No longer an outlet for has-been champs and never-will-be pretenders, ESPN2 has offered a major upgrade in terms of competitive matchups for its Friday Night Fight series this year. Tonight is no exception, as promising Bay Area welterweight Jose Antonio Celaya (26-2 15 KOs) squares off against undefeated Tennessee product James Tim “Spider” Webb (17-0 14 KOs) in San Jose, California.

The bout, which headlines a card promoted by Marquez Brothers Entertainment, is more than a crossroads bout. It also serves as a reunion between old friends from the amateur days, as Celaya and Webb first met at the 2000 Olympic Trials. Both recall meeting and being impressed with the other.

“I thought it was odd that my first big break would come against an old friend,” said Webb, who makes his national televised debut this Friday. “It’s been five years since I’ve seen him, and a part of me would’ve liked to have faced someone else. But this is boxing, so I put that aside and look at the opportunity. National television, and Celaya has a world ranking (#10 by IBF at 147, #23 by the WBC at 154). That’s all the motivation I need to want to win, and look good doing so.”

Celaya shares a similar view, even if the motivation differs.

“I like Webb. I remember him from the amateurs, though it’s been about five years since I’ve seen him,” recalls Celaya, who will also grace the national airwaves for the first time in his career. “But none of that will come into the ring with me. I’ve already had my share of setbacks, and have worked very hard to keep them in the past. A big win over an undefeated fighter will look very good on my resume as I move toward a title run.”

Webb will be the first undefeated fighter Celaya has faced since his pro debut five years ago. It remains to be seen if it translates into being his toughest test to date. Most of Webb’s seventeen victims have been of the club circuit variety, including a 2002 decision over the infamous Reggie Strickland. Hailing from Columbia, TN, approximately forty-five miles south of Nashville, Webb does not reside in a boxing hotbed, and has been forced to fight off the boxing radar as a result.

Conversely, Celaya has been celebrated for so long, it’s hard to believe that he is only twenty-three years old. With a solid marketing team and a dedicated fan base in the Bay Area, Celaya has received championship treatment even when participating in eight round fights. Though lacking a win over a big name thus far, Celaya does boast victories over solid divisional trial horses such as Hector Quiroz (TD10, July 2002) and Norberto Bravo (UD8, February 2003).

A lot has changed in Celaya’s career since those fights, though it took an upset stoppage loss for him to realize that he needed to grow as a fighter.

"When I lost to (Eduardo) Sanchez, my career was a bit unstable," says Celaya. "I just signed with Emmanuel Steward three weeks prior, and we went into the fight not really familiar with one another. That's never a good thing in the corner. I was WBO #1 contender for two-and-a-half months and was led to believe that I was facing Kermit Cintron before everything changed in my career. And then Sanchez comes along…"

And gone is his mandatory alphabet ranking. Sanchez went to San Jose and shocked the Bay Area with a sixth round stoppage over the budding contender. Celaya wasted no time in making additional changes amongst his team.

"Manny's still around, but he's my manager now. I ended up turning to John Bray, who has a great rep in this section of the world. The moment I hit his gym, I knew that I'd soon be able to put that "L" behind me. Instead of getting upset over a lost opportunity, I learned from the fight and am now 4-0, with 4 KO ever since."

The most recent win came just five weeks ago, a second round knockout over .500 club fighter Terry Wright. Such would be the same length of time since Webb has last fought, a third round knockout over forty-five year old stepstool named Lester Yarbrough.

Both fighters have been fairly active as of late; Celaya's four knockouts have all come within the past five-and-half months; Webb fought six times in 2004, the most he has fought in any given calendar year since turning pro in 2001. Admittedly, the competition left a lot to be desired, which is why he jumped at the opportunity to travel to San Jose, giving away home court advantage, in addition to taking on far and away the biggest fight of his career.

"The thing about living in a small town like Columbia is that there isn't a lot of local action going on," reveals Webb, who heads for California as this article goes to print. "I work full time performing oil changes all day, and have been limited to whatever club shows are around the way. I keep winning, obviously, but it's tough to get motivated for fights against walkover opponents I've seen hundreds of times. Celaya provides such motivation. Even if it means fighting in San Jose; at least I'll truly know what I'm made of at the end of the night."

Win, lose or draw, Webb plans on returning to the ring on June 2 in Nashville, on a ten-fight card offered by Rock Solid Promotions. Obviously, a win would be the preferred route to travel heading into next month's show.

"I've only fought twice in Nashville, and both came early in my career," says Webb. "So the thought of being a part of a big show so close to my hometown has me very excited. Knowing that my local fans will be there to support me will make the night that much more special. However, it will be a lot less of a thrill if I head into the show with a loss. But it's an opportunity I didn't want to pass on, which is why I take the fights three weeks apart. I obviously couldn't pass on the ESPN2 card, so now on top of wanting Celaya's ranking, I have even more motivation to leave San Jose with my "0" still intact."

No way, Jose…claims.

"I would like to see (Webb) go on to achieve great things, but it's not going to come at my expense," insists Celaya. "I've learned my lesson in taking a home court advantage for granted. Mr. Bray has me fine-tuned, and I'm ready to give my hometown the thrill of a lifetime.

"For me, this fight is an audition, an introduction for the next level. I get this win, and then start seeking the fights that will lead me to the belts or the jackpot."

The belts belong to Zab Judah, who defends his undisputed welterweight crown one night later in Las Vegas. The jackpot would be Oscar De La Hoya, easily the highest grossing fighter in the sport – heavyweights included. Oscar has threatened the boxing world with a welterweight return. Much like every other welterweight on the planet, Jose would love nothing more than a shot at pulling off the upset and earning millions in the process.

"I'm excited about Oscar returning to the division. It shakes things up, makes them more exciting. With Zab having all sorts of mandatory challenges lined up, there's a long wait for his belts. Oscar provides a second option, and a much more lucrative one at that. A win over him would be just as huge as becoming undisputed champ."

Webb has his eyes on the same prize, but has no problem working his way toward the top. Not that he'd turn the fight down if the opportunity presented itself.

"I couldn't begin to tell you what a huge thrill it would be for me to land a fight with either Judah or Oscar de la Hoya. Right now, my goal is to beat Jose, stay busy, fighting at least once a month, and give ESPN2 and other networks enough of a reason to keep bringing me back on TV. It drives me crazy to see guys I knew from the amateurs get huge contracts, and then stop training the moment they turn pro. Shoot, I work full time, and still train four hours a day on top of my lunch break.

"Of course a fight with Oscar or Zab would be the breakthrough of a lifetime, but I'm not looking to get rich quick. I don't mind putting in the hard work, and earning my keep. If I did mind, I wouldn't fight someone like Jose right now. But I know that I'm ready for him, and that a win over him will spark interest once the day comes where the bigger fights are within reach."

Two old friends with one common goal. Unfortunately for one of them, his luck figures to run out come Friday the 13th.