DUSSELDORF (3a.m., wearing presumably the only Phillies hat in Germany) - I'm not going to insult my hosts or new neighbors by assuming I know much about German motivation after just a couple months here with a temporary citizenship work permit, but I've been around enough pre-fight buildups to understand that this weekend's Sturm - Sylvester fight seems to hold some deep nationalistic overtones.

It's like Fernando Vargas getting under Oscar de la Hoya's skin with hype like "I'm more Mexican than he is."

Except here in the Rheinland, my impression is the public takes it more to heart. Bragging rights may be less pronounced, but carry more weight.

I'll leave further cultural psyching to more qualified observers Saturday night at the Konig Pilsener Arena in Oberhausen, where Sylvester challenges for Sturm's WBA middleweight title.

Besides, my sociological studies will be focused on getting on and off the autobahn in one piece (it doesn't look much different than the Jersey Turnpike, and nothing as sweet as some of the wider, newer multi lanes around Phoenix). Most of the cars here are much smaller, but it's initially a scary scene trying to figure out the signs while the passing lane hums at way over 200 kph (125 mph).

Through individual routes, Sturm and Sylvester are promising to leave each other in punched out pieces among the ringside wreckage.

Sturm comes into the contest with more of a ‘been there, done that’ attitude, while Sylvester presents a more brash approach.

"A truly great champion does not need a big mouth," said Sturm. “To be a good boxer you just need heart, courage and a good mind. However, intellect and (high) standards don't exist with Sylvester's team."

Sturm notched his belt with a unanimous decision nod over Javier Castellejo in 2007, to avenge a TKO loss to Castellejo in '06. The latest common duking denominator points to Sylvester stopping Castellejo in 12 last April, but by then mauling mileage had really piled up on the Spaniard.

The same type of wear and tear may finally catch up to 29-year-old Sturm, 30-2-1 (13), one of Germany's top kilo for kilo performers for many years. On paper, Sturm looks like a solid favorite, and usually in title fight scenarios I find that what should happen, statistic wise, does. This time it looms differently. "Hurrikan" Sylvester is only one year younger, and with a similar record at 29-2 (14), but against far less accomplished opposition overall.

The smoother road may have kept Sylvester fresher. Take your pick, it's a coin flip situation going in.

Sturm is coming off a rugged unanimous decision over Randy Griffin in July, with whom he drew in '07; Sylvester is coming off the Castellejo win.

Most global observers know Sturm from his controversial decision loss to Oscar de la Hoya in June 2004, a fight many ringsiders felt Sturm deserved and one De la Hoya has subsequently admitted he was lucky to nab. In fact, while I've heard a lot about German hometown cooking, two of the biggest Vegas rip-offs I've seen are De la Hoya -Sturm and George Foreman - Axel Schulz.

Sturm may have peaked in 2004-05 when he got back on the winning track after his US disappointment, in a run that included a decision over Robert Frazier and quick blast-outs of Bert Schenk (KO2) and Hacine Cherifi (KO3).

Sturm is definitely the elder statesman here, and has carried himself accordingly.

"Sebastian won versus Castellejo clearly and it was a good performance," said Sturm. "I respect him for it. I know he's a serious challenger and I'm ready."

Team Sylvester borrowed a page from the Joe Frazier against Muhammad Ali book and mocked Sturm by referring to him by his name at birth.

"My fight against Castellejo was just a semi-final," said Sylvester with claims he's been chasing Sturm. "Now comes a real championship at last and I'm completely focused on crushing Adnan Catic."

If body language counts for anything, and in this sport I've seen it amount to anything about 50% of the time, Sturm looked like he was already packed for an early ski vacation while Sylvester looked like he was already in the middle of the sixth round.

"I'm looking forward to fighting in Oberhausen again since I won my title here," mused Sturm. "Most of the tickets were sold a month before the fight. The amount of crowd support is amazing. I'm just happy for another great turnout. I've learned to correct some of my mistakes like the ones I made against Griffin. I feel good, and with my conditioning program I'll move around the ring much better than Sylvester."

There's a gym/team concept on the German cards I've seen that generally leads to USA in-state college rivalry type settings. Sylvester's manager, Winfried Spierlingm made the most inflammatory proclamation when he mentioned promotional allegiances, which seemed like a personal insult to Sturm.

"We have a slogan (for this fight) against Universum Box," said Spierling. "We will hunt, ram, and sink."

In regard to the cordiality of such proceedings in Germany, this was treated by some local observers as the equivalent of Tyson biting Lennox Lewis's leg. I get the feeling that if a USA fighter ever really wanted to infuriate a German foe, something relatively tame like the nose to nose shoving that often goes on to stir the pay per view pot might be considered Ali-Liston type madness.

I was in a workshop with the late, great playwright August Wilson where he illustrated dialogue by using examples of Black, Japanese, and White men talking at lunch. No right, no wrong, just distinct differences. In my roots, when the fight gets good, the crowd gets a little crazy.

The photographer I was with at a Susi Kentiakian card said the scene was more like a tennis match, an accurate categorization. When I asked writers at Valuev-Ruiz and Klitschko-Peter, they affirmed that the crowds here were always very polite.

Come to think of it, the only person I've ever heard yelling with abandon at the fights so far was Marco Huck, encouraging a stablemate.

My Vegas vibe tells me things will be different Saturday.

That vibe also whispers it will be Sebastian's night, but Sturm won't go quietly.

Thanks to the good people at Universum/Spotlight boxing who squeezed me in to an already fully booked arena, I'm looking forward to seeing the generally reserved German boxing patrons get rowdier than usual. The potential for 12 close rounds of top level boxing is high.

Sturm-Sylvester has been billed in some circles as the first alphabet sweepstakes between two sons of Deutschland since April 2000, when Dariusz Michalczewski stopped Graciano Rocchigiani, but the record books I checked listed Michalczewski as hailing from Gdansk, Poland.

To me, all that matters is that both guys come from schools of hard enough knocks to make it the best fight on paper I've seen since my Lufthansa flight landed.

In fact, the featured prelim that pits undefeated Sergiy Dzinziruk, 35-0 (26), against Joel Julio, 34-1 (31), could steal the show.

Whether or not I figure out all the roadsigns to Oberhausen, get the pedal down and roll with der big dogs, the Sturm-Sylvester trip looks like a great rumbling ride.