

BRUTE Part XVIII: You Never Know With These Things

Written by Kaelan Smith
Monday, 04 May 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

The crowd was not prepared for the fight to start, as the previous one had ended early, and the gap between had not lasted five minutes. So when the theme from Superman announced the young Estonian, and after Stan Martyniuk had entered the ballroom and climbed through the ropes into his corner, half the audience was still standing in the aisles, and the other half had coagulated like a scab at the bar.

“Why isn’t Stan in the semi-final?” I asked no one in particular.

“You never know with these things,” said Mehrad, whose face was a little pale with fear.

Terrance Jett had taken the corner opposite Martyniuk. His eyes were so wide open that from across the room they looked like two pools of cream on a mahogany table. He was not subject to the blanching effects of terror, but were he, he might have been transparent. The announcer, who had by this time taken up permanent residence in the ring, held a card at arms’ length in front of him and introduced the boxers. When he gestured to Martyniuk, the room did not erupt as I hoped it might. They had been subdued first by a draw, and immediately following, by the sort of knockout only Geraldo Lopez’s mother would have liked to see, and perhaps not even her. But the White Tigers were in full voice, and Stan raised his glove to us in acknowledgment. If our cheers weren’t sufficient, he could at least take some strength from the fact that a few drunken partisans—made Estonian by a few visits to the bar—booed Terrance Jett.

At the bell the boys came out. Terrance looked skittish, and when Stan approached him on his thin, taut legs, Jett edged towards the ropes like the cat that prefers to keep one flank against the wall. When he’d gotten close enough, Martyniuk released a jab that fell short of its mark, and Jett responded with an ineffective jab of his own. Immediately Martyniuk threw a hard left hook that Jett somehow managed to avoid. There was a sibilant intake of breath as the crowd imagined collectively what might have happened had the punch landed, and the fans, all still out of their seats, stood with full lungs waiting for someone to actually get punched. The relative silence in the ballroom, I decided, was the result of a general nervousness, and not a common ambivalence.

Having avoided the first real threat, Jett’s eyes narrowed, shall we say, to smears of cream. He swung at Martyniuk, but Stan took the left on his glove, retaliated with his own short, leading

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hook, and then a much longer and more powerful one. After the lefts, Martyniuk added a right that caught Jett on the jaw. Jett's eyes were round again, and out of an obvious fear for his life he grabbed onto Martyniuk as a captain might moor his ship amongst the rocks that breeched his hull, else the vessel sink completely. But Martyniuk refused to ballast him, and instead punched out of the clinch with two rights and a left. The rest of the round was decidedly one-sided. Although Jett landed two lefts to the kazazza—a region of the torso that A.J. Liebling describes in his essay "Next to Last Stand" as occupying the areas below the armpits but above the belt—neither of them produced their intended numbing effect on Martyniuk's transmission. I had the feeling that Jett was punching Stan there because he couldn't figure out how to hit him in the face.

Martyniuk answered the hooks to the body with a right uppercut, and not twenty seconds later, an uppercut from the left that landed solidly on Jett's small chin. Cranial girth is often an indicator of how well a boxer can metabolize trauma to the brain, and Jett had a small head. He did not seem capable of tolerating abuse well. After the second uppercut his legs were not sturdy, but he used them nonetheless to translate the rest of his body to the ropes. Stan followed, as any good finisher does, and with Jett's most effective defense nullified (that is, his ability to retreat), Martyniuk hit him solidly in the face at least four times. But at the end of the barrage Jett was still upright, nodding his head and grinning. A fight fan knows that the boxer who smiles after getting hit is affecting that smile. But it is also true that a man on the verge of getting knocked out does not have the wherewithal to mock his opponent. I gleaned, therefore, that Martyniuk was hurting Jett, but that Jett was likely going to lose the fight by decision. He'd survived at least three theoretical evening-ending punches and hadn't even put a knee down on the canvas.

By the time the first bell rang, I noticed that whatever insecurity I'd had about the outcome of the fight had dissipated. I was free, therefore, to enjoy the round girls. Angela stayed in her seat, so it was her partner, slightly taller, with a slightly larger chest, and slightly less tattooed, who made clear to us all that the second round was imminent. I looked over at Mehrad. He was watching the girl in the ring and smiling, and when he noticed me he said, "These ones are better than last time."

"One of them is the same," I said.