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Army boxers brace for U.S. Nationals, Olympic Team Trials

By Tim Hipps
IMCOM Public Affairs

SAN ANTONIO – Reigning light-heavyweight national champion Spc. Jeffrey Spencer will lead several Soldiers into the 2011 U.S. National Boxing Championships June 20 through 25 in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The top four finishers in each weight class will qualify for the U.S. Olympic Team Trials for Boxing, scheduled for July 31 through Aug. 6 at the Mobile Civic Center in Alabama.

Four boxers in the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program already have qualified for the Olympic Trials: Spencer at 178 pounds, Sgt. John Franklin at 114, Capt. Michael Benedosso at 108, and Spc. Samuel Vasquez at 152.

Three other Soldiers are qualified for the Olympic Trials as All-Army contenders: heavyweight Spc. Charles Blackwell, super heavyweight Staff Sgt. Andrew Shepherd, and lightweight Sgt. Toribio Ramirez.

All seven are scheduled to compete in Colorado Springs.

Second Lt. DeRae Crane will attempt to qualify for a berth in the Olympic Trials at Nationals, as will Spc. Carrie Barry, who is vying for the 132-pound spot on Team USA for the Olympic debut of women's boxing at the 2012 London Games.

Spencer recently earned a berth in the 2011 Pan American Games, scheduled for Nov. 12-20 in Guadalajara, Mexico, with a silver-medal performance at the second Pan Am qualifier in Quito, Ecuador, where he lost a 16-8 decision to Felix Valera of the Dominican Republic. Spencer struck gold last October at the 2010 CISM World Boxing Championships on Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C.

“He’s looking good,” U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program boxing coach Basheer Abdullah said. “Spencer is the guy to beat in that weight class, and DeRae is right there also. I’m expecting one of these guys to make this Olympic team.”

Should Spencer and Crane happen to meet in the quarterfinals or semifinals at nationals, Abdullah said he would sit Spencer to allow Crane to advance.

Third-ranked Franklin, 27, a silver medalist at the 2007 Military World Games in Hyderabad, India, faces a tough battle in the flyweight division that features two-time Olympian Rau’shee Warren, who is attempting to become the first three-time member of the U.S. Olympic Boxing Team.

“He’s capable of beating Rau’shee on a good night, when he’s at his best, but that’s going to be his biggest hurdle,” Abdullah said. “But we can’t overlook some of the other guys in his weight class. He definitely has the potential. He’s got to bring his ‘A’ game every night.”

Benedosso struck gold in the 2010 CISM Military World Championships at Camp Lejeune and silver at the 2009 Police Athletic League Championships in San Antonio.

“This is a very important tournament for him,” Abdullah said. “Not necessarily to win the tournament, but to make a statement that he is a true contender to make the Olympic Team.”

Abdullah calls Vasquez “our little secret” in the welterweight division.

“He lost to [two-time national champion] Errol Spence at the Nationals, but I think he challenged Errol better than anyone in the tournament,” said Abdullah, a three-time U.S. Olympic boxing coach and technical advisor. “He’s really growing. I think we’ve finally connected. He understands. We’ve made some adjustments to how he approaches bouts and he’s looking really sharp. I think he’s going to be one of the biggest surprises at Nationals this year.”

Shepherd won gold at the 2010 CISM Military World Games but has since been released from WCAP and is boxing under less pressure and scrutiny.

“Right now, he appears to be very relaxed, mentally,” Abdullah said. “He’s having fun with it because at the end of the day he knows he’s going back on line regardless of what happens.”

The U.S. Olympic Team Trials for Men’s Boxing is a double-elimination tournament showcasing eight boxers in each of the 10 men’s Olympic weight classes. The winners will represent the United States in September at the 2011 World Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, where they will attempt to qualify internationally for the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

The 2011 USA Boxing National Championships will begin June 20 at Colorado Springs Christian School, with preliminary action continuing through June 22. Semifinals are set for June 23 and consolations June 24. The finals will be June 25 at the Colorado Springs City Auditorium.

Olympic Trials qualifying began at the 2010 National Police Athletic League Championships in October and continued at the 2011 Armed Forces Championships at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, and the recent National Golden Gloves Championships. The champions at those three events will be joined in Mobile by the top four finishers at Nationals and the 10 champions from the Last Chance Qualifier, scheduled for July 3-9 in Cincinnati.

Women's boxing will make its Olympic debut in 2012, but the U.S. Olympic Team Trials for Women's Boxing are scheduled for early 2012, prior to their international qualifying tournament.

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