

# Former NCO Vows to Learn From First Professional Boxing Loss

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

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Sammy Vasquez Jr. walked out of the ring dejected.

The 30-year-old former sergeant in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard had just finished battling Felix Diaz to a standstill in a welterweight boxing match Saturday night at Legacy Arena in Birmingham, Alabama. For Vasquez, it was the first time he didn't emerge from a fight victorious. Instead, he heard a judges' verdict of a majority draw.

Then, Vasquez was called back to the ring.

In an uncommon move, the state boxing commission representatives at ringside recalculated the judges' scores and deemed the fight a unanimous decision for Diaz, handing Vasquez his first professional loss.

"I've never been in a situation where I had to wait for them to add up the scores again," said Vasquez, whose record now stands at 21-1 with 15 knockouts.

For the former NCO, it was the second time this bout provided the need to adapt quickly to

change. Merely two weeks before Vasquez was scheduled to enter the ring, Diaz was installed as his opponent after his previous foe, Luis Collazo, was scratched due to injury. Several boxing writers deemed Diaz a much harsher test for Vasquez — despite being five inches shorter — given his background as an Olympic gold medalist in 2008 for the Dominican Republic who was coming off a hotly contested majority decision loss to former champion Lamont Peterson last December. That notion came to fruition Saturday night. Vasquez knew it even before he had to march back to the ring after the first decision was announced.

“I knew in my heart I lost that fight,” he told reporters after the contest, which was the co-main event of a card that saw WBC heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder successfully defend his title against Chris Arreola. “I tried my hardest, but there were things I should have done that I didn’t do.”

Vasquez accepted the new result with grace and dignity, clapping for Diaz after his win was announced.

“He’s a hell of a fighter,” Vasquez said. “He’s an Olympic gold medalist for a reason. He had a tough decision loss to Lamont Peterson. To me, he was an undefeated Olympic gold medalist. I take nothing away from the man.”

The fight seemed to begin according to Vasquez’s plan. He slowly backed the shorter Diaz down, keeping him at bay with his longer jab. But near the end of Round 2, Diaz unleashed a barrage of counter punches that momentarily stunned Vasquez. That theme replayed throughout the fight, as Diaz timed his counter-overhand shots well. Vasquez struggled to avoid the punches anytime Diaz came forward. The longer the fight went, the more galvanized Diaz became as he partook in some mild showboating by waving his hand like a mitt trying to goad Vasquez into a trade inside.

In Round 7, Vasquez lost his mouthpiece from a glancing blow. He lost it again in Round 8 after Diaz backed him into a corner. The fighters traded a rousing flurry of punches in Round 9 that brought the crowd to its feet, with Vasquez appearing to find his form again after struggling for most of the middle rounds. In Round 10, Diaz was content moving about the ring figuring his decision victory was sealed. Vasquez landed a slew of jabs while Diaz backed up. Diaz landed a counter shot in the round’s waning seconds that once again dislodged Vasquez’s mouthpiece. The referee stopped action and took a point from Vasquez for the delay before the fight ended less than a minute later.

That point proved to be the difference on two of the judges’ modified scorecards as Ron Moon and Irwin Deutsch both scored it 95-94. Karen Holderfield scored the bout 96-93 for Diaz after the modification.

Despite suffering his first loss, Vasquez vowed to regroup and continue his quest to become a

world champion.

“We’ll huddle up and start back at the drawing board,” he said. “I’ve got to start knocking those names down again. ... This is my first loss. Losses you learn from. Losses just mean you have room to grow. We’ll take it and come back strong the next time.”

While disappointed with the result, Vasquez also approaches the setback with a different perspective. Vasquez deployed twice to Iraq with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard in 2005-06 and in 2008-09. He still carries the hidden scars of war. Earlier this year before his fight against Aaron Martinez, Vasquez revealed he had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He still attends weekly sessions with a counselor and sees a psychiatrist regularly. Vasquez said his progress is bolstered by the physical outlet boxing provides.

“I’ve already been in the biggest fight of my life,” Vasquez said in the lead-up to his tilt with Diaz. “The difference when fighting other people in the ring and fighting in a war is you get to walk away. Win, lose or draw, I don’t really care. I mean, I want to win of course, but at the same time for someone that has been through the stuff that I have, that us Soldiers have, it’s just great to be ranked in the top 10 in the world. If it was all gone tomorrow, I wouldn’t be upset. I’ve accomplished a lot in my life and I’m very proud of how far I’ve come.”