

Riding the Rough Road: Nick Casal Back in Action

Written by Aaron Lowinger

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Following Google directions to Casal's Boxing Gym on the post-industrial northern edge of Niagara Falls takes you down a dirt road riddled with enormous potholes and labeled by road signs with the rather obvious message: "Rough Road."

This Thursday, Nick Casal will wage his first professional fight in his hometown of Niagara Falls, NY, and his first fight since his career, let alone his life, was threatened by a brutal attack nearly two years ago.

It's fitting for Nick Casal, whose career path has been bumpy to say the least, that the eponymous boxing gym established by his father, appears on the left almost as soon as the bad road yields to smooth pavement.

On a recent Monday afternoon, the Casals' airplane hangar-type gym was a hive of activity, with Nick oscillating between sparring, mitt and heavy bag work, and helping Ray lead the boxing classes. Ages and ring condition ranged the gamut from seven years old to beer gut. Fight posters lined the walls, the most prominent of which advertised the one that got away: a scheduled ESPN-televised showdown against the relatively unheralded Siberian Ruslan Provodnikov.

The fight never happened because Casal was assaulted in an attack to his head so vicious that the internet image search "Nick Casal" is enough to turn the stomach.

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From there, their paths diverged sharply. Provodnikov earned his place in boxing lore with the 2013 Fight of the Year against Timothy Bradley and then went on to win the light-welterweight championship from Mike Alvarado six months later.

Meanwhile, Casal's assailant was apprehended and prosecuted and he was back in the gym about a month after the attack, but he's been unable to land a fight. He's been stuck at a crossroads that has grown all too familiar as the rest of the boxing world motors by.

"Oh yeah, I watch his fights," Casal said about Provodnikov, "good for him. He took his opportunity, obviously, it hurts from my end."

It was obvious that Casal regards the poster with some degree of ambivalence, "he's where I wanted to be. He's there now, so that gives me motivation that I'll get there too. That could be me."

But to his credit, Casal stays positive and still sees himself among the company he battled with in amateurs that included Bradley, Victor Ortiz, Devon Alexander, Lamont Peterson, and Vanes Martirosyan. "I fought with all these guys in 2004, we all turned pro together. I see myself with these guys. Just gotta get back on track."

And he honest with himself about where it went wrong for him and right for the other guys: "They won the big fights. I didn't. I fell short a few times. I thought I won one of those, but wasn't given the decision. I thought I beat DeMarco . . . I wanna prove to everybody that I'm back. A little accident isn't going to stop me from getting my title shot hopefully eventually."

It may still be a while before Casal can earn such a fight. It's clear that other people in boxing don't think he's worth the risk. His combination of knock-out power and his volatility in and outside of the ring has made him a hard match to make.

But like a true warrior, Casal keeps coming forward. He admits to having bad habits a younger pro, "I was a little lazier in my younger career, but more focused now. Take that extra hour in the gym. No matter what, I'm here [in the gym]."

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First up on Casal's rebound trail is Thursday night's six rounder against Shakha Moore, a journeyman who has won only two of his previous fights. It's an obvious tune-up fight, but Casal knows better to tell anyone that. "No fight's a tune-up fight," Casal cautioned. "I know this guy comes to fight, he's a good fighter. So I don't underestimate anybody. I'm preparing for this fight like it's a championship fight."

Ten years into his pro career but still only 28 years old, Casal is trying to revive the status he enjoyed as an amateur and get his car off the rough road.

Rounding out the card in Niagara Falls is six round cruiserweight showdown between prospects Greg Brady (4-1, 4 KOs) and Joel Shojgreen (8-0, 7 KOs); light-welterweight prospect Emanuel Colon (3-0, 3 KOs) and Andre Byrd (2-0); Milos Pantelic vs. Mike Bissett, 6 rounds, cruiserweights; Aleem Whitfield vs. Phil Rose, 4 rounds, super middleweights; Brandon Williams vs. TBA, 4 rounds, featherweights; Jake Ventry vs. Jesus Gonzalez, 4 rounds, featherweights; Michael Jackson vs. Carl Davis, 4 rounds, junior lightweights; Michelle Cook vs. Ivana Coleman, 4 rounds, female junior bantamweights; Jennifer Woodward vs. Kylie Fallis, 4 rounds, female lightweights.

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