Saturday night Kassim Ouma returns to the ring. For a man who has literally been fighting all his life, this is his last battle.

The former IBF junior middleweight champion has not fought since the last of three consecutive losses, a disastrous, passionless defeat to journeyman Cornelius “K-9’’ Bundrage seven months ago that left his fistic future in doubt. That remains the case today as he prepares in Philadelphia for a low-level comeback against a low-level opponent named Martinus Clay in a low-level building, a National Guard Armory with no fistic history.

It is a long drop from fighting in Madison Square Garden and Caesars Palace and winning world titles, to fighting an opponent with a 13-18-4 record in a National Guard Armory on the edge of northeast Philadelphia. Ouma knows this, for harsh reality has been too large a part of his life since he was five.

So the question is whether or not he is ready to overcome the psychological weight of his present reality, the weight of where his career now stands and the baggage he has carried with him ever since the day he was kidnapped out of his classroom at the age of five in Uganda and forced to become a child soldier in a rebel uprising that kept him in warrior’s clothes until he escaped at 19 to become a fighter of a different sort in America.

Saturday night Ouma begins his final war. How long it will last not even the people closest to him know. All they know is that he cannot afford to lose again. Not now at least.

“Hopefully this will be the start he needs,’’ said Philadelphia promoter Russell Peltz, who co-promotes Ouma with Golden Boy Promotions. “His last two fights were gimmes but he fought like he was in a daze. It’s not whether or not he wins this fight because he shouldn’t lose to this guy. What’s important is how he looks. His energy. Is the punch output there?

“Ouma needs to show he can still throw those 100 punches a round all night that made him a champion.’’

Ouma’s last great performance was a dominating points victory over Sechew Powell 26 months ago. Then he lost bravely but unintelligently to middleweight champion Jermain Taylor and for whatever reason he seemed to lose his fire after that. Losses soon followed to Saul Roman in what was supposed to be a comeback fight and then dispassionately to Bundrage before taking seven months off to marry, promote a documentary about his sad life and reassess his career path.

That documentary, which has been well received at several film festivals and is slated to be entered in 10 to 15 more, was revealing in many ways. Some good, some not. The latter came when Ouma was seen smoking marijuana outside the gym on a day he was supposed to be training for Taylor, an event that shocked and angered Peltz.

It came as a surprise to his co-manager, Tom Moran, as well but not a shock. Moran may be as close as anyone is to Ouma and has long known of the nightmares and sleepless nights he suffers with as a result of his stolen childhood in Uganda. But “self-medication,’’ as Moran calls it, has not served Ouma well.

“Since he was a kid Kassim drank beer and smoked marijuana to cope,’’ Moran conceded. “It’s not a good thing. At times he’s had difficulties with it. We’ve talked about it a thousand times. It’s never easy but right now I think he’s okay.

“I don’t expect Kassim to be fully back to what he was but he’s been training in Philadelphia for a month for this and more importantly he’s been working out daily with Jeff Goldstein, his strength and conditioning coach. He wasn’t with him his last two fights and that showed.

“He knows he can’t train at home any more in Florida, sparring against amateurs and hanging around with his friends. He has to come to Philadelphia. He’s agreed to that. The bigger question is does he still have a passion for the sport? Can he go back and be as hungry?

“Kassim’s game is throwing those 100 punches round after round. He’ll never have great punching power but he became champion by outworking people. That night against Bundrage there was nothing there. No passion. It was as if his zest for success was gone. He fought like he didn’t care.

“People said after that fight he was shot but I don’t believe that. They don’t know all the things that have been going on in his life. In Uganda. This is a new beginning. I told him it’s the first fight of the second half of his career.’’

If Ouma does not win both impressively and showing the same kind of passion that was his hallmark on his greatest nights the second half of his career will be far shorter than the first. The question is how does one muster the enthusiasm to again scale a hill as steep as the one that leads to a boxing championship?

“I was with him a week ago in the same building he’s going to fight in,’’ Peltz said. “It was at a small show, maybe 500 people there. No lights over the ring. No TV. No energy. He seemed a little bit sad that night.

“He seemed one level down on the enthusiasm scale. He said he’d make it happen this week but he just seemed a little forlorn. Like he was thinking, ‘So this is what it’s come to?’’’

Sadly it has for a brave little soldier whose heart was always bigger than his body. Kassim Ouma has overcome a horrendous childhood, a hell none of us can really understand. He lives with demons few can imagine but for a shining moment he was a champion and nothing can take that away from him.

Very likely he will defeat Martinus Clay and live to fight another day but no one knows yet how much of Kassim Ouma is really left inside. Probably not even him.

“If he doesn’t blow this guy out what is there?’’ Moran said. “If he doesn’t then I got to talk with Kassim about real life, life without boxing.

“There’s a possibility we’ve seen the best of him. He’s only 29 but he’s an old 29. It’s sad. His life is so much more complicated than what happens inside a boxing ring.

“He was a national hero in Uganda when he was champion. Then he loses three fights and he’s a bum. It’s as if people suddenly didn’t like him as much. That shocked him. A sadness is definitely there.

“But Kassim has found a lot of salvation in boxing. The question is 'What does he have left as a boxer?' I still believe he can be the fighter he once was. Do I know it? No. The story is the same as it’s always been for him. Kassim’s got the potential to be terrific and he’s got the potential to be a train wreck. We don’t know how it’s going to end.’’