at 18. When she was nearly 2, her father, a journalist, was shot and killed in a park. Years later, her mother remarried, to an abusive man. When he started threatening the girls, Ramos's mother sent her and Daniela to an aunt in Washington Heights. Neither woman has been home or seen their mother in person since.

Ramos went to community college, then worked various jobs before landing at the restaurant her sister manages. She's been a server there for six years. The work is hard, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights, and she's "bone tired" by 11 p.m. If she has to, she'll alter her Sunday long run to accommodate her weary body. She had planned to PR in New York this year and run a 3:20—"I know I can do better," she says—but in early August, a ruptured ovarian cyst set her back. It didn't stop her. "I'm running the marathon for my own good," she says. "Running and Gabriela are my sources of strength and happiness."



5:45 A.M. Starts the day by stretching for 20 minutes. She shares her three-bedroom apartment with her sister Daniela. Ramos is separated from her husband; the couple can't afford a divorce.

6:15 A.M. Makes breakfast for Gaby. Ramos treasures the morning, as it's the only time she has with her daughter.

6:50 A.M. Scrolls through her iPhone, and reads through workouts from her coaches, Sid and Asteria Howard (the latter is vice president of WSX). Today is an easy day, a 30-minute recovery run.

7:00 A.M. She and Gaby head to Riverbank State Park.

7:21 A.M. Ramos is the only person running with a kid. She enjoys the challenge of pushing 45-pound Gaby: "I feel stronger in my core," she says. Occasionally, Gaby falls asleep, but mostly, she talks. "She's like a coach. She'll yell at me to run faster."

7:30 A.M. The pair head home. On long runs, Ramos packs water and snacks in the bottom of the stroller.

8:00 A.M. Gaby has run several kids' races, and her medals are on her bedroom wall; Ramos keeps hers in her underwear drawer. "It's the only place where I have space."

9:34 A.M. Takes the subway to the Upper West Side restaurant Bettola, where she is a server.

10:15 A.M. After arriving for her 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. shift, starts arranging tables.

11:00 A.M. A babysitter arrives at Ramos's apartment to relieve Daniela and watch Gaby until 7 p.m., when a friend will take over.

11:42 A.M. Sets tables. Ramos averages just over \$100 a day in tips, \$200 on Saturdays. "Serving is honest work. I can't complain. I pay all of my bills from here."

12:17 P.M. Folding napkins gives her time off her feet.

12:48 P.M. Attempts a quick bite of a sandwich, but customers arrive. She tries to eat every two hours. "She eats like a man," says her sister Daniela, laughing. Ramos is 5'5", 105 pounds, and says she'll likely gain about five pounds during training.

2:48 P.M. Lunch crowd winds down.

6:00 P.M. The dinner crowd starts trickling in. A dozen people are seated within minutes.

6:57 P.M. The restaurant is nearly full. Ramos moves quickly, placing menus, taking orders, clearing plates, serving wine, and refilling water glasses.

9:10 P.M. Only a few tables remain. Ramos uses the lull to call the babysitter—her friend wasn't able to come and watch Gaby. Ramos pays the babysitter, who watches Gaby three days a week, \$10 an hour. Tonight, she'll owe her more than usual. "It's hard. Sometimes I feel guilty that I work so much. Gaby is old enough to understand that if I don't work, we can't keep the apartment. It's a sacrifice, but life could be worse." Daniela helps watch Gaby, too, when she's not at the restaurant.

10:00 P.M. Ramos orders Mahi-Mahi and a salad that she'll eat at home. On slow nights, she leaves before 11.

10:45 P.M. Cleans the apartment and prepares a meal for Gaby and the babysitter to eat the following night. "We don't use the microwave. I'd rather spend more time and money buying organic food and making sure Gaby is eating well." She makes rice with sautéed spinach and a salad of chopped carrots, tomatoes, and avocado.

12:00 A.M. Goes to bed an hour earlier than usual.

Cesar ESTEVEZ

57, Queens, barber
From San José de las Matas,
Dominican Republic
Arrived 1976

"I LOVE WHAT I DO," says Cesar Estevez. "I talk all day about different subjects—from politics and sports to business. It's good for the brain. You learn a lot as a barber." Estevez has spent the last 38 years plying his craft at a private men's club in Midtown. He especially loves it when his clients—he'll have about 25 over an eight-hour shift—ask for running advice. He likes to say, "Listen to the body. I'm not afraid to run a nine-minute pace."

Heeding his own advice has helped him finish 43 marathons, including seven in Boston and 19 in New York City, all as a WSX member. He set his 2:51 PR in New York in 2010 and this year aims to run 2:57. "I know my mind has to be right there with me," Estevez says. "You have to learn how to run with your head and your heart when you're tired." The same mental fortitude helped him when he first came to the U.S. in 1976 at age 18. He and his father and three siblings settled into a three-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side. "It was different back then," says Estevez. "There was a lot of crime and drugs. I didn't understand people. I just had hope." When he joined WSX 21 years ago, initially to lose weight, he ended up tapping a hidden talent and discovering his passion. "I hope when I turn 80 I will still run," he says. Every weekday, he looks up at the rainbow of marathon medals that hang in his barbershop above a bulletin board tacked with race photos. The view inspires him to keep on going.



5:00 AM



6:12 AM



8:00 AM



11:00 AM



9:00 PM

5:00 A.M. Wakes up and puts on his running gear. Skips breakfast—Estevez doesn't like to eat before he trains, not even before a 22-miler.

5:15 A.M. Drives to Forest Park. Estevez runs six days a week (he takes Fridays off), logging 50 to 70 miles.

6:12 A.M. Today he runs solo on the park's trails, but on Tuesdays and Thursdays, he meets a fellow WSX member at the park's track for speed workouts.

8:00 A.M. Ends his workout with a series of crunches and pushups near the track, grabs a quick drink, then heads home.

9:00 A.M. After showering, Estevez drinks green tea and eats two rolls of bread, his typical breakfast. If he has time, he'll take a quick nap.

9:20 A.M. Leaves his apartment and walks around the corner to Q37 bus station. His commute to Midtown is approximately an hour each way. His work attire is semi-casual: slacks and dress shoes and a smock. He always removes his white Garmin before leaving for work.

11:00 A.M. The morning rush in his shop begins 30 minutes after he arrives and will last for the next three hours. His clients are primarily businessmen and lawyers. "Running is good for my business," he says. "When my clients know I'm training for a marathon, they want to talk about running."

2:00 P.M. Takes a 15-minute break for lunch—chicken sandwich and fruit—in the club's cafeteria. If he's overbooked with appointments, he'll skip lunch and raid the mini-fridge in his shop, which he keeps stocked with fruit and water.

3:00 P.M. A lull in appointments gives him a chance to drink a cup of green tea and read the *New York Post*

or *Runner's World*, which a client regularly brings in for him.

4:00 P.M. Afternoon rush starts; this one also lasts about three hours. Estevez doesn't mind standing most of the day; he thinks it makes him physically stronger, which helps him run better.

7:00 P.M. Prepares to close the shop.

8:00 P.M. Leaves for the train back to Queens.

9:00 P.M. Arrives home in time to eat dinner with his wife of 30 years, Maria. Their two daughters, ages 27 and 29, also live in the house. Maria mostly cooks Latin food, rice with chicken or steak and beans with yucca and yams. Estevez is mindful about not consuming much processed food. "I love chocolate. I love Oreos. But I can't keep sweets in the house," he says, laughing and pointing to his belly. He is 5'7" and weighs 155 pounds.

10:00 P.M. Relaxes by watching pro sports. He can't get enough of the Mets—his favorite team—when it's baseball season.

11:00 P.M. Lights out. Estevez wears a Garmin Vivofit fitness band on his right wrist, which tracks his sleeping patterns. He averages about six hours a night.

Rene CUAHUIZO

32, Queens,
food delivery worker
From Cholula, Mexico
Arrived 1999

THERE'S A SMALL MEXICAN FLAG sewn on Rene Cuahuizo's WSX racing singlet. A club member for 13 years, Cuahuizo has run 10 marathons, eight in New York City and two in New Jersey. He ran his 3:02 PR at the New Jersey Marathon in April, and can't help wondering how much faster he'd be today if he hadn't spent three years—2011 through 2014—working 14 hours a day at a Midtown pizzeria. Back then, he only averaged 26 miles a week. Now he gets up at 4:30 for his nine-hour shift (which occasionally stretches to 12) as a food delivery worker and trains after work in Central Park or Juniper Park in Queens. Intending to go big at this year's New York City Marathon—his goal is 2:40—he's doing more speedwork and more mileage, 80 to 100 miles a week.

Cuahuizo came to the city in 1999 to live with his father, who'd arrived several years earlier. He joined WSX around 2002 to make friends (he wasn't a runner at the time), and has come to see his teammates as members of his extended family. Today, he shares a three-bedroom apartment with his father, brother, older sister, and her 5-year-old son; another brother lives in Brooklyn. His mother and six more siblings are still in Mexico—he hasn't seen them in 16 years. "I miss everything about my mother," Cuahuizo says, recalling their last day together. "She left me at a bus station; I was 15 years old. She told me, 'Good luck, take care.'" They Skype once a week. Cuahuizo thinks about her during every marathon—he's dedicating this year's race to her.



6:00 AM



8:00 AM



3:16 PM



10:02 AM



4:04 PM



6:13 PM



6:51 PM



10:30 PM

4:30 A.M. Gets up, takes the first of three daily showers.

5:00 A.M. Walks a few blocks from his apartment in Corona, Queens, and takes the R train into Manhattan.

5:45 A.M. Arrives at Grand Central Station in Midtown. Walks to his job at a nearby food market.

6:00 A.M. Unloads boxes of produce, meat, and poultry in the market's basement; he estimates each box weighs roughly 50 pounds. It takes about two hours. "This is my gym," he says.

8:00 A.M. Helps prep nearly 50 fruit platters for delivery to corporate offices.

10:02 A.M. Takes a 15-minute break to eat eggs, potatoes, and fruit. Cracks a raw egg into his orange juice.

10:39 A.M. Delivers catering orders to nearby offices.

11:30 A.M. Washes dishes for the cooks. About 50 employees work the market's pizza, pasta, sandwich, salad, and sushi bars.

2:30 P.M. Piles two plates with fruit, coleslaw, rice, lasagna, and salad. "I don't eat much meat when I marathon train. It's too heavy." He's the only runner on staff.

3:03 P.M. Changes out of his work clothes for the commute home.

3:16 P.M. Waits for the 7 train; he'll transfer trains to get home.

4:04 P.M. Arrives at the three-bedroom apartment he shares with four other family members. In his room, which he shares with his younger brother, Cuahuizo has more than 60 race medals, 12 trophies (mostly age-group awards), and stacks of *Runner's World Mexico* from 2009. "I like to reread them for training information." A copy of *Competitor* is autographed, "To Rene, Best wishes. Run

to win. —Meb"; Cuahuizo met the Boston Marathon winner at a running store in New York City. **4:45 P.M.** Showers for the second time. Puts on the Boston Marathon T-shirt he got this year when he went as a spectator. He wears it for inspiration. "I want to run Boston someday." **5:07 P.M.** Leaves for the train to go to Central Park for a six-mile training run. He plans to do some weekend long runs with Roberto Puente. Both men ran the 2011 NYC Marathon as guides for Edison Peña, one of the Chilean miners who was trapped underground for more than two months in 2010. Cuahuizo also helped guide Peña for the miner's inaugural NYC Marathon in 2010. **6:13 P.M.** After a few warmup drills, Cuahuizo takes off at a seven-minute pace; he'll soon drop down to 6:30. He often thinks about Mexico when he runs. "I always miss home." He's mailed several race medals and running photos to his mother, which she displays in her house. **6:51 P.M.** Finishes in 38 minutes after latching onto another runner. "I feel good, strong." He's extremely competitive, and doesn't like getting passed.

9:02 P.M. Back home in Queens, Cuahuizo showers again then eats dinner—three eggs with tuna salad and refried beans—while watching the Gold Cup soccer match, U.S. versus Honduras. His living room is sparse; a few folding chairs lean against orange walls, and a small table sits adjacent to a tiny kitchen. **10:30 P.M.** Eats five pieces of toasted bread soaked in cold milk—a ritual of comfort food that reminds him of his childhood in Mexico, when his grandmother fed him the same snack. **11:00 P.M.** Lights out. **11**