

UFC 72: Franklin Back On Track In Ireland

Written by Ronan Keenan
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BELFAST, Northern Ireland - The Irish have been known to enjoy a good fight, so the packed crowd at the Odyssey Arena must have been happy with the UFC 72 event on Saturday.

The growing global popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship was apparent as 8,000 fans created a raucous atmosphere throughout the eight fight card.

In the main event Rich Franklin secured a shot at his old UFC middleweight championship against the winner of July's clash between champion Anderson Silva and Nate Marquardt with a three round unanimous decision victory over Yushin Okami.

The fighters took a cautious approach to the bout with Franklin (24-2) managing to control the pace for much of the fifteen minutes. The contest lacked drama, with Franklin proving to be more well-rounded than his relatively raw 25-year-old opponent.

The first round was a tactical affair, with little engagement between the fighters. Franklin, aware of Okami's highly-touted grappling ability, used his jab to keep the Japanese at bay throughout the frame.

When the fighters did come close together, both combatants nullified each other with tight clinching, forcing referee John McCarthy to restart the contest.

The slow tempo continued in the second, with much of the crowd, perhaps hoping for the frenetic action of the preliminary bouts, voicing their displeasure. Okami (21-4) showed a reluctance to trade strikes and held Franklin when the action moved to close quarters, with the referee again left with no choice but to separate the fighters.

"[Okami] was slippery so I wanted to control the action from the centre [of the octagon]," said Franklin.

Okami, 25, sensing he was behind on the scorecards, showed more urgency in the final round, using a trip to take Franklin off his feet for the first time in the fight. Still, the former schoolteacher from Ohio overpowered Okami and mounted his opponent to land a flurry of punches, much to the crowd's approval.

Okami regrouped and soon scored another takedown and attempted a Kimura armlock, but Franklin, 32, used his experience to escape and dominate the final stages of the round.

All three judges scored the contest 29-28 for Franklin.

It was undoubtedly a step up in class for Okami and should prove to be a valuable experience.

"Rich taught me a lot tonight," he said. "I think next time I can improve on this performance."

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Next up for the victor is a chance to regain his old 185 pound title.

“If that fight is next, that’s what’s next. I’ll fight whoever.” said Franklin in characteristically understated fashion.

Other bouts:

Exciting fan-favorite Forrest Griffin got back to winning ways with a unanimous decision win over the durable Hector Ramirez in a light heavyweight contest. Despite suffering a first round knockout defeat to Keith Jardine last time out, Griffin (14-4) appeared confident and dominated the stand-up action throughout.

“I did exactly what I set out to do,” said Forrest. “I hit him a lot and he didn’t move.”

Griffin won the opening frame by keeping busy with a high volume of strikes. Ramirez (6-3-1) managed to connect with a left-right punch combination, but Griffin’s chin withstood the test and the Ohio native responded with a flurry of heavy blows.

Both fighters again remained on their feet in the second, with Forrest pressing the action with his high work-rate. Ramirez was unable to get into a rhythm as Forrest evaded his attacks and continually landed with the right cross.

Even though Forrest appeared to be tiring in the third, the bout maintained a similar pattern as Ramirez remained on the back foot while eating a steady feed of high kicks and right hands on route to a wide points loss.

“I was afraid of getting knocked out after what happened in my last fight [against Jardine] but I’m Irish so I deserved a bit of luck tonight,” said Griffin in typically self-effacing manner.

Former Rich Franklin victim Jason ‘The Athlete’ McDonald scored a second round stoppage win over Rory Singer to move his record to 20-8. The opening round featured a lot of clinching, with the more active Singer gaining the upper hand with a series of knees.

However, the second frame saw McDonald control much of the action after manoeuvring himself on top of Singer (12-8) early in the round. The Canadian looked to wear down his opponent and eventually opened up Singer’s guard to connect with a flurry of clean punches forcing the bout to be stopped at 3:18 of the round.

“I’m a bit of a slow starter,” said McDonald after the bout. “But in the second I got into my groove and managed to finish him off. Rory was being a wise-guy at the press conference so I was glad to knock that sense of humor out of him.”

23-year-old lightweight prospect Tyson Griffin rebounded from his recent defeat to Frank Edgar with a hard-fought spit decision win over Clay Guida. In what was unquestionably fight of the night, the aggressive Griffin(9-1) looked to exchange punches with Guida from the start, but the Illinois native proved slippery and continually evaded the heavy blows.

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In the second, Guida (21-5) managed to apply a rear choke while balancing on the standing Griffin's back. But Griffin used his superior strength to break the hold and looked for more big hooks as the round drew to a close.

Guida dominated the third, keeping Griffin on his back for much of the five minutes, but Griffin constantly replied with heavy kicks and punches to disrupt his opponent's attacks.

The split verdict irked much of the crowd, with many admiring Guida's game effort.

Afterwards, UFC president Dana White said a rematch should happen in the near future.

In a battle between two alumni of The Ultimate Fighter, Ed Herman raised his record to 15-4 using a rear-naked choke to submit Scott Smith. Herman controlled the bout after slamming Smith (13-4) hard to the canvas midway through the first.

'Short Fuse' unloaded with a series of elbows on the ground to severely damage Smith's nose. Smith managed to escape near the end of the round, but Herman reaffirmed his dominance early in the second, controlling from on top before applying the rear choke at 2:25 of the round.

Irish-American Marcus Davis (17-4) delighted the fans with an emphatic victory over Jason Tan after landing a ferocious right hook early in the first round of their welterweight fight. After a tactical opening, the southpaw Davis, a former professional boxer, launched a big right hand that caught Tan (5-2) cleanly on the jaw, leaving the Englishman inert on the canvas after 1:15.

Davis, who has now won his last nine MMA bouts was clearly ecstatic with the outcome.

"My parents are from Ireland and it was always my dream to fight in here," he told the crowd. "And I achieved my dream with a vicious knockout."

Colin Robinson (9-3) of County Antrim was stopped in the second round by Eddie Sanchez in a see-saw heavyweight battle. Robinson seemed to be on the verge of victory after flooring Sanchez (9-1) in the first round with a right uppercut. Robinson rained down punches on Sanchez but couldn't catch the American cleanly. Robinson then attempted an arm lock but Sanchez managed to escape the hold and mount his tiring opponent.

The round ended with Robinson in trouble, and Sanchez was quick to pounce at the start of the second, sending the Irishman to the canvas. After a flurry of unanswered punches referee Herb Dean called a halt to the contest at 32 seconds of the stanza.

The bad luck of the Irish also got to local fighter Stevie Lynch (4-1) who suffered his first MMA loss after submitting to Dustin Hazelett (11-3) at 2:50 of the first round. After a cautious opening, Hazelett floored an off-balance Lynch with a right hand before synching in a front choke, forcing the Irishman to tap out.

Also:

At the post-fight press conference Dana White admitted that the UFC were in recent

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negotiations with wrestling star Kurt Angle, but he said that Angle would “get his ass kicked” if he fought in the octagon. He also denied rumors that the organization was in talks with Brock Lesnar.

White also announced that Saturday’s event broke the UFC merchandise sales record and that the UFC plans to stage a card in Dublin, possibly in 2008.