

Hoop Dreams

ESPN journalist Israel Gutierrez usually reports about others. But when his personal story came to light, he became comfortable focusing on himself.

**BY NILA DO SIMON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN STONE**

Israel Gutierrez has a sweet jump shot. There's an ease to the trajectory. His right hand, which has the letter "I" tattooed in Old English font on the side of his wrist, puts a slight underspin onto the shot. His form is near-perfect while shooting hoops at the outdoor courts on Fort Lauderdale Beach. But if Gutierrez is known for anything, it's not his basketball game; it's the way he covers the sport.

The nationally recognized sports reporter has written for the *Miami Herald* and currently covers the NBA for ESPN and espn.com. He is a regular contributor to the programs "The Sports Reporters," "Around the Horn" and "The Jump," all of which feature some of the nation's most popular sports journalists. An occasional sideline reporter, 39-year-old Gutierrez has evolved into a multimedia sports figure, completing the trifecta of media by also co-hosting the weeknight radio show "Jorge and Izzy" with Jorge Sedano on ESPN Radio.

Raised in Miami by Dominican parents, Gutierrez grew up in the heyday of Dan Marino and Don Shula, and the rise of the Miami Heat and Florida Marlins, perfect breeding grounds to develop a love of sports.

"I would read these sports articles by Dan Le Batard and Dave Hyde, and I thought they were phenomenal," Gutierrez says. "When I read them, I started experiencing all these emotions. As I got older, I realized they were among the best of the best sports writers."

After getting a taste of journalism as editor of his high school yearbook, Gutierrez went on to study at the University of Florida, where classmate Jesse Eisenberg (now the fantasy sports editor at Yahoo) introduced Gutierrez to sports writing at the student-run newspaper, *The Independent Florida Alligator*. The rest, as they say, is history. Gutierrez interned at the *Palm Beach Post*, which eventually hired him after he graduated.





SPORTS FEED South Florida-raised Israel Gutierrez grew up watching the Miami Heat, and now covers them and other NBA teams for ESPN. He's photographed here at the outdoor basketball courts on Fort Lauderdale beach.

He covered a few local sports teams for less than a year before earning an opportunity few rookie writers are bestowed: After writer Ethan Skolnick left to work at the *Herald*, Gutierrez was asked to take over Skolnick's beat, covering the Marlins for the *Post*. Soon after, he was asked to cover the Heat.

"After graduating college, I was asked where I saw myself in 15 years, and I said I'd be happy being the NBA beat writer for a major metro newspaper," Gutierrez says. "I had no idea that it would happen within 10 months."

Like the athletes he covers, Gutierrez's work is precise, focused and full of emotion. When he was 22, he wrote a memorable piece about Heat power forward Alonzo Mourning that discussed almost everything except the basketball star's on-court feats. Instead, it focused on his infamous health battles, which included a life-threatening kidney disease that curtailed the former Defensive Player of the Year's playing career for two seasons. Though Mourning's health issues were well-documented through various news sources, Gutierrez says he did something that separated him from other writers: He sought an interview with Mourning's foster mother, Fannie Threet.

"For some reason, no one thought to call her to get her thoughts," Gutierrez says. "And she told me his condition was bad. Very bad. And that he needed a transplant soon."

The story made the front page of the *Post*, and it created a bond between Mourning and Gutierrez that Gutierrez says helped launch his career. "Zo and I developed a trust that allowed me to have the best stuff on him," Gutierrez says. "I felt proud that it was a story I took and developed at such a young age."

Gutierrez would go on to write even more nationally recognized NBA pieces, including an in-depth story about the Heat's Dwyane Wade, known as the face of the franchise for more than a decade, that openly discussed the star's willingness to step aside to allow the newly added LeBron James to take control of the team's reins. The story was so big in the sports world that parts of the interview even ran on ESPN's ticker.

When asked how he is able to connect with sports stars to eke out such intimate quotes, Gutierrez is a bit stumped. After a moment of reflection, he says, "I feel like I get people really well. I can connect with people, and I can translate what they are thinking and saying. At the end of

the day, I'm not sure Dwyane would have gotten that comfortable with someone else."

Gutierrez's ability to connect with others, along with his sports acumen, has served him well as a contributor at ESPN. He remembers his first time on "The Sports Reporters"—a program where four rotating journalists talk about the week's sports news in a roundtable discussion—as being filled with jittery nerves and, well, a stench.

"The show is filmed on Sunday mornings in Times Square at ESPN Zone, which is basically a bar that had probably hosted a pretty late night the night before, so there was this smell to it," says Gutierrez of his debut appearance on the program in September 2008. "I remember stepping onto the set, where the makeup artist had a dim spotlight to work with, and there was a small table with a few bagels and some coffee. Not glamorous at all."

But what was glamorous was Gutierrez's performance that day. To use a sports term, he hit it out of the park. Mike Lupica, a prominent sports writer and regular guest of "The Sports Reporters," said he was impressed with Gutierrez's research and preparation.

Gutierrez also makes regular appearances on "Around the Horn," a fast-paced talk show that has journalists vying for host Tony Reali's approval on their opinions of sports news.

"It's a rare thing for someone in the TV business to be themselves," Reali says. "But Israel has always been authentic."

It turns out that Gutierrez wasn't quite himself, something only close friends and family members knew at the time. In an industry where journalists are innately conditioned to never become part of the story, Gutierrez made national news this past September by airing out a bit of his personal history. The journalist, who is enveloped in the heavily machismo world of sports, is gay. After coming out to his family in 2009, Gutierrez felt the time was ripe to make it public. Speaking about it today at a coffee shop a few miles from his Wilton Manors home, he is still emotional from his huge announcement.

"I went through how I would tell this a million times," he says. "I thought about doing it short and sweet on TV, or saying it on the radio. I talked to Le Batard at least three or four times about how I should do it."

Instead, Gutierrez settled on the medium with which he began his career: writing. He created a WordPress site for the sole purpose of housing his

coming-out statement. The site has only one post, his 1,806-word piece pronouncing him as a proud homosexual man who was getting married in a few short weeks to the love of his life, David Kitchen. In the post, which Gutierrez titled "Thanks for Reading," he writes how he initially denied his sexual orientation, how sometimes he wished and prayed that he wasn't gay.

But in the end, all the prayers "worked," because I eventually saw my true self, and I've never been happier," he writes.

During the days leading up to Gutierrez publicly coming out, "There was a lot of silent support," Kitchen says. "I was just there, in the present, and there were a lot of spontaneous tears."

Immediately after he posted the piece, the reaction was met with an outpouring of support. FIFA World Cup Champion Abby Wambach, a fellow Gator and an openly gay athlete, told Gutierrez that he "saved lives." Rick Welts, president of the Golden State Warriors and one of the few openly gay executives in professional sports, congratulated Gutierrez for his brave act.

For all the internal back-and-forth that Gutierrez went through, he says today that, "I have comfort in knowing that it was done right."

"Since he's come out publicly, he has been somebody who has worn his heart on his sleeve," Reali says, referencing a recent segment of "Around the Horn" called "Face Time"—an uninterrupted 30-second monologue by the winning journalist—in which Gutierrez spoke about deadbeat fathers. "Something similar happened to his family member, and he was OK speaking about it instead of holding it in."

Reali isn't the only one who's noticed a change in Gutierrez since the coming-out note. So has his husband. "There's a huge weight off his shoulders," Kitchen says. "He just seems complete. There was just this one final thing he had to do, and he did it."

Today, Gutierrez lives with Kitchen and their two dogs, a golden retriever named Huck and a Labrador named Sawyer (yes, named after those famous literary friends), in Wilton Manors, a community that Gutierrez says played a huge role in his growth as a homosexual. "I immediately felt a sense of community around me," he says. "And I needed that."

It's a fitting respite for a man who would rather be reporting the news than being a part of it. Here, Gutierrez is himself. And there's not a day that goes by that he isn't thankful for it. ■

“I feel like I get people really well. I can connect with people, and I can translate what they are thinking and saying.” — **Israel Gutierrez**



TEAM BUILDING When asked what he is most proud of in his years as a sports journalist, Gutierrez says it would be covering Dwyane Wade's career from the start. "From being a young player to being a leader, I had a good view of who he was in all stages of his career," Gutierrez says.