When former IBF junior middleweight champion Paul “Ultimate” Vaden of San Diego, California, learned that bantamweight Francisco Rodriguez was teetering near death after a tenth round TKO loss to Teon Kennedy in Philadelphia on November 20, he immediately fell into a downward emotional funk.

Exactly ten years to the day earlier, on November 20, 1999, Vaden, then 32, had stopped Stephan Johnson, 31, of New York in the tenth round of their fight for the vacant USBA junior middleweight title. The bout took place in Atlantic City, on the undercard of a heavyweight battle between Michael Grant and Andrew Golota.

The gravely injured Johnson was rushed to the hospital, where he passed away on December 5.

The 25-year-old Rodriguez, a Chicago resident with a 14-3 (8 KOS) record, was also rushed to the hospital, where he succumbed to his injuries two days later.

For many of the past 10 years, the extremely sensitive Vaden said he would spend the month leading up to November 20 “preparing” for the heartbreaking anniversary.

“My body and mind would go into a sort of shock, and I would get very cranky and sad,” said Vaden, who will turn 42 on December 29. “All I wanted to do was wash away the guilt that I was feeling. I always had a feeling of dread; that something bad was going to happen to me so I would be paid back. I was punishing myself. It was horrible.”

Hypochondria was one of the many conditions brought on by Vaden’s overwhelming grief. Every time he got a sniffle or a cough, he was convinced it was the beginning of a dreadful illness that might lead to a long, slow death. If he pushed his son’s stroller as he jogged, he’d silently pray that if something happened to him his son would somehow get home safely.

“I became scared to live,” Vaden explained. “I would call my doctor every second, for every little thing. As a fighter I was a counterpuncher, always very defensive, and I was rarely hit solidly by punches, but I would always ask the doctor if something was wrong with my brain.”

Even after Vaden would get clean bills of health, his obsession would not diminish. “If I got a throat scratch, I’d think it was cancer,” he said. “If I got a twinge in my legs, I’d think is was MS (muscular sclerosis).”

Vaden desperately needed someone to share his pain with, someone who could personally understand his emotional turmoil which was exacerbated by the suicide of two relatives with whom he was very close. He finally reached out to Johnson’s former fiancée and received some much-needed, albeit temporary peace.

Her involvement in a new relationship made him realize that she had, to some degree, moved on with her life. It was the first time that Johnson was able to put the death behind him enough to live with some degree of normalcy.

One of his first orders of business was embarking on a health regimen, vowing to participate in at least one physical activity per day. Over the last seven months he has walked, run, boxed or played basketball, ate better food, and immersed himself even more intensely in the scores of altruistic activities that have kept him busy for many years.

Having already lost 54 pounds, he said that in the days leading up to the 10-year anniversary of Johnson's death he was in the second best shape of his life.

After learning of Rodriguez's grave injuries and subsequent passing, however, the similarities to his own travails came back with a vengeance for more than the obvious reasons.

"I started thinking, probably way too much," said Vaden. "He (Rodriguez) and I were both out-of-town fighters, and we had both flown into the Philadelphia airport for our fights. That's how much I started reaching to put myself back there, the whole punishment thing was happening all over again. It was a big backward step."

It has been almost a month since Rodriguez's death and Vaden, utilizing all of his tools, is finally feeling somewhat like his old self. Besides being a corporate motivational speaker, he is the founder of a high-end boxing workout called "Ultimate," and has also started work on a book and screenplay.

He is on the board of directors of Spectrum Sports, Inc., which assists special needs children, and very active in the San Diego chapters of Big Brothers, Big Sisters and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

"My goal is to help those in need," said Vaden, who it seems would be just as civically oriented even if the Johnson fight never took place.

Vaden draws great strength from the positive aspects and the positive people in his life. Among them are his beloved 13-year-old son, Dayne Taylor, who he just took snowboarding, and good friend Chris Byrd, the former heavyweight champion who recently moved his family to San Diego.

During Vaden's illustrious amateur career, which encompassed 337 fights, of which he says he lost only 10, he and Byrd often met in the finals of amateur tournaments. While Byrd represented the United States on the 1992 Olympic boxing team, Vaden, who was also one of the country's top amateurs, opted to turn pro in 1991.

Vaden stopped Vincent Pettway in the twelfth round of their August 1995 bout to win the IBF crown. Four months later, in a unification match with WBC champion Terry Norris, he lost his title by 12 round decision. Vaden finds some irony in the fact that the Norris bout took place in Philadelphia, as if he and Rodriguez have a kinship because they both laced up the gloves in

the City of Brotherly Love.

Vaden rebounded from the loss to Norris with four wins and one loss, the latter of which was by 11th round TKO to WBC middleweight champ Keith Holmes. After the tragic fight with Johnson, he fought just once more, losing a 12 round decision to Shibata Flores in April 2000. His final ring ledger was 29-3 (16 KOS).

“I thought I closed the door completely on boxing in 2000,” said Vaden. “After the situation with Johnson, I read a quote by Michael Jordan, where he said once he retired all he wanted to do was take his kids to school, get a pot belly and gain weight. I thought that sounded pretty cool.”

Because he was mired in such a deep depression, what seemed cool early on did not last long. What also wasn’t cool was the bad blood between him and Norris, who also hailed from the San Diego area. Their rivalry extended far beyond the local spotlight they were forced to share and the time they spent swapping punches in the ring.

When asked about the rumors of a sordid love triangle, Vaden’s uneasy laugh made it clear that it was not an issue he wanted to discuss. What he did say, however, was that the animosity that he and Norris once had for each other has since waned and that he couldn’t be happier about that.

“For so many years there was nothing but disdain between us,” said Vaden. “Every time we saw each other, we just stared or snarled. It was very uncomfortable.”

Several years ago the two met at an amateur show, where they shook hands and made up. Bygones have become bygones, and they now treat each other with the mutual respect that each deserves.

“The moment we shook hands all of the disdain and hate for him left my body,” said Vaden. “I wish Terry nothing but good things, and I am honored and privileged to have shared the ring with a Hall of Famer.”

In some ways, having a positive relationship with Norris has helped Vaden come to grips with the Johnson tragedy, whenever the emotional remnants of that fight rear their ugly head.

“Life is too short to spend it second guessing or punishing yourself,” said Vaden. “You can only do your best, which is what I try to do every day. That is why I am involved in so many charitable activities. I want to make a difference, a positive difference. Until I take my final breath, I want to help those in need in whatever way that I can.”

Check out Vaden’s web site at: www.paulvaden.com