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Features

Sailor weights to succeed

By **Albert Fulcher** - 06/10/2022



James Rodriguez

Petty Officer 2nd Class James Rodriguez is a U.S. Navy Aviation Rescue Swimmer who lives in El Cajon and owns a successful wholesale gym equipment company, Gym Bro Fitness in Chula Vista.

Rodriguez is 24 years old. How he got to where he is, where he is heading, is from a passion for fitness for this soon to be civilian business owner.

Originally from Long Island, New York, Rodriguez spent most of his growing years in North Carolina before going back to Long Island, then enlisting in the Navy. Rodriguez has served for five years, 10 months, and his End Of Service is coming up July 14.

Rodriguez was stationed at Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 21, an expeditionary unit deployed on landing helicopter dock amphibious assault ships. He is a MQ-8 Fire Scout, an autonomous helicopter system that provides real-time intelligence, a payload operator, and conducts anti-mine countermeasures. He has over 580 hours in flight hours and 100 hours in Fire Scout operations. He completed a tour on the USS Charleston on its first deployment from San Diego to Hawaii, Marshall Islands, Guam, Philippines, Singapore, Japan, and a first joint military exercise with the Sri Lanka navy.

Physical fitness has always been an important part of his life.

"I was a tri champion wrestler in high school," he said. "Ever since I started playing sports, fitness has been a centerpiece in my life. It was a common theme in my Navy career, as keeping fit helps me keep on the straight and narrow path. I focused on fitness because I love what it does and what it teaches you in how to handle the problems that are complex in your own life. And, I did have to keep a high state of physical readiness as a rescue swimmer. A person's life could depend on my physical fitness and mental readiness."

Rodriguez purchased his home in El Cajon in December 2019, and in El Cajon, there were few gyms that he liked to work out at, so he decided to create a home gym. He started with a couple of rusty dumbbells, adjustable benches, rusty barbells, and plates and began working out in his garage. He refurbished the equipment and was trying to sell them for more money than he paid so that he could upgrade his own equipment. Nobody wanted to buy. Rodriguez said he was already in contact with someone in Victorville who was selling heavy dumbbells for "dirt cheap."

"That same weekend, COVID had been in the air about shutting down and when they announced the closings, and all gyms were shut down in San Diego, that same night, while watching the news, I have a 10-minute video of me just scrolling through notification of the equipment I had posted online," he said. "People were asking me to come pick up that equipment that night, people saying they would pay \$40, \$50, \$60 more than I was asking. They were even asking about my equipment in the background. It was crazy. I have never seen this many people message anybody. I was blown away."

Rodriguez immediately contacted his person in Victorville and purchased the equipment, posted them locally. By the time he drove from Victorville to El Cajon, people were waiting for him at his house, and he sold all the plates for double his money that same day.

"I just made my whole paycheck in a day," he said. "There is something to this right now."

Rodriguez started calling every fitness center he could find and started buying as much equipment as he could. The next day, he received a text from someone who owned a gym in Los Angeles wanting to sell all his equipment. He drove there, negotiated, and purchased 7,000 square feet of gym equipment for \$21,500, exactly how much money he had in his bank account.

"My plan was to find a place to open up a gym," he said. "But all the gyms were closed. Gyms were going out of business, so I posted some of the equipment I did not want, and that stuff flew off the shelves. By week one of this deal, I had already made the \$21,000 back, and still had most of the gym equipment left."

He started looking for warehouse space and sub-leased a warehouse through a Navy buddy of his who knew someone looking to rent space out. When he called him, he was surprised to find out that he was a retired rescue swimmer chief petty officer. He said with that common connection, he not only got space, but an education as well.

"That is where I basically learned my skills in business was out of that warehouse in Chula Vista," he said. "We started selling equipment out of this warehouse and got a call from another gym with a truck full of a 24 Hour Fitness gym that was closing. I went and looked at it. I had enough money to buy it. It had everything. It was a really great deal. This was the first time I was seeing large amounts of cash coming in. In our first 10 months of business, we made over seven figures while I was still working part-time and in the Navy. We did over \$100,000 in the first three months out of that warehouse. It was absolutely insane for someone who did not have much experience in business."

Rodriguez eventually moved from that warehouse to Gym Bro Fitness on Anita Street in Chula Vista. Gym Bro Fitness now sells home and commercial gym equipment, from rubber flooring to commercial strength weight equipment, cardio equipment, refurbishes equipment, and equipment repairs. With 10 people on staff and looking to expand, Gym Bro sells for personal use, schools, police and fire departments, high schools, resorts, casinos, colleges, gym owners, commercial residential buildings, and is talking with a gym franchise in Dominican Republic.

But the story is not over. Rodriguez has big plans for the business' future.

"Currently, I participated in DOD SkillBridge, a program implemented by the Department of Defense for active-duty military to transition into a career 180 day prior to their EOS. I heard about a program, Workshops for Warriors at 32nd Street Naval Station San

Diego," he said. "It is a nonprofit, funded by donors. It teaches manufacturing and its goal is to bring American manufacturing back through teaching the trade of Computer Numerical Control Machining, CNC Lathe, and welding program."

Rodriguez said his mission with the business is to manufacture gym equipment in the United States.

"I chose to go to the trade school to learn all the details, techniques, tooling, machinery, and learn how to operate everything," he said. "That way I have the knowledge to communicate with other machinist, other welders, and other amazingly talented people. The goal is to hire as many veterans as possible and to manufacture as much gym equipment here in the U.S. as possible."

Rodriguez said looking at China, and the problems he has seen ordering overseas, that he realizes how any conflict in the world, or between the U.S. and Asia can detrimentally impact that supply chain.

"I see that as a liability to rely on overseas manufacturing," he said. "I am doing this out of sense of duty to my country, my fellow service members, brothers and sisters, but also from a risk standpoint as well. Long-term, I believe there is instability there. If you look at what happened with COVID, and all the things we know and touched is being delayed on deliveries, prices of everything are skyrocketing, things like this would not be affected if we manufactured mostly everything here in the U.S."