

How One Fight Can Define Bernard Hopkins' Career

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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It's amazing how a fighter's whole career and perception can hinge on the outcome of one fight. When looking at some of boxing's greatest fighters, in most cases their greatness was achieved and documented based on the outcome of one major fight. Just by a fighter winning or losing that one signature fight, it's more often than not the single thing his career is remembered for.

Some fighters are luckier than others in having more than a few outstanding/great fighters in their era to measure themselves against. Fighters like Emile Griffith and Dick Tiger come to mind. They both fought a plethora of outstanding/great fighters, beating some and losing to some. But in most cases, fighters are lucky to have more than a couple signature or defining fights in their career.

Evander Holyfield beat every top fighter of his era, but never was regarded as an all-time great until he beat Mike Tyson. Imagine if he would've lost to Tyson. His whole career would've been capsuled by that fight. Joe Frazier tore through the heavyweight division from 1967-70 during Ali's exile. However, he wasn't considered an all-time great until he defeated Ali in "The Fight of The Century." Had Frazier lost to Ali in their first fight, he probably would be viewed as just another alphabet champ.

Even Muhammad Ali, having already defeated Liston and Frazier wasn't thought of as one of the top two or three greatest heavyweight champs of all time. It wasn't until he defeated the 40-0 (37) George Foreman to regain the heavyweight title that he became universally recognized as the greatest. Ironically, the fight that stamped Ali's greatness cost George Foreman his. Had Foreman stopped Ali in the eighth round instead of being stopped, he very possibly may have gone down as the greatest of all time. What a resume he would've had, stopping an undefeated Joe Frazier and stopping a never been stopped Muhammad Ali.

Boxing history is littered with greats and near greats whose career was defined for the better or worse by one fight. The Leonard-Hearns showdown of 1981 is another great example. Leonard won and solidified his greatness. What if Hearns had survived the 14th & 15th rounds and won the decision? History would view Hearns as the greater fighter.

This leads me to the most anticipated fight of 2004, Hopkins-De La Hoya. If there was ever a fighter whose historical ranking was riding on one fight, it's Bernard Hopkins. Hopkins has been the best middleweight in the world for the last nine years. He owns the record for consecutive middleweight title defenses with 18. The problem he has is there are only two names on his record that anyone will remember, Jones and Trinidad.

In the two biggest fights of his career versus the best opponents he ever fought, Hopkins is 1-1. He lost a unanimous decision to Roy Jones in his first bid for the middleweight title back in May of 1993, and hasn't lost since. It's been three years since Hopkins faced the only other great fighter on his record, Felix Trinidad. Hopkins dominated Trinidad from beginning to end before stopping him in the 12 round.

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Oscar De La Hoya represents the highest profile fighter Hopkins has ever fought. There is no doubt that his fight tonight with De La Hoya is the biggest and most high profile fight of his career. He cannot lose to De La Hoya and hope to go down in history as a legendary middleweight champion. When he lost to Roy Jones, he didn't suffer much because Jones is regarded as the best fighter of his era. On top of that, Hopkins was still in the early stages of his career and wasn't really outclassed.

Hopkins was a 5-2 underdog versus the undefeated Felix Trinidad when he defeated him in September of 2001. However, many critics consider Hopkins victory over Trinidad somewhat watered down since it was only Trinidad's second fight at middleweight. Although his win over Trinidad was dominant, it won't matter if he loses to De La Hoya. Which is just about defies logic since it was Trinidad who handed De La Hoya his first defeat.

Since turning pro in 1992, with the possible exception of Mike Tyson, Oscar De La Hoya has been the most talked about and comprehensively covered fighter in the world. On top of that, De La Hoya is thought to be a great fighter who has fought the best fighters of his generation. De La Hoya has also won titles in six different divisions.

The fight with De La Hoya will bring more exposure to Hopkins than he's ever had in his career, on top of providing him his biggest pay. However, the exposure and money won't mean a thing to Hopkins if he doesn't beat him. Despite holding the middleweight title longer than any other fighter in history and making the most consecutive defenses, Hopkins place in history will be determined by the outcome of his fight with De La Hoya.

Hopkins has longed to be mentioned among the greatest of the greats in middleweight history. For him to solidify his name with the likes of Ketchel, Greb, Robinson, Monzon, and Hagler, he has to beat De La Hoya. And he knows it. During the weeks leading up to his fight with De La Hoya, Hopkins has relished in having his name mentioned in the same vein as Carlos Monzon and Marvin Hagler. Monzon and Hagler have been the two most dominant middleweight champions since Sugar Ray Robinson last wore the crown in the late 1950's.

I can't recall the last time a dominant Champion's place in history hinged on the outcome of one fight the way it does for Bernard Hopkins. A convincing victory over De La Hoya guarantees Hopkins name will be included among the greatest middleweight champs in history. On second thought, just beating De La Hoya will probably be enough to accomplish it.

Unfortunately for Hopkins, a loss to De La Hoya will unfairly be what his career is most remembered for. It's never a good thing when the fight a fighter is most known for is a loss. Think about that. How many fighters who are considered all-time greats lost the biggest fight of their career?

Bernard Hopkins whole career has come down to one fight. Hopkins has been the master of his own destiny his entire career. Nothing means more to him than going down as a legendary all-time great fighter. It all comes down to one fight. He must beat De La Hoya .