

## Robert Benitez's Rising Star

Written by Robert Mladinich  
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When super bantamweight Roberto Benitez made the 2000 United States Olympic team as an alternate to Jose Navarro, he was besieged with offers to turn professional by a variety of promoters.

However, because he was so certain that he could win Olympic gold in 2004 he turned those offers down and opted to remain an amateur for another four years. Although he won the 2004 Olympic Trials, he lost a heartbreaker in the American qualifiers and was not invited to Athens.

Realizing it was time to turn pro, the now 25-year-old Benitez was disheartened by the lack of interest from promoters. He returned to his native New York, where he was born and raised on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

While preparing for the 2004 Olympics, he had been living in Marquette, Michigan, where he trained under the stewardship of the esteemed Al Mitchell. He also earned an associate's degree in business from Northern Michigan University, which he attended on a boxing scholarship.

"I was surprised at how little interest there was in me as a professional entity," said the extremely intelligent and articulate Benitez, whose parents were both born in the Dominican Republic. "I spoke with a few promoters, but they seemed to think that I'd be a hard sell because I was a lower-weight Dominican from the East Coast. They didn't share the same vision that I had.

"But that has only given me a stronger hunger to succeed. I respect successful people, not just successful athletes. I know that anyone who has achieved true success has not had an easy road. And I appreciate that."

When asked if he would have been willing to relocate, perhaps to Las Vegas, California, or Texas, where there would be no shortage of quality opponents, Benitez was circumspect.

"If the appropriate package came along I would be willing to move, no doubt," he said, while citing that Florida, where his beloved four-year-old daughter Janiyah resides, also has a vibrant boxing scene, much of which is based on fighters of Latino descent. "But I don't want to lose control of my career by signing with people that don't share the same enthusiasm that I have for my future."

Benitez, 3-0 (2 KOs), now trains at the Church Street Boxing Gym in downtown Manhattan with Ray Velez, who compiled a 6-4 (1 KO) record as a professional welterweight from 1985-89. He concedes that Velez is not yet known as a top-flight trainer, but hopes that they can both grow together in what is perhaps the world's toughest vocation.

He also has a small consortium of friends who assist him with his business affairs. From both a

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logistical and financial standpoint, it has been far from easy, especially for a fighter with such a good amateur pedigree.

Benitez's pro debut, a four round unanimous decision over Jenkins Alvarez, was televised by ESPN2 from Miami on April 8. Since then he has fought in Duluth, Georgia, and Dorchester, Massachusetts. The latter, which occurred on November 19, was a first round blowout of Nick Shaheen.

He is next scheduled to lace them up on December 29 at the Amazura Night Club in Queens, New York. He then travels to Salt Lake City for a January 26 bout against an opponent to be determined.

"I am a project in the works," said Benitez. "Once people see me fight, I believe they will be impressed. Michael Carbajal and Junior Jones were both able to establish themselves as HBO fighters. I feel as if I have as much fan appeal as they do.

"Being Dominican doesn't hurt me at all. I think that is a tremendous market to tap into. I'm proud of my Dominican heritage, and take that proudly into the ring with me."

Because Benitez is not currently aligned with any promoter, the logistics involved in establishing himself in such a challenging sport have been vexing. But he is smart enough and patient enough to realize that his time will come if he doesn't lose focus.

"I absolutely envision myself being an HBO fighter," said Benitez, who hopes that his unique good looks will also garner him future modeling assignments and film roles. "I have the heart, skills, tools, and desire to make it in this sport. Someday the right people will share that vision and, if necessary, help me get there."

Among the championship-caliber fighters Benitez has worked with are Joan Guzman and Kevin Kelley. Even though he is a veteran of over 200 amateur fights, of which he lost about 13, he says he learns a little something from everyone he spars with.

Benitez's boxing ability can only be matched by the apparent gratitude he seems to have for all of the hardship he has endured. Deep in his psyche, it seems, he realizes that for one to be truly happy with their success they must know that they earned it through their own grit and determination.

He admits that he only started boxing at the age of 10 because he was regularly bullied at school and was not very good at any team sports.

"I loved boxing from the first moment," he said. "It was the first sport I was really good at, and I loved hearing all the positive feedback. I got so much confidence from boxing, I went to the gym everyday just because it made me feel so good about myself."

Although Benitez is now fighting hard to see all of his lofty dreams come to fruition amid financial instability and the harsh realities of an unforgiving sport, his sense of self-belief is

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awe-inspiring. Without sounding the least bit arrogant or bombastic, he serves as his best public relations representative.

His website, [www.rbenitez.com](http://www.rbenitez.com), is regularly updated with articles and photos, and he bends over backwards to accommodate the press. Unlike many of his contemporaries, his cell phone number does not change weekly and he calls back when he says he will.

“It’s easy for people to lose interest and when they lose interest you lose your credibility,” said Benitez. “In boxing, you are only as good as your last fight. It’s a grimy business, which only makes me more determined to be successful. People like to tell me all the things that I don’t have going for me; mainly that I’m a lighter-weight fighter from the East Coast.

“But I’ve won five U.S. [amateur] championships and have done everything there is to do as an amateur. I know the pro game is different, but I’m not going to let that stop me. I have a lot to offer this game. I’m not looking for anything I haven’t worked hard to attain. I’m not looking for a handout or easy fights. I’m willing to put in my time and I take nothing for granted. Pretty soon the boxing community and the fans are going to realize that they have a new star on their hands.”