

# Ex-NCO Comes Up Short in Welterweight Boxing Main Event

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Sammy Vasquez Jr.

Sammy Vasquez Jr. entered the ring Thursday night for a nationally televised welterweight boxing match, believing it was a bout he couldn't afford to lose.

The only problem? His opponent felt the same way.

Vasquez, a former sergeant with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, suffered the second loss of his career when he was knocked out in the sixth round by Luis Collazo. The fight was the main event of a Premier Boxing Champions card at the Horseshoe Tunica Hotel and Casino in Tunica, Mississippi.

Vasquez (21-2) entered the fight coming off the first setback of his career, a unanimous decision loss to Felix Diaz in July. Collazo was Vasquez's original opponent in that summer tilt before an injury in training camp made way for Diaz. Vasquez remained eager to eventually face the battle-tested Collazo in order to salvage his top-15 ranking in boxing's premier division.

But Collazo (37-7) had plans of his own. The veteran southpaw hadn't fought since a July 2015 loss to WBA welterweight champion Keith Thurman. The long layoff gave many experts reason to write off the 35-year-old. He knew he had a weapon in his repertoire that could prove otherwise.

"I knew his big punch was the right hook," Vasquez told reporters after the fight. "I was working on keeping my hand up to block it. I dropped it at the wrong time, and he got me."

Collazo first connected with the punch in Round 3, sending Vasquez to the canvas. He then deftly lured the Iraq War veteran into the knockout blow in the sixth round.

"In the locker room, my team was telling me that he's going to be waiting for it," Collazo said. "We wanted to touch him soft down low and then go up top. We opened him up. We both tried to line up the hook, and mine landed first."

Vasquez controlled the action early, using his movement and jab to nullify Collazo's aggressive approach. But Collazo found his target in Round 3, resulting in the knockdown. Vasquez regained his legs in the fourth round, peppering Collazo with a flurry of punches that opened a cut above his right eye. Action slowed down in Round 5 as Vasquez resumed keeping Collazo at bay with his movement, seemingly clawing his way back

into the fight.

But it all came to a violent end in Round 6.

Though disappointed with the result, Vasquez also approached the setback with a different perspective. He previously stated that he has been in the biggest fight of his life. Vasquez deployed twice to Iraq with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard in 2005-'06 and in 2008-'09. He carries the hidden scars of war. Last year, Vasquez revealed he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He attends weekly sessions with a counselor and sees a psychiatrist regularly. Vasquez said his progress is bolstered by the physical outlet boxing provides.

After his second consecutive loss, Vasquez knows he will have an arduous task ahead of him to climb up the welterweight rankings again. But — as he did last summer — he is willing to make the trek back.

“Obviously this is going to set me back,” he said. “I need to come back stronger. I hope that I can come back and fight someone that can help me move up the ranks.”