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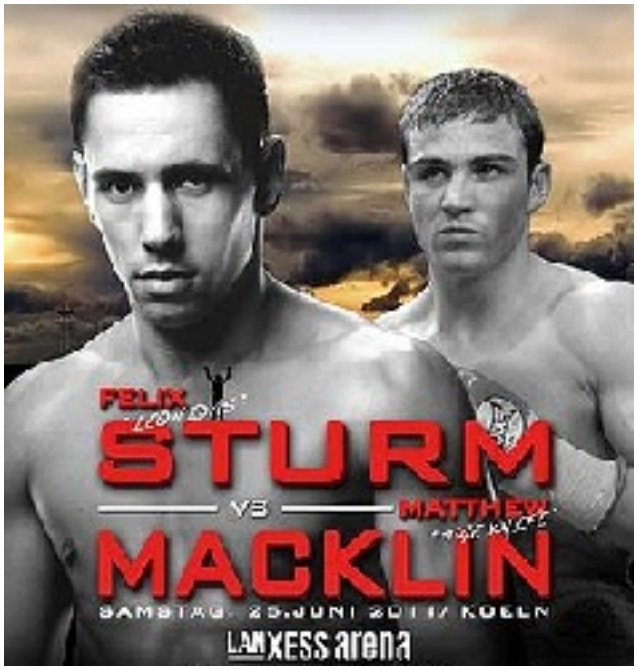

COLOGNE, WHERE MANY THOUGHT THE DECISION STUNK - Like the upbeat, beat-up looking Matthew Macklin repeated Saturday night at a cordial but tense postfight press conference; you can't blame Felix Sturm.

Macklin seemed self-satisfied with his performance and the basic guarantee of a quick rematch, while his good-natured but disappointed, insistent team tried to scribble up a quick rematch contract and have a somewhat chagrined Sturm sign it on the podium.

"He's a warrior and I'm a warrior. It's not Sturm's fault, he's not the judge," said Macklin. "It was a great fight and he showed why he's a champion, but I believe I was the better man tonight. He's a real man, so I'm sure he'll give me a rematch."

"It was a tough, brutal fight," acknowledged Sturm. "He deserves a rematch and I will give it to him. Everybody has an opinion (about who won), and if there is a rematch we will hear many more opinions about that. "

The contest was certainly compelling enough to generate plenty of rematch interest. The subject covered approximately 85% of the postfight dialogue, though it seemed Team Sturm wanted to concentrate more on the draining victory than focusing on future times and locales.

It isn't often a fight's promoter finds himself in such charged circumstances, but Sturm handled it with aplomb.

Sturm, still WBA Middleweight Champion after the highly criticized split-decision verdict, didn't look nearly as scuffed as he did during the intense bout. He had a nick by his right eye and

slightly puffy brows, but didn't really look marked up. Macklin's face was much more a mask of welts and bruises. Judging from their recently-tagged countenances, it looked like Sturm won big; but you couldn't see the left side of his ribcage, which seemed to be growing fluorescent pink after less than two rounds of Macklin's midsection marking mallets.

Maybe the fighters' faces told part of the slugged out story.

Nowhere near the entire story, though.

Some of that was left to the generally gentle German press, which described Sturm's victory as "very lucky" or a "fluke". Deutschland's perceived image as a judging den of thieves for English speaking fighters flared up, but a few hours and time zones later a similar situation outside St. Louis with Devon Alexander and Lucas Matthysse proved conking controversy remains a global game.

Maybe there was a little due duke-out karma toll extracted Saturday night in front of an announced sell out of 19,000 at Lanxess Arena. Any time somebody has a 40-foot image of themselves on a glittering throne as a main part of the promotion, they may be asking of it.

Billed as "Das Deull um de Krone", a rainy Cologne was saturated with fight posters and quarter page ads that ran in many regional newspapers. Sturm has floated well into the promotional waters around the Rhineland, but outside Germany the potential conflict of interests is considered a deterrent by some potential foes.

Macklin definitely had more inspired fans, with almost a couple hundred of the UK's flag draped finest roaring in the stands.

They kept Macklin serenaded while there was over a ten minute hold up in Sturm's high-decibel arrival, which included a preliminary pop rocker by former Spice Girl Mel C ("Sporty"). In terms of international recognition and success, a former Spice is like being a former unified champion. Her song was indistinguishable from the Beyonce/Britney formula, but the band was arena sharp and Ms. Mel did a good job on the ropes.

Macklin had a great entrance w/a "Mack the Knife" and Irish folk-rock type that played well to the audience, and totally pumped his cheering section. The typically stoic German audience weren't quite sure what to make of the dressed-up, banner waving visitors displaying behavior usually designated for soccer only. Macklin's was a great entrance for a foreign challenger, and set the tone for the night in terms of swaying the swarm's loyalty. When Macklin was subsequently kept waiting in the ring, the usually passive German fans whistled with much less restraint than normal.

Macklin charged out and threw twenty punches before Sturm threw one.

Sturm remained composed and very precise with his shots during excellent infighting. Macklin built points until Sturm made a move around the fifth frame and became more aggressive. Sturm landed some huge uppercuts, but also seemed to lose a step as Macklin mauled him

around the strands.

By the 8th, it seemed like Macklin had built a sizeable lead but Sturm started chipping away, and during the 10th seemed like a pick'em bout. Sturm looked like he understood the assignment necessary to win and made Macklin pay coming in with some huge rights but Macklin stayed on him. That was pretty much the story of the fight, except that in the early rounds Sturm didn't land many rights.

The tenth round featured grueling give and take and it looked like whoever won that session might deserve the verdict, in a classic example of trying to pick a guy landing more shots or a guy landing better shots. I scored that frame a draw.

Every time Macklin looked for a swarming finish, Sturm responded with punishing uppercuts that seemed to hurt Macklin. A weary Sturm opened up to close the show. The question was whether it was enough. Two of three judges said it was.

Unquestionably, it was a great fight for the frenzied crowd, by far one of the best high profile European bouts this year. At least two rounds (5 and 10) were so close they became basic judgment calls on style preference. Levi Martinez's 115-113 nod for Macklin might have been the most accurate tab only because it was the closest, in an affair that seemed only a point or two apart. Roberto Ramirez and Jose Ignacio Martinez (116-114 Sturm) might have favored the proper winner, but it seemed very questionable to say that Sturm won by four rounds.

"First of all I want to say the treatment we had all week was first class," said Macklin. "I don't want to be weeping and moaning, nobody wants to hear that, but I think I showed why I should be world champion. Everyone saw the fight on TV in the UK, Germany and the US and there were 19,000 people here who saw it. Everyone has their own opinion, but I doubt if there's too many people who think I lost."

Team Macklin claimed to have received a text from Lou DiBella saying a fight against Sergio Martinez could be offered for the Fall in New York.

Will Macklin and Sturm rumble again?

Since Sturm was at the promotional reins for their first engagement and figures to continue with his apparently successful enterprise, it would seem that scheduling another 12 rounds would be a relatively simple project, but don't count on the next production moving as quickly as the fighters flurrying fists.

"I would be glad to have a rematch and I will prove my victory more," said Sturm. "It would be fine to have another fight here in Cologne but we can also fight somewhere else. First we have to speak to the television administrators though, and if everything is available it will happen soon. One day we will have a rematch."

"We're willing to come back to Cologne, but I'd rather fight on neutral ground," said Macklin. "I just hope to fight again, and in the ring after the fight Sturm said he would give me a rematch."

Then Macklin finished the subject with unintentional boxing irony.

"I believe him."

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