

UFC Angles For Boxing Fans In Ireland

Written by Ronan Keenan
Saturday, 17 January 2009 19:00

DUBLIN, Ireland – UFC President Dana White described the Manny Pacquiao-Oscar De La Hoya event as “a bad day for boxing”, citing an abbreviated undercard as a driver for the show’s poor production values. Turns out the fights on the UFC 93:Franklin vs. Henderson card didn’t last very long either.

But there was a key difference: the fights on UFC 93 were competitive and entertaining, regardless of their brevity.

Just two of the eight bouts went the full three rounds, but the 9,369 crowd at the O2 Arena in Dublin didn’t disapprove. They were under the impression that the matchups were relatively even, despite the fact that one fighter scored usually a conclusive victory in quick fashion.

None of the bouts featured a fighter evidently out of his league and there was never a hint that any fight was merely a showcase opportunity for a favored contestant.

Some of the fights did lack quality, such as the tangle between Mauricio “Shogun” Rua and Mark Coleman, but that clash had the crowd roaring its approval up until the knockout finish by the Brazilian.

This was the first UFC event in Dublin, a city that has feverishly supported the sweet science over the years. It’s an old school fight town, populated by a plethora of boxing gyms and the prospect of a night of fights, regardless of their discipline, saw intense demand for tickets to UFC 93, with all seats selling out within two weeks.

The attendance generated an exhilarating atmosphere, getting vocally involved in all bouts on the five hour show, leading Dana White to describe the crowd as “pound-for-pound one of the best crowds” the UFC has observed. The organization’s U.K. President, Marshall Zelaznik, announced that the UFC plans to host an annual St. Patrick’s Day card in Ireland and will make the nation one of its key hosts.

The newfound presence of the UFC will test the Irish fight fans’ loyalty to boxing. After seeing a well-produced, invigorating UFC show their appetite for pugilism may wane, as the prospect of evenly matched, unpredictable fights overshadows the likelihood of a cumbersome undercard beneath a big boxing match. Value for money matters during these economically tough times. Fans can’t afford to feel cheated anymore.

Many observers maintain that boxing and MMA followers are mutually exclusive, but Irish boxing stars Wayne McCullough and Bernard Dunne, seated at Octagon-side, were inundated with attention from fans throughout the night, indicating that a sizeable portion of the crowd were genuine boxing supporters.

In recent years the Irish public has turned out in force to support John Duddy, Andy Lee and

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Dunne and it is likely that each of the three fighters will make appearances at the O2 Arena within the next year. But when they do, ticket sales may be adversely affected by the prospect of an upcoming UFC card. National pride will always see the Irish public show strong support for their boxing heroes, but if home-grown UFC stars arrive, fans may decide to pump their money into MMA instead.

Such a scenario may never materialize, but ultimately Ireland will prove to be a case study as to whether fight fans really do switch allegiance from boxing to UFC.

In the main event of UFC 93, Dan Henderson gritted out a split three round decision over Rich Franklin to take a major step towards a title shot. Even though this contest was at light heavyweight, Henderson will next face Michael Bisping at middleweight.

Henderson, 38, looked physically smaller than Franklin, even though both men were listed at 6'1 and just under the 205-pound limit. Franklin figured to use his cleaner striking ability to subdue the rugged former two-time Olympic wrestler, and the strategy worked at times, but Henderson's ability to control affairs on the ground ultimately proved the difference.

"He did well on the outside, landing some nice kicks," admitted Henderson after the fight. "But I landed some good shots in close as well as from on top."

On entering the octagon, Henderson seemed thoroughly relaxed in his surroundings, his nerves eased by the experience of battling some of the sport's biggest names in his 23-7 career. His renowned looping right-hand staggered Franklin early, providing the opportunity for Henderson to take a dominant position on the ground, while landing a series of knees and right hooks.

Franklin, 34, managed to scramble to his feet and thereafter he recomposed himself and enjoyed some success with left kicks from his southpaw stance. But an accidental head clash dampened his momentum, opening a deep cut on the top of his head.

Franklin's superior strength saw him push Henderson around in the clinch, but a single-leg takedown from the Californian saw him govern the majority of the round, pounding Franklin with forearm blows and looping punches. It wasn't the prettiest action of the night, but it was effective, as Henderson maintained his position to stifle the technically smoother Ohio native.

The third round was Franklin's best, as his leg kicks found their mark, but he was still unable to get leverage into his usually dangerous left cross. The threat of Henderson's right-hand may have limited Franklin's output and an inadvertent finger to his eye brought a stop to the action, enabling Henderson to regroup. Both fighters winged punches at the fight's close, with the decision uncertain as the contest ended.

Two judges scored it 29-28 for Henderson, while the other somehow had it 30-27 in favour of Franklin.

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“At the most I would have given Rich the third round,” said Henderson. “I didn’t feel any power in his punches. I tried to time his [left cross] and land my right-hand, but he did a good job with the [left] kick.”

Henderson will now take on the role as coach of the U.S. team in the upcoming The Ultimate Fighter reality series which begins filming in Las Vegas on Monday.

Both fighters in the co-main event, Mauricio “Shogun” Rua and Mark Coleman, showed a lack of conditioning and shoddy technique but still managed to captivate the crowd throughout the 14 minutes of their affray.

The bout was awarded Fight of the Night status [along with Marcus Davis –Chris Lytle] by the UFC, but the distinction is arguable given the lack of quality on display. Both fighters had nothing left after just three minutes of a fight that moved at an ordinary pace.

Coleman, despite showing some of the wrestling skills that made him the first UFC heavyweight champion, was on rubbery legs after absorbing a series of leg kicks, knees and punches from Rua in the opening minutes. But with the 44-year-old apparently ready to be taken out, Rua shockingly was unable to summon the energy to finish the job and live up to the hype that preceded his arrival in the UFC in 2007.

Coleman then somehow found his way back into the fight, though only by default, as Rua struggled to maintain any sort of attack. The American’s left jab found its mark on Rua’s face with regularity, but the 27-year-old had numerous chances to wrap up the contest but had to wait until the dying seconds before a right hand sent Coleman reeling and a followup uppercut sent him down. The referee quickly intervened to halt the bout at 4:36 of the third.

Both fighters were visibly drained afterward. Coleman can maintain a degree of pride, as few expected the rematch to their 2006 encounter to be so competitive and there were calls that the contest was stopped early. But Rua looked a shell of the fighter that thrilled audiences with his striking skills in PRIDE.

Rua blamed his poor performance on inactivity since his upset loss to Forrest Griffin in 2007.

“I stayed sidelined for one year and a half,” explained Rua at the post fight press conference. “I went through surgeries. That is not easy, and that took a lot of my conditioning. It’s one thing to train and another thing to fight.”

Despite’s the crowd’s involvement in this fight, there will be no imminent rematch as Dana White announced that Rua will face Chuck Liddell at UFC 97 in Montreal on April 18.

The unpredictability of MMA was demonstrated in Alan Belcher’s submission victory over the much heralded Denis Kang in a middleweight matchup. Belcher had a reputation for being a one-dimensional kickboxer, but he showed improved ground skills in defending against Kang’s submission attempts and securing a decisive guillotine choke.

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Kang was in control up until the fight's end, showing impressive boxing skills while working in a variety of submission attempts. But Belcher used his strength to escape from Kang's attempts of a d'arce choke and kimura.

When Kang attempted a takedown in the second round, Belcher stuffed the attempt and used Kang's momentum to lock in a guillotine choke, forcing the Canadian to tap out.

"I think I've established myself in the UFC," said Belcher. "Kang is one of the top middleweights in the UFC."

Marcus Davis and Christ Lytle showed why they are regarded as two of the UFC's most durable fighters by electing to engage in a standup battle that featured an abundance of clean blows.

The bout started with Lytle enjoying some success with kicks to Davis' legs, but the latter constantly threatened with sharp straight lefts from the southpaw stance. A right hook from Davis momentarily floored Lytle, but "The Irish Hand Grenade" was unable to capitalize.

Lytle enjoyed more success with his punches in the second, trapping Davis along the cage and unloading with a barrage of hooks. Davis was forced to run from his opponent to escape the combinations. But the Maine native rebounded with a double-knee combination and landed a number of clean punches as the round drew to a close.

Both fighters embraced at the start of the final frame, but the hostility soon resumed as Davis began to land the straight left with increasing frequency. A variance of leg kicks and nifty footwork saw Davis take control of the fight drawing wincing from the stationary Lytle, but the hard-hooking Indianapolis resident remained a danger throughout.

The judges scored the contest 29-28 (twice) and 28-29.

"I've fulfilled a dream," said a tearful Davis as the crowd roared their approval. "To beat someone as tough as Lytle in front of my family's homeland is amazing. I knew how important movement would be in this fight."

Jeremy Horn and Rousimar Palhares put on an exhibition of technical ground fighting in their middleweight tussle. Palhares ultimately proved to be too strong for the UFC veteran.

Horn, a 104-fight veteran, used all of his experience to provide a tough test for the Brazilian submission specialist. Palhares was unable to trap the slippery American, who used his long limbs and agility to escape from any submission attempts.

Horn looked the better fighter standing, but the stocky Palhares used his strength and low center of gravity to routinely bring Horn to the ground. Palhares cited a broken hand as the reason he could not finish off his opponent.

John Hathaway clinically ended the ambitions of hometown hero Tom Egan, taking the fight to

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the ground and controlling the action until the stoppage at 4:36 of the first round of their welterweight clash.

Hathaway wasted little time in taking Egan off his feet and doggedly pressurized the Irishman, never allowing him to regain his footing. As much as Egan struggled to escape, Hathaway maintained control, smothering his opponent until securing the mount and raining in strikes until the referee called a halt.

The 21-year-old Englishman was relentless in his pursuit of victory and never gave Egan a chance to settle into his debut UFC contest.

Martin Kampmann got back to winning ways in his welterweight debut, stopping Alexandre Barros at 3:09 in the second round of their contest.

Eric Schafer used his noted jiu-jitsu skills to dominate Antonio Mendes, forcing the referee to halt the light heavyweight fight at 3:35 of the first.

Poland's Tomasz Drwal wasted little time in beating Ivan Serati, pounding on the Italian until the fight's end at 2:02.

Knockout of the Night honors went to Denis Siver, who landed a devastating spinning back kick to the solar plexus of Nate Mohr. A follow-up assault brought the fight's end at 3:47 of the third.