

FORMER NCO, CURRENT WBC/
FECARBOX WELTERWEIGHT CHAMPION

SAMMY VASQUEZ JR.



Former NCO Continues Combat Tour In The Ring

By Pablo Villa – NCO Journal

When budding boxing star Sammy Vasquez Jr. steps in the ring Sunday at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, it will be the first time one of the former Army sergeant's fights will be showcased on national television.

The 10-round welterweight bout, which will air live on CBS, will pit Vasquez (18-0, 13 knockouts) against Nigerian knockout artist Wale Omotoso (25-1, 21 KOs). The clash at the MGM's famed Grand Garden Arena will be the first time in more than two years that Vasquez, a Monessen, Pa., native and the World Boxing Council Central American Boxing Federation, or WBC/FECARBOX champion, fights in Las Vegas — the sport's modern mecca. Despite the elevated stakes and grandiose setting, Vasquez, who deployed twice to Iraq during a nine-year career with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, is unfazed.

"People ask me all the time, 'Are you nervous?' or 'How do you feel fighting in front of everybody on a big stage like that?'" Vasquez said during a phone interview from Fort Carson, Colo., where he held his training camp. "I tell them, 'I've deployed twice. I've already been on the biggest stage of my life.'"

Fighting has been a part of Vasquez's life since he was 9 years old. That's when he was introduced to boxing by

his father, who wanted to give his son an outlet and a method to defend himself from the bullies that hounded the younger Vasquez at school. While his newfound pugilistic skills staved off most schoolyard fights, Vasquez showed glimmers of talent inside the ropes during an amateur career that would number about 200 fights. But he never thought about fighting professionally. Instead, he enlisted in the National Guard after high school to help pay for college. That decision introduced him to a fight like no other.

Vasquez deployed in 2005-06 and in 2008-09. His first deployment took him to Camp Habbaniyah, Iraq, where gunfire was 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.

"Going overseas, it gives you a different outlook on life," Vasquez said. "It shows you how blessed we are to be in the country that we live in. I'm just blessed to be here boxing, living my dream and giving the fans enjoyment from someone who used to be a Soldier, used to be in Iraq and used to do everything a Soldier does."

Vasquez still found time to train in the sport he loves while deployed, setting up makeshift gyms amid the Spartan conditions of various Iraqi locales. He said

it provided a release from the rigors of deployment. He eventually parlayed that work 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. While a member of WCAP, Vasquez earned a berth at the 2012 U.S. Olympic Trials. Though he missed being a part of Team USA — he lost the spot to Errol Spence Jr., himself a rising professional boxing star — Vasquez knew fighting would remain in his life.

After leaving from the Army, Vasquez made his professional debut April 7, 2012, in a four-round bout against Clifford Gregory. Vasquez defeated Gregory by technical knockout in Round 2, displaying the grit and power that has helped him rack up victories and become a fan-friendly draw.

“I try to be entertaining, but at the same time be smart,” Vasquez said. “I want to be an exciting fighter. I want to be that edge-of-your-seat fighter.”

He says he also wants to fight for those who can’t anymore.

“There are Soldiers out there who can’t live their dream because they got blown up by an IED (improvised explosive device), and now they’re amputees,” Vasquez said. “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.”

Since his first professional win, Vasquez has reeled off a slew of victories. He has stopped eight of his last nine opponents in stunning fashion, with several of those wins shown on cable television. His last victory perhaps vaulted him onto a plane closer to the 147-pound division’s biggest stars. Vasquez defeated Emmanuel Lartey by unanimous decision Feb. 20 in Pittsburgh, a mere 30 miles from Vasquez’s hometown. The bout was the main event of a Showtime Boxing card. It gave Vasquez his greatest exposure to date and proved he could go the distance against stern competition.

“I wanted to knock him out,” Vasquez said of Lartey. “But at the same time, there’s a lot of talk of, you know, can I go 10 rounds? The only people that Lartey lost to were Errol Spence and Felix Diaz. I think I handled him better than any one of them.

“(Lartey) wanted to quit in the eighth round, but his coach wouldn’t let him. If I would’ve pressured him in the ninth round, he would have quit. I guarantee it. But I decided to box and just not risk it. I just wanted to be smart about it and beat him.”

Beat him Vasquez did. That win set the stage for his first showcase bout in Las Vegas. His clash with Omoto-

so will be the featured undercard of a main event pitting Rances Barthelemy against Antonio DeMarco in a super lightweight showdown. Though the fight is far from home in one of the most storied environments the sport offers and against a challenging opponent, Vasquez is composed.

“It’s a different atmosphere, of course,” Vasquez said. “Me fighting at home, I bring six- to eight thousand people to the fight. So, coming to this one, I know I’ve got about a plane and a half coming down for the fight. So I’ll have some fans there. It’ll be a different venue, but the same results. You can’t let wherever you fight dictate what the fight outcome is going to be.

“To be successful against (Omotoso), my game plan is to box him. I don’t think he can take the power that I have. He hasn’t really fought anybody with power yet. But he’s doing his job. I see mistakes that he makes, but I see nobody exposing mistakes so far. So my job is to do that.”

To accomplish that task, Vasquez hasn’t strayed far from his military foundation. His head coach is Staff Sgt. Charles Leverette, a former All-Army champion and the WCAP head boxing coach. Vasquez says having someone in his corner who understands his trials and tribulations as both a boxer and a Soldier is a boon.

“It’s tremendous. It’s a huge help,” Vasquez said. “In this sport, in this game, you have to keep a close, tight-knit family. Having Coach Lev be the head coach and be a part of the team — the guy who was the head coach of the military boxing team — you couldn’t ask for anything better. He still has the mind-frame that I have. That’s why we work so great together. He still has that Soldier mentality when we both work out. But when we go home and we have family parties and stuff like that, we relax, we have fun.”

Their lessons as NCOs add to the successful mix, Vasquez said. He credits his time as a sergeant in the National Guard with teaching him the biggest lesson that an elite fighter requires.

“Discipline. You have to be disciplined in this sport,” Vasquez said. “It’s unreal. You have to cut weight. You have to watch what you eat. Everyone around you is eating pizza and you have to eat salads. The training and work ethic have to be superior. You have to push yourself to different levels. Being an NCO, that’s what your main job is. You’re in charge of people. You have to look out for them. You have to be on your A-game at all times. So, being an NCO, that’s what taught me — the same kind of aspect as in boxing — I have to be on my p’s and q’s at all times. I have to be mentally prepared and mentally focused. If things don’t go my way or I have a bad day sparring or a bad day of training, I have to know and be focused on the next task at hand.”

For now, the next task at hand is Wale Omotoso. And Vasquez will look to find a way to win the fight, like he has most of his life.

Watch it

- What: Sammy Vasquez Jr. (18-0, 13 knockouts) vs. Wale Omotoso (25-1, 21 KOs) in welterweight fight.
- When, where: 4 p.m. EDT, MGM Grand Garden

Arena, Las Vegas.

- On TV: CBS.
- 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 featured undercard of a main event bout featuring super lightweights Rances Barthelemy and Antonio DeMarco. ■



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