

Rafi Yari turned to West Baltimore's Upton gym to realize his dream of boxing in the US. He made good on his chance.

Charles Cohen 8/7/23 8:30 a.m. EDT, Updated 8/7/23 5:30 a.m. EDT



Rafiullah Yari is determined to become a world champion and have his image up there in the gym among the greats, one of whom is Upton's own Gervonta "Tank" Davis, world champion in three weight classes. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

His first professional bout came nearly two years after he and family members fled Afghanistan when the Taliban took over

Rafiullah Yari was the first pro boxer to show up on this day at the Upton Boxing Center in West Baltimore, the same place where Gervonta "Tank" Davis showed up some 21 years ago. Now Davis' likeness as a world champion hangs throughout — a living patron saint embossed on the heavy bags stationed to take daily beatings in this marvelously austere but deliriously red-painted center that aspires all to train — to train hard, to the breaking point.

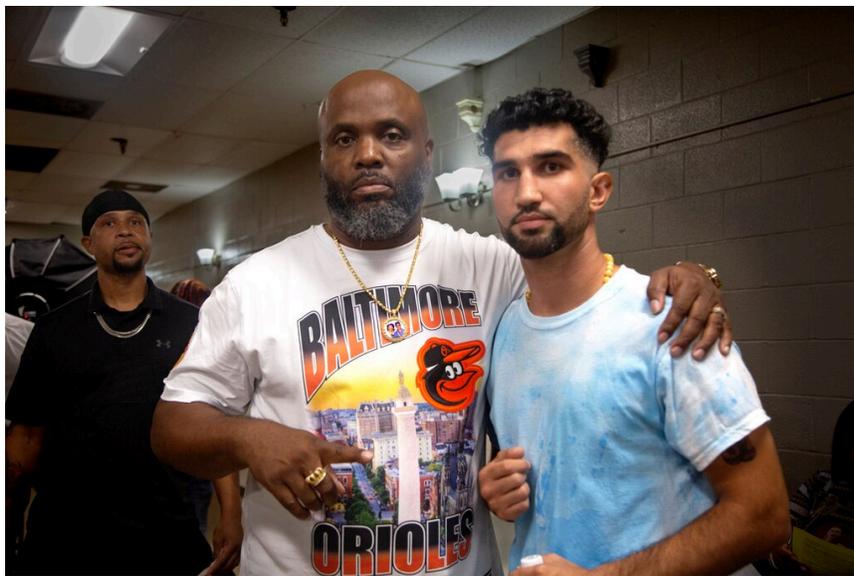
This all-important breaking point approach was demonstrated rather nonchalantly when coach Mike Gutrick took Yari, 27, to the side ring and worked him out with boxing pads. Although this warmup is standard fare in the gym, one could notice other fighters pausing in their routines to steal a glimpse.

Maybe it was because Yari was a week away from his first professional bout in the United States, set for Aug. 5. Maybe it was because Yari, as a refugee from Afghanistan, showed up just a little more than 16 months ago. He was one of the fleeing Afghans who crowded at the airport doors in Kabul, wondering if he was going to get out, wondering if that blast that shook him and his family was the first of many bombs.

Maybe it was because even though he is all business when it comes to boxing, he can disarm others with his broad smile and revels in the camaraderie with trainers and fighters alike. Everyone fist-bumps Rafi. That is how it goes at Upton.



Although Rafiullah Yari was on the Afghanistan boxing team, with two fights in Pakistan in 2020 to 2021, he said he opened himself up to intensive training by the coaches at Upton Boxing Center in West Baltimore after coming to the U.S. in 2021. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)



Rafiullah Yari (right) stands with Coach Kenny Ellis, who has been helping him prepare at the Upton Boxing Center in West Baltimore. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

Yari was looking to get his last training days in, with the important lessons doled out by coaches Calvin Ford and Kenny Ellis, both legends in the Baltimore boxing world and beyond. As much as a human being can do, Yari offered himself to the Upton coaching staff to mold, to train, to build, and for this there is a love here.

“Everybody said the athlete has to want it more than a coach,” Ford said. “Well you have an athlete that motivates the coach to coach you.”

Two days later, Yari would tell me through an interpreter that his goal — not his dream, but his goal — is to be a world champion.

“So my name should be in the sight of Mike Tyson and my name should be at their side also,” he said.

Yari speaks limited English, but he has a deep connection with his coaches. There are moments when Gutrick leans in to his boxer’s ear to give him what surely is a key last bit of curated advice as he laces up his gloves, as if he were going to fight now.

But the roar of the crowd would have to wait. On this Monday, Gutrick led Yari to the side ring, where he worked him out on hand pads. Yari snapped punches at them, landing with a satisfying bap. A buzzer going off every two minutes, simulating boxing rounds, gave him no reprieve. Yari exhaled through his teeth, the way boxers do with each punch fired — tss, tss, tss. The coach picked up a round pad, turned it sideways, parallel to the ground, demanding that Yari come up from his belt in upper-cut fashion. Doing this once is one thing, but smacking the bag over and over again created a finishing grind like a runner sprinting several miles, or a weight trainer opting to get in an extra rep. This was the zone of exhaustion, of fuzzy-headiness, that Yari needed to get to. He needed to know he still could count on his arsenal, his ...

“Ferociousness,” said Ford, seated in an office that looks out onto the facilities like a cab dispatcher’s roost. Pictures and old fight posters are everywhere. Of course there are renditions of Davis in all kinds of media — photos, paintings, even an etched-on steel plate of his mug that has a distinction that lends itself to the camera. There are also well-presented clippings of civil rights stories mixed in. Upton, on Pennsylvania Avenue, is very much a cultural well — from summer camp for pint size-fighters, both girls and boys, to literacy classes given upstairs.

Ford leaned forward in his chair. “I can’t wait until Rafi fights. I can’t wait.”

The coach sounded like an excited teenager, and excitement from Ford carries weight. After all, he has been coaching for almost 30 years.

The reason Rafi Yari was standing here in the United States, never mind finding his way to Upton, was due to the photographer and interpreter taking photos of him for this story. A roving Afghanistan photographer based in Kabul, Mariam Alimi also worked as an interpreter for media organizations.



Rafiullah Yari, a 27-year-old Afghan refugee, works out at the Upton Boxing Center, where he has trained under the renowned coaching team of Calvin Ford. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

When the Taliban seized control of the country in August 2021 as U.S. forces pulled out, she said, she was approached by The New York Times, then National Geographic and then Disney to leave — as in now. But she couldn't leave her family to face the chaos and violence. Over long and dangerous days, with flights dwindling, she negotiated for 15 of her family members to get out. One of them was Yari.

“Whenever I’m talking about that, that makes me sad, because that was not a good and easy moment when we passed through that situation,” she said.

Yari eventually settled at Alimi’s uncle’s home in Reisterstown. His aunt traditionally offers nuts, dates and tea to guests, but mixes a purple protein drink for Yari, who must make weight the next day. (Two fighters on the bill of seven fights did not make weight.)

Yari, through Alimi, explained how he grew up admiring local boxers in Kabul, taking advantage of gyms, which required miles of walking due to “economics.” At that time, he had designs to be an international fighter representing his country.



“They got some chances to go abroad and have the competition with other countries and come back with good results and to talk about all this stuff,” Yari said. “So this is kind of an inspiring thing for me.”

Rafiullah Yari has developed a strong bond with the coaches at Upton Boxing Center. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

He said that, by finding good coaches and showing promise, he ascended through local competitions that culled fighters. In 2020 and 2021, he represented Afghanistan's national team in Pakistan, where he won his bouts.

From Afghanistan, he said, he followed famous fighters, including Tank Davis, and dreamed of coming to the United States to fight, but not as a refugee. When he got here, first in New Jersey and then in an apartment complex in Halethorpe in Baltimore County, he had no idea where to go to train, but his uncle knew about Upton and its reputation for minting contenders.

Yari said Upton had many more resources than he had in Afghanistan. In West Baltimore, he had several seasoned coaches who could work one-on-one with him. That was not the case in Kabul, though Yari spoke highly of the coaching and training that got him to the national team.

But standing in the Upton gym and trying to communicate with a new fighter looking to be a world champ and barely speaking English, coaches Ford and Ellis weren't sure what they were looking at.

Ford put it this way, "Good is just good. There are a lot of guys who are good. You got to be past that level."

Ellis summed it up like this, "He didn't jab, man," he said, with a hint of incredulousness, "He just jumped in and rumbled. There was like no jab at all. But now we got him jabbing, you know, finding his range. But at first there is no such thing as a jab when it comes to the ring. He's just gonna jump on you."

Yari took every morsel the coaches could dish out. Now it was Ellis' time to sit in the coach's room with all the windows and smile. "He has a relentless style, though. He's straight. You'll see him Saturday, he's coming. He will get the job done."

Fight Day



Making good on his prediction to his coaches, Rafiullah Yari defeated his opponent, Christopher Wright of Georgia, in the second round of a bout at Coppin State University on Aug. 5, 2023. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)



Rafiullah Yari in his corner during the fight.
(Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)



Rafiullah Yari during his fight with opponent Christopher Wright of Georgia at Coppin State University.
(Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

Fight day found Yari in his uncle's house waiting for his ride from Reisterstown to Coppin State's athletic facility. It was done up with pink trimming by the promotor, Badgurl Promotions. (Owner Nikki Cobbs claims this was Baltimore's first professional fight card promoted by a woman. There would be seven fights, amateur and pro, all with alluring storylines.)

Yari spent the afternoon waiting, pacing, on the phone and stooping down in a makeshift playroom to build a fortress with his 5-year-old niece. He paced some more, looked at his trunks, a lamé splendor of the American flag on one side and the Afghan flag on the other. He clutched his prayer beads, and finally his ride came by. But wait. His aunt, the family elder, called him back for a quick Muslim prayer in the doorway. Then, bam, he was off.

All that rushing to get to the gym hours early brought more waiting — waiting to do a urine test, a doctor's checkup. Officials with old-school badges looked over his shoulder to check the wrapping of his hands to make sure nothing illicit was placed in the mix. The wrapping takes on its own sense of time. Watching fighter after fighter go quiet, their eyes go distant, there is no doubt that a ritual is taking place.

Yari had the look until Gutrick asked him about his cup. He had forgotten his cup. That would be a bad way to be disqualified. Luckily, a fellow fighter had an extra one in the car. Gutrick gave Yari a hard stare as if he hoped he wasn't seeing some flaking out right here before the moment of truth. The coach tied on the gloves and Yari popped out of the crowded locker room into the glare of the linoleum white hall — the fight was a just walk down the aisle. There he was, dancing in place, focusing with trainers all around as if he popped up in a dream hatched way back in Afghanistan, a dream that one day I will come to the United States and fight.



In Christopher Wright (left), Rafiullah Yari faced an opponent who was 5 pounds heavier and had a longer wingspan during a bout at Coppin State on Aug. 5, 2023 (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

His name bounced around the auditorium. They had to go. He came through the celebrity curtain to Afghanistan's national anthem. A distinct roar complete with a blasting horn fired down from an upper section, his section. A contingent of cousins, uncles and aunts were making themselves known, and it was no coincidence that Yari found his boxer's glide as he bounced between the crowd and fired up the steps to his corner. His opponent, Christopher Wright, had come up from Georgia, where he trained on his own, working out on a bag suspended from a pine tree. He had his manager in his corner.

But when the bell rang, it was just the fighters. All that training and hype faded to coaches' yells they may or may not even hear. Wright came out looking to leverage his long wingspan and the nearly five pounds he had on Yari's 150-pound frame. And Yari heeded Ford's advice not to charge in but to feel him out. Thus, the first round went back and forth. One moment Yari dictated the pace with his bobs, looking for places to land a scoring punch. The next, Wright gained confidence and responded with punches that looked lethal but wild. Two definitely stung Yari, one leaving a red welt under his eye. A lot of action makes for a long two-minute round. Back in his corner, Ford noted Wright might be gassed but warned Yari that he was still alive.

The second bell couldn't come fast enough as Yari skip-danced out to work in a series of flurries on Wright. Wright not only regained himself but landed a few punches and looked for more. But at times Wright no longer held his gloves up to his face, a sign of weariness. Yari, on other hand, was protecting the dome, stepping close and accepting that he would get hit in the body – and he did. But he also placed confidence that his ducks and bobs would produce the winning moment. Still, Wright had game. Yari found himself counterpunching off the ropes and then — it came.

Yari landed a punch behind Wright's face-protecting gloves and smacked his jaw solidly. Wright went down on one knee. He couldn't find his way to his feet. As the ref counted Wright out, Yari paced as if in disbelief, perhaps tasting that moment when a dream turns real, and he too went to the mat — to pray.

One could hear a roar of elation from his hometown contingent, and he turned and raised his fists. Yari found Calvin in tears. Those tears were a long time coming. Early this week, Ford barely contained himself when he contemplated Yari's first American fight

“Rafi, man, amazing guy,” he said. “Afghanistan, came to this gym. A bunch of Black guys. You know, he told me the other day he felt like family. So you know I'm doing my job to make a person from another country feel that way. Another nationality.”



Rafullah Yari celebrates victory after a bout on Saturday Aug. 5, 2023 at Coppin State. (Mariam Alimi/for the Baltimore Banner)

A dream realized

The aftermath took on its own distinct whirl of time. Yari seemed to suddenly emerge in street clothes and clamored up the stands, diving into the jubilation of his extended family, about 20 in all. His older cousin, Ahmad Ramazan, who served as Yari's point of contact in the U.S. and was literally standing in his corner, explained that just about all of those who showed up on Saturday had lived in Pakistan as

Afghan refugees. He said the adults had worked as interpreters for the U. S. Army and would be in danger if they returned under the current Taliban regime. They all lived in a 12-room house, combined families living together, surviving and watching a knee-high Yari talk about becoming a fighter.

“This was one of his dreams to come to the United States, to fight in the United States, and he just did it,” Ramazan said.

Taking a seat in a lounge chair along the concourse, Yari was frankly a bit exasperated in trying to explain the significance.

“I have waited 12 years for this,” he said. But soon enough he'll be back training, jumping rope, doing crunches in several incarnations, and then finding Gutrick waiting for him with the hand pads ready to take him to the breaking point.

Charles Cohen is a freelance writer who contributes to *The Baltimore Banner*.

Correction: This story's photo captions have been updated with the correct spelling of Rafiullah Yari's first name.

This story originally appeared in *The Baltimore Banner*. For more content like this, please visit [*The Baltimore Banner's* website](#).