Julio Gonzalez (37-2 23 KOs) fights Montell Griffin (47-5 30 KOs) in an IBF light heavyweight elimination bout from the Spa Resort Casino in Palm Springs, California. The winner meets Clinton Woods for the title.

It has been a long hard road for Gonzalez to reach this point. He was born Julio Cesar Gonzalez Ibarra on June 30, 1967 in Guerrero Negro, Mexico.

"We're a family of seven boys, no girls. We lived on a farm. I moved to the States when I was twelve. Ever since I was 14-years-old I got into boxing. I was like a lost kid wandering around the neighborhood and I found a gym. I just started liking boxing from then and kept it up. It kept me out of trouble. It kept me out of gangs," Gonzalez tells me. "You like this thing. It's something that grows inside of you. I fought amateur and then I decided I wanted to go back to Mexico to represent Mexico in Atlanta '96. I made the team for Atlanta '96 and I qualified, but my luck ran out when I met Vassiliy Jirov for the first trials and he put me out of the tournament."

Although Gonzalez was out of the tournament, he was not out of boxing: "After the Olympics I took a little bit of time off, like a couple of months, and then I decided to give a shot to the pros and I did good. I just did 28 fights as a pro undefeated - until I fought Roy Jones and he gave me my first loss."

The two men met at the Staples Center on May 28, 2001 and Jones decisioned Gonzalez. I'm curious what it was like fighting Roy.

"It was something great," Gonzales says. "All my career I watched him be a great fighter and I was just amazed to be in the ring with him. He had tremendous speed. You can get ready for speed, but once you were there with Jones it was something else. Roy Jones was just a tremendous fighter with tremendous speed."

There's no question that Jones had tremendous speed, but his career prospects have taken a dive of late.

"It was shocking to see him lose back-to-back fights. I tell people that what hurt him was going up and coming back down for the heavyweights. Not so much physically, but emotionally too, because at the time you happened to have the hurricane going on over there in Florida and some cocks of his died, so emotionally I think he wasn't there," says Gonzalez. "You can see it in the fight that he was not throwing punches. He was not himself. The same thing happened to Barrera when he fought Pacquiao. The fires were going on right here at Big Bear and he had no more camp and he couldn't concentrate. The kind of excuses I give myself for them."

Distractions outside the ring can be disastrous inside the ring. How does one prevent or control all those disturbances?

"You try to control that by moving your camp somewhere else, stay focused, or doing whatever works for you. That's what being a professional is all about," the light heavyweight contender insists. "You have to adapt to everything that's going on and come up with some ideas that keep you focused."

I ask Gonzalez if he can take step back and objectively describe his skills.

He laughs and says "I used to say that I was a skillful boxer, that I'm tall and long and like to box, but lately I guess I've shown to everybody and myself that I'm a fighter, a true warrior, a true Mexican that doesn't use my natural ability - long arms, tall, just jab, move around. I like to get in there and fight toe-to-toe. And my heart is my biggest thing that I have - that I'm not a quitter. If they're going to take me out, they're going to have to take me out on a stretcher. So, there's no end for me."

No matter what, it's not likely the end will come with tonight's fight.

"And whoever wins goes for the title against Clinton Woods and we cannot let that opportunity go to waste. This is what we've been working for. This is what everybody wants," Gonzalez says. "It's going to be a great fight. It's a veteran fighter that brings a lot of things into the ring, and a young fighter that is hungry and is going to win the fight!"

Griffin has an unusual manner in the ring. I wonder how Julio Gonzalez contends with his opponent's style.

"We have sparring partners that simulate his fighting style, but we have to adapt, too, to what situations he brings to the ring, because he's adjusting to my style of fighting too. So we both have to adjust in the ring. I expect Montell Griffin will prepare. This is his last shot at the title, so I expect him to be ready for a good fight. Griffin is a very good counterpuncher, a slick fighter that likes to move his waist a lot and is hard to hit. But I gotta push the fight and make him fight the fight I want to fight, a toe-to-toe fight. He can duck so many punches," says Gonzalez, "but not all of them."