Written by Phil Woolever
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ALREADY RUMBLING BY THE RHEIN - The bruised left eye Felix Sturm sported at the final prefight press conference before his nearly sold-out engagement against Sebastian Zbik probably said something about Friday night's potential result.Just what that might be, however,remained as unclear as how the heated rivalry will unfold once the bell rings.

Maybe Sturm's observations about changing his primary training regimen back to more boxing basics as opposed to the general strength and conditioning routine he'd been doing will prove to be more than typical prefight hype. The fresh shiner could be evidence of the type sparring demands it takes to remain at the top of one's game, year after year, as Sturm has.

Or, it could signal that training camp was not so smooth, with some younger sparring partner leaving his mark.

Either way, Sturm, the usually model of decorum, was more agitated than usual in assessing the upcoming contest.

"I'm happy to be fighting Zbik and I think I will perform better than in my last fights," said Sturm, acknowledging recent controversial decisions in his favor. "I know he's a good fighter, but not on my level. They gave Zbik a title and he lost it in the next fight, and now he questions my record?"

While Sturm, 36-2 (15),is the logical favorite due to factors from hometown edge to championship experience, it doesn't mean Zbik, 30-1 (10),doesn't have a decent shot.33 year old Sturm is due to show his ring age one of these nights. While Zbik, 30,isn't quite the cream of the middleweight crop, he's still a very solid performer, and if he had any real punching power you could call it a very close fight to call.

"I heard Sturm had two options, fight me or fight Gennady Golovkin," said Zbik smugly. "He thinks it's better to fight me first, but he's going to lose anyway."

Sturm has been criticized for serving up Deutschland home cooking in his recent, self-promoted defenses of the "super" WBA belt and seems to be increasingly more sensitive on the matter, especially since Golovkin got a version of his own belt. While a relaxed Zbik seemed to be merely prodding Sturm along during prefight promotional appearances, Sturm looked genuinely pissed off.

Sturm remains one of the most disciplined athletes in the gloved up game,but it might take much less than usual to upset him this time.A spokesman for Zbik's promoter Universum stated issues with Sturm's promotional practices leading up to the fight.

Sturm took it like a slap, then another, across the lips.

Sturm, one of the very few boxers you are likely to see with a Calvin Klein endorsement, prides himself on propriety. Even when Martin Murray or Matthew Macklin questioned the outcome of their contests, they mentioned the first rate treatment they received from Sturm the promoter.

When Sturm and Zbik exchanged angry greetings during an early media gathering, for the polite

German ensembles the bickering became the equivalent of Dereck Chisora and David Haye rolling in the Munich deep.

"I'm glad you grew some balls and finally got ready to fight me," mused Zbik.

"I'm glad you grew some balls," responded Sturm.

"We are not friends," said Zbik later, still amused."There's a lot of emotion in this fight. I think there will be a high pace and lot of action. I've seen all his recent fights and I'm not worried. He calls himself a 'super champion' but he should fight better. I had to criticize him on Facebook to get a chance to show I'm better than others. I'm sure Sturm doesn't have the power of Julio Cesar Chavez, Jr. Chavez is a totally different fighter.I don't think Felix is that strong."

Zbik may have gotten under Sturm's skin, and may have relit an old motivational fire in Sturm, who is now a few comfortable years into the family and business sides of life.

"I 've had problems with Zbik since we were both with Universum in Hamburg," observed Sturm. "After I left, he starts to talk trash. A guy like him can not talk about me. I've wanted to fight him for a while. He's an interesting opponent for me. We almost completed negotiations with him before this,but the WBC wanted him to fight Chavez. This is a very good fight for Germany. I think it's a good story, with our history."

Sturm has or makes no illusions about his apprenticeship in the promotional realm. With a series of well received cards, and no apparent shortage of A list sponsors,Sturm doesn't claim any success beyond maintaining his independence and winning his fights, with hopes of another two or three years at the top before taking on more of an administrative role. "I have a great team," says Sturm. "Most of the time I just worry about training. They set up opportunities for me and I just sign things."

Zbik, of course, wants to send Sturm the fighter packing toward retirement.

Both men looked well prepared at the weigh in, Sturm coming in just over 159 and Zbik about half a pound more. The vibe says pick 'em, so we'll say the most likely scenario looks like Sturm UD 12, by a score of 116-113. No knockdowns but plenty of first-rate action.

This is the type of fight that one should avoid wagering on, unless there are highly favorable odds to bait you, something not likely to appear in this instance.

Whatever happens, Zbik already has a clear target, in deep purple, just below Sturm's left eye.

It could lead to the best contested bout on yet another strong weekend of boxing around the globe.

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deepwater says:

The pic of that chick at the press conf. is better then this fight will be. Sturm outboxed dlh, besides that nothing much. pirog is the most exciting boxer of the middles. watch pirog vs jacobs on youtube