

Former NCO Looks to Get Back on Track in Boxing's Welterweight Division

By Pablo Villa, NCO Journal

February 1, 2017



Sammy Vasquez Jr.

It would have been easy for Sammy Vasquez Jr. to take a step back.

After suffering his first professional loss and a health scare last summer, the budding welterweight boxing star could have set his sights on an opponent of a lesser caliber in order to get back into the win column. But Vasquez, a former sergeant in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, knows only one direction to move — forward.

"Boxers now, if they lose a fight, they take a step back," Vasquez said during a recent telephone interview. "They fight mediocre guys just to get back on a win streak. I don't have time for that. I want to fight the best guy out there. I don't care who. Just throw me in against someone."

That someone will be veteran Luis Collazo. Vasquez (21-1-0, 15 knockouts) faces the former WBA welterweight champion Thursday in the main event of a Premier Boxing Champions card at the Horseshoe Tunica Hotel and Casino in Tunica, Mississippi. The fight will be broadcast live on Fox Sports 1.

Collazo (36-7, 2 KOs) will arrive in Mississippi with a solid résumé. Most of the losses on his record have come at the hands of world champions, including his most recent fight in July 2015 against Keith Thurman, the current WBA title holder. The veteran southpaw presents a formidable challenge in Vasquez's quest to bounce back. But the former sergeant's preparation, which he says has been bolstered by the removal of a tumor and a trio of parathyroid glands in his throat, is also aided by a bit of familiarity.

Vasquez was scheduled to fight Collazo in July before an injury forced the New York-based fighter to bow out. Vasquez was forced to adjust to a new opponent in Felix Diaz, an Olympic gold medalist for the Dominican Republic who gave Vasquez fits when the pair squared off at Legacy Arena in Birmingham, Alabama. Diaz's fast hands and sprightly footwork nullified Vasquez's game plan. Though Vasquez offers no excuses for his unanimous-decision loss, he does concede his health was a factor in the fight. The tumor gave him elevated levels of calcium and caused his Vitamin D levels to dip. He developed kidney stones. The surgery to have the tumor removed was scheduled two days after the fight. Despite that, he pushed forward.

"I didn't tell anybody on my team about the tumor," Vasquez said. "I kept that to myself because I didn't want anybody to take the fight away from me. Diaz is a very tough fighter. A competitive fighter. The things that I wanted to do. I couldn't do. My feet felt like they were in quicksand."

... was a very tough fight, a competitive fight. The things that mattered to me, I didn't see my feet and they were in question.

Like a good NCO, Vasquez said he adjusted. He led Diaz around the ring, hoping the smaller fighter would tire from the number of punches he was throwing. Vasquez bided his time until the ninth round when he unleashed a flurry of punches that momentarily stunned Diaz. But it wasn't enough.

"I just couldn't close the deal," Vasquez said. "I was just too physically exhausted."

Vasquez didn't have much time to dwell on the loss before his surgery 48 hours later. He says being surrounded by a solid support team including his coach, retired Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, a former All-Army champion and the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program head boxing coach, made the healing process easier.

"They were there through the whole process," Vasquez said. "Everything, through the fight, after the fight, they were there giving me positive vibes. The people that you really know are there for you when you're at your worst or your best. It touched me. But at the same time, I don't dwell on the past. I just get ready for the future."

The immediate future brings an opponent who will be no pushover. Collazo is historically an aggressive fighter who tries to back fighters down, willing to eat shots to deliver some of his own. But Vasquez says he is prepared for any contingency the crafty veteran will bring.

"I have to stay on my toes, box him," Vasquez said. "He's always a come-forward guy. He takes a good shot and keeps coming and coming. We worked on a lot of game plans. I'm very excited about this fight. It will definitely test where I'm at in this game."

A win against the battle-tested Collazo puts Vasquez back in the conversation among the upper echelon of the stacked welterweight division, his manager said.

"Sammy Vasquez Jr. is a warrior. He has the character to go forward," said Garry Jonas, CEO of Probox Management, in an interview with BoxRec.com. "This opportunity against Collazo will be Sammy's return to the big fights. He is at the best level and will soon be challenging boxers like Danny Garcia, Keith Thurman, Errol Spence Jr. and the best out there at welterweight."

"We do not want to make any excuses about his defeat in the last fight. I just want to say that we are convinced that this year Sammy Vasquez Jr. will return to the big fights. Sammy is a pro. He prepares for each fight with determination and that is what will stamp his name again with the big fights."

The label of pro is one Vasquez has previously said he honed during his time with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. The Monessen, Pennsylvania, native 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, Vasquez turned to the sport he had been a part of since he was 9 years old. 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. After his time in the Army, Vasquez quickly ascended the welterweight ranks, collecting the World Boxing Council Central American Boxing Federation, or WBC/FECARBOX, title along the way.

During his rise, Vasquez quietly dealt with the hidden scars of war. Before his fight against Aaron Martinez in January 2016, Vasquez revealed he had been living with post-traumatic stress disorder. Vasquez credits his wife, DeRae, with helping him carry the burdens and urging him to get help. He still goes to weekly sessions with a counselor and sees a psychiatrist regularly, which has calmed his anxiety. He continues to urge fellow veterans and Soldiers to seek help if life is proving difficult.

"The things that I've been through in my life are tough," Vasquez said. "But everybody goes through problems. My message is there's always help out there no matter what situation you're going through. There are always people to talk to, there's always someone to confide in. I would definitely take advantage of that. I think that's the biggest problem for a lot of veterans. A lot of us are so thick-headed, we don't feel that we ever have a problem or we ever need to talk to somebody. I really hope that people can start reaching out and start talking about their issues or problems with someone who can help them find a better avenue to get through tough situations."

For Vasquez, the next tough situation arrives in one day, and he intends to show that he is ready to fight his way forward.

"It was a good thing I lost that fight (against Diaz) because I think that a lot of people were ducking me," he said. "I was undefeated, an up-and-comer and had a lot of hype around me. So a lot of guys were afraid to fight me. Now that I lost, it's 'Oh this kid's beatable.' So hopefully now I'll get an opportunity to fight names. Fighting somebody and beating somebody like Collazo I think is a great reputable name for me, especially after taking my first loss."

Watch it

What: Sammy Vasquez Jr. (21-1, 15 knockouts) vs. Luis Collazo (36-7, 19 KOs) in welterweight fight.

When, where: 8 p.m. EST Thursday, Horseshoe Tunica Hotel and Casino, Tunica, Mississippi.

On TV: Fox Sports 1.

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 main event of a Premier Boxing Champions card. The undercard includes a welterweight fight between Yordenis Ugas (17-3, 8 KOs) and Levan Ghvachava (17-2-1, 13 KOs); and a junior welterweight bout between Ryan Karl (13-0, 9 KOs) and Eddie Ramirez (15-0, 10 KOs).

Get help

If you think you are suffering from the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, there are ways to get help:

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (tel:1-800-273-8255).

Contact the Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255 (tel:1-800-273-8255), press 1 (text 838255)

Find a therapist: www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/therapy-med/finding-a-therapist.asp (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/therapy-med/finding-a-therapist.asp>)

All Veterans Affairs Medical Centers provide PTSD care, as well as many VA clinics. Some VA's have programs specializing in PTSD treatment. The VA PTSD Program Locator can help you find a PTSD program: www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp (<http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp>).

If you are a war Veteran, call the 24/7 Veteran Combat Call Center 1-877-927-8387 (tel:1-877-927-8387) to talk to another combat Veteran.

DoD's Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) 24/7 Outreach Center for Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury provides information and helps locate resources. Call 1-866-966-1020 (tel:1-866-966-1020) or email resources@dcoeoutreach.org (<mailto:resources@dcoeoutreach.org>)

Military OneSource: Call 24/7 for counseling and many resources 1-800-342-9647 (tel:1-800-342-9647).