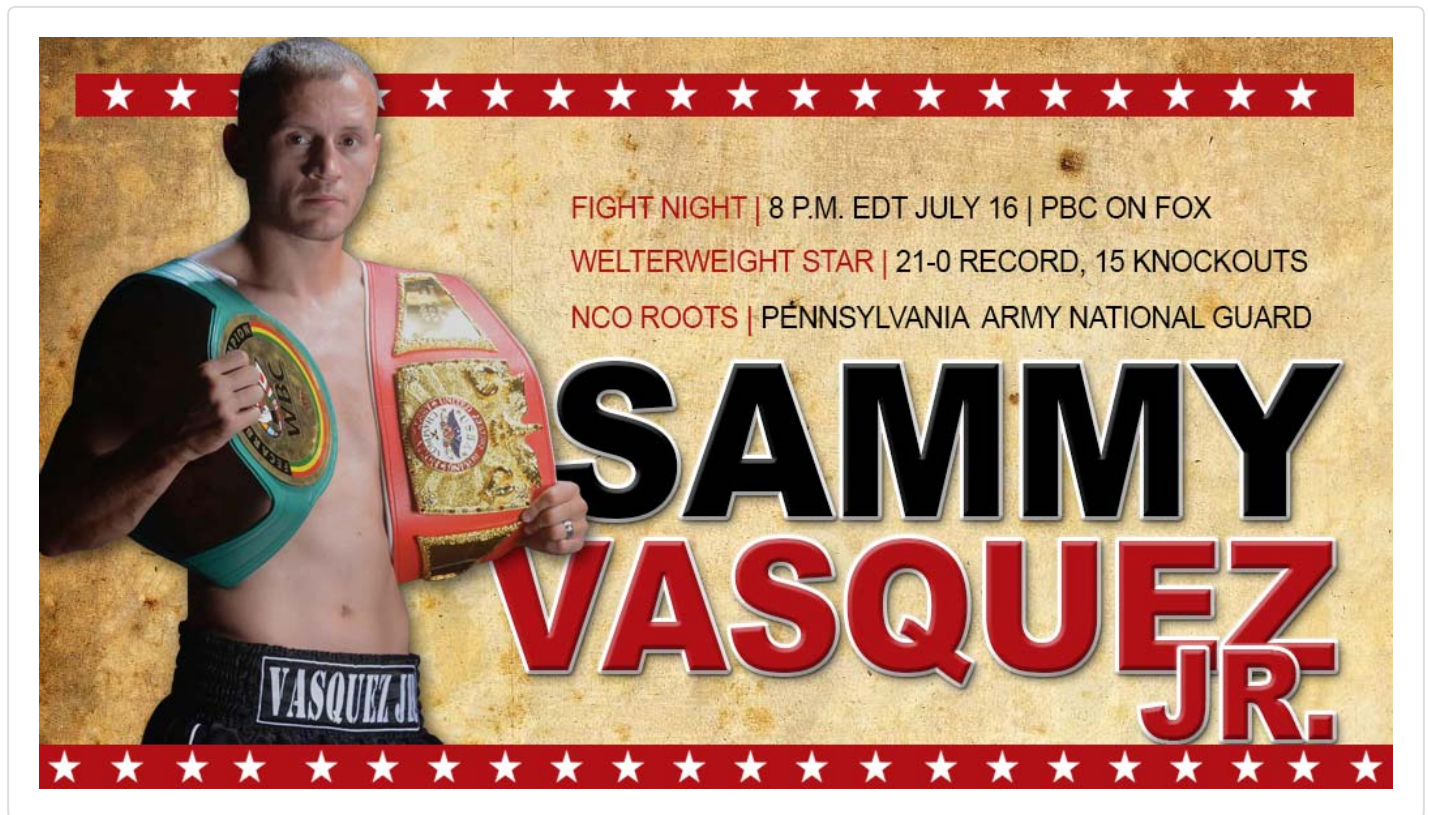


# Boxing Phenom, Former NCO Sammy Vasquez Jr. Sets Sights Even Higher

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

July 11, 2016



Fast-rising boxing star Sammy Vasquez Jr. wants to reach the top. Literally.

The 30-year-old former sergeant in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard says he wants to climb to the summit of Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak, once his days in the ring are done.

"I've always wanted to do it," said Vasquez, a native of Monessen, Pennsylvania, during a recent phone interview. "I just think it would be pretty cool to take a picture on top of the highest mountain on Earth."

But before he reaches that daunting Himalayan pinnacle, the undefeated Vasquez wants to continue his ascent of the welterweight division and become a world champion. The path to that objective continues this weekend against an opponent with not quite the stature of Everest, but dangerous nonetheless. The 5-foot-10 Vasquez will face 5-foot-5 Felix Diaz in a welterweight bout Saturday billed as the co-main event of a Premier Boxing Champions card in Birmingham, Alabama, that will be broadcast live on Fox. The other headline fight pits WBC heavyweight

champion Deontay Wilder against Chris Arreola.

For Vasquez, who boasts a 21-0 record with 15 knockouts, Diaz (17-1, 8 KOs) is a short-notice opponent. The Dominican fighter, who won a gold medal at the 2008 Olympics, was added to the card July 1 after an injury sidelined Vasquez's original opponent, the 5-foot-9 Luis Collazo. But just as he has so many times during his eight-year Army career, which included two deployments to Iraq, Vasquez adjusted.

"Just like being an NCO, you have to adapt and overcome," Vasquez said. "You have to expect change like that; that's just how it works sometimes. It wasn't a big change for me because of the fact that they're both southpaws. One is just taller than the other. Now I'm fighting a guy who is shorter. So the only difference is the accuracy of my punches needs to be lower now rather than high. So it really wasn't that big of a change to adapt to."

Despite being shorter, Diaz still presents formidable opposition. His Olympic pedigree helped him charge up the super lightweight and welterweight ranks with highlight wins during the past two years over Emmanuel Lartey and Adrian Granados. Diaz suffered his first loss in October in a split decision against Lamont Peterson. One judge scored the fight, in which Diaz gave the former champion fits, a draw.

Vasquez expects Diaz to try to apply the same formula during their clash, with the smaller fighter looking to keep the action inside to nullify Vasquez's reach advantage and limit his movement around the ring. But Vasquez, often rated among the top 10 welterweights in the world, says he is looking to dictate the pace of the fight and is ready for whatever Diaz throws at him.

"I'm not Lamont Peterson," Vasquez said. "I hit harder than Lamont Peterson and I intend to stick to the game plan as usual. I've got a decent inside game as well as outside game and I move a lot. He's an Olympic gold medalist. He's going to be aggressive. But I can slug, too, so I think it's going to be a hell of a fight because we're both very big competitors."

Though a win would be a boon for Vasquez and his surging career, he says he is happy simply stepping in the ring. Vasquez has long enjoyed boxing. He was introduced to the sport at age 9 by his father, who wanted to give his son an outlet and a method to defend himself from the bullies who hounded the younger Vasquez at school. But fighting means so much more to Vasquez now, as it provides relief for the hidden scars of his time in combat.

In the lead-up to his fight against Aaron Martinez earlier this year, Vasquez revealed he had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Vasquez deployed with the National Guard in 2005-06 and in 2008-09. His first deployment took him to Camp Habbaniyah, Iraq, where firefights were a typical part of the day during missions that took Soldiers from the base near Fallujah to the outskirts of Ramadi. Vasquez's second deployment saw him split time between

Fallujah and Taji.

Upon his return, even as he parlayed his boxing skills into a gold medal at the 2010 All-Army Championships in the 152-pound division and an invitation to join the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program at Fort Carson, Colorado, Vasquez knew something was different about him. Those feelings lingered and manifested themselves in the dark confines of the bedroom in the house Vasquez shared with his wife, DelRae, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“A lot of traffic came by my house,” Vasquez said. “At night, I really couldn’t get a lot of sleep. I would count the cars that would pass my house. The lights would reflect off my blinds and hit my ceiling. It was hard for me to fall asleep. I was always thinking because I would hear brakes, cars slowing down and stopping. On Halloween, I looked outside and there was a kid out late at night. A truck stopped right by my house and the kid was jumping in the back of a truck and they rolled off and I would hear the brakes, then again down the next street. I would get very paranoid. It was just tough.”

Vasquez credits his wife with helping him carry the burdens and urging him to get help.

“A lot of people know the cover of my story but my wife is the only one who knows my book,” he said. “She’s the one who helps me deal with everything. If it wasn’t for her, I’d be hurting. I mean not even my father, nobody really, knows about everything because people just don’t understand unless they’ve been through it.”

Vasquez goes to weekly sessions with a counselor and sees a psychiatrist regularly, which has calmed his anxiety. He said he has received a big lift by recently moving his family to a home on five acres of property in Colorado Springs.

“I sleep 10 times better than I ever have,” Vasquez said. “It’s been really good now.”

All of his progress is bolstered by the physical outlet that boxing provides.

“Boxing’s very therapeutic for me,” Vasquez said. “I get a lot of anxiety, I’ll get angry or frustrated. If I ever get into that moment, I’ll just go to the gym and hit the bag, think about things and get it all out. When I get tired physically, I’m able to think a lot clearer about the whole situation and then explain to my kids or my wife why I acted out the way I did. We’re able to talk about it, discuss it. It’s just a way for me to wear my body out to where I can really think.

“There’s a lot of things that we all deal with. With this, it’s never going to go away. But it takes dealing with it every day. Eventually you’ll be able to help yourself.”

Another facet of his training that helps is being coached by a former NCO. Retired Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, a former All-Army champion and the World Class Athlete Program head boxing coach, has helped Vasquez reel off a slew of victories. The fighter says his coach has also served as a father figure and is an advocate during his journey through PTSD.

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“Sammy’s right there,” Leverette said in a previous interview with the NCO Journal. “He is close to big things. ... We just have to keep proving ourselves and what comes next will come next.”

But Vasquez acknowledges far more of the Army is in his corner. Throngs of Soldiers have expressed their support. While he hopes to make them proud, he also wants to use his platform to help remove the stigma for those who may be experiencing some of the psychological challenges he faces.

“I appreciate all the NCO support, the support from all the Army,” Vasquez said. “But also, I’m rooting for all the guys who are cheering for me. If you’re ever in a struggle or any situation where you don’t know what to do anymore, you definitely need to go talk to the VA, a therapist or a counselor. There’s help out there. You need to be the one to take that step to go see somebody. If you can’t see somebody or you’re afraid to, you can always message me. I’ll reply back, I’ll help you find a source to go get help.

“We’re born and bred in the military to deal with things and just work it out on our own. But everybody needs help. From my standpoint, I’m ranked top 10 in the world in boxing but yet I still go see a therapist. I have a psychiatrist that I talk to. I sought help. It doesn’t matter who you are, how big you are or how little you are. Just because I box and I’m on TV, it doesn’t dictate who I am as a person. So it’s not demeaning or belittling to go see somebody to talk about your situation. It actually really, really does help you. I did eight years. After you’re done you can always follow your dreams. Me? I’m just going to keep pushing forward like always, keep adapting to anything that changes, just like this fight.”

The fight in question is just another obstacle Vasquez must navigate to position himself for a title shot. He said he wants to fight WBC champion Danny Garcia before the end of 2017. A win against the undefeated Philadelphia fighter would bring one of Vasquez’s dreams to fruition. He said he’d defend that title several times before moving on from boxing and on to the next lofty ambition.

“I want to add that to my story,” Vasquez said of his goal to climb Everest. “I just think of my kids being able to say, ‘My dad’s been to Iraq twice, he was a welterweight champion and he climbed Mount Everest. What did your dad do?’ So I want to get to the top.”

The climb begins this Saturday inside Legacy Arena.

## **Watch it**

- What: Sammy Vasquez Jr. (21-0, 15 knockouts) vs. Felix Diaz (17-1, 8 KOs) in welterweight fight.
- When, where: 8 p.m. EDT, Legacy Arena, Birmingham, Alabama.

- On TV: FOX.
- Of note: Vasquez is a former sergeant with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. He deployed to Iraq twice during an eight-year career. The fight is the co-main event, with the headline fight featuring WBC champion Deontay Wilder defending his title against Chris Arreola.