

50 Year Middleweight Trifecta - Monzon, Hagler, Bernard Hopkins

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 21 September 2004 18:00

This past Saturday night Undisputed World Middleweight Champion Bernard Hopkins won the biggest fight of his life. In the signature-fight of his career, Hopkins knocked out boxing's biggest star and Golden Boy, Oscar De La Hoya in the 9th round. De La Hoya had never been stopped before as a pro. The win over De La Hoya extended Hopkins record of successful middleweight title defenses to 19.

Before the fight with De La Hoya, it was thought by many boxing observers that Hopkins' career legacy could be in jeopardy if he lost. Despite being undefeated for over 11 years and holding the middleweight title for nine. The thought was, although owning a tremendous record, Hopkins hadn't fought many top tier fighters during his title reign. A criticism that is not totally without merit.

Well now it can be said that Hopkins has fought three of the top fighters of his era—Roy Jones, Felix Trinidad, and Oscar De La Hoya, only losing a decision to Jones. In some circles he's been admonished for losing to Jones. Which doesn't make sense since Jones has been considered one of boxing's best ever pound-for-pound fighters. In fairness to Hopkins, he hadn't developed into the seasoned pro that he would eventually become when he met Jones. Jones was only Hopkins second career defeat, the other was in his pro-debut, something that isn't held against any past all-time great.

Some look at his stoppages of Trinidad and De La Hoya as no great accomplishment since they both moved up in weight to fight him. What is never mentioned is Trinidad was undefeated when he fought Hopkins and had won a piece of the middleweight title in his previous fight. And he was a 5-2 favorite to defeat Hopkins. De La Hoya had suffered three losses going into the Hopkins fight. However, two of them were highly disputed decisions. And he was never close to being stopped in any fight before fighting Hopkins.

Since Sugar Ray Robinson last held the middleweight title 50 years ago, there have been three dominant champs to hold Robinson's old crown. Carlos Monzon (1970-77), Marvin Hagler (1980-87), and Bernard Hopkins (1995-2004). Monzon, Hagler, and Hopkins rank one, two, and three in successful title defenses. Hopkins has made 19 and counting, Monzon made 14 and Hagler made 12. Despite owning credentials on par with Monzon and Hagler, many of today's boxing writers and fans resist accepting Hopkins as their equal.

When comparing the overall careers of these three greats, it's very close. If you can be objective when evaluating them, it's a matter of splitting hairs as far as making a convincing case for one over the other.

Carlos Monzon is regarded as middleweight royalty by many today, and deservedly so. However, three of Monzon's title defenses were against former welterweight champs, including Emile Griffith twice. Although Griffith won the middleweight title before facing Monzon, his legacy is as a welterweight. The other former Welterweight Champ Monzon defended his title

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against was Jose Napoles. Both Griffith and Napoles are considered two of history's greatest welterweight champions. Yet, neither of them weighed more than 155 pounds when they fought Monzon. In those fights Monzon went undefeated. He decisioned Griffith and stopped him, and stopped Napoles.

The past great Hopkins is most often compared to and measured against is Marvin Hagler. Like Hopkins, Hagler's biggest and most high profile fights as champ came against fighters who were moving up in weight to challenge him. Most agree Marvin Hagler is one of history's greatest middleweight champions. Yet his career shares many parallels to Hopkins.

Hagler's first big title defense came against Roberto Duran. Duran is best known for his seven year reign as lightweight champ. After giving up the Lightweight title, Duran went on to capture the Welterweight and Jr. Middleweight titles. When Hagler fought Duran, Duran had already been fighting for 15 years and had lost four fights. Duran had never fought at middleweight until challenging Hagler for the title. When they met, Hagler had to rally in the last three rounds of the fight to secure the decision by one point on two cards and two points on the other. In 15 rounds of fighting, Hagler never put Duran down or visibly hurt him.

In the biggest fight of his career before fighting Ray Leonard, Hagler fought former welterweight and jr. middleweight champ, Thomas Hearns. Hearns is one of boxing's greatest punchers from 147-160. Entering his fight with Hagler, Hearns had won 40 of 41 fights. His defeat was to Sugar Ray Leonard, who stopped him in the 14th round of their welterweight unification bout four years earlier. The Hagler-Hearns bout is one of the greatest fights in boxing history. Hagler stopped Hearns in three furious rounds in a fight that no one who saw it will ever forget.

Two years almost to the day after his fight with Hearns, Hagler defended his middleweight title against Sugar Ray Leonard. Leonard was a former welterweight and jr. middleweight champ, but never fought at middleweight until fighting Hagler. The once-beaten Leonard had only fought once in five years before taking on Hagler. His only defeat was to Roberto Duran seven years earlier. The Hagler-Leonard fight ended with Leonard winning a controversial split decision over the 4-1 favored Hagler. The fight was very close, but in this writer's opinion, Leonard out-thought and out-boxed Hagler that night and earned a close decision.

In Hopkins defense, Jones was undefeated when he fought him, and was voted fighter of the decade during the 1990's. Trinidad was undefeated and won a portion of the middleweight title before fighting Hopkins. And De La Hoya also won a piece of the middleweight title in his last fight before fighting Hopkins.

Against the superstars who moved up to challenge Hagler and Hopkins, a case can be made either way as to who fared better. The case for Hagler is Duran and Hearns. The two fighters Hagler defeated out-rank Trinidad and De La Hoya, the two fighters Hopkins beat. The case for Hopkins is he defeated Trinidad and De La Hoya more convincingly than Hagler did Duran and Hearns. In their losses, Hagler was out-boxed by Leonard, and Hopkins was out-boxed by Jones.

Why is there so much reluctance by some to recognize Hopkins as a great Middleweight

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champion? Most of those same fans and boxing writers who deny Hopkins his accolades, shower Roy Jones with much high praise? And the light heavyweight division that Jones dominated, until being KO'd by Tarver, is every bit as pedestrian as the middleweight division Hopkins has dominated. In fact I can't remember when both divisions were so bad. But, Jones gets a pass?

If Jones is so great, how come he didn't outclass a green and inexperienced Hopkins when they fought. Before Jones was knocked out by Antonio Tarver, Hopkins gave him his most competitive fight. Besides winning titles in multiple divisions, Jones has accomplished something Hopkins hasn't. Unlike Jones, Hopkins has never been stopped, let alone knocked out by one punch.

I love Carlos Monzon and Marvin Hagler as fighters. Without question they are probably two of history's five greatest middleweight champions. That being said, had either one of them at their peak fought a peak Hopkins, I have not a single doubt that the fight would've gone the distance.

Hopkins is at least as good as the older Griffith that went 15 and 14 rounds with Monzon. Rodrigo Valdez took Monzon 15 rounds twice in title fights. Is it a reach to suggest that Hopkins is at the worst the equal of Valdez?

Roberto Duran, at 5'7" took Hagler 15 rounds and was leading on two judges cards after 12. In his fight with Hagler, Duran was never close to being in trouble. I don't think there is a single doubt that Hopkins is every bit as formidable an opponent for Hagler as the 1983 version of Duran. And because of size, Hopkins would be able to neutralize Hagler even more than Duran did.

In Hagler's last defense of the title, he lost a split decision to Sugar Ray Leonard, the original Golden-Boy. Leonard was able to stand up to Hagler's best in his first fight at middleweight after fighting once in five years. Is there a question that Hopkins chin isn't as good as Leonard's, no. In fact at middleweight it's probably better.

Why is it so hard for more than a few astute followers of the sweet science to rank Hopkins with Monzon and Hagler? His career accomplishments measure up to theirs. And in a head-to-head confrontation, what do Monzon and Hagler have that would out class Hopkins by the perceived landslide some see. I just don't see it. Hopkins would be in the fight with either one of them.

If forced to pick in a Monzon-Hopkins prime vs prime fight, I'd favor Monzon, but I wouldn't bet much on it. If forced to pick in a Hagler-Hopkins prime vs prime fight, again, I'd favor Hagler, but I wouldn't bet much on him either

Bernard Hopkins is a throw back, old-school fighter. He has power, and he can fight inside or outside. Hopkins is capable of winning by boxing or trading. He's never been out of shape or stopped, and has a cast iron chin. He is calculating and cerebral. And he is a master fight strategist, who always makes his opponents play to their weakness. Hopkins credentials definitely earn him a place among the greatest middleweights of the last 50. And if forced to name history's 10 greatest middleweight champions, Hopkins name has to be among them.

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Someone please tell me exactly who the nine middleweights in history are who have the career accomplishments and longevity to rank above Hopkins. You'll be looking for a long time. And while you're at, find nine past middleweight greats who would be a solid favorite over Hopkins in a head-to-head confrontation if both were at their best. Before jotting down names, you better check their records out and see who they defeated and who they lost to. I did.