

Is Bernard Hopkins An All-Time Great?

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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I believe that Bernard Hopkins is a Hall of Famer. In this era, I believe he is as good as it gets. But I have trouble believing these words: Bernard Hopkins ... All ... Time ... Great.

Hopkins is a complete fighter. There is not a facet of the game in which he is lacking. He has honed his craft and practices it like a consummate professional. He demonstrated that in his signature fight against Felix Trinidad in 2001. To a lesser degree, he also displayed that against William Joppy in 2003. While Joppy is not the caliber of Trinidad, Hopkins fought a flawless fight. It was as technically proficient an exhibition as you will see in a boxing ring.

I consider Hopkins a throwback fighter, meaning that he embodies the spirit and ethic of the great fighters of the past. I just don't think his career compares favorably to theirs.

Should Hopkins beat Howard Eastman, he will have made 20 successful defenses of his middleweight title. That is an impressive accomplishment in any era. Hopkins has cleaned out the division. But take a look at who he is beating. The only great middleweight he has fought in his career is Roy Jones Jr. and that happens to be the last fight Hopkins lost. The two biggest wins of his career have come against Trinidad and Oscar De La Hoya, a pair of great welterweights.

A decade from now, will Robert Allen, Antwun Echols or Andrew Council be recalled as elite middleweight contenders like the Philadelphia contingent of the 1970s? Remember Bennie Briscoe, Bobby Boogaloo Watts and Willie the Worm Monroe?

It may not be fair to penalize a fighter for his era because it is beyond his control. But I believe that quality of opposition is perhaps the most important factor in analyzing an all-time great. Should it keep Hopkins out of the Hall of Fame? No. He deserves entry. But in ranking the all-time great middleweights, I don't think The Executioner should be grouped in the upper echelon.

I want to compare Hopkins to a pair of fighters – Trinidad and Carlos Monzon. Trinidad remains Hopkins' greatest victory and Monzon held the record for middleweight title defenses before Hopkins broke it. Since Hopkins is old school, let's start with Monzon. The Argentine made 14 successful title defenses and boxed from 1963 to 1977. He is in the Hall of Fame and the consensus among experts is that he usually rates inside the top five middleweights of all time.

All of Monzon's significant pre-title bouts took place in Argentina, which could skew some the decisions he earned. However, he scored two wins over Jorge Fernandez, who came into each bout with over 100 career victories. In fact, when Monzon defeated him the first time in 1966, Fernandez hadn't lost a fight since challenging Emile Griffith for the welterweight title in 1962.

The other notable fights include a draw with Bennie Briscoe in 1967 and wins over Harold Richardson and Tom Beathea in 1969. Bethea would later stop Nino Benvenuti.

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In terms of his title defenses, these are the names to consider: Benvenuti, Griffith, Jose Napoles, Rodrigo Valdes and Briscoe. The first three are all Hall of Famers, Briscoe may be the greatest middleweight to never win a world title and Valdes beat Briscoe three times.

Benvenuti and Griffith were great fighters and Monzon beat each of them twice. In fact, he stopped Benvenuti twice and Griffith once, the only time in his career the New Yorker didn't finish a fight on his feet.

Napoles was great as well, but if we don't credit Hopkins for beating great welterweights, I'm not going to give Monzon too much credit for this victory, although Monzon beat him so badly that Napoles quit on his stool.

It is true that Griffith was also a former welterweight, but more than half his career (12 out of 20 years) was spent at middleweight. Also, many of Griffith's non-title bouts during his welterweight reign came at 150-plus pounds. In reality, Griffith was a natural junior middleweight. He rarely scaled 160 pounds, fighting most of his middleweight bouts in the 157-159 range.

As for Briscoe, if there was any doubt surrounding their draw in 1967, Monzon erased it with a unanimous verdict in 1972. And, finally, Monzon ended his career with consecutive unanimous decisions over Valdes. Valdes, who was trained by Gil Clancy, won the vacant WBC middleweight by stopping Briscoe in 1974. It was the only time Briscoe had been stopped. The Colombian won 63 bouts against 8 losses and scored 43 knockouts.

Also, Monzon knocked out Benvenuti in Rome, Jean Claude Bouttier in France and Tom Boggs in Denmark. That is akin to Hopkins defeating Trinidad in Puerto Rico.

Hopkins has not defeated a middleweight the caliber of Benvenuti, Griffith, Briscoe or Valdes.

Now, let's compare his career to that of Trinidad. Hopkins dominated Trinidad at Madison Square Garden in 2001. But I'm not convinced he is the better fighter. The bigger and stronger fighter? YES. The better fighter? Maybe not.

Consider this: Trinidad weighed 138 pounds when he turned pro. In his 13th pro fight, weighing 143 pounds, he scored a unanimous decision against former world champion Jake Rodriguez. He did not reach the welterweight limit of 147 pounds until his 17th pro fight.

(It's also worth noting that de La Hoya fought at junior lightweight (130) early in his career, had seven lightweight title fights and didn't compete at welterweight until his 24th pro fight.)

In contrast, Hopkins originally turned pro as a light heavyweight and fought as high as 166 pounds through 1992. He did not meet a world champion until he fought Jones.

Trinidad won the IBF welterweight title in 1993 He made 15 title defenses, including Oba Carr (TKO 8), Yory Boy Campas (TKO 4) and Pernell Whitaker (W 12).

Why do I single those out? Carr was 32-0 and the premiere welterweight contender for a

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number of years in the mid-1990s. He lost to Trinidad, Ike Quartey and De La Hoya. Carr was a better welterweight than any middleweight that Hopkins has defended against.

Campas was 56-0 going into the Trinidad fight and Whitaker is a future Hall of Famer. In fact Whitaker, who had gone through fights without losing a round, was dominated by Trinidad. I would also submit that Whitaker was a better welterweight than any of the middleweights Hopkins defeated.

Then, during a four-fight span that bridged his climb from welterweight to junior middleweight, Trinidad hung the first career losses on De La Hoya, David Reid and Fernando Vargas. And it is not a stretch to suggest that he so thoroughly beat Reid and Vargas that they were never the same again.

We all know what happened when Trinidad moved up to 160 pounds. While that one fight has defined Hopkins' career, I don't believe it diminishes the career of Trinidad. Trinidad had a Hall of Fame career *before* he fought Hopkins.

Hopkins beat a smaller fighter that night. He did it well and he did it convincingly. But it doesn't make him an all-time great middleweight.