



# Michelito, the 10-year-old bullfighter

BY GILLES BERTIN  
AFP, LIMA

*Most children Michelito Lagravere's age dream of following in the footsteps of soccer giants. This young boy dreams of slaying bulls*

“

**My father is a bullfighter  
and I really like it. I want  
to be more famous than  
he is and I want to fight  
bulls all my life.**

— Michelito Lagravere,  
10-year-old bullfighter

Michelito Lagravere is just like any other child who likes playing guitar, surfing the Internet and watching Spiderman, but at just 10 years old, he is also a star bullfighter and has already killed 160 calves.

The pint-sized matador is fearless and dreams of rivaling the best. One of the world's youngest bullfighters, the French-Mexican is also one of the sport's hottest stars in Latin America.

Bull-fighting “is my passion. My father is a bullfighter and I really like it. I want to be more famous than he is and I want to fight bulls all my life,” Lagravere said.

Most children his age here dream of following in the footsteps of soccer giants such as the legendary Brazilian player Pele or the Argentinian Diego Maradona. But not Lagravere.

Lagravere, who began fighting bulls when he was just 5 years old, is following in the path of his father, French bullfighter Michel Lagravere. “The first time, I thought of it as a game. But now I take it more seriously. Even if it's still a game, it's more than that,” he said before heading into the ring. “I want to choose something different and become a professional torero starting when I'm 14.”

Born in Merida, where he attends bullfighting school, Michelito practices swishing his red cape every day. “I go to school in Merida and work over the Internet. I send my homework every other day,” he said.

Over a breakfast of fruit and cereal, he talked about his passion for playing the guitar and for cartoon characters such as *SpongeBob*

*SquarePants, Asterix and Obelix* and *Spider-Man*.

At the ancient Plaza de Acho in Lima, the oldest bullfighting ring in South America, Michelito pitted his strength recently against two girls, a 16-year-old Mexican and a 19-year-old Peruvian.

Thrown to the ground by a young male calf, he recovered his poise quickly, to give a flawless performance with his cape before thousands of spectators.

The young apprentice works mostly in Mexico and other countries in Latin America because he is too young to compete in Spain, where the minimum age for entering the ring is 16.

Anti-bullfighting campaigns have denounced a move in Latin America that has seen a number of children facing off with bulls in the ring, calling for a ban on the fights where young beginners fight calves from 8 months to 2 years old.

“It's one thing to say you don't like corrida, but it's another to call for a ban on something you don't like,” said Michelito, brushing off the criticism.

“I don't like football, but I would never criticize that sport.”

Like any fighter, he bows before a statue of the Virgin Mary before entering the arena. And he has only one superstition — on the day of a fight he wears his socks inside-out.

He proudly claims to have never been wounded — “just a few bruises,” he says — during more than 100 bullfights in France, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru.



French-Mexican Michelito Lagravere, who began bullfighting at 5 years old, is considered one of the sport's hottest stars.

PHOTOS: AFP

## Embodying his downfall, narco-baron's home now a zoo



Giant dinosaur sculptures lie inside Hacienda Napoles, the favored recreation home of the late infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar near Puerto Triunfo, Colombia.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

*Once a bacchanalian  
expression of criminal wealth  
and power, Hacienda Napoles  
now stands as a monument to  
the extinction of the world's  
most infamous drug lord.  
The narco trade, however,  
refuses to give up so easily*

BY RORY CARROLL AND SIBYLLA BRODZINSKY  
THE GUARDIAN, HACIENDA NAPOLES,  
CENTRAL COLOMBIA AND BOGOTA

Hacienda Napoles was once the playground of the world's most notorious drug lord, a bacchanalian expression of criminal wealth and power, but today it stands as a monument to his extinction.

Pablo Escobar used this 1,500-hectare ranch in central Colombia in the 1980s to host wild parties and strike business deals, as well as to house his collection of exotic animals — and fake, life-size dinosaurs.

Colombian authorities hunted down and killed the billionaire narco-trafficker in 1993 and now the hacienda embodies his downfall. The mansion is gutted, the swimming pools are empty and the site has been turned into a heritage park and zoo. Tourists flock here to gawk at the ruins of one man's hubris.

An exhibition of photographs, culminating in Escobar's bloodied, chubby corpse sprawled on a Medellin rooftop, is titled *Triumph of the State*. A museum narrative tells how Colombia overthrew the drug lord and was reborn with “new values.”

In a surreal touch, speakers hidden in tree stumps fill the air with dinosaur moans and roars. The message is clear: Escobar and his kind are gone.

“That's all history now. I'm actually more interested in seeing the animals than Escobar's old stuff,” said Eduardo Torres, 22, a tourist, while feeding carrots to a hippo.

Recent events, however, suggest Escobar's legacy is far from extinct. A new generation of narco-traffickers has emerged and energetically applied his strategy of corrupting politicians and security forces to smooth cocaine's passage overseas.

“After the death of Pablo Escobar we were told that the days of the big capos were over. That was clearly a lie,” said Gustavo Duncan, a political analyst and researcher into the

social and political impact of drug trafficking in Colombia.

A host of investigations is under way into politicians' links with the lucrative trade, a corrupt web that reportedly reaches senior government ranks.

This month a US congressional report concluded that nearly US\$5 billion in aid to Bogota, a central plank in Washington's “war on drugs,” had failed in its goal of halving illegal narcotic production in Colombia. Coca cultivation rose by 15 percent and cocaine production rose by 4 percent from 2000 to 2006. The South American nation remained the source of 90 percent of cocaine in the US.

“I think it's very, very important that a US agency has now said that the US drug war has failed in Colombia,” Adam Isaacson, of the Centre for International Policy, a Washington-based thinktank, told the Associated Press.

Escobar's heirs have learned from his mistake in openly challenging the state. Whereas Escobar flaunted his wealth and intimidated opponents with car bombs, massacres and high-profile assassinations, his successors are lower-profile.

Cocaine barons such as Daniel Rendon (known as Don Mario) and Daniel Barrera (El Loco) account for much if not most of the 600 tonnes shipped annually, a scale that matches the heyday of Medellin's most infamous son.

The capacity to move that volume “can only exist where there is high-level corruption,” said Duncan.

The evidence is mounting. In September, in a huge embarrassment to the government, Medellin's top prosecutor, Guillermo Valencia Cossio, was arrested on charges of colluding with Don Mario. Valencia happened to be the brother of the justice minister.

Earlier this month President Alvaro Uribe,

under pressure to crack down, questioned the army's lack of progress against El Loco's organization. “I ask is the army capable of capturing [him] or if it is protecting him.”

The scandals have cast a shadow over Colombia's success in taming the violence that once made its cities synonymous with mayhem. Urban regeneration projects have transformed slums and won international plaudits. The turnaround is expressed in a tourism campaign slogan: “The only risk is that you'll stay.”

Medellin, Escobar's former fiefdom, is supposed to be the Renaissance jewel: a safe city with an impressive new cable-car system and daring architecture. “My God, things are so much quieter now. It's a lovely place to live,” said Sonia Vargas, 34, who sells snacks in a once-notorious hillside slum.

But analysts said the violence subsided in recent years largely because a cocaine baron, Diego Murillo, won undisputed control through government-linked paramilitary groups.

Murillo was extradited to the US in May,

leaving a vacuum which his rival, Don Mario, has tried to fill, triggering a renewed wave of violence. By September murders were up 35.5 percent to 735 from the same period last year, according to the mayor's office. Rattled, the authorities have launched a media campaign with a slogan which sounds like a plea: “Violence will not return to my city.”

The city retains a sneaking regard for the one-time car thief who rose to become a charismatic, if psychotic, billionaire. It is not forgotten that Escobar built houses for the poor and distributed Christmas toys.

Taxi drivers display stickers with the familiar, chubby features and most people refer to him as Pablo. Flower-sellers do brisk business on the anniversary of his death, Dec. 2, when crowds visit the grave.

Out at Hacienda Napoles, his rural retreat, nostalgia is blossoming. At the entrance, Escobar used to display, on a pedestal, the single-engine Piper Cub plane that flew his first cocaine shipments. It disappeared long ago but earlier this month a replica took its place.

The dilapidated house and pool lie in ruins at Hacienda Napoles, abandoned 13 years ago when Pablo Escobar was killed by a special task force.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

