

Eastman Comes West - Will He Leave With A Title?

Written by Charles Jay

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For Howard Eastman, this is as opportune a time as ever. At 34, and sporting a beard that, if the light is just right, can make him look six years older, he's got a chance to knock off a well-regarded middleweight champ who is coming off the most high-profile win of his career, but who really IS six years older.

Bernard Hopkins recently turned 40, and knocked Oscar De La Hoya out just five months ago. So you might forgive "The Executioner" if he needed some prodding to get himself emotionally primed for the title defense he'll make this coming Saturday against Eastman in Los Angeles.

Just what does Hopkins see in his future? A fight with the Felix Trinidad-Winky Wright winner? Perhaps, but if that winner turns out to be Trinidad, dibs on the rematch would probably go to De La Hoya, who's also Hopkins' new business partner. A move up to fight Antonio Tarver, Glen Johnson or Roy Jones at light heavyweight? Not likely.

I wouldn't be surprised if Hopkins is able to get himself focused on this match, and I've grown old waiting for HIM to get old. Consequently, I don't know that I would bet on such a thing happening in time for the fight.

Eastman's record is outstanding (40-1), although the "1" came by way of a majority decision at the hands of William Joppy. In retrospect, coming within a whisker (no pun intended) of beating Joppy doesn't move me all that much. And though Eastman is a pretty good fighter, a victory over Hopkins would represent a quantum leap over any opponent he's beaten to date.

Hopkins will go down in history as the man who knocked out both Trinidad and De La Hoya. But what that historical fact tells us more than anything else is that as a naturally bigger fighter, he was far too formidable to be just a stepping stone on Tito's and Oscar's respective paths to glory.

Those wins were easily the most significant in Hopkins' career, and they came against guys who made their mark as welterweights. Eastman is a full-fledged middleweight. However, it's not as if Hopkins hasn't dealt with that before; witness the likes of Keith Holmes, Antwun Echols, Robert Allen, Syd Vanderpool, and of course the aforementioned Joppy. And what about Glen Johnson, who was a middleweight with a 32-0 record when Hopkins beat him?

Among all those guys, does Eastman top the list? I can't say for sure. Maybe he's more complete than the others. He's pretty tough, and he's not the most orthodox fighter in the world. But wins over Hassine Cherifi, Sergei Tatevosyan and Robert McCracken hardly serve as a barometer for what he could do against Hopkins.

I have said in the past that Hopkins' dominance of the middleweights has been, in part, a by-product of a relative dearth of overwhelming talent at 160 pounds. Is Eastman's status as a top contender symbolic of that, or is he something special?

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Reaching out across the pond might provide some insight.

Most people in the U.S. have seen Eastman only once, while Britishers have had quite a bit more exposure to him. Since the Guyana native doesn't lack for respect in his adoptive land, it might make sense to take a look at how things stand at the UK-based online sportsbooks. After all, British bettors have shown enough faith in their lightly tested favorite son, Ricky Hatton, that the number on his upcoming junior welterweight title opponent - Kostya Tszyu - is relatively short (that's a story for a later time). If his countrymen felt Eastman had a genuine shot in this contest, clearly the action would reflect it.

In point of fact, though, Hopkins is most substantially favored in books that most strongly target UK action. At Paddy Power, Hopkins is -800 (laying 8/1) with a +450 takeback on Eastman. At Bowman's, the champ is -770/+400. Ladbrokes, William Hill, BlueSQ.com, TotalBet.com and Sporting Odds all have Hopkins at -700, with Eastman priced at +400.

Conversely, sportsbooks located elsewhere generally show more support for Eastman. Canbet (Australia) has Hopkins at -588 to Eastman's +385; World Sports Exchange (Antigua) has Hopkins a -650/+450 favorite, while Pinnacle Sports (Curacao) has Hopkins laying -615 with a takeback of +553 for the challenger.

How much does this mean? Well, it doesn't - in and of itself - tell the tale, but it seems to indicate that the people who have seen Eastman most are the ones who are least supportive of him.

That may be something worth considering.

(All information is presented for entertainment purposes only. Odds posted were current as of 7 PM ET on February 14. Odds naturally are subject to change, so check first with each individual sportsbook.)