KRAZY KREFELD - Sometimes a guy basically gets his face pounded flat.

That's pretty much what happened to Japanese visitor Koji Sato during his WBA middleweight title crash against hometown hero and defending champion Felix Sturm on Saturday. Sturm, now 32 -2-1 (14), hails from nearby Leverkusner which sits about half an hour down the autobahn from the Konig Palast, where a packed house of around 9,999 revelers rocked the rafters.

Until Floyd Mayweather returns, Sturm showed that he may have as good a jab as there currently is in the business.

The previously undefeated challenger Sato looked strong, but he was no match for Sturm, who made it hard to tell just how much the brave but outgunned Sato really had to offer.

Sato, 14-1 (13), notched a 1st round TKO for his 2005 debut in Las Vegas. Since then all his fights had been in Japan, and it was obvious that his previous opposition was nowhere near enough to prepare him for the pounding problems Sturm presented.

For his part, the deceivingly dangerous Sturm looked like he has as much a claim to being the best of the 160 pound division as do his more touted rivals Arthur Abraham or Kelly Pavlik, who are pursuing on and off negotiations to meet for "undisputed" honors.

The stoically optimistic Sturm, who made his sixth defense, isn't worried about having anything to prove. He put on as stylish an exhibition as the Calvin Klein logo on Sturm's trunks suggested he would.

The place was packed, and roared with chants and counter chants for Sturm from start to finish.

"Every fight is a step forward," mused Sturm without looking past Sato ever after having dispatched him with relative ease.

"This was continued progress for me, against another strong opponent. I'm not concerned about who I'll fight next. If I keep winning the fans will continue to recognize me. I'd like to be considered one of the very best pound for pound fighters, but I'll be satisfied being known as the best middleweight. Abraham says he's going to fight Pavlik but a lot of these fights never happen.

I'll get around to fighting everyone that matters. I'll probably get to Abraham someday, but if they fight I think Pavlik will beat Abraham. Then the fight with Pavlik will be more attractive for me."

Sturm, 158 3/4, marched out quickly behind a solid peek-a-boo stance and immediately set a jarring pace that kept Sato off balance. Sato's head snapped back again and again, and a stick to the chest made him stumble backward early and often.

Sato, 159 1/2, hung tough in an exciting second session, and fired four punch combinations that showed he had come to win with a knockout ratio based on quality skills. But Sturm feinted well as his jab connected with loud pops that emphasized his technical superiority and excellent conditioning. Sturm blasted in a couple of short overhand rights and a shot to the ribs that made Sato look vulnerable as he went back to his corner blinking.

Sato's slow motion probes to the body illustrated why he concentrated upstairs. Sturm stayed a primary headhunter himself, but his unblocked leads made that a no-brainer. By the third frame, Sato's eyes looked tenderized, especially the right.

Sato started the fourth with shots that looked more harmful than they were as the crowd booed in briefly worried response. Howlers in the cheap seats couldn't tell how many gloves Sturm blocked.

Sturm always kept control. Rapid clapping by the assembled swarm became a metronome for Sturm's ceaseless shots straight up the middle. By the fifth, Sato's right eye was closed and his nose was bloody. He tried to escape on his bicyle to no avail. It was getting to be that time when corners need to seriously think twice.

Sato never gave up and definitely earned his paycheck. In the seventh, Sturm trapped Sato in his own corner and whaled away. A reeling, badly faded Sato gasped for breath until referee Luis Pabon watched Sato's troubled countenance closely, and wisely called it off at 2:56.

Sato seemed disappointed at the finish, but probably couldn't have lasted another three minutes. He maintained class at the postfight press conference.

"Everything turned out badly for me tonight," said a multiple-bruised Sato with his chin still up. "The fight was stopped because I lost my strength. I should not have to make a comment on that. I just want to be thankful for getting a title fight opportunity."

"The fight went almost exactly as I wanted it to," said Sturm with slight nicks under each eye. "When it ended isn't important. What counts is that I felt very good throughout the fight. I'm very pleased with my performance. I adjusted like I needed to, as always. The first four rounds I wanted to pressure him because I knew he wanted to start strong."

In the featured undercard bout, WBO super middleweight kingpin Karolay Balzay, 21-0 (15), successfully made his first defense with an 11th round stoppage over 42 year old Maselino Masoe, 29-6 (27) who looked like he'd lost some pop since losing a title decision against Sturm back in 2006. Balzay, relocated in Hamburg from Hungary, is being touted as a potential future star.

For now, justifiably, the star around here is working class hero type Sturm, who got loads of

love from the locals.

Krefeld is a large, fancy but funky industrial area with plenty of upscale central areas that looked like Sturm party central for hours before and after the event. The streets outside the arena were jammed. Nearby parking was out of the question.

It's posible that Sturm or his popularity have not peaked yet.

Last November, when I saw Sturm against Sebastian Sylvester the same week as watching Abraham versus Raul Marquez I decided everyone who assumes Abraham would unquestionably dominate Sturm is mistaken.

Tonight didn't change that opinion a battling bit.