

Bisping Closer To Title Shot With UFC 89 Win

Written by Ronan Keenan

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For two fighters with a history of volatile behaviour outside the octagon, Michael Bisping and Chris Leben were unexpectedly restrained in the build-up to their showdown at UFC 89 in Birmingham, England on Saturday.

Leben has a reputation for ill-advised impulsiveness, with the most famous incident coming from The Ultimate Fighter reality series when he punched through a door in an alcohol-fuelled stupor. Britain's Bisping is no stranger to speaking his mind, most notably when he angrily defied reporters at a post-fight press conference when he was questioned about his close decision victory over Matt Hamill at UFC 75.

Yet while both fighters have displayed newfound self-discipline in recent months, sports writers from both sides of the Atlantic were keen to express their forthright opinions on Bisping in the days before UFC 89.

The Briton has drawn mixed reactions from observers for both his fighting ability and manner away from the cage. After winning The Ultimate Fighter 3 competition, Bisping was marketed heavily in his native country, with organizers conscious of his ability to promote the sport in Europe.

Claims were made that Bisping, 18-1, was matched easily in his first few UFC appearances, with fans' disapproval of the situation reaching exorbitant levels after he was awarded the victory over Hamill in a fight many onlookers thought he lost.

After a decision loss to Rashad Evans in his subsequent outing, Bisping moved down a division to middleweight [185 pounds] and has rejuvenated his career, with Saturday's points triumph over Leben offering further evidence that the Briton is a legitimate title contender.

But writers are split in their judgment of Bisping as an ambassador for the sport. CBS Sortsline.com columnist Gregg Doyel has been unimpressed by Bisping's attitude, labelling the fighter an "irritating egomaniac".

Conversely, Gareth Davies of The Daily Telegraph is unhappy with the treatment Bisping has received from the stateside media.

"What is it with the American bias against Michael Bisping?" wrote Davies last Wednesday. "There is still talk of him having to 'move up the levels' to meet [middleweight champion Anderson] Silva. If he could live with [Rashad] Evans, and is powerful at middleweight, then what are we waiting for? Does it smack of American bias against the British fighter? Perhaps that comes from the American audience finding it difficult that a Briton came and won TUF Series 3 over in the States, when all the odds were stacked against him."

Now that Bisping has overcome Oregon's Leben, the UK versus US MMA debate is set to

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escalate as UFC President Dana White reportedly revealed that Bisping will act as a coach on the ninth season of TUF, and will preside over a team comprised wholly of British fighters. Bisping's team will oppose a group of American fighters to be coached by winner of January's Rich Franklin-Dan Henderson matchup. Bisping will then fight the victor of that showdown when the TV series has ended.

Before his recent resurgence at 185 pounds, the Manchester resident would have been a heavy underdog against either Franklin or Henderson, but after the performance against Leben, the odds on a Bisping victory will likely be shortened.

The Briton, 29, looked composed throughout the three round contest, clinically picking-off the onrushing Leben with sharp punches. Leben, who is a respected power-puncher, failed to connect with any heavy blows, and was sporting noticeable facial damage from the second round on.

Bisping displayed slick footwork in evading Leben's attacks, and punched from angles to score with a range of clean strikes.

All three judges scored the bout in Bisping's favour by scores of 30-27 (twice) and 29-28.

After the fight, a humble Bisping provided an honest reflection of his standing: "All people seem to be talking about is a title fight," he said. "Whenever it comes I'll be happy, if they said it was next fight or in five fights, I'll be happy. I don't think I'm there yet. I probably need one or two more solid fights over solid opponents."

Franklin or Henderson will certainly provide a concrete test.

In light heavyweight action Keith Jardine moved back towards title contention with a split decision victory over Brandon Vera.

In another light heavyweight matchup, Brazil's Luis Cane scored a second round stoppage over the once highly-touted Rameau Thierry Sokoudjou.

The ever-entertaining Chris Lytle recorded a unanimous decision win over Britain's Paul Taylor in a gruelling welterweight contest.

Marcus Davis used a guillotine choke to submit Paul Kelly in the second round of their welterweight clash.

UFC debutant Dan Hardy upset Akihiro Gono in another welterweight showdown, emerging with a split decision victory.