Starting over is never easy in life. This is particularly true in prize fighting, where the road is steep and the opportunities are few.

Friday night, in an out-of-the-way slot casino in Lincoln, Rhode Island, former world title contender and reality television product Peter Manfredo, Jr. will begin that hard climb, fighting an unknown guy in a little known place for the kind of money he'd rather not have anyone know he accepted. That is how it happens when you lose the two biggest fights of your life within eight months of each other. You start over or you roll over.

After a heated family debate, Manfredo chose the former over the latter, convincing his father, with whom the 27-year-old super middleweight has trained for 20 years, that he remains serious about the most dangerous trade in sports. He understands where he is and how he got there. Most of all, he understands what it will take not to stay there.

"I'm back to square one but everything happens for a reason,'' Manfredo (28-5, 13 KO) said a few days before he is to meet a lightweight light heavyweight from South Carolina named Shane Benfield who is the kind of guy you face when you're in Manfredo's shoes - someone with a good record (17-1) but little else to offer up but his body.

"After the (Joe) Calzaghe fight (which was stopped in three rounds) I wasn't putting 100 per cent into my training. I trained for (former IBF champion Jeff) Lacy, but in the ring I didn't have that hunger to do it.

"I knew I could beat him but I didn't have that desire to step it up so I blew a big opportunity. One thing about this game you can't blame anybody but yourself. I accept that. It's made me hungry again.''

Hungry enough to convince his father that it was not time to devote himself to day work, even though it was something Manfredo alarmingly suggested to him after losing the decision to a Lacy who he believes should not have beat him but did because he allowed it to happen.

"I didn't think he had the desire any more after the Lacy fight,'' Peter Manfredo, Sr. said from his Rhode Island gym. "I didn't like the way he trained for that fight. He was in shape but I needed him to train a little bit more than six weeks. I didn't see him pushing himself any more so after he lost that fight I just felt maybe he doesn't want to do it any more.

"Peter's been in the gym since he was five with me and training since he was seven. He has a lot of things in his life now. He's made over a million dollars, which is a lot more than most guys in this game. He's got three kids. He wants to start a business and go to work.

"When he started talking about working (as an electrician) I told him you can't work and box. I just felt he couldn't do that and compete at the top level so why do it? That was my main beef

with him.

"I expect a lot of him because this isn't tennis or basketball. This is boxing. You can be physically damaged from one punch. I don't want him to get hurt. This is a dangerous game. I told him I didn't think he wanted it any more and if that was the case I wasn't going to be on board. I didn't want to see him walking on his heels at 45 because he kept going when he didn't really want to do it. Who wants that for his son?''

The two talked about the future and if there really was one in boxing for him after the loss to Lacy. They talked loudly and then they didn't talk at all. It was a time of decision for both, a decision arrived at first by the son and then accepted by the father.

"It was very difficult,'' Manfredo said. "My father taught me all my life 'You got to box, box box.' Now all of a sudden he tells me, 'I think you should do something else.' I was angry about it. I was very angry with him but I took it to heart.

"My Dad didn't call me after we got back from the Lacy fight. Freddie (Roach, who helped prepare Manfredo for the fight at his Wild Card Gym in Hollywood) called. My uncles called. What happened to my father? I took it like the way a fan treats you. They love you when you're on top but when you lose they don't call.

"It took me to call him. He told me real men talk in person and I said 'Drop the bullshit. I'm your son.' We were on the phone for an hour and a half. I told him 'Dad, everybody thinks I'm rich but I got to get a job. I got three kids. My benefits cost me $1000 a month.' He told me, 'You can't work and box.'

"It got pretty heated but at the end I agreed with him. Maybe I hadn't been giving it 100 per cent. Boxing is tough on a family man. If you're single it's simple. There's nothing else to do but train. Now I get up and take the girls to school. I'm up early. 'Who wants to go to ballet?' You know? It's hard to concentrate fully on boxing but we came to an agreement. I'm back where I want to be. I'm back in the ring on March 14.''

With him will be his father, who agreed to continue training him but admits he was watching closely early on. Boxing teaches its advocates to go by what they see not what people say. What the Father saw was a son who said he wanted to get back down to 160 pounds after a couple of fights.

He saw a son getting up in the morning again to run without prodding. One who came to the gym in the evening like a professional. He came to work.

"He came back and started to train like I wanted him to,'' Manfredo, Sr. said. "He was away for a week or two after we talked. I know other people approached him about training him. He knows nobody knows him better than I do but you don't want to be arguing with your father every night.

"When he came back he went right to work. He wasn't telling me (what he wanted to do), he

was showing me. Dieting, running, working hard. Mentally and physically he's ready for this. He's in shape to do what he wants to do and he's never backed down from a fight.

"He's a tough kid. A nice kid. He's a kid people like. He can still make good money at this but he knows he has to come back and prove himself again. He's working to do that.''

Working to get back to where he was just eight months ago. Back as a top 10 rated fighter but perhaps this time as a middleweight, where he feels he will have a physical advantage he lacks at 168. Back, if things go well, in the kind of place where 36-year-old Nate Campbell found himself last weekend.

Like Manfredo, Campbell had been forced to work his way back up boxing's slippery ladder after having lived for years on the sport's hard edges. When his second chance came it wasn't supposed to be a chance at all really. It was supposed to be a sacrifice on the altar to WBC lightweight champion Juan Diaz but things didn't quite turn out that way.

This night belonged to Nate Campbell and when it was over his hand was raised. He had made it all the way to the top after so often before having stumbled along the way. Peter Manfredo, Jr. could look at that and gain strength from it, knowing that perseverance sometimes pays off in boxing if you are true to yourself and true to a hard game.

"There some opportunities for me out there,'' Manfredo said. "I need to win a couple times and if I can get down to 160, which is more mental than physical, maybe I can get a fight with (John) Duddy or a title shot with (Kelly) Pavlik. I'll take that. Lacy came down from 220 to 168. I walk around at 188, so I know if I just keep working I can get back down.

"I know some people are interested in me because of the popularity I got from the TV show (he was a finalist on the first "Contender'' season). Some people like to talk bad about us. They say we're just reality TV fighters not real fighters but I would never regret having done that show.

"Who knows where I'd be without it? You only know what happens to you. What happened to me was some people grew to love me because of The Contender, not for the fighter I was but for the Peter I was. Now I want to get back in the ring and start winning again and show them I can still fight, too.''

To do that, Peter Manfredo, Jr. had to decide if he wanted a day job or a night job. Once he made that decision, his father was where he's always been since he was a skinny seven year old. He was in his corner.

"Peter knows there are people out there who think he's a reality TV guy who can't win the big one,'' his father said. "He hates that. He hates that. He's working hard and taking this very seriously. He knows this should be an easy fight for him but this kid is coming here to try and make a name for himself at Peter's expense. He knows what's at stake. He can't afford any slip ups this time. Peter's not going to let that happen.''