

Ex-Minnesota Guardsman loses controversial decision in latest UFC bout

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Timothy Johnson sought to climb higher in the UFC rankings Saturday. The trek began with a lofty challenge.

The former sergeant in the Minnesota Army National Guard faced a mismatch in his heavyweight bout against Alexander Volkov as part of the main card of “UFC Fight Night 99 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Johnson was taking on a fighter four inches taller and with more than a two-inch reach advantage in the 6-foot-7 Russian.

But Johnson, an NCO of the 134th Brigade Support Battalion until last month, has not only faced stiff challenges before, he has conquered them. He appeared to do that again Saturday, dropping Volkov with a sizzling uppercut in the opening round and keeping the lanky kickboxer at bay for most of the bout. When the fight went to the judges, one of them scored all three rounds for Johnson. But the other two saw it differently, giving Volkov scores of 29-28 and a controversial split-decision win.

Only winners of the night’s bouts attended the post-fight news conference. While there, Volkov heaped plenty of praise on his opponent.

“It was a great fight with a great opponent and he did a lot in the fight. Basically, I feel a split decision was a good decision because he did a lot too. But I won,” Volkov said.

It was Volkov's UFC debut, but he entered the octagon with much ballyhoo, having been the heavyweight champion of the Bellator fighting organization some years ago. His lengthy frame and kickboxing expertise was expected to be a big advantage over the burly American and former collegiate wrestling star. Early on, that notion seemed to come to fruition as Volkov tagged Johnson in the opening minute with long combinations and pinned him against the fence. But just as Volkov seemed poised to end the fight, Johnson uncorked a big uppercut that crumpled the Russian. Johnson worked Volkov into the mat and the fence for the remainder of the round, seemingly winning it despite his bad start

Johnson opened the second round with a looping combination and the fighters moved into the clinch. Both fighters traded positions several times with neither really taking control. When they weren't in the clinch, Volkov showed more offense, but Johnson was the one landing the better blows.

The third round saw Johnson slow down tremendously as Volkov opened with punches before moving into the clinch. He controlled the action the entire round though he never landed a takedown. In the end, it was enough to sway two judges.

The fight was Johnson's final contracted fight with the Ultimate Fighting Championship. He stepped away from the National Guard to focus solely on fighting. The loss doesn't offer much clarity on his future with the world's premier fighting organization considering the controversial decision. But he did enter the match ranked No. 15 among a stacked heavyweight division and owning a win over Shamil Abdurakhimov, who will headline a UFC card next month. But Johnson has always displayed a willingness to fight through adversity, whether on the mat, in the field or in the cage. He credits his time as an NCO with developing that fortitude.

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"You learn to be Gumby, to be flexible," Johnson told the NCO Journal in a previous interview. "(Being an NCO) it's taught me to get in there, it's taught me to have the mentality of just going and getting the work done."