Keith Mullings was on cloud nine after stopping the heavily favored Terry Norris to win the WBC super welterweight title in December 1997.

The Brooklyn, New York, native who had served as an artillery man in the U.S. Army during the Gulf War in the early nineties was a breath of fresh air to the sport of boxing.

Having done most of his fighting on the road, the relatively unknown Mullings was a 10-1 underdog against Norris, even though he had lost a competitive 12-round split decision to IBF junior middleweight champion Raul Marquez just three months earlier.

Norris, who was looking forward to a $4.5 million payday against Oscar De La Hoya, couldn't help but look past Mullings.

That proved to be a very costly mistake. Mullings, who describes himself as "a non-denominational religious person who is as comfortable in a mosque as I am in a church," utilized his faith in the Story of Job to attain what might have seemed like the unattainable to a man of lesser grit and determination.

"Job endured a lot, but kept having faith through so many trials and tribulations," Mullings said back then. "Like Job, I never have any doubts."

Mullings had entered the Norris bout with a nominal record of 14-4-1 (9 KOS). He left the ring with a title and the newfound respect of the boxing public. Sadly, his title reign did not last long.

As a new champion, he made only one successful defense, an HBO-televised fifth round TKO over David Ciarlante of Italy in Atlantic City in March 1998.

In his next defense, in January 1999, he lost the title by majority decision to Javier Castillejo in Castillejo's home country of Spain.

Mullings still found himself somewhat in demand, but once again the breaks were not coming his way. He lost decisions to then undefeated David Reid, a 1996 Olympic gold medalist, and Winky Wright.

The bitterness, distrust and cynicism he was feeling was totally at odds with his warm, friendly and trusting nature. He retired after being shockingly stopped in two rounds by then undefeated Steve Roberts, 23-0 (9 KOS), in London in April 2001.

It was only time he was stopped in his professional career, which ended with a deceptively nominal record of 16-8-1 (11 KOS). At the time, Mullings had no intentions of ever coming back.

“A lot of things were happening to me, and I didn’t even realize what some of them were,” said Mullings, who, today, at the age of 38, still looks to be at his prime fighting weight.

“But I had a lot of issues. Everything was suspect to me: my management, my training, tainted water. My mind was running away from me.”

Seeking help at a Veterans Administration hospital, Mullings was soon diagnosed with post-traumatic stress-disorder (PTSD) from his days on the battlefield, where he often waged war in 145 degree heat.

Some of his paranoia was traced to a time some army colleagues messed with his gas mask. While he concedes that they might have done it as a joke, he says the lingering horrors of war sometimes make one’s mind do funny things.

“I was really hyper-vigilant, to the point where I needed to deal with my issues,” said Mullings. “I joined a group of war vets and found out that I was not alone. There were lots of vets from the Gulf War – even the Vietnam War – who had the same problems as I did.

“I always thought I was the only one,” he continued. “To find out I wasn’t alone was a godsend. I’ve learned how to trust again, not just in boxing but in every aspect of life.”

Mullings took a job in food services at a Westchester County veteran’s facility and concentrated on raising two of his four children in the Bronx.

He and his ex-wife Ruthie, who is also a U.S. Army veteran, broke up about four years ago.

Mullings was just looking for something to do when took in the recent boxing doubleheader featuring Vernon Forrest vs. Ike Quartey and Kassim Ouma vs. Sechew Powell at Madison Square Garden on August 5.

As he watched the action and hobnobbed with some old boxing acquaintances, he says the desire to fight again hit him like a bolt of lightning.

“I always had a lot of opportunities in life,” said Mullings. “I was a good baseball and football player in high school. That could have taken me places. When I graduated from James Madison High School in 1986, I barely had a 70 average but my classmates voted me the most likely to succeed.

“I had the opportunity to join the NYPD, but passed that up for boxing,” he continued. “I made a decision a long time ago to go into boxing with my heart and soul. Even though I won a title, I didn’t feel that I got out of boxing all that I could have. I didn’t really have time to enjoy my title, and I didn’t leave the game on my terms.”

Less than 48 hours after making the decision to return to the ring as a middleweight, Mullings was training with Hector Roca and an associate named Cowboy at Gleason’s Gym.

The second he entered the fabled training facility, he knew that he had made the right decision.

“It was like I was never away,” said Mullings. “I don’t want to be self deluding, but I sparred with a young undefeated kid and did very well. I’ve always been an underdog, so this is nothing new to me. I’m taking things one day at a time, but I couldn’t be happier about my progress. When I leave the gym everyday, I feel great.”

Mullings is hoping to climb through the ropes for the first time in five-and-a-half years in September. He doesn’t expect any gimmes, because he never had any in the past.

One potential opponent he has his sights set on is undefeated middleweight sensation John Duddy, a native of Ireland who also fights out of Gleason’s.

“I’ve been watching him work the bag and he looks like a real sharp, compact fighter,” said Mullings. “He is very aggressive and reminds me a lot of Norris. He’s somebody I would definitely be interested in meeting down the road.”

If Mullings can put together a winning streak, anything is possible. He always comes to fight, and is always capable of causing an upset. Shortly after beating Norris, Arnie Rosenthal, who was then his manager, marveled at the fact that Norris even accepted Mullings as an opponent.

Hopefully lightning will strike twice for Mullings, who is so easy to root for. Even if a fight against Duddy doesn’t materialize, what about an even bigger bout against middleweight king Jermain Taylor?

His victory against Norris notwithstanding, Mullings is very easy to underestimate. He can only hope that some of the money guys – such as Taylor and Wright – continue to underestimate him, especially since he is now closer to 40 than he is to 35.

“I’ve been underestimated my whole career,” said Mullings. “In the past, it has helped me more than it hurt me. I actually feel younger and stronger than I did back then. If people underestimate me I think they’re making a big mistake, but I hope they continue to do so.”