

Former NCO Returns to the Ring in Showcase Main Event

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By Pablo Villa

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The last time boxing star and former Army Sgt. Sammy Vasquez Jr. was inside a ring, he kept his undefeated record intact on national television. His next act will garner even more of the spotlight.

Vasquez announced Tuesday that his next professional fight is scheduled Jan. 23 against Aaron Martinez at Staples Center in Los Angeles. The welterweight bout is the co-main event of a fight card headlined by welterweights Danny Garcia and Robert Guerrero. Vasquez (20-0, 14 KOs) will look to stay unbeaten against Martinez (20-4, 4 KOs) in a 10-round match and retain his World Boxing Council Central American Boxing Federation, or WBC/FECARBOX, title. Both fights will be televised live beginning at 6 p.m. in the Premier Boxing Champions' inaugural event on FOX.

"I'm exciting to be fighting Aaron Martinez and to be fighting on this big stage in a fight that I think the fans will really enjoy," Vasquez said after the fight announcement. "This is just another stepping stone for me to move closer to my goal of fighting for a world title. This will be my first time fighting in California, and I'm sure the fans out there will enjoy my exciting style of fighting. I've always wanted to fight at Staples Center and now I have my chance. I'll be a long way from home, but it's a nice feeling that all of my fans who can't make it will get to watch me on FOX."

Vasquez's contingent of supporters expands far beyond his native Monessen, Pennsylvania. He has developed a following among the Army ranks and he says he fights with them in mind. Vasquez served nine years with the Army National Guard and deployed to Iraq twice. He honed his boxing craft with the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program, narrowly missing the Olympics in 2012. He says he carries the lessons and hardships of his fellow Soldiers with him every time he steps in the ring.

"There are Soldiers out there who can't live their dream because they got blown up by an IED, and now they're amputees," Vasquez told the NCO Journal last summer. "I fight for those guys. They can't do that stuff anymore. I try to show them and give everyone else a better light of the military, because there's so much negativity against the military. But the military has been around me, obviously, for a long time. So for me to showcase it in a better picture while I'm doing my sport? That's why I do it."

Vasquez, 29, does it with an Army-laden background in his corner. His head coach is recently retired Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, a former All-Army champion and the WCAP head boxing coach. Together, the two have reeled off a slew of exciting victories, most recently a fifth-round technical knockout over Jose Lopez on Sept. 15 in California, Pennsylvania. Their next test will be against a tough competitor who is coming off a convincing unanimous decision win against former welterweight champion Devon Alexander in October.

"This is a great opportunity that I am very thankful for," Martinez said. "Sammy is a great fighter who I have a lot of respect for but Los Angeles is my home. I intend on defending my turf and coming out victorious."

With a win, Vasquez can put himself in position for a potential title fight against the winner of the co-main event between Garcia and Guerrero. Garcia is the No. 2-ranked welterweight by the World Boxing Council and is a former title-holder in the light welterweight division. Vasquez's coach knows the heights are endless for him.

"We're hoping for bigger things," Leverette said. "The buzz that's in the air is, 'OK, now this kid has proven himself.' We just have to keep proving ourselves and what comes next will come next."

Watch it

- **What:** Sammy Vasquez Jr. (20-0, 14 knockouts) vs. Aaron Martinez (20-4, 4 KOs) in welterweight fight.
- **When, where:** 8 p.m. EST Jan. 23, Staples Center, Los Angeles.
- **On TV:** Fox.
- **Of note:** Vasquez is a former sergeant with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. He deployed to Iraq twice during a nine-year career. The fight is the co-main event of a card headlined by a welterweight championship clash between Danny Garcia and Robert Guerrero.