

MARYLAND Family

APRIL 2003

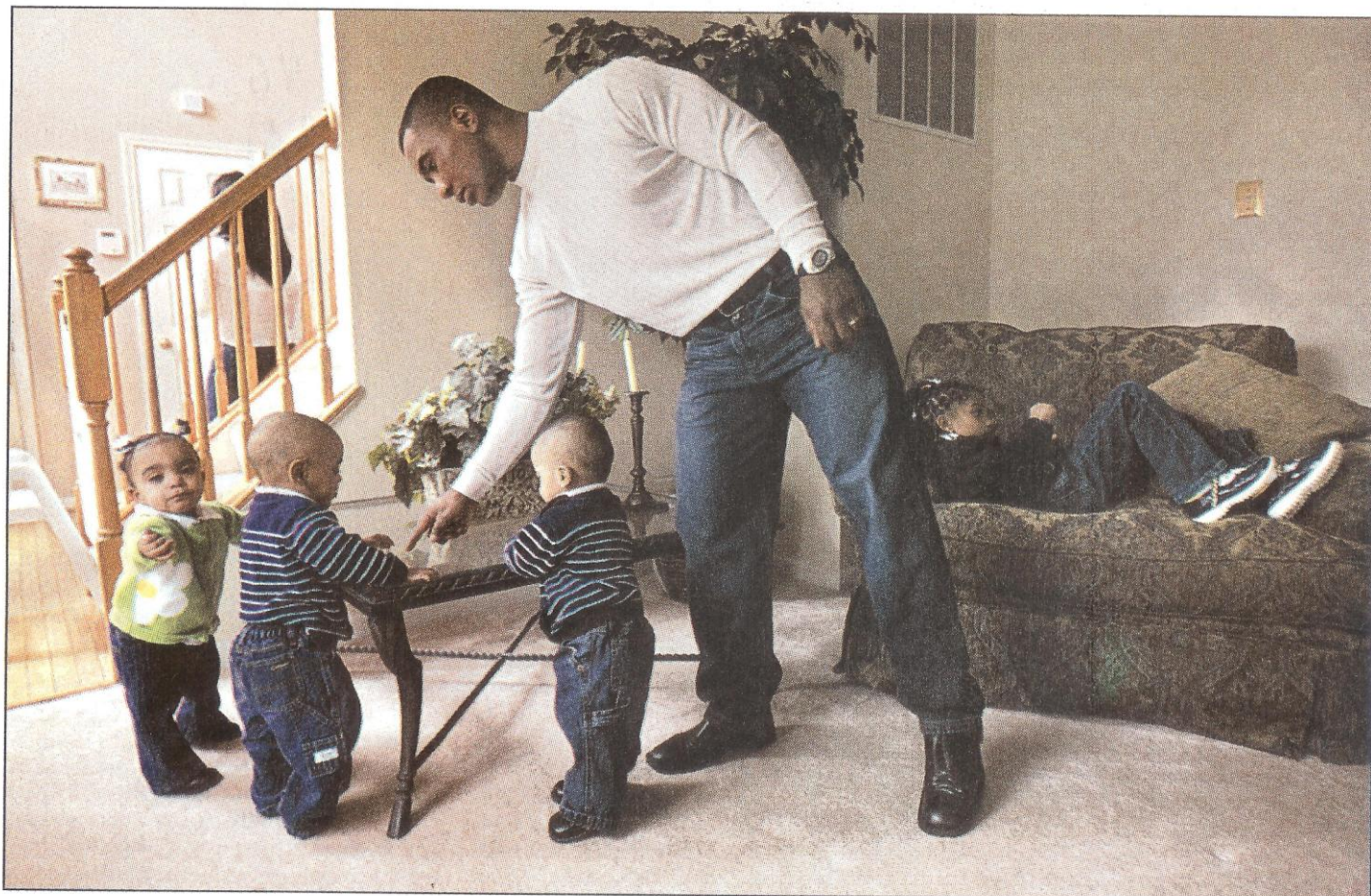
High five

Quintuplets give Orioles' Melvin Mora his own hearing section



1st party in Vader
Way to give your kid's birthday character
Starting a new course?
Title over charter schools

4 STAR
BEST PARENTING
PUBLICATION 2002



Melvin Mora knows the start of another baseball season means more time on the road. "It's hard to be away from them," he said.

High five

With 20-month-old quintuplets, the Orioles' Melvin Mora has his own cheering section

BY BO SMOLKA • PHOTOS BY JEFF LEARD

Melvin Mora says he was only kidding. Mora, now in his third full season with the Baltimore Orioles, says he was "only playing around" when he told his wife, Gisel, that he'd like to have six kids.

But in a frenetic span of three minutes on July 28, 2001, Mora got his wish, as Gisel capped an arduous, abbreviated pregnancy by giving birth to quintuplets — two boys, three girls — who joined Tatiana, Gisel's daughter by a previous marriage.

Seeing the Mora quintuplets today, running around their Bel Air home like any other toddlers, it's hard to believe that their lives were once measured in minutes, their bodies so fragile that the slightest infection could have proved fatal.

Now 20 months old, they have given Melvin and Gisel unbridled joy as well as fresh perspective. Tough isn't hitting a 97-mile-an-hour fastball. Tough is knowing your 2-week-old son is fighting for his life as doctors rush him into an operating room in the middle of the night. Pressure isn't batting with the bases loaded in the ninth inning. Pressure is giving your 4-month-old daughter CPR on her first day home from the hospital.

Fears of miscarriage

A 5-foot-1 beauty of Puerto Rican descent, Gisel met Melvin, a native of Venezuela, while working for a baseball agent who represented Latin American players.

They married over the baseball All-Star break in 2000, and her baby shower was held between games of a doubleheader.

So she knew well how draining the six-month baseball season can be. Both she and Melvin wanted more children, and she hoped to get pregnant early in 2001, before another season began.

After trying unsuccessfully for several months, Gisel went to see a specialist and took fertility drugs while on a trip to Venezuela to see Mora's family. She soon learned she was pregnant, and a doctor told her she would be having twins.

But one day that spring, Gisel woke up in a pool of blood, sure she had lost the babies.

They rushed to a nearby hospital where doctors assured her that, no, she hadn't lost the babies. In fact, they told her, there were five of them.

"Everybody asks, 'When you found out you were having five, what was your reaction? Were you completely freaked out?'"

she said, her slight accent hinting at her Brooklyn roots. "And I wasn't. It was actually a relief because I thought I had lost the pregnancy."

Gisel spent three months on bed rest and suffered several bleeding episodes. By early July, she was hospitalized and medicated as doctors battled to delay her labor as long as possible.

But on the morning of July 28, with the babies at just 26 weeks, doctors couldn't wait any longer.

Melvin was in Anaheim, Calif., with the Orioles when he received the urgent word: Get on the next flight home. Your babies are being born.

A first at Hopkins

Meanwhile, at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Dr. Susan Aucott, the medical director of the neonatal intensive care unit, put into motion a well-rehearsed plan for what is believed to be the first set of quintuplets ever delivered at Hopkins.

Aucott explained that the operating rooms where Cesarean sections are performed have facilities and equipment for just three births.

"Our first question," she said, "was where are we going to put more babies?"

The plan called for the team to use two adjoining operating rooms, with additional supplies at the ready in a nearby hallway.

With a cadre of more than 20 medical personnel taking part in frenzied, excited, controlled chaos, Gisel gave birth to Genesis, followed by Christian, Rebekah, Matthew and Jada. Each weighed between 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 pounds. All were in critical condition, some worse off than others.

"In a very preterm baby," Aucott said, "the first question the first day is how well are the lungs doing?"

Genesis was struggling the most, needing 100 percent oxygen and fighting for her life by the minute. But the minutes soon grew to hours, then to days.

All the while, Gisel kept vigil. Although she says she "always hated nursing," Gisel quickly immersed herself in the vocabulary and technology of the neonatal intensive care unit. She studied medical charts, monitored instruments and checked vital signs. After home games, Melvin would join Gisel late at night in the Hopkins NICU.

Quiet by nature, Melvin just shakes his head and recalls, "They were so small."

He takes off a championship ring from his days with the New York Mets and shows how the ring fit over Matthew's arm, all the way up to the shoulder.

With each passing day, the tiny quin-



tuplets grew stronger, but there were bumps in the road. Genesis survived a bout with meningitis. Matthew had lung problems. One night at 2 a.m., Christian's vital signs began dropping and he was rushed into surgery to repair a perforation in his underdeveloped bowel.

"Once the babies were born, I always tried to keep really positive," Gisel said. "That's one thing I've learned from Melvin. As much as he worries — and he is a worrywart — he always told me to stay positive."

"As bad as things got, all of a sudden it would work out. They told us there was a 50-50 chance the pregnancy would go completely, then they told me there was a 50-50 chance Genesis would make it. And it always worked out. I was like, 'This is what the Lord had planned for us.'"

Still, they were a long way from home. All five quintuplets spent the next two months at Johns Hopkins as doctors worked to strengthen their hearts and lungs, and they spent several more months shuttling between Hopkins and Mount Washington Pediatric Hospital. Rebekah, the healthiest from the start, was also the first to leave the NICU, after two months.

Jada came home in mid-November, but just four hours after her arrival, she began choking on medication. Melvin rushed in from the kitchen to find his daughter blue in the face. He quickly performed CPR just as he had learned it at Mount Washington Pediatric Hospital — he attended the class twice just to be sure he knew how to do it — and

helped restore her breathing.

Genesis, who struggled so much that first day, remains the least developed. She is the only one not yet walking and works regularly with physical therapists. There is still some risk of cerebral palsy, Gisel said, but added, "she's a spitfire. That's what the nurses in the NICU called her. She probably wouldn't have gotten this far if it wasn't for that."

Home, sweet home

Now that all five quintuplets are home, the family's four-bedroom house on a Bel Air cul-de-sac — Mora is one of the only Orioles who lives in the area year-round — is the quintuplets' kingdom. A room off the kitchen is loaded with playpens and swings. The breakfast nook conveniently fits five high chairs arranged in a semicircle. The family room is stocked with toys, while the refrigerator is stocked with bottles, color-coded for each child (Genesis and Jada still take liquids through a feeding tube.) Upstairs, the boys share one bedroom, Tatiana has her own room and Genesis, Rebekah and Jada share a room bathed in pink.

A smaller SUV has been traded in for a Ford Excursion, roomy enough for five car seats as well as the family's custom-made stroller for five. (It's too long for the regular elevators at Camden Yards, though, so when they go see Daddy at work, the quintuplets ride the freight elevator.)

If there is any such thing as a "routine" with 20-month-old quintuplets, the Moras



Above: The starting lineup at lunchtime includes, from left, Genesis, Jada, Rebekah, Matthew and Christian.

have settled into it. That includes two loads of laundry a day and 175 to 200 diapers a week. Gisel says she frequents BJ's Wholesale Club and Super Fresh, reaping big dividends from its "Baby Bonus Savings Club" discount program.

The quintuplets' daily schedule — up by 8 or so in the morning, lunch at around noon, a mid-afternoon nap and bedtime at about 9 p.m. — is well suited to Melvin, who had 10 brothers and sisters himself. Even after night games, he is often the one who greets them first in the morning. He'll nap later in the morning, then leave for the ballpark just as the quintuplets go down in the afternoon.

"He's an awesome dad," Gisel said. "He changes diapers, he feeds them. He's taken a very active role in being a dad."

That includes, apparently, teaching them to dance.

As the salsa music blares one day, Melvin dances in the middle of the family room, all five toddlers dancing, laughing and spinning around him like moons orbiting a planet.

But with Melvin's work schedule, the bulk of the caregiving falls to Gisel.

"She is wonderful," Melvin said. "Sometimes to see how well she takes care of all these babies is hard to believe."

The Moras also get a helping hand from Meredith Ball, who works at the house 20 to

Maybe the team isn't doing well, or I had a bad game. But when I come home and see my family, everything changes.

Melvin Mora

50 hours a week. Gisel met Meredith through a friend at Mount Washington Pediatric Hospital, where Ball had been helping a family with quadruplets.

Watching Meredith feed the quintuplets their morning snack is like watching an old manual typewriter. Left to right she moves, a spoonful for Genesis, then for Jada, then for Rebekah, Matthew and Christian .. *ka-ching!* ... back to Genesis ... And so it goes. Gisel says the "record" is 14 jars of baby food at one sitting.

The Moras are also careful that Tatiana, 6, doesn't get lost in this sea of toddlers. Once a week, after Tatiana's dance or gymnastics classes, Melvin, Gisel and Tatiana go out to dinner, just the three of them.

"She told Meredith one day that it would be boring if we only had one baby," Gisel said. "We asked her why, and she said, 'Well, if one cries, you'd still have to keep playing with the same one. You can't change babies.'"

Tatiana can quickly recount which baby was first to walk, which has the most teeth, which one prefers which toys. If Tatiana is closest to any of them, Gisel said, it is probably Rebekah, who was the first one home and the only one Tatiana was allowed to hold in the hospital.

But, Tatiana said, "I love all my babies."

Neighbors, fans chip in

Gisel also said the support from friends, neighbors and Melvin's fans has been phenomenal. Cards and gifts poured in to the Moras while the babies were in the NICU, and one fan in Atlanta even left a package of

diapers for Melvin. When Melvin left for spring training last year, neighbors arranged to cut the lawn, and they have also helped car-pool Tatiana to school and back.

"The people of Maryland have been great to our family and we want them to know how much we appreciate it," Gisel said. "With my six little ones and a husband that is on the road more than he is home ... I could not have done it without them."

With a new season beginning this month, Melvin, who plays several positions, again should play a key role for the Orioles. His new \$1.7 million contract — a fivefold increase from last year — should help buy plenty of diapers, while also allowing him to continue sending money home to family in Venezuela.

But a new season also means more travel, more time when Melvin and the Orioles are on the road, sometimes for a week or longer.

"He was just talking about how he'll miss going into their rooms in the morning and getting that first smile," Gisel said. "They've gotten so used to him that they call out to him — Papa! Papa!"

"At the beginning," she added, "a lot of moms would say, 'Oh, it must be so hard with him leaving.' And I would always see it the opposite way. It's gotta be hard for him. I get to keep my family with me. He has to leave them."

Melvin agrees.

"It's hard to be away from them," he said. "When I come home, my life changes. Maybe the team isn't doing well, or I had a bad game. But when I come home and see my family, everything changes."

