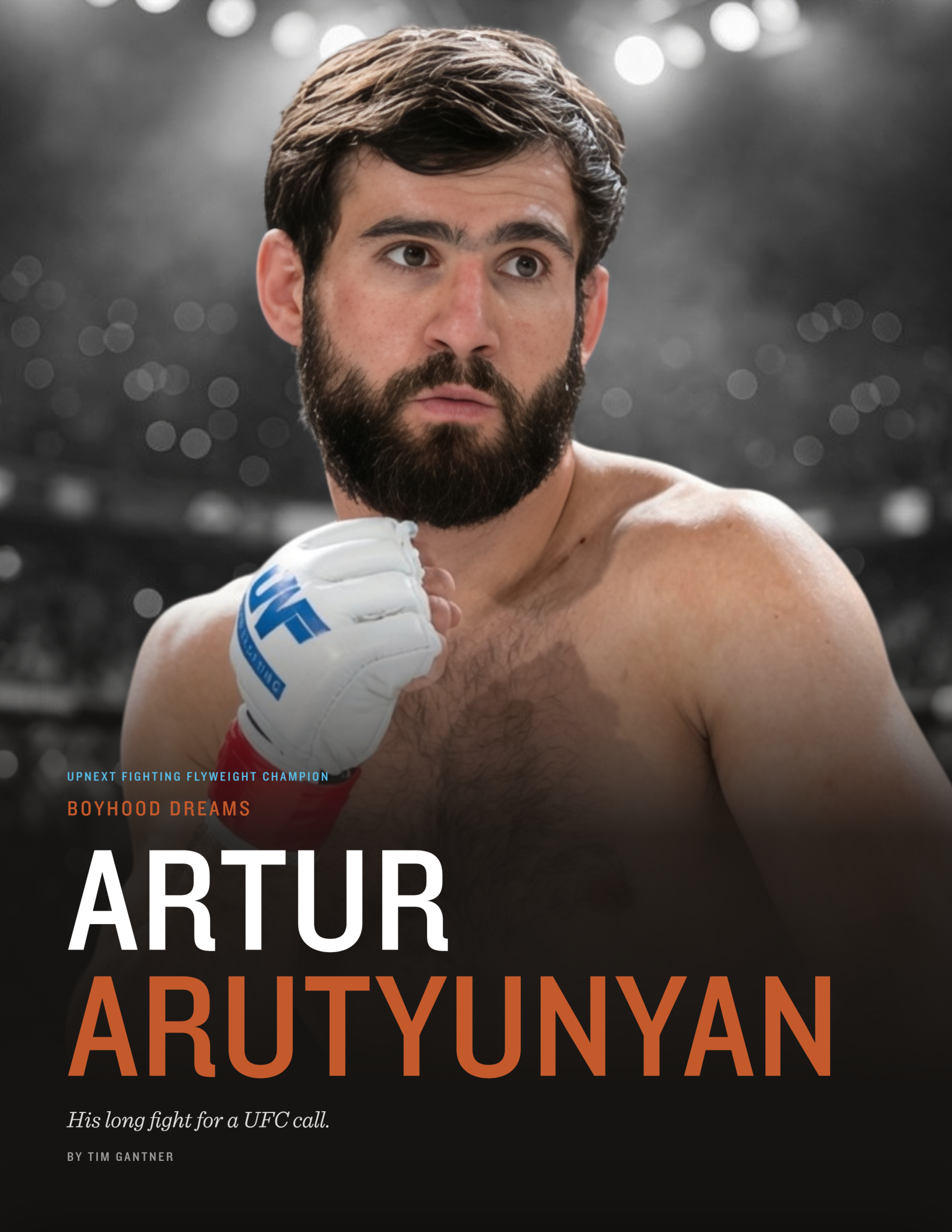




UPNEXT FIGHTING FLYWEIGHT CHAMPION

BOYHOOD DREAMS

ARTUR ARUTYUNYAN

His long fight for a UFC call.

BY TIM GANTNER

BOYHOOD DREAMS

Artur Arutyunyan's Long Fight for a UFC Call

After a torn ACL, a two-year layoff and six straight finishes, Artur Arutyunyan faces the toughest fight of his career on Aug. 29.

BY TIM GANTNER

In a Yerevan courtyard, three older brothers cornered 4-year-old Artur Arutyunyan.

The younger brother, Artur, set his feet. One punch for each boy. All three fell.

His father saw the whole thing.

“From that day, I felt that Artur has a great future in sports,” Grigor Arutyunyan said.

His father saw the same thing everywhere. His son needed to be first.

First in a race. First to the ball. First in whatever game the children found outside.

Now Arutyunyan holds the UpNext Fighting flyweight title. On Aug. 29, he returns to Commerce Casino to defend it against Royce Butler, with those around him believing another win could bring a call from the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

A knee injury took nearly two years from him. Aaron La Farge took his perfect record. Neither changed what his father had seen in that courtyard.

THE BOY WHO HAD TO BE FIRST

Grigor Arutyunyan enrolled his sons, Artur and Harut, in karate when Artur was 9. Harut stuck with it, but Artur lasted only two months.

“Dad, this isn’t my sport,” Arutyunyan said.

A year later, his father took him by the hand and walked him into a kickboxing gym. “I belonged there. I felt the energy right away,” Arutyunyan said. “This is what I’m going to do for the rest of my life.”

Four months later, Arutyunyan won an Armenian championship in his age and weight class.



A young Artur with his father, Grigor, in Yerevan.

“My dear son, if you want to reach the heights, you must be the very first to enter the gym and the very last to leave,” Grigor Arutyunyan told him. He took his father’s words literally.

His grandfather made a prediction when he was 11. “I won’t be around, but all of you will be,” his grandfather said. “He’s going to reach very great heights in sports.”



A young Artur with his grandfather in Yerevan.

Arutyunyan went to school in the morning, trained in kickboxing four evenings a week and competed in one tournament after another. His father kept track of the medals. Arutyunyan recorded 15 first-place finishes, five second-place finishes and two third-place finishes. A medal in every tournament.

Then a winning ticket in the green card lottery uprooted the family from Armenia.

TWO BUCKETS OF MEDALS, ZERO GROUND GAME

At 16, Arutyunyan arrived in the United States. His family crowded into a two-bedroom apartment in North Hollywood. His parents still live there.

Two gallon-size plastic buckets sit packed with medals. His father plunges his hands inside and lifts a tangled mass of gold, silver and bronze. It clinks like loose change. Every piece hangs from a faded ribbon of Armenian red, blue and orange.



A young Artur kickboxing in Armenia.

Kickboxing had taught him how to stand his ground. Grappling taught him what happened when he lost it.

Arutyunyan attended Ulysses S. Grant High School in the east-central San Fernando Valley. There, he met Samvel Boyajyan. They lived on the same street. Boyajyan trained in mixed martial arts and convinced his friend to tag along to a grappling class.

But Arutyunyan had one question. “What’s that?” Arutyunyan asked.

Boyajyan brought him to Hayastan MMA Academy in North Hollywood, a judo and grappling gym founded by Gokor Chivichyan.

“What the hell is this? I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.”

Before practice even started, Boyajyan caught Arutyunyan in an arm-triangle choke. Minutes later, Dylan, one of the gym’s best grapplers, submitted him with a rear-naked choke.



Arutyunyan trains with Karen Darabedian and Samvel Boyajyan.

“What the hell is this?” Arutyunyan said. “I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.” But he returned because he wanted to understand how another man could overpower him and leave him feeling helpless.

At Hayastan, Arutyunyan met Karen Darabedian, the coach who would shape the rest of his game.

Darabedian was still fighting professionally at the time. He fought in World Extreme Cagefighting after handing future UFC interim champion Tony Ferguson his first professional loss in 2009.

While coaching at Hayastan, Darabedian split his own training between the gym and Main Event Gym, where he worked with boxing coach Roma Kalantaryan.

Arutyunyan followed him to both gyms and developed his wrestling, jiu-jitsu, escapes, takedown defense and cage work.

Darabedian’s best friend and training partner, Sevak “The Silverback” Magakyan, competed on the 12th season of “The Ultimate Fighter.”

Magakyan knew what the next level demanded. In Arutyunyan, he saw a skinny striker who knew almost nothing on the ground but learned quickly. “He would stop, listen, process and start doing it,” Magakyan said.

The ground game came first. Belief took longer. “Karen has that thing where he can make you believe,” Arutyunyan said. But Arutyunyan still had to see what his coach saw.

“When Art noticed that he had it a few years in, that’s when everything came together,” Darabedian said.

FIVE FIGHTS IN 12 MONTHS

In 2018, Darabedian opened KD MMA in Glendale. That same year, his young protégé fought five times in 12 months and went 4-1.

“I had the skills,” Arutyunyan said. “I needed the experience.” The third fight ended in a decision loss. “When I returned for my next fight,” Arutyunyan said, “I felt the difference in the level of fighter that I became.”

He turned professional the next year. On Oct. 4, 2019, Arutyunyan stopped Ali Nazari in the second round of his professional debut at Celtic Gladiator 25 in Burbank.

THE NEARLY TWO-YEAR SILENCE

Two days after the win, Arutyunyan returned to the gym looking for another fight. He and a 220-pound training partner made a bet over who could take whom down. They reached the edge of the mat. His partner shot for a double-leg takedown and trapped Arutyunyan’s foot beyond the edge of the mat.

“I had one normal leg and one leg that only had bones on it.”

As their weight shifted, Arutyunyan’s knee buckled under the pressure with a sickening pop.

“I felt my leg coming off its place,” Arutyunyan said. “I thought I was going to see my knee one way and my

foot another way.”

Darabedian was across the gym when the scream cut through the room. “I remember the knee injury like yesterday,” Darabedian said. “We were all here grappling, and out of nowhere, I heard a loud yell.” By the time he reached Arutyunyan, the knee had started to swell.

Arutyunyan tore his anterior cruciate ligament. Surgery repaired it. Recovery stripped the muscle from the leg. “I had one normal leg and one leg that only had bones on it,” Arutyunyan said.



The difference after surgery: one leg stripped of muscle.

Then he disappeared into himself. “You couldn’t talk to Art,” Magakyan said. “He wanted to stay away from everybody and process it.”

Arutyunyan was more than a prospect to Darabedian. He was a close friend and student trying to decide whether fighting could support his parents, a future wife and the family he wanted to build. “Art’s not a random person to me,” Darabedian said. “I want to make sure that he succeeds not only in fighting, but in life.”

It was almost two years before Arutyunyan accepted another fight, this one for Lights Out Xtreme Fighting, or LXF. “I was young and hungry,” Arutyunyan said. “I couldn’t wait to come back.”

A week after accepting a bout with Aaron La Farge, Arutyunyan was grappling with teammate Hamzeh Trad when he tried to lift Trad from half guard. His left knee popped again. This time, he tore his medial collateral ligament.

He trained around the injury. No wrestling. No grappling. He stayed at range, hit pads and boxed.

In the first round, La Farge was almost out on his feet. Arutyunyan punched himself out chasing the finish, but it never came. La Farge survived and submitted him in the second round at LXF 5. “He beat me,” Arutyunyan said. “That’s what happened.”

Two setbacks. First the knee. Then the fight. “That was all of our loss,” Darabedian said. The knee forced him to stop. The loss taught him when to stop.

Early on, every opening seemed like a chance to finish, and Arutyunyan went after all of them. He burned through energy trying to force finishes. After La Farge, that stopped.

“We became patient,” Darabedian said. “We started getting ready for adversity in fights.” They drilled the bad positions. The failed takedowns. The lost scrambles. They built the conditioning to keep fighting after the first game plan broke.

“One word: experience. I know myself way better than before.”

SIX STRAIGHT FINISHES

In the winter of 2023, Arutyunyan signed with UpNext Fighting, or UNF, a Southern California promotion offering something he needed: activity.

Marcelino Silva went first. Rear-naked choke. David Secaida followed. Rear-naked choke. Josh Paiva reached the third round before his corner threw in the towel. Carlos Puente Jr. gave up his back. Rear-naked choke. Jeff Martin reached the second round before Arutyunyan submitted him with the same choke.

At UpNext, Arutyunyan stopped worrying about what came next. He waited, settled the position and took what his opponent gave him. “One word: experience,” Arutyunyan said. “I know myself way better than before.”

Almost three years after his UpNext debut, Arutyunyan fought Christopher Cruz for the vacant flyweight title March 21, 2026, at Commerce Casino. Cruz shot for a takedown early in the fight.

Arutyunyan reversed him and took him to the ground. Then Cruz exposed his back.



Arutyunyan with the vacant UNF flyweight title.

At 4:46 of the first round, Arutyunyan showed off his art and locked in the rear-naked choke. “I don’t think he expected to get pinned,” Arutyunyan said. “He was hand-fighting well off his back, but I got the choke.” The belt was the cherry on top. The people around him were the blessing.

HIS FATHER’S VICTORY

Arutyunyan had never dedicated a win before. The title changed that. “My father put me into this,” Arutyunyan said. “This one is for my dad.” After the fight, he put the belt on his father.

Magakyan watched. “That gave me goosebumps,” Magakyan said. “He thanked his dad like, ‘This is your victory.’”

The belt showed Grigor Arutyunyan that the family had not spent those years in vain. To Darabedian, it brought back his own father.

Darabedian’s father put him in martial arts at 5. He told his son not to spend his life taking damage. Fight. Make a name. Then teach. He was 19 when his father died.

“My dad was very big on me passing on my knowledge,” Darabedian said. “I never thought it would become this big.”

Following the success of KD MMA’s Glendale location, Darabedian and Magakyan opened a second location in Montrose in November 2023. In 2025, Darabedian and Arutyunyan opened the Northridge academy.

When Arutyunyan placed the title on his father, Darabedian saw his own father’s plan living inside another family. “To have it go full circle, where a guy comes to my gym to gain knowledge, wins the title and dedicates it to his dad, that’s amazing,” Darabedian said. “In a way, I’ve done my job.”



Artur places the belt on his father, Grigor, after the win.

The family went home. Food and sweets covered the table. They sat together and watched the fight again.

HIS CORNER GETS BIGGER

At some point during this fight camp, Arutyunyan will become a father. A son is on the way. “Now it’s not only about myself,” Arutyunyan said. “It’s about someone else who you brought into this world.”

His father had spent years pushing him toward the gym. But with a grandson coming, he pointed him back toward home. “Love your wife, love your child,” Grigor Arutyunyan said. “Be by your family’s side.”

At KD MMA’s Northridge academy, Arutyunyan already coaches children and teenagers. He’s also a partner in the gym. “I love teaching. I love coaching,”

Arutyunyan said. “Once I’m done fighting, I’m going to be a full-time coach.”



Arutyunyan celebrates a win with two of the students he teaches at KD MMA.

He also corners teammates and helps other fighters when he isn't competing. "Art's that kind of guy," Magakyan said. "Whoever has a fight, he's on top of it, trying to help everybody."

Kris Buckner, UpNext Fighting's chief operating officer, has watched Arutyunyan up close. "Artur's such a good human being," Buckner said. "He's so quiet, so respectful, but such a killer in the cage."

ONE MAN IN THE WAY

On Aug. 29 at UNF 35, Arutyunyan will walk back into Commerce Casino for his first title defense. Royce "Too Smooth" Butler will be waiting.

"He's a good, rangy striker," Arutyunyan said. "He sells a lot of tickets and brings a crowd. It's going to be electric on Aug. 29."

Butler is the toughest opponent of Arutyunyan's career.

Both fighters are 7-1. As of July 21, Tapology has Butler ranked No. 32. Arutyunyan holds the No. 38 ranking among North American professional flyweights.



Royce "Too Smooth" Butler, first challenger to the belt.

Butler can finish fights. Four of his seven wins have come by knockout or technical knockout. He also has fought in the UpNext cage, submitting David Bedai Quiros in the first round in April 2025.

Then came A1 Combat. Butler won the vacant flyweight title at A1 Combat 31, stopping Mason Carzino-Hartshorn with punches at 4:56 of the second round.

But his record isn't perfect anymore. At Fury FC 117 in March, Justin Longoria landed a right to the body,

then a left hook up top. Butler went down. Longoria kept punching until the referee pulled him off Butler.

Now Arutyunyan gets him. Win this one, and talk of the UFC gets louder.

"When we talk about the UFC, I see his eyes get wide."

ONE WIN FROM THE BIG SHOW?

Six straight wins brought questions about the UFC. Ryan Buckner, UpNext Fighting's chief executive officer, believes Arutyunyan will get a call very soon. "He deserves it already," Buckner said. "One more fight and he should get that Contender Series call."

Darabedian said UFC matchmaker Sean Shelby sent him a link to submit Arutyunyan's profile. "If he fought now, he might be top five," Darabedian said. "Those guys have experience in the UFC cage, and Art doesn't have it yet. As far as talent goes, he's up there."

Magakyan once heard the same words now following Arutyunyan. One fight away. It never happened for him. He knows the pressure behind those words. And he sees Arutyunyan's reaction whenever the UFC comes up. "When we talk about the UFC, I see his eyes get wide," Magakyan said. "Art is ready for anybody the UFC puts in front of him."

Grigor Arutyunyan believed his own father was listening from above. "Dear Grandpa, what you said is coming true," Grigor Arutyunyan said.

Whether the UFC calls after one win or three, Arutyunyan said the job stays the same. "I don't let the noise get to my head," Arutyunyan said. He fights to provide for his family and for the people who kept believing.

Asked what a UFC call would mean, Arutyunyan looked back to the first kickboxing gym he ever walked into.

"It would mean I wasn't wrong when I was a boy," Arutyunyan said. "That I'm the guy I said I was going to be."