

Written by Phil Woolever
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ZBIK ZAPPED, NEXT UP? - Slowly but surely, boxing has been coming up with many fights fans want (we'll leave the big exception out, why beat a dead ride?), with further evidence in the middleweight division.

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Felix Sturm's disciplined demolition of Sebastian Zbik made Sturm's frequently discussed collision with undefeated contender Gennady Golovkin not only one of the hottest topics in the thriving Germany boxing scene, but one of the very best battles in the middleweight division. If another oft-requested encounter, that between Sergio Martinez and Julio Cesar Chavez Jr, comes off for this fall as rumored, and Sturm signs for Golovkin (more rumors), we've got a legitimate final four for the division, a quick mini-tourney for further middleweight consensus.

It ain't Mr. Kimball's heralded Four Kings of the 80's, but it certainly isn't four jokers either.

Unless the always entertaining Marco Huck, by no means a given to get past Ola Afolabi on May 5th, announces rematches of his controversial zingers (one win, one loss) with either Alexander Povetkin or Denis Lebedev, Sturm - Golovkin shapes up as the best potential "German" fight in years. And yes, again, the same thing goes, potentially, in terms of status in the division.

While one can't expect a middleweight classic like Marvin Hagler-John Mugabi or James Toney-Reggie Johnson, even half those fireworks make for a heck of a fight, and Sturm -Golovkin offers much more than half those fireworks.

Sturm's skill and strength were exemplified by a precision jab that eventually battered down the thick gate that was Zbik's higher intention, and reasserted Sturm as one of Germany's elite boxing performers, alongside the rarified ringside air of the Klitschko Brothers, Huck and that's about it right now. Joan Pablo Hernandez is on his way and has many potential opponents to get him there quickly, but he's not there yet.

After his stoppage of a worn down and out Zbik, Sturm has significant justification to assert himself as the most qualified opponent for top dog Martinez. With strong foes like Daniel Geale, Peter Quillin or Dmitry Pirog waiting, there are plenty of good, hard to call bouts available.

"The knockout of Zbik was a good clean fight and the result was without controversy," said Sturm afterward. "I'm very satisfied with this win. Now I would love a unification fight or any big fight in the USA, but I will probably fight again in Germany unless a very good offer comes. I

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might fight Golovkin in the fall unless there is the chance for a unification match. My training makes me feel like I can still perform better than I did against Zbik."

Zbik looked relaxed and unfazed early until Sturm found the range, and Zbik looked very strong as he effectively backed up the off-balance Sturm. At first, Sturm looked mechanical but displayed one of his primary strengths, in conditioning, and the tide quickly turned. Zbik had early success with short looping shots from each side, but Sturm erased them with precision pistons inside.

Those solid mechanics up the middle will serve Sturm against Martinez, Chavez, Jr, or any other top 160 pounder. Sturm looked stronger and grew more aggressive as it became clear Zbik was losing the steam necessary to hold Sturm off. the more determined Sturm looked, the more scuffs appeared on Zbik's forehead. Zbik's face went from optimism to grimace. Zbik didn't look bad at all, but Sturm, still possessing one of the best jabs in the business, looked excellent.

The large assembled swarm seemed satisfied with the result, even though the battle was nothing like the advertised brawl. It was more like the fighters took turns standing up to each other's best. Sturm endured. Zbik did not. For Sturm, another solid promotion and win wrapped earlier than expected.

Sturm himself has described his hands-on contribution to much of his namesake company's promotions as minimal beyond lending his name and image. Whatever the formula, it seems to be working since day one, as the crowd for Zbik looked around 15,000 strong. Sturm - Golovkin could fill a decent sized soccer stadium. Martinez-Sturm could do good business in the Garden's big room.

The whole Sturm-Zbik card looked strong on paper but the featured warm up act fizzled as Denis Boytsov plodded to a woeful decision over Dominick Guinn. Boytsov was far too cautious of Guinn's experience, while Guinn was way too wary of Boytsov's reputed KO power. Boytsov pitched a shutout, but it was sandlot ball. Styles make fights, lethargy makes slop. Strong female newcomer Nadia Raoui, 14-1-1, who previously fought on near-even terms with ultra-popular Susi Kentakian, stole the undercard with a strong performance against solid Eileen Olszewski, 7-4-2, of New York.

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"I'm very disappointed but I have to admit Sturm beat me, no question," said a realistic Zbik, with the lumps to verify his statement. "There's a reason he's been a champion for so long. He was stronger and faster than I thought he could be. The way he fought tonight I think he could beat anybody."

Golovkin, would certainly dispute that statement, and he's made a point of verbally challenging Sturm at any available moment. Golovkin might remember what happened after Zbik got under Sturm's skin.

Based on recent form, at this point I'd still pick Sturm, 37-2-2 (16) as a slight favorite. Golovkin, 22-0 (19) looked awesome the only time I've seen him live, flattening Lajuan Simon last December, but Sturm looked like a real champion against Zbik. How Golovkin fares against a strong, experienced fighter who adjusts, Sturm in a nutshell, is the big question.

Martinez is middleweight champion, Sturm remains his strongest challenger, though they will probably never engage.

Huck remains the most exciting fighter in Germany, but Sturm probably remains the best until somebody proves different, face to face.

"The main thing for me right now beside my family, as a boxer, is just to win my fights, and as promoter try and give the people the best fights possible," observed Sturm. "If that's Golovkin, fine, I would like to show the people what I can still do. I would also like to fight Martinez, but I don't know how easy it would be to reach an agreement."

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brownsugar says:

This is what I've been talking about,... the middleweight division is alive with talent and most fans only know about Martinez. Golovkin is real technician with Hagler-like tendencies,.. in fact I think he can become the new Hagler.. I hope HBO's new head of boxing embraces some of the new talent in the 160 division.

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