



Punchin', Preachin', and the Piney Woods

George Foreman's love for East Texas

story by **Matt Joyce**

MAYBE YOU KNOW GEORGE FOREMAN THE BOXER. "BIG George" notched a 76-5 record in his legendary career, including an Olympic Gold Medal in 1968, a world heavyweight title in 1973, and, following an improbable comeback at age 45, a second world heavyweight title in 1994.

Maybe you know George Foreman the pitchman. He sold more than 100 million George Foreman Grills before parting ways with the maker of the electric, indoor "lean, mean, fat-reducing grilling machine." (George says he still uses his grill; his favorite dish is salmon steak.)

Maybe you know George Foreman the preacher. Following his second professional boxing defeat in 1977, George experienced a religious

"Springtime in East Texas captured my heart. ... I knew then that this would be my permanent life."

conversion and started evangelizing. He now presides over the nondenominational Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Houston.

Or, maybe you know George Foreman the entertainer. George travels internationally as a motivational speaker and recently starred in the NBC reality show *Better Late Than Never*, which chronicled his travels across Asia with Henry Winkler, William Shatner, and Terry Bradshaw.

At 68, Foreman, who was born in Marshall and grew up in Houston's Fifth Ward, has overcome significant odds since dropping out of high school and joining the Job Corps at age 16. George, the father of 10, and his wife, Mary, split their time between Houston and a ranch in Marshall.

Q: *Do you still box? How do you get your exercise?*

A: If I am going to do what I love more than anything, and that's eat, I am going to have to pay the price. And I have about 3,000 square feet of gym right next to my kitchen, so I work out as much as I can. I have bicycles, a punching bag, and lot of weights, but I don't box at all anymore.

Q: *Do you miss competitive boxing?*

A: I fell in love with boxing, which is the worst thing in the world to do because it's too much abuse. Sometimes I miss the workouts but not the actual fighting.

Q: *How much of your time do you spend traveling?*

A: A major portion of my time is traveling. As a matter of fact I just got back from Germany this Monday, and I'll be traveling to England > *continued on page 66*

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at the end of this month by way of New York. I'm always invited out to speak and tell my story, the American story of which I'm so proud. And of course, I'm invited out to give my testimony about how I found God. A major portion of my time is in the sky. I sleep better in an airplane than in my king-size bed.

I raise horses called gaited horses, and I love those horses. I raise them and ride them and train them myself, and I'm always being bucked off.

Q: *What are some of your favorite places in Texas?*

A: I love East Texas, and I know every inch from looking for places—farms roads and old roads—where I can get my trailer out and ride my horses. About twice every year I travel to Nacogdoches and visit my friends, and we have these trail rides around Nacogdoches. That is the most wonderful thing that I have going for me in my life, trail riding in East Texas.

Q: *You bought your ranch in Marshall in 1976?*

A: Yes. Of course, I had family that lived in Marshall. Occasionally my mom would go down and visit my grandmother, and we spent maybe a day or two. But once I traveled there in '76 with my uncle to take him home, and I discovered the beauty of springtime in East Texas, and I decided I was going to live there. I stopped what I was doing, and we bought a ranch instantly.

Q: *What's the ranch like?*

A: The ranch consists of about 600 acres. I raise a group of Brangus cattle, and my wife loves fresh eggs, so we keep a lot of chickens. It's a pig farm, too. And most of all it's a place where I love to fish. There are a lot of ponds with catfish and bream, perch, and bass. That's where you'll find me, under a tree, 80 percent of the time in Marshall. And I raise horses called

gaited horses, and I love those horses. I raise them and ride them and train them myself, and I'm always being bucked off.

Q: *Why have you stayed in Marshall and Houston?*

A: I lived in California for a long time, and there's a lot of beauty to California. But springtime in East Texas captured my heart, going through Nacogdoches, looking at the green rolling hills and the horses. I knew then that this would be my permanent life. Of course, I have my church work. I got into the ministry in 1977, which means I have to keep my ministry going in Houston and then take care of my ranch in Marshall. I couldn't live without either place.

Q: *What have you learned from raising 10 children?*

A: The biggest thing about raising children is stability. I learned I couldn't do what I wanted whenever I wanted to do it. I was going to have to build my life on what was best for the family. Children teach you that. And I learned that if you raise children, you've really got to love them all the same, and none will ever think you love them all the same, though. You can't prove it; you've just got to do it.

Q: *What's next for you?*

A: The most important thing I'm working on now is a George Foreman comfort shoe. Those of us who call ourselves retired or whatever, we can't forget the most important thing and that's activity, that's walking. I'm designing a shoe you can dance in, play shuffleboard with your kids, go to the airport, go to Florida—a shoe that's so comfortable that someone will have to make you take it off. **L**

Texas Highways (ISSN 0040-4349) is published monthly by the Texas Department of Transportation, 150 E. Riverside Drive, Austin, Texas 78704; phone 512/486-5858, fax 512/486-5879. The official travel magazine of Texas encourages travel within the state and tells the Texas story to readers around the world.

Periodicals Postage paid at Austin, Texas, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Texas Highways* Circulation, P.O. Box 8559, Big Sandy, Texas 75755-8559.

TRAVEL MATTERS

TRAVEL TALK WITH TRUE TEXANS



Who's Dat?

Football star Dat Nguyen's improbable journey

story by **Matt Joyce**

DAT NGUYEN HOLDS THE DISTINCTION OF BEING THE first and only Vietnamese-American to play in the National Football League. And he's got a life story to match that accomplishment.

Born in 1975 in an Arkansas refugee camp, Nguyen grew up in a Catholic Vietnamese shrimping family in Rockport. He joined the Rockport-Fulton Junior High football team in eighth grade and, despite his parents' skepticism, found his calling.

"I fell in love with the game," he says. "The most intriguing thing to me about football is that everything is so challenging—the lineups, making a tackle, going out there and running or catching the football. The execution part was really the drive that got me interested."

As a linebacker at Texas A&M from 1995 to 1998, Nguyen won a host of awards, including his induction this year into the College Football Hall of Fame. In the NFL, he started six seasons as the

"Some of my teammates and opponents were born to be NFL players; I, on the other hand, was born in a refugee camp to immigrant parents, neither of whom is a smidgeon over 5-foot-2."

Dallas Cowboys' middle linebacker before retiring in 2006.

Nguyen served coaching stints with the Cowboys and the Aggies before leaving the game. Last year, he became proprietor of the Chick-fil-A restaurant at Montgomery Plaza in Fort Worth.

All this for a child who was in his mother's belly when the family fled Vietnam by boat, under fire, on the night the Viet Cong captured Saigon. Today, the 41-year-old Nguyen lives in Grapevine with his wife, Becky, and their five children, ages 2 to 13.

Q: *How did football lead to Chick-fil-A?*

A: I wanted to coach football, no doubt about that. The only thing I didn't like about coaching was the potential of moving my family around the country, and there was a little bit more politics than I thought going in. When you're a coach, you're impacting young people's lives, giving them a chance to pursue a dream. I wanted to do something where I could impact other people on a daily basis. That's why I decided to do the restaurant business with Chick-fil-A. You're building a team. I have about 65 to 70 employees; about 45 to 50 of them are 19 or younger. So I'm having a chance to touch a lot of these kids' lives and teach them life skills. I use all the football concepts—impacting, motivation, awards. The only things we don't do are gas-sers and up-downs and stuff like that that's physical punishment.

Q: *How did your family manage to escape Vietnam?*

A: My dad was fortunate to be in a position that he could afford a radio, and he knew a couple of people on > *continued on page 90*

the inside who knew what was going on with the Viet Cong. And my dad coordinated a boat to take our family and to give us a chance to get away to have a life in America or another country, wherever it was. They had five kids, and my mom was four-and-a-half months pregnant with me. You talk about courage, just taking a leap of faith. I don't know if I have enough courage to do that now.

Q: *How did your parents choose Rockport?*

A: My relatives were distributed on the Gulf Coast where they did the shrimping industry, which they did in Vietnam. And so we decided to move south, and my mom's family members were in Rockport. What's ironic is we lived in a small village south of Saigon called Bin Da. The translation of Bin Da is Port of Rock.

Q: *Hu-Dat in Rockport is your family's restaurant?*

A: My mom started the restaurant. When my brother turned 20 years old, my dad built him a shrimp boat. And my dad had a shrimp boat himself. And they'd usually start about 4 o'clock in the morning. My mom would make coffee before they left, and at 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon when they got back, she would be making sandwiches or meals. During that transition, my dad sold his boat and built a marine supply, which is what he did in Vietnam. He would sell shrimp nets, pulleys, cables, ropes, whatever they needed on the shrimp boat. The shrimpers would go there and buy stuff from dad and eat a meal from mom. My mom thought, "I'm doing this every day; I might as well make it into a restaurant." That's how Hu-Dat started.

Q: *What do you like at Hu-Dat?*

A: You can't go wrong with the traditional food, the rice and the pork. I like the pork chops. Then you have to go to my sister's place in Corpus Christi,

HU-DAT D'Noodle House. She has the Dat Nguyen Special. It's called the Shaken Beef. It's cubed beef marinated with oyster sauce and pepper and a little bit of soy sauce, and it's laid on top of tomatoes, onions, and lettuce, and then you eat it with a bowl of rice.

Q: *Did Hu-Dat influence your interest in the restaurant business?*

A: Absolutely. I saw how it worked. We started Hu-Dat in 1993 when I went to college, and every time I came back in the summer, I would work for my mom. I was a dishwasher, a busboy.

I remember fifth grade, sixth grade, seventh grade, every summer I had to be on the shrimp boat. ... When I fell in love with football, I said I never want to get back on a shrimp boat again in my life.

Q: *Did you ever work on a shrimp boat?*

A: Oh yes. I was my brother's deckhand. I remember fifth grade, sixth grade, seventh grade, every summer I had to be on the shrimp boat. We'd leave at 4 o'clock in the morning, and you don't have a life. So that was the last thing I wanted to do. When I fell in love with football, I said I never want to get back on a shrimp boat again in my life.

Q: *Where does your family like to vacation in Texas?*

A: We love Marble Falls. We go up there to the Bluebonnet Café, of course. There's a little Thai place, Ginger and Spice, right downtown where we always eat; it's very good. Austin is one of our favorite places. We love to go see the bats with the kids. My wife loves the outdoors. Now that we have these 2-year-olds it's a little bit harder, but before that we'd go down to Barton Springs and swim. We like to go down to College Station, and you have to hit up the famous Wings 'N More. Those might be the best chicken strips in the country.

Q: *What do you like to do in Rockport?*

A: I spend time with my mom and my dad. [Dat's father, Ho Nguyen, passed away in April.] You miss the home cooking of course. And it depends on the mood of my friends. There's a new sports bar that popped up called Benchwarmers. They've got fabulous wings, and they've got great fried oysters as well. If I'm wanting crawfish, I run down to the Boiling Pot. Everybody knows about the Boiling Pot. They spread out the paper on the table and then dump the food on the table and you just eat—crawfish, shrimp, sausage, you name it.

Q: *How has your family's immigrant experience influenced you?*

A: It shaped who I am. The adversity, the opportunity, the dedication, having a dream, having a vision. You saw it in my parents coming over here for an opportunity, having faith, and never knowing when that opportunity was going to be. You think about my career at Texas A&M. I was the backup linebacker my freshman year. Leading up to the first game against LSU, the starter stepped on a sprinkler head. He twisted his ankle and couldn't play. That's how my career started. I had worked so hard to be in that position, I knew I wasn't going to give it up. My parents are the reason I am who I am today. I'm thankful and grateful for the opportunity, and now I get a chance to impact other people. In the Bible, Jesus said, "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." And that's what we're supposed to do—have a purpose. I try to walk that path each and every day and try to impact people to have a better chance, a better life, and to fulfill their dreams. **L**

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Accordion Queen

Eva Ybarra was born to play the accordion

story by **Matt Joyce**

NOT MUCH HAS COME EASILY FOR EVA YBARRA, EXCEPT playing music. Since getting her start as a young girl in San Antonio icehouses in the 1950s, the accordionist has carved out a lasting career with her progressive style and forceful singing. Today, Ybarra is recognized as one of conjunto's most accomplished players—despite the vagaries of the music business and the headwinds of macho chauvinism—and is known by the esteemed nickname, *La Reina del Acordeón* (the queen of the accordion).

Ybarra made her first recordings as a teenager and worked the San Antonio conjunto circuit for years—often wearing a cowboy hat and holster on stage—winning over fans and escaping from more than a few tight spots, such as the bar brawls, spiked drinks, and attempted assaults that she recounts in her song “La Historia de mi Vida.” The fifth of nine children, Ybarra lives in an apartment not far from the southwestern San Antonio house where her mother and father, a truck driver, raised

“This is the thing: I didn’t want to copy anybody. I wanted to have my own style.”

their kids and played music on nights and weekends.

“Ybarra went where few women dared, she ventured into the male-dominated ranks of conjunto,” says Ramón Hernández, a musicologist who included Ybarra in his *Legends of Tejano* exhibit, which is on display through Dec. 20 at the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University in San Marcos. “She is famous for being a pioneer, helping set the mold as an example and opening the doors for other female accordionists.”

Ybarra has won numerous honors over the years, including induction into the Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame, and this summer, she was recognized with one of the nation’s top awards for a folk artist, a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts. Still, Ybarra performs only periodically with her group, *Eva Ybarra y Su Conjunto*, mostly at festivals, and she sometimes plays with mariachis at local restaurants to make ends meet. She also teaches weekly accordion classes at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio.

Q: *You grew up in a musical household?*

A: I remember sleeping in the crib, and my dad was playing the guitar with my brother and some other guys in the living room. I woke up hearing the music, and I went to the living room. They told me to go back to sleep, but I didn’t sleep. I was looking through the keyhole because I wanted to watch them.

Q: *How did you get started on accordion?*

A: I started with a two-row accordion at 4 years old. At 6 I was playing here > *continued on page 86*



and there, at icehouses, supporting my parents. They sat me on plastic crates because I was too small and couldn't reach the floor. I was very little.

Q: *How did you develop your personal style of accordion playing?*

A: This is the thing: I didn't want to copy anybody. I wanted to have my own style. I can copy if I want to, but I wanted to cross over. And I did, because my songs are played in Germany, Australia, Canada. I learned a little bit of music theory—inverted chords, pentatonics, and chromatic scale—that makes me a little bit different. I like to play a little blues. I wrote a huapango called "Huaplan-blues," and I have one called "Huaplan-jazz." Sometimes people don't like it. They like more traditional. But I'm not that. You don't have to like it. If there are 10 people that like it, and one that doesn't like it, I'm winning.

Q: *How did you get the nickname La Reina del Acordeón?*

A: It wasn't me. They could call me Eva Ybarra the humble, the criminal, the killer, the monster. But *La Reina del Acordeón*, the people give me that name. And I appreciate it.

Q: *What's it like being a woman in conjunto music?*

A: It's not too easy for me. I struggle a lot because there's a lot of envy. They don't want to see a lady being the leader of the band or making arrangements or making songs. They don't like it. There are a lot of guys that say, "I'm afraid to play in front of you." They get intimidated, and they say, "Eva Ybarra is coming? I don't want to play after her."

Q: *Where do you like to perform in Texas?*

A: I've been in Corpus Christi, Austin, the Valley. They appreciate the music. San Antonio does too. I love San Benito. I wrote a song called "Mi Querido San Benito." They enjoy and appreciate our music, and I wrote it for them. I like every town, and



EVA YBARRA

Keep up with Eva Ybarra's upcoming performances at [facebook.com/thequeenoftheaccordion](https://www.facebook.com/thequeenoftheaccordion). Ybarra sells CDs at her shows, and some are available online.

every town I go I want to stay. But no, San Antonio is my hometown, and I wouldn't change it.

Q: *What places do you like to take visitors in San Antonio?*

A: I like *las misiones*, the missions, the Alamo. I love that everything there is historical.

Q: *What are your favorite San Antonio restaurants?*

A: Mi Tierra, La Fogata, Jacale, Los Barrios; and El Golfo is a good one too. What I like is the *campechana* [a seafood cocktail] with shrimp, fish, avocado, lobster, and lemon. I like Chinese food and the Golden Star on Commerce. After playing with the mariachis, we go and eat over there, and sometimes I order the fish and gravy.

Q: *Have you seen more young women playing conjunto music?*

A: There are a lot of young accordianists that are good. But I opened the doors for them. Sometimes they don't understand that, but like I say, I'm the pioneer. I opened the door.

Q: *Eva Ybarra y Su Conjunto has been your band ever since you were a teen?*

A: Yes, but now we call it Eva Ybarra y su Conjunto Siempre para Ustedes. That's the way it's going to be: forever for the people. Without the people, we're nothing. I love music; it's in my body. Like I always say, if I stop playing, I think I will die. And I'm still going to play with God. ♪

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