

TSS Closer Look-Felix Sturm

Written by Ronan Keenan
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“The belt looks a little loose,” shouted the photographer at the busy boxing gym.

World titlists are no strangers to photo shoots, but it wasn't Felix Sturm's WBA middleweight strap that needed adjustment, instead a designer belt supporting his sharp pair of slacks and dress shirt required tightening.

The man formerly known as Adnan Catic has a reputation for handling himself with class inside and out of the ring. Whether modelling business attire or out-boxing opponents, the German-based Bosnian maintains a calm demeanour which has helped his image morph away from that of the average prizefighter.

But in the last year, Sturm's fighting style has taken a grittier edge, with composure being substituted with traces of aggression.

The former economics student became a hit with the boxing media after accepting a debatable 2004 points loss to Oscar De La Hoya with admirable grace, but he has since lost much of his lustre as a steady diet of soft opposition seemingly dulled his reflexes, leading to a surprising stoppage defeat against a 38-year-old Javier Castillejo.

In a possible sign of desperation and a response to the chorus of boos that highlighted his safety-first points victory over the unthreatening Noe Gonzalez Alcoba last June, Sturm displayed uncharacteristic recklessness in last October's clash with Randy Griffin.

The nimble footwork and busy jab that earned Sturm the devalued WBA title in a 2007 rematch with Castillejo [politics saw then-champion Jermain Taylor stripped of the belt] was generally absent as Felix sought to produce a crowd-pleasing performance in Halle, Germany.

Sturm's lack of natural punching power and Griffin's resiliency resulted in a back-and-forth scrap that was appropriately declared a draw. Sturm tagged the American with sharp uppercuts early in the contest, but Griffin hardly took a backward step and gained control as the fight wore on.

Sturm was unable to match Griffin for strength, but in the final two rounds he dug deep to out-land the challenger and salvage a draw.

“Randy deserves (a return] and I need a rematch to prove something to myself,” admitted Sturm immediately after the result.

The rematch is scheduled to take place on Saturday in the original venue and has been preceded by a compelling performance from Sturm.

Last April he bludgeoned the unbeaten but obscure Jamie Pittman in seven rounds, blending swift movement with accurate two-fisted assaults. Sturm, 29-2-1 (13), utilized a full range of

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punches to dismantle the Australian. A straight right rocked Pittman in the second; a body shot floored him in the fifth; a left hand-right uppercut salvo sent him to the canvas in the sixth, and a full-scale barrage saw the referee stop the contest in the seventh.

It was undoubtedly Sturm's most impressive display as he finally managed to combine his tight, practical boxing skills with hurtful power-shots. But dazzling against the likes of Pittman figures to be a different proposition to tangling with Griffin again.

"I feel I won the fight (last October). It was close but I deserved the decision," claims Griffin. "Every time he touched me the crowd went crazy. But I've no problem going back (to Germany). I felt at home there."

The Philadelphia native has built up a 24-1-3 (12) record to little fanfare stateside, so it is unsurprising that he would welcome a return with Sturm in front of a 12,000 crowd at the Gerry Weber Stadion.

Underscored by a points win over former titlist Maselino Masoe and draws with Yusaf Mack and James Obede Toney, Griffin's résumé suggests he belongs well below elite class, so why could Sturm only manage a draw with the American?

Wrote Graham Houston following the fight: "I wonder if [Sturm] has peaked at the age of 29. He was hard-pressed to earn a draw with Griffin, a good but unremarkable challenger."

Sturm's ambition in boxing is unclear. He has shown no interest in fighting outside Germany and the proposed mega European showdown with Arthur Abraham is unlikely to transpire since the Armenian seems intent on fighting in the U.S.

Moreover, Sturm has plenty of interests away from the ring to keep him busy, whether it's upscale photo shoots or hitting the books.

"I do many things," he reveals. "I like basketball very much. I like water polo, what a hard sport it is; often underestimated from the outside. I drive go-karts, I play table tennis and I play a lot of chess. Besides, I still have my studies."

Maybe the well-rounded showing against Pittman was a sign that Sturm is willing to add to his repertoire, or just an illusion involving a quality fighter beating up an overmatched novice. Regardless, Sturm will need a stirring performance against Griffin to assuage those who doubt his desire.

"My motivation couldn't be greater," he says. "I'm fighting for my team and my large family. Becoming a world champion is easier than always having to defend it against hungry challengers.

"I learn from my mistakes."