

Brute Pt. 4: I Just Woke Up. Who's Winning?

Written by Kaelan Smith

Monday, 26 January 2009 19:00

The forthcoming book "Brute" follows two Sacramento boxers: Mike Simms, a cruiserweight who trained with the Olympic team in 2000, who when I found him had lost five successive fights; and Stan Martyniuk, a young, Estonian-born featherweight, who when I found him had just fought and won his professional debut by decision, despite breaking his right hand in the first round.

Over the next few months I look forward to sharing the stories of these two fighters with the readers of the Sweet Science, and I look forward to hearing from any and all of you. --KS

At the bell, Otis Griffin came forward first, and threw an imprecise left hook. Mike Simms stepped away from it, certainly not bouncing on his toes, but boxing the smaller man. Throughout the first round of sparring, he neutralized Griffin's attack, jabbing his way outside. By the way Griffin continued to press forward, though, it was clear that his cardio was superior. He threw a series of combinations but failed to land anything with much authority. Late in the round Simms backed Griffin into the ropes and landed a hard left hook to the body, to which he added a stiff, straight right to Griffin's forehead. After the bell Simms leaned over the ropes and stared out the roll-up door at the rear of the gym that had been raised to let in a breeze. Griffin stood with Eric Regan who gave him a sip of water and suggested that he continue to press forward against Simms. One of the Marines from the recruitment center next door to Nasser Niavaroni's had walked back to the ring and was standing with his arms crossed. When he had finished with Griffin, Regan asked, "Can I help you?"

"I just got kicked out of the office," said the Marine. "I thought I'd come over and watch the boxers."

In the second round I felt that Simms' footwork was more deliberate and intelligent than it had been in the first. He would stick Griffin with a right jab, or cross over with a straight left, and Griffin couldn't gain enough composure to found any offense. Simms kept a high left hand when he jabbed, and that forced Griffin to go to the body, where he landed two left hooks to Simms' right oblique. They tied up after that, and without a referee to separate them, Simms escorted Griffin to the ropes, where he threw the first truly malicious punches of the morning. He landed a right and a left consecutively to Griffin's head, then disengaged. But as he danced back outside he reminded Griffin of their embrace by stinging him with a jab and a left. The buzzer signaling thirty seconds left in the round sounded, and Simms, visibly tired already, had to accept two impetuous rights from Griffin that, had he not been wearing his headgear, might have wobbled him.

In the second break Regan tended to Simms. "Keep finishing with the left," he said.

In the third, Griffin reintroduced himself as the aggressor, but it was Simms who continued to land the cleanest punches, including a short left uppercut that lighted on Griffin's chin. Griffin seemed relatively undaunted, though, and pressed forward as Regan had instructed him to do

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four minutes earlier. Griffin pushed Simms back into the ropes, and I felt a breeze of anticipation. Simms had said that he liked to attack off the ropes, and I watched to see if he could find an exploitable opening in Griffin's defense. He didn't. Instead he accepted a flurry of punches to the body. Eventually he dislodged himself and backed into the corner where I was standing. There he strung together a good series of punches, lefts and rights, that continually caught Griffin on the temples. I wondered if he were showing off, or if he knew the round was nearly over and needed, were there judges present, to impress them.

The fourth round, if you were cheering for Simms, was not lovely to watch. Simms seemed exhausted, and he kept his guard up with his elbows fastened to his sides, inviting whatever punches Griffin cared to throw. And Griffin cared to throw plenty. He caught Simms with two right uppercuts from the inside, and two solid, alternating, three punch combinations. Simms appeared to be resting, but boxing is not a sport suited to stationary recuperation. He was forced, late in the round, to latch onto Griffin. And then as if to distract the three observers—myself, Eric Regan, and the Marine—Simms threw a hard, low, left hook to Griffin's liver, but none of us were persuaded to donate him the round.

The fifth round began as the last had transpired, with Simms plodding around the ring backwards, singularly egressive. Regan seemed frustrated, even bored with Simms performance, and he yelled, "I'm the old judge. I just woke up. Who's winning?" Simms, rather than the hypothetical judge, seemed to wake up, as if in the first half-round he'd been thinking about something else—perhaps his child support payments. With his newly unearthed focus Simms put together the best combination of the bout, but Griffin shrugged it off. At the end of the round he had Simms against the ropes again where he landed a final, hard right to the cheek.

The sixth was a dramatic round, insofar as it was dynamic, with the boxers exchanging ownership of one another. Griffin came in with combinations, using a hard right hook on the inside to oppress Simms. But then Simms overthrew him, using his size to muscle Griffin around the ring, hooking Griffin as he pressed with alternating shots to the body. They arrived, ultimately, in my corner again, and Simms landed a left to the body and a right to the head that convinced Simms to hold on until the bell reprieved him.

After the fight there were no stools and Simms crouched in the rear of the ring, facing the alley, with his hands over his face, almost as if he were praying—or crying. I highly doubt he was doing either. After awhile he stood up and walked over to where Regan and Griffin stood near my corner, and crouched down again. Regan took off Griffin's gloves first, and when he took off Simms', Simms said, "How long before a fight can I get a massage? I know it drains you. Turns you to jelly."

"Maybe two or three days before," said Regan. "It's different for everybody."

I stood around at the front of the gym, waiting for the fighters to change. A young man came in with a large box and set it on the counter. Regan had come up to the front desk to answer a phone call, and when he hung up he opened it. It was full of cookies, and he took out one container of them and handed it to me. "Give these to your mother," he said. It was Mother's

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Day the following Sunday. "Don't eat them all yourself." I thanked him and told him I would be back in the morning.

"Tell Simms that I'll see him at 9:00," I said.

When I returned the following day at 9:30AM, the gym was open. The silver Isuzu was parked in front as it had been the day before. Inside Simms was standing by the ring in a sweatshirt and shorts. He had not wrapped his hands. At the front desk was a man in a Stanford hat, who, judging by the strident tone of his voice, was Nasser Niavaroni. He was at least talking loud enough that he appeared to own the place. Simms came towards me and we shook hands, but he looked melancholy. I turned then to Niavaroni, and listened to what he was saying into the phone.

"So he gets new blood work done for his last license, which is still good," Nasser was saying, "but because he has to redo the license maybe it's better to get more blood work? He just got a full medical clearance for his last fight, and that was less than two months ago." He paused for a response and then added, "Okay, yeah, that's crazy. All right. Thanks, Lilly."

I looked at Simms and knew immediately by the look on his face that the party in question, who needed new blood work, was Simms himself.

"Michael, don't just stand there," said Niavaroni. "Get your s--t together."

"I don't understand what just happened," said Simms.

"What good are you doing standing with your arms crossed?" Niavaroni said to Simms. This was obviously a rhetorical question. "You've got to get more blood work, period. That's what it is: a dictatorship. You've got to have blood work. You don't have it, you don't fight. I really don't care. I might cancel the show today. Don't worry about it."

"We got a shitty commission," said Simms.

Nasser had passed from frustration almost into complacency. "Yeah, we do."

I followed Mike across the gym to the ring where Ezra Regan was sitting on the mat having finished his three hundred sit-ups. Simms knelt down in front of his bag, took out his wrap, and began winding his hands as he talked. "They screwing so much stuff up down there." I think he was referring to the Sacramento boxing commission. "It's ridiculous."

I asked him if the fight were in jeopardy of being cancelled, and he said, "This February I got my blood work done, and when you get it done it's good for a whole year. And every couple of years you got to get the eyes. Even after the fight here I went and fought in Russia, and everything that was done here was good there."

Ezra, as had everyone else in the gym, had heard Niavaroni yelling at Lilly, and knew that the fight was, apparently, on the verge of being terminated. "You got to do what they say," he said.

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"Don't even waste your energy on it."

But Simms seemed as if he wanted to waste a little more energy on it. "I think they trying to kill boxing in Sacramento, in my opinion. Think I'll have to try cage fighting. I mean Nasser just told her he'd submitted the fight card, who's on the fight card. Why are you all just now, a few days before weigh-ins, letting me know I need blood work? They should have had it checked out way ahead of time. This close to weigh-ins and they're making everybody jump through hurdles." Jumping through a hurdle, rather than over one, it occurred to me, was probably more difficult.

"That's to be expected," said Ezra. "They try to do stuff like that all the time."

I asked Simms if he planned to spar, and he told me that he had to go try and get his blood work done. I wondered then why he'd wrapped his hands if he was leaving the gym, but I shook his hand instead and left. On the way out I asked Niavaroni if he really thought the fight would be cancelled.

"I'll know this afternoon," he said.