

Coughlin previews Shamrock vs. Baroni

â€œThe Half-Guarded Truthâ€•

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â€œShamrock v. Baroniâ€•

In the ideal main-event, a win by either fight is a boon for the promotion. Now, it isn't always the case that this takes place. UFC 72 was headlined by Rich Franklin taking on Yushin Okami, with the winner going on to challenge for the middleweight championship. Two scenarios could have arisen: Franklin wins, which is a positive as it sets up the former champion challenging for the belt that was once his, and is likely a match that can headline a PPV on its own merit; Okami wins, which would then see an uncharismatic fighter that doesn't speak English challenging for the title, and the fight would likely be relegated to semi-main status. Franklin ultimately won, so the UFC was spared from presenting Okami as a #1 contender. Still, in that case, the match-making was flawed. This Friday, from the HP Pavillion in San Jose, CA, Strikeforce and Elite Xtreme Combat will promote a PPV featuring Frank Shamrock squaring off against Phil Baroni. This is an ideal main-event.

Shamrock's return to the world of mixed martial arts, un-coincidentally at the same time the sport has entered a golden era, has so far been a mixed bag. On March 11, 2006, at the same arena he headlines this Friday, Shamrock knocked out MMA novice Caesar Gracie in 21 seconds. At 17,465, the show set a paid attendance record that still stands in North America. To those that feel the sport is about making money first and foremost, Shamrock's return was perfect. To the hardcore fans, that care more about winning and losing than ticket receipts, it did little to answer lingering questions. Shamrock's last fight against an opponent of any name was Elvis Sinosic, and that was in 2000. One goes back to 1999, when he famously defeated Tito Ortiz, to find a fight where Shamrock took on someone universally regarded as a high caliber fighter. In 2003, he tapped out relative unknown Bryan Pardoe, which did little to impress. And all the fans that had either seen or heard the legend that was/is â€œFrank Shamrock,â€• the submission wizard who could strike with the best of them and was one of the sport's first truly well-rounded fighters, were not satisfied by his knocking out Gracie, a man who has never fought MMA before. If the test was entitled, â€œIn the modern age, is Frank Shamrock a world-class fighter,â€• KOing Gracie was question 1 out of a 100.

Eleven months later, Shamrock moved on to the essay portion of the test, this time fighting a Gracie that was anything but a neophyte to MMA: Renzo Gracie. The bout was top of the card for the first ever Showtime/EXC presentation and, once again, from a financial standpoint, it was a success. The show did a 1.62 rating and 365,000 viewers, solid marks for a pay cable station. It was that test question Shamrock failed. Renzo was chosen as a smart opponent for Shamrock: he could talk and build hype; he was an average striker, but not someone to be feared; with years of having fought the sport's best he had a legit name; and though he had unreal submission skills, his takedowns were never seen as incredible. Shamrock was supposed to come out and outclass Renzo while standing, leading to a flashy knock out. It didn't happen. Renzo ended up taking Shamrock down with little resistance and essentially shut down the former King of Pancrase. The fight then ended in controversy. As part of a strategy to wear down Renzo, over the course of the fight, while on his back, Shamrock repeatedly threw one knee after another to the body of Renzo. Whether mis-aimed, mistimed, a mistake or deliberate, half-way through the second round, Shamrock unloaded multiple knees to the back of Renzo's head. The submission master was in obvious pain and ended up suffering a concussion from the illegal blows. Having already previously warned Shamrock about the strikes, referee Herb Dean ruled the blows intentional and the final result was a Renzo victory by disqualification. Oddly enough, the judges had Shamrock up on the cards till that point. As much as people were let down by not seeing a satisfactory conclusion to the fight, the ease with which Renzo took Shamrock down exposed a serious flaw in Shamrock's game. A few more questions had been asked and the answers weren't good for Shamrock.

The next portion of the Shamrock Test takes form in the shape of Phil Baroni. A veteran of 17 MMA fights (and a few odd Toughman bouts here and there) Baroni began his career after Shamrock had essentially stepped away from the sport. Heavy-handed, with a granite chin and solid wrestling skills, Baroni looked like a can't-miss prospect. Of course, the fact that Baroni possesses a gift of gab that rivals the trash-talking Shamrock didn't hurt his marketability. Early in his career, he was beaten by Matt Lindland via majority decision. It was certainly a close fight and Baroni was anything but quiet regarding Lindland. After obliterating Amar Suloev and former middleweight champion, Dave Menne, both in the first round, Baroni let any and all know that he wanted Lindland. As the saying goes, be careful what you wish for. Baroni finally got a rematch with Lindland and at UFC 41 the two again fought for 15 hard minutes. And again, Lindland got the victory, this time a unanimous decision, and again Baroni complained.

At UFC 45, Baroni was granted a chance to get a high-profile win, taking on Evan Tanner. Early on, it appeared that Baroni was en route to another spectacular first-round KO. Then, a moment that defined Baroni's career (at least for a while) took place. Tanner recovered from his beating, took a gassed Baroni to the mat, mounted him, and unleashed a flurry of elbows. One after another, the hard bone would crash into Baroni's tough jaw. This is where things get confusing. Referee Larry Landless supposedly asked Baroni if he wanted the fight to be stopped; Baroni thought Landless asked if he wanted to continue. Baroni said, "Yes." Landless jumped in, waved off the fight, and an irate Baroni lost his mind. He lost his temper and broke a cardinal rule: do not touch the referee. Baroni not only touched Landless, he punched him. At this point it didn't matter who made the mistake, Baroni was in trouble. He was subsequently suspended and didn't fight till June of 2004, 8 months later.

Baroni came back for a rematch against Tanner and looked in a physically different shape. His "m" going to go competing in Mr. Olympia's physique was replaced with a leaner, more athletic build. The talk was that Baroni had trained harder than ever before and was a new fighter. To a degree, the rumors were true; the wild, aggressive, emotional Baroni was gone. Unfortunately, the raw energy that had gotten "The New York Bad-Ass" attention wasn't replaced with anything. He looked sluggish, lethargic at times, and was summarily defeated by Tanner once again, this time without any question. Baroni then lost to TUF 4 alum, Pete Sell, when he was choked out in the third round. It was a fight Baroni was winning till he was literally choked unconscious. Four straight losses created the lowest circumstances Baroni had ever found himself in. He was no longer a UFC fighter.

A second chance that Baroni may not have deserved presented itself in an invitation to fight for PRIDE against Ikuhisa Minowa. As he had in his previous fights, Baroni tired badly in the fight, but true to form, his iron will refused to surrender and it carried him to a victory; a second round knock out. He followed that up with a first round knock out of Ryo Chonan (who had just defeated Carlos Newton, Anderson Silva, Roan Carneiro, and Nino Schembri). Just as it appeared Baroni was finally living up to his own hype, he reverted to his prior self and lost a decision to Minowa when the two rematched in the first round of the PRIDE middleweight grand prix tournament. But, Japan still proved to be a hospitable environment for a New Yorker, as he notched maybe the most impressive win in his career next, a first round knock out of Yuki Kondo. A decision loss to Kazuo Misaki in June of 2006 was offset by a first round submission of talented boxer (though very green at MMA), Yosuke Nishijima, the latter taking place during PRIDE's US debut.

For Shamrock, a win over someone like Baroni, not considered top 10 at MW, but certainly someone that is a game fighter, would go a long way towards reestablishing his reputation. It wouldn't fully cement Shamrock as top of the food-chain, but it would answer a lot of the remaining questions.

For Baroni, a win over Shamrock would give him the high profile victory on American soil, something he hasn't had since 2002. The PPV is unlikely to draw a ton of buys, but within the fight industry it is being closely watched. It's hardly a secret that UFC President Dana White has a relationship with Shamrock that would make some divorcees blush, and White has gone public saying if Baroni knocks out Shamrock, White would be very happy. The reports that Baroni would immediately get a UFC middleweight title shot are incorrect, but making White smile is never bad for one's career.

The fact that either Baroni or Shamrock can win and there is real money to be made is why this fight is a perfect main-event.

It wasn't a mistake that Baroni was chosen as an opponent for Shamrock. With the public no longer willing to watch Shamrock fight scrubs, quality opposition was demanded. Of the available fighters in the MW class, Baroni is perfect for Shamrock. Ignoring his fighting prowess, Baroni's non-stop mouth guaranteed that he'd play the promotional game with Shamrock. With both men understanding the need to build, the back and forth promos by each have been fantastic. How much of the animosity is real is anyone's guess, but it's clear that to those who've seen them jaw-jack, this is a (fabricated?) grudge match.

As far as dangerous fighters go, Baroni is a complex challenge for Shamrock, but one he should be able to conquer. Baroni carries with him an incredible chin and heavy, accurate hands. He's proven difficult to takedown over the years, and surprisingly enough, given his reputation for mentally flaking out, difficult to submit. Baroni's biggest weakness has always been that his physique is a Ferrari with a Peugeot engine; he looks like he should be in much better cardiovascular shape than is reality. Still, despite his constantly gassing, Baroni is not a quitter and his will to fight really should be admired. If he loses, it won't be due to lack of effort this Friday, but due to lack of effort in the six weeks prior. He has a fast starter and can catch foes off guard with his power.

As a fighter with a legendary gas tank (forget Peugeot, think hybrid engine), surely Shamrock is licking his lips in anticipation of the later rounds. The trouble is getting it past the first and second round. Shamrock really hasn't been tested on his feet in years and though he's looked sharp, Renzo and Caesar Gracie aren't exactly great strikers. In theory, Baroni has the advantage standing so long as he's in shape (5 minutes, 10 tops). Most opponents try to not stand with The Bad-Ass, knowing he's weaker on the ground, but Shamrock may not have the wrestling skills needed to get Baroni down. Shamrock can let his ego get the better of him, and if he comes out guns-blazing, looking to entertain the crowd and trade punch for punch with Baroni from the get-go, he could be in trouble. If he paces himself, picks Baroni apart with leg and body kicks for a round or two, Shamrock should have the PRIDE and UFC veteran gasping for air as the championship rounds begin. From there, Shamrock can do to Baroni as he wishes and the showman inside may tell him to ignore obvious submissions, instead opting to throw one punch after another until the referee stops the bout.

Frank Shamrock, TKO, referee stoppage, 3rd round.

Mike Coughlin hosts Five Star Radio, a weekly look at MMA, found exclusively at f4wonline.com. This week's show is FREE~! It features in depth previews of the Ultimate Fighter 5 Finale as well as all the other fights on the Strikeforce card.
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