

A. J. Banal gets ready for payback

Written by Joaquin Henson
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CEBU CITY — Highly-touted bantamweight contender A. J. Banal (above) admitted the other day his obsession is to reverse the only stain in his professional boxing record and only after avenging the loss to Panama's Rafael Concepcion will he focus on gunning for a world title.

Banal, 22, scored an eighth round technical decision over Canada's Tyson Cave in Cebu last week and is set to take on a still unnamed opponent in the undercard of the Ramon Garcia-Donnie Nietes fight for the WBO lightflyweight title at the University of St. La Salle Gym in Bacolod City on Oct. 8.

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If Banal hurdles his next assignment, the much-anticipated rematch with Concepcion will be held either in Manila or Cebu in January.

“My goal is to beat Concepcion,” said Banal whose record is 25-1-1, with 19 KOs.

“After I take care of Concepcion, then I’ll start thinking about challenging for a world title. I know I’m ready. I’ll fight whomever Sir ALA (Antonio L. Aldeguer) and Sir Michael (Aldeguer) put in front of me. I’m not afraid of any of the champions — Anselmo Moreno, Koki Kameda, Toshiaki Nishioka, even Nonito Donaire.”

Banal said his opponent in October hasn’t been picked but if he had a choice for a tune-up, Mexican warrior Jorge Arce’s younger brother Panchito would be a perfect fit.

But Arce, 29, has an appointment with Hugo Ruiz for the interim WBA bantamweight title in Los Mochis on Sept. 17.

Last May, Arce lost a 12-round decision to Ruiz in a brawl where both fighters were dropped twice and Arce took a one-point deduction.

Banal’s recent win over Cave was a damper and left him with an ugly cut on his right eyelid.

The wound took 15 stitches to sew up, two in the inner layer of the skin, four in the middle and nine in the outer.

Cave never engaged Banal and clowned around until referee Tony Pesons stopped it with the Filipino bleeding profusely from the cut inflicted by an accidental headbutt in the fifth.

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Banal returns to the gym today after a one-week rest but won't be able to spar until early next month to allow his wound to heal.

"I was surprised with Cave's style," said Banal.

"He didn't want to fight. He ran away. We watched him fight on YouTube and that's not how he fought. I think he was afraid. He refused to stand up and fight."

Banal said he learned a lot from the experience.

"I lost my composure," he said.

"I wanted to knock him out. I should've thrown more combinations. I should've cut the ring off instead of just follow him. I never got scared when I was cut. It was just too deep and by the eighth round, I couldn't see from the right eye. Still, I wanted to continue fighting. I didn't want to win that way."

Banal said he owes his career to the Aldeguers.

"My uncle Joselito Campana, a former boxer, brought me to Sir ALA when I was nine and I started to train as an amateur," recalled Banal.

"I've been with the ALA Gym since. When I grew up, my idols were the ALA Boys, Tito Trinidad, Oscar De La Hoya and Manny Pacquiao. I always dreamed of being an ALA Boy. At first, my trainer was Berto Castanares then Peter Cuizon, Edito Villamor and now Edmund Villamor. When my father got sick, it was Sir ALA who helped our family and paid for his medicine. Sir ALA doesn't share in my purses. He supports the ALA Boys 100 percent. I'll never leave Sir ALA. I want to repay him by becoming a world champion."

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Banal lives in a four-bedroom, two-storey home in the Ermita district of Cebu City with his mother Marlinda, two brothers, his girlfriend Junbeth and his one-year-old daughter Alexeth Jean.

He's the fourth of eight children and the sole family breadwinner.

His father died in 2006.

Banal pays for the schooling of a younger brother Nicholas, a former boxer.

He paid for the education of another brother Carlos who finished a course in care-giving.

"My biggest purse was P500,000 for a fight in Sacramento in 2007," said Banal.

"I've been saving to buy a house for Junbeth and our daughter. They're my inspiration. Someday, when we have our own house, Junbeth and I will get married. Right now, I send two brothers to school and pay for my mother's medical expenses. I have a motorcycle which I use to buy and sell fish."

Banal's mother suffered a stroke last year and is half-paralyzed.

While Concepcion is the only fighter whom he has lost to, Banal said Mexican Juan Alberto Rosas was his toughest opponent.

Banal outpointed Rosas in Las Vegas in 2007.

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Rosas later became the IBF superflyweight champion.

“I got hit the hardest by Rosas and I remember in the third round, I was groggy after taking a shot to the temple,” he said.

“Concepcion hurt me in the body. But I lost because I ran out of gas. I learned from that. Now my conditioning coach Pio Solon makes sure I’m in shape for every fight. I work on conditioning in the morning and boxing skills in the afternoon every day of training.”

Banal promised a vengeful win over Concepcion.

“When I watch heavyweights on tape, I notice when they fight close, they’re tight, they throw hard but that’s because they’re big and they’re heavy hitters,” he said.

“At my weight, I should be more relaxed, I should take my time. Concepcion will come in, that’s his style, and I’ll be ready for him in our rematch.”

Banal’s trainer Edmund Villamor, who also works with Nietes, Boom Boom Bautista and three others, said he’s sure a world title is within reach.

“A. J. has all the tools,” said Villamor.

“He just needs a little more maturity because he still gets frustrated when the knockout doesn’t come early. You’ll see more improvement in his style in his next fight. More body attack, more movement. I see A. J. becoming a world champion by next year.”