DUSSELDORF - As a true native told me upon an early visit to an Arizona reservation, "It's different here."

That concise, accurate description fits perfectly to tell you about Saturday night's card featuring Germany's WIBF/WBC Featherweight Champion Ina Menzer's stirring successful defense against worthy challenger Esther Schouten, relocated from Netherlands, at the Burg-Wachter Castello.

Anybody who tried to tell you women's boxing was dead would look like a fool among this typically high spirited crowd. The swarm was announced at a near sell-out with 4000 paying customers. My personal head count put it closer to around 3,500 but there are always plenty of people in the "alt" or "pils" (local beer type) line or outside on smoking breaks. You can get a contact high just walking past a smoking area doorway or standing on some train platforms in these parts.

Now, I understand that the gals' gloved up game is in much different, usually weaker condition at various other locales, and I know times are hard between the coasts of San Diego and Atlantic City.

I'm hoping that reports of boxing's general demise are as premature and inaccurate as they were prior to my temporary relocation outside my beloved USA last summer. Like I said back then to those who could only criticize boxing year after year: ok, quit beating the dead horse, bury it in your personal graveyard, then shut up and leave it alone.

Sometimes it reminds me of writers in Vegas who'd complain about everything from the matches to the promoter's personal life. Funny how they always shoved their way to the front of the buffet line, or whined that media gifts weren't good enough.

But the point is that professional pugilism, men's and women's alike, is alive and well in Deutschland.

If you stroll down the famous "Ko" shopping district or hit the Alstadt waterfront area of Dusseldorf, you'd never know there was a global financial crisis amidst all the everyday glamour and cuisine. Better informed people than I say Germany too will feel a consumer crunch in the near future, but it doesn't look like that day is right around the corner.

Current business here also seems to be good in regard to ringpost corners. Promoters like Universum, who put on Menzer's latest showcase, have strong stables that travel well throughout the country and play to big crowds and live TV audiences. I've heard that when Universum's broadcast contract with German TV is up for renewal next year the profit margin is expected to decline, but there's no speculation that female fighters like Menzer or Suzi Kentikian will lose their star power.

Which brings us back to Saturday night's main event.

As in Kentikian's appearance a few months ago, there was never any doubt about who was the star of the show, despite the presence of some decent duking men on the undercard. It was the women who's picture covered the fight posters or were seen or heard in the newspapers or TV broadcasts.
It was their names on the tickets, which ranged from around 20 to 200 US dollars at the current exchange rate.

Price wise, it seemed similar to what I'm hearing about Mayorga - Mosley. Good fight + good price = good crowd.

And after solid preliminaries, which included a surprisingly dramatic brawl for the "interim" WBO Cruiserweight Championship, the crowd was there to applaud Menzer and Schouten. Even after Victor Ramirez rallied for a televised upset stoppage over touted local favorite Alexander Alekseev it still clearly remained a warmup act for the ladies, who earned their distinction with a fine, two way firefight.

After a glamorous, lighthearted prefight buildup, both women looked primed for battle by their dressing room warmups. Shouten continued to display good spirits and a big smile for her entrance while Menzer came in looking much more lean and mean intense as she tagged herself during her walk to the ring. Both had weighed in at 125 3/4.

Shouten seemed to carry more power, Menzer more technique. At first things got so attentively quiet you couldn't hear anything but their feet shuffling across the Adidas sign on the canvas. There was so much anticipation the two minute rounds flew by in more like thirty seconds as Menzer fired continuous jabs and Shouten countered with rights over the top.

Neither threw many body shots at first. Menzer's jab made Shouten's face red quickly and her right eye looked tender, but Shouten moved Menzer with powerful counters. Action looked as close as their corn row hair styles, but I thought Menzer controlled the pace better.

By the fifth frame, it looked like Shouten was calmer and more composed, as if her game plan was starting to kick in. Since a WBC belt was involved, there were open scoring announcements in German. I translated later that Menzer was up by a point after 4, and by 2 on a pair of cards after 8. The tallies never appeared to effect anyone in the building.

Shouten scored with some big rights and had Menzer backing up during the middle rounds, but Menzer's jab still made the crucial difference.

In the 8th, Menzer fired almost a dozen jabs before Shouten could get set to throw a punch. When Shouten's rights did come, Menzer countered near-perfectly and drew a trickle a blood from her challenger's nose.

Shouten kept things dramatic by upping the pressure and swinging for the fences in the 9th, but Menzer stayed on her toes and kept control with a series of one-twos.

In the 10th, Menzer finished strong and caught Shouten with crunching rights coming in. It was an excellent fight.

Scoring went 97-93 twice and 96-94 for Menzer. The judges were Jurgen Langos (GER), Andrew Smale (RUS), and Roger Tilleman (BEL), but who scored what got lost in translation. I had it 99-92 Menzer. Referee Daniel van de Weile did a great job staying out of the way.

"This was a great fight," said Menzer, still undefeated at 23-0 (9). "I knew she'd be very tough and that I'd have to be well prepared, and I think I deserved this important victory. She should be proud of how well she did. This was a very hard contest for each of us, I'm glad I have such a strong team behind me."

"I can't complain about losing and I'll keep my head up," said Shouten, now 22-5-1 (11). "She's an excellent fighter and deserves to be champion. I did all I could do."

Both fighters expressed gratitude to the audience by TV microphone after the contest, and both earned loud cheers. There were scattered shouts of "Susi!" in reference to Kentikian. If Kentikian decided to gain weight and tackle Menzer (28 year old Menzer has no fighting weight to lose), Universum would need to find a much bigger building for a match that would be something similar to if Felix Sturm and Arthur Abraham ever engaged.

I'm no expert on women's boxing by any means, but I've seen a number of the top female performers over the years and my appreciation is growing, probably to increased exposure and better overall audience reaction on this hemisphere. At Valuev - Holyfield, where the entire undercard played to a vocal crowd of around 12,500 a women's bout was better received than almost all the others.

When I first heard about Menzer - Schouten, I was more concerned about who the supporting acts were.

Now I know a little better.