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At the end of HBO's telecast of the Bernard Hopkins-Morrade Hakkar Middleweight Championship fight on March 29, 2003, HBO commentators Larry Merchant and George Foreman left the audience with one final exchange. Merchant: "The way Hopkins looked tonight, 38 years old, I think all those junior middleweights ought a jump up and fight him because I think they can beat 'em." Foreman: "Oh no, that's gone a little too far, they can't beat him."

Here's why Foreman is right! Bernard Hopkins is some fighter. He's the undisputed middleweight champion (the first since Marvin Hagler in 1987) who just made a record setting 16th successful defense of his title, and man can he fight! Look what this guy brings to the ring. He's an exceptional boxer (fundamentally) and he can change his style to negate his opponents. Against Trinidad he showed he could be pursued, but yet still control the fight, in spite of being the aggressor in most of his major fights. Hopkins has shown a tight defense, is more then an adequate puncher with both hands and has a concrete chin. However, one of his biggest assets is his undeniable will to win; he simply refuses to let his opponent beat him. The champ has always sought the toughest fights and has never avoided any challenger. He keeps himself in tremendous physical shape and hasn't lost a fight in ten years.

Since his signature fight with Felix Trinidad 18 months ago, he's defended his title twice, stopping nondescript mandatory challengers Carl Daniels and Morrade Hakkar. Hopkins' goal of making a record setting 20 successful defenses of the middleweight championship seems certain to be realized. However, what isn't certain is whether we will ever see Hopkins really challenged again. The problem for Hopkins is the lack of quality challengers in his true weight division. He is in the same situation as Roy Jones in the light heavyweight division. They are both great fighters fighting in divisions with storied histories of past greats. Unfortunately for them, the middleweight and light heavyweight divisions are enduring what may be possibly their worst era ever, regarding the depth of outstanding fighters. Like Jones, Hopkins must go outside his division to attract a mega fight.

Forget about seeing Jones-Hopkins II. Jones (who is the last to defeat Hopkins) showed in his heavyweight debut vs. John Ruiz that he's just too big for Hopkins. So where does Hopkins turn? It appears that going after one of the light heavyweight title belts that Roy Jones will have to vacate is an option. By capturing a piece of the light heavyweight title, Hopkins can add his name to the short list of middleweight champions who have moved up and won the light heavyweight championship. A more lucrative option would be to try to lure one of the junior middleweight "young Turks," as he refers to them, to meet him at a catch-weight.

In reality, there's only one fighter who can provide Hopkins with the marquee match that would add to his legacy and several millions to his bank account--Oscar De La Hoya! Not Shane Mosley or Fernando Vargas, not Winky Wright, and not Vernon Forrest, only De La Hoya. Hopkins-De La Hoya is definitely a super-fight that all boxing fans would love to see. Hopkins has gone on record saying that he would be willing to meet "The Golden Boy" at a catch weight of 158, with both fighters putting their titles up. I've seen De La Hoya quoted, saying that he

would agree to those terms. Before we get too carried away, lets remember we're talking about boxing and the best fights usually don't happen when they should. I can't remember the last fighter I've seen who at age 38 looks like he's as good as he's ever been like Hopkins does. Other than Roy Jones, De La Hoya is the best fighter/manager in boxing today. I have no doubt that De La Hoya also sees this, and that's why this fight has no shot of happening for at least two years, and maybe even longer. Oscar will try to stall the fight until the "Executioner" shows signs of erosion. Unlike Hopkins, there are plenty of interesting fights in the junior middleweight division for De La Hoya to stay in the spotlight while adding more dead presidents to his portfolio, and the longer he can push the fight back, the more it's to his advantage.

From the De La Hoya standpoint, this is a very wise path to follow. I'm sure that Oscar and his advisers know better than to mess with the "Executioner" right now. Hopkins is still as hungry as ever and close to being at the top of his game. And more importantly, De La Hoya has no shot of beating Hopkins, just as no other junior middleweights have any chance of upsetting the middleweight champ. Hopkins is simply too strong, too tough and too complete for any fighter 160 pounds or below. How does fighter A beat fighter B, when fighter B can do everything better than fighter A? This is the exact situation De La Hoya would face in a proposed fight with Hopkins, if it were to happen within the next year. How would De La Hoya win? He can't out box Hopkins, nor can he out punch him, and I have no doubt Hopkins is more determined and tougher then De La Hoya. This doesn't just pertain to Oscar, the same holds true for all the top junior middleweights. They are all in the same boat in that they have nothing in their arsenal that Hopkins doesn't have an answer for, nothing! Since Trinidad never had Bernard in any trouble, I can't envision a scenario where De La Hoya, Mosley, Wright or Forrest could hurt him enough to break him down, which means they'd have to out box him (good luck). Again, how do you out box a fighter who is longer, stronger, equally as fast and more experienced then you? If they pressure him like Trinidad did (which is Tito's style), they are just setting themselves up to be hit harder by Hopkins' counter-right, left-hook combinations, which slowed Trinidad before stopping him. How about if they move and try to box, making Hopkins come forward after them? For this to be effective, they have to out jab him, which is not likely since his reach is just as long or longer than theirs and his jab is just as fast. Another problem in this strategy is you must take the lead against one of the best counter punchers fighting today, which would suit Hopkins fine. I just don't see any way that any of the top junior middleweights in the world have a chance vs. the middleweight champion. Not when they can't out-speed, out box, out-punch or out-tough him. And lastly we mustn't forget, like Hagler, Hopkins is a champion who fights as if he's the challenger.

Foreman is right on the money on this one, and Merchant is dead wrong. The way this writer sees it, the junior middleweights have three choices. They can watch their caloric intake, they can stall the fight as long as possible in hopes that father time catches up with Hopkins, or they can fight him now and get schooled before being taken apart! Does anyone really believe we'll see any of the top junior middleweights in the ring with the middleweight champ anytime soon? I doubt it!