

Brute 6: First Bout Is Coming Your Way

Written by Kaelan Smith

Monday, 09 February 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

While I was standing at the bar, a man with long, dark hair tied back in a ponytail came up to me and asked if I was a reporter. I said that I was and he told me, before asking what sort of story I was writing, that I should do a feature on his man Stan Martyniuk. "I haven't seen him fight," I told him. "Are you a fighter?" He did not look like a boxer, but I felt I should give him the benefit of my enormous doubt.

"I'm a promoter," he said, and then introduced himself as Mehrad. "This is Gerrell." He indicated to a young man to his right wearing a blue t-shirt and shorts. Gerrell looked, if not like a boxer, at least potentially like a high school wrestler who has been taught to punch his opponents after taking them down.

"Is he a fighter?" I asked.

"No," said Mehrad. "He's my business partner, but you should see his left hook." Gerrell looked embarrassed.

"What do you promote?" I asked.

"Fighters," said Mehrad. I suppose I should have anticipated that answer. But he continued. "Also musicians, or whoever." That seemed to be a rather broad business plan, but he elaborated by saying that they were promoting Martyniuk. "We have a company called White Tiger Promotions. We'll introduce you to Stan the Man after his fight." Mehrad seemed very confident that Martyniuk would win and that after the bout he would be in the mood to talk with journalists. Gerrell, by his expression, was more apprehensive. Then Mehrad asked, "Who are you writing about?"

"Mike Simms," I said.

"I don't know him," said Mehrad.

"He's on a five fight-skid," I said. "He needs a win badly."

"When's he fighting?"

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"I have a feeling he might be first."

Up in the ring, the announcer, dressed in a tuxedo and sweating profusely from his cheeks and forehead (he must have been standing out at the patio bar before coming in to announce), held up his microphone. "Our first bout is coming your way right now," he said. He was, apparently, exaggerating, because he paced around the ring for a few minutes longer while the crowd, who had prepared themselves for the fighters impending entrées and then found that there was little impending, moved hesitantly towards their seats. Mehrad, Gerrell, and I stood by the bar with a group of almost fifty others and continued talking. The music that had been appeasing us during our wait came back on over the speakers. Then a man notified the announcer of something, and he took up the microphone again and said, "We're ready to fight."

"That's Stan's music," said Mehrad. Apparently, Mike Simms was not fighting first.

Martyniouk came out in a red, white and blue robe, colors that most of the audience must have construed as American, but I believe it was Martyniouk's nod to Russia. His opponent, Matt Mahler, of Manteca, making his pro debut, came out after, but the announcer introduced him first. When Martyniouk was introduced there was a loud cheer from the crowd. Manteca is not far from Sacramento—much closer, in fact, than Russia—but Martyniouk apparently trains in the Capital and had gained favor with the partisans in his two previous fights. Martyniouk weighed in at 130 1/2, and Mahler just below the featherweight ceiling.

When the bell rang, the debutante came after the Russian with the bravado of a man who has fought for money before, but also with the naïvely brisk pacing of a man who hasn't, while living up regardless to his surname's belligerent homonym. He backed Martyniouk into one of the neutral corners with a veritable blizzard of well-intentioned punches to the body and head, but Martyniouk had dressed well for the occasion. It was a brief squall, perhaps because the mauler remembered that Russians are weaned on ice, and Mahler let Martyniouk off the ropes.

In retrospect, it would have been better for the mauler to have exhausted himself punching shoulders and elbows. As it happened, Stan the Man followed the dissipated storm back across the canvas. I was writing a note, so I missed the right hook that hurt Mahler, but I looked up as the crowd began to scream, and certainly did not miss the short right that knocked the young Mantecan out. Mahler fell prostrate on the floor, and though, after the referee had waved him out, he tried heroically to get to one knee, it required two men to haul him to his corner. He had only been conscious for thirty seconds. And of those, for twenty-two he must have thought he was winning.

I was very impressed, and I congratulated Mehrad and Gerrell on their man's success. They were both elated, if Gerrell a little less visibly than Mehrad. "That didn't take very long," I said. "That's a hell of a right hand." It is rare, of course, to meet a young featherweight with one-punch knockout power. The disciples from White Tiger Promotions had already been converted, but the rest of the multitudes in the ballroom, whether they had been behind Martyniouk before the fight or not, were standing around as if they'd just been fed at Bethesda.

"I told you he was worth watching," said Mehrad. "Now I just wish I knew what I was going to do

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for the rest of the night." I suggested that he root for Mike Simms, and he and Gerrell took up the cause. I feared, though, that the show had started with a climax and was moving towards an expository first scene. I hoped that Simms would put on a good show, but I was simultaneously terrified that he wouldn't.

The announcer stepped back into the ring and read the decision, a thirty second knockout, and a few minutes later Brandon Gonzalez, whom a week earlier I'd gone to Niavaroni's gym to interview, came through the ropes. That implied that Simms was fighting at least third, and that the fight card in the lobby had been printed upside down, with the preliminaries on top. This was a strange way of promoting, as if the man who had drawn up the promotional materials was more accustomed to filling in baseball box scores, where the home team resides at the bottom of the card because they bat in the bottom half of the inning, which, of course, comes after the top. The only other explanation I could come up with was that the two preliminary fights were anticipated to be more exciting, and that the semi-final and final would be treated like consecutive six-round emergency bouts scheduled to fill in the negative space left by an early-round knockout in the main event.

Gonzalez had won his three previous fights with knockouts in the first round, and in the wake of Martyniuk's astounding right hand, the crowd was poised to watch another man put to sleep. His opponent, Mike Alexander, was technically undefeated, but he had drawn two out of the three times he'd fought.

When Gonzalez was an amateur he fought at the NABO's light-heavyweight limit of 178 pounds, but discovered that, unlike Cassius Clay, he was better suited to cutting weight as a professional than adding it on. Also like Clay, he served on the Olympic Team, but unlike his predecessor, Gonzales, perhaps lacking the patience to wait three years (he joined the team in 2005) for a chance to repeat Clay's 1960 Roman victories a few miles east in Beijing, turned pro in 2007. Or he needed money. He is a manager, still, at Starbucks, and that can erode one's patience.

According to his record, it seemed a wise decision to have traded Sacramento for Beijing. But as the bell announced the first round, Mike Alexander looked the more flagitious, and he supported that claim by knocking Gonzales down a minute into the first. This was an unprecedented coup, and the crowd waited, almost in silence, to see what the Olympian would do. Gonzales got up after three, stood for the remaining mandatory five, nodded to the referee, and stalked in again. He was apparently more cautious, though he landed, near the end of the round, a flurry of alternating hooks to Alexander's head. Gonzales, nonetheless, lost the round—the first of his career—and he sat down bright-eyed on his stool after the bell had rung, almost basking, it seemed, in the unfamiliar adversity of being two points behind on the cards with only three rounds remaining.

It took Gonzales almost the three full minutes of the second round to nullify the knockdown, but he did, with all the brutality of a lumberman transubstantially punishing his infidelitous wife by chopping down a tree. Neither fighter did much to write about in the first two minutes, but Gonzales, having measured and re-measured Alexander's reach, found a flaw in his battlement and walked inside. There Gonzales began punching Alexander in the obliques as if they were

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positive and negative poles and his fists were the magnets in an electric motor switching between them. Alexander did not last long. But before he quit lasting he had his back against the ropes, inanely guarding his face. It appeared to be a left to the liver that felled him finally.

Near me in the crowd a man said, with some melancholy in his voice, that there were only four fights on the card. At the rate fighters were losing, the evening would expire after nine minutes of actual boxing. Another man seemed to feel similarly. "They're charging \$100 for four fights?" he asked rhetorically. "I should have hawked my ticket. Anybody need a ticket to the fight tonight?" A number of people turned towards him, laughing. I didn't think his was a fair reaction to Gonzales' stunning body-punch knockout, but I empathized with the scalper. \$10 for each minute of fighting was not ethical.