

Bernard Hopkins – One of Boxing's Best in the Last 25 Years

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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Bernard Hopkins goes for title defense number 20 Saturday. Who would have thought, watching “Ex” struggle with Segundo Mercado in December 1994, that the Philadelphia tough guy would go on to become perhaps the greatest middleweight in the history of boxing?

But Hopkins has chugged along with a combination of talent, punching power, guile, experience and intelligence. He has been a model of consistency for a decade, outlasting contemporaries Roy Jones Jr., Oscar De La Hoya and Shane Mosley — all of which were considered better fighters for most of the last 10 years.

Now that Hopkins has made history and is attempting to extend his incredible reign six title defenses past 160-pound great Carlos Monzon and eight past Marvin Hagler, his place in history is secure.

But where does Hopkins rate among the greatest fighters of the last 25 years?

Let's evaluate.

20. Wilfredo Gomez: Most remember his losses to Salvador Sanchez and Azumah Nelson. But he was fighting at uncomfortable weights and, against Nelson, was past his prime. As a 122-pounder, however, Gomez was simply awesome. Going into the Sanchez fight, he was 32-0 with 32 knockouts. He could box and, boy, could he punch. Signature fight: KO 5 Carlos Zarate (1980).

19. Lennox Lewis: Lewis wasn't always fun to watch, and he often appeared mechanical and unimaginative. But he still unified the titles, and established himself as the best big-man of his era — an era that included Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield. Signature fight: KO 8 Mike Tyson (2002).

18. Azumah Nelson: The Ghanaian superstar almost defeated the great Salvador Sanchez as an inexperienced novice in 1982. He went on to become a two-time champion and a dominant featherweight king. Nicknamed “The Professor” because of his boxing skills, Nelson could also bang. He is, in a word, underappreciated. Signature fight: KO 11 Wilfredo Gomez (1984).

17. Salvador Sanchez: Some may rate the Mexican higher, but the truth is Sanchez' greatness was cut short by his untimely death. Consider that he only reigned as featherweight champ for a little over two years, and he often struggled against ordinary opposition like Patrick Ford. But when he was on, the slick counterpuncher was on. Signature fight: KO 8 Wilfredo Gomez (1981).

16. Alexis Arguello: Arguello's prime years were actually before 1980, when he reigned as featherweight and junior lightweight champ. But he was a good enough lightweight to dominate the class in the early 1980s, defeating the likes of Jim Watt and Ray Mancini. He came close to

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winning a fourth world title, but was stopped by a raging Aaron Pryor. Signature fight: KO 14 Ray Mancini (1981).

15. Aaron Pryor: “The Hawk” wasn’t taken seriously until his 1982 knockout of Alexis Arguello. He repeated the knockout in 1983, and then sunk into a life of drugs. But in his prime, Pryor was the Arturo Gatti of his day. Consider he engaged in back-to-back fights of the year, against DuJuan Johnson and Arguello (1981/1982). Signature fight: KO 14 Alexis Arguello (1982).

14. Felix Trinidad: Perhaps the greatest Puerto Rican fighter of all time, “Tito” made a pretty impressive run at welterweight, notching 15 defenses of the IBF crown before moving up to junior middle in 2000. He was built like Thomas Hearns, and punched like him, too — with his left hook. Still one of the best fighters in the world. Signature fight: KO 12 Fernando Vargas (2000).

13. Michael Spinks: Let’s call Spinks the Lennox Lewis of the light heavyweight division. The St. Louis native didn’t always win impressively, but he always won, unifying the 175-pound title in 1983. He could out-punch the punchers and outbox the boxers. Never lost a fight at light heavyweight. Signature fight: W 15 Dwight Muhammad Qawi (1983).

12. Mike McCallum: How good was the “Body Snatcher”? The elite fighters of his day — Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, Roberto Duran — avoided him like the plague. For good reason. He was a numbing body puncher and as technically sound as any fighter of the 1980s. Won the 154, 160 and 175-pound titles. Signature fight: KO 5 Donald Curry (1987).

11. Roy Jones Jr.: Difficult to rate Jones, since he destroyed all of his competition in his prime. And, like Ali, he did everything wrong. He never jabbed and usually displayed poor form. But what did it matter when he possessed perhaps the greatest combination of speed and reflexes the sport has ever seen? Ultimately won titles at middle, super middle and light heavy, and defeated James Toney and Bernard Hopkins. Signature fight: W 12 James Toney (1994).

10. Mike Tyson: His prime ended unexpectedly, but it was anything but short. He reigned for four years and made 10 title defenses — pretty lengthy for any fighter in any class, really. And when you consider he was a heavyweight, becoming boxing’s biggest star at age 20, you have to give “Iron Mike” his due. Known for his punching power, but his speed is what overwhelmed his foes. Signature fight: KO 1 Michael Spinks (1988).

9. Evander Holyfield: Considered an ordinary light heavyweight, Holyfield won and unified the cruiserweight titles, then won and unified the heavyweight titles. The classic overachiever, the “Real Deal” was strong, heavy-handed and skilled, but his most impressive attribute was his heart. Only fighter he couldn’t defeat was the much bigger Lennox Lewis. Signature fight: KO 11 Mike Tyson (1996).

8. Roberto Duran: Probably one of the top five fighters to ever lace on the gloves, Duran was already great by the time he challenged Sugar Ray Leonard for the welterweight title in 1980. That he went on to win three more titles is nothing short of amazing. Used his smarts and savvy to beat guys who were bigger and years younger. Signature fight: W 15 Sugar Ray Leonard

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(1980).

7. Larry Holmes: Holmes, like Hopkins, wasn't considered anything special when he won the WBC heavyweight title from Ken Norton in 1978. But he went on to become the best heavyweight of the 1980s, notching 20 title defenses over seven years. Possessed perhaps the best jab in heavyweight history, a good right hand and a great heart. Signature fight: KO 13 Gerry Cooney (1982).

6. Bernard Hopkins: How can you deny 20 title defenses in perhaps the toughest division in boxing? It is obvious that Hopkins could have hung with any middleweight in history, including Sugar Ray Robinson, Carlos Monzon and Marvin Hagler. Not the most talented fighter, Hopkins made up for it with superior conditioning, smarts and a big punch. And, of course, a ton of confidence. Only blotch was a decision loss to Roy Jones Jr. in his first world title shot. Signature fight: KO 12 Felix Trinidad (2001).

5. Thomas Hearns: What separates Hopkins from Hearns? Quality of opposition. Consider that Hearns defeated Pipino Cuevas, Roberto Duran and Wilfred Benitez — three of the greatest fighters in history. And his knockouts of Cuevas and Duran were spectacular. He also won the light heavyweight title by defeating a prime Virgil Hill when he was well past his best days. Hearns won titles in five weight classes and was never defeated by anything but boxing's best. Also possessed one of the sport's great right hands. Signature fight: KO 2 Pipino Cuevas (1980).

4. Marvin Hagler: Hagler made 12 defenses of his middleweight title, and all 12 came as "Marvelous Marvin" reigned as undisputed champion. He defeated the best 160-pounders of his day, but made his name against smaller guys coming up in weight — as Hopkins has. Hagler outpointed the great Duran, and blew out Hearns in perhaps the greatest fight of all time. And a lot of people think he was robbed in a decision loss to Sugar Ray Leonard. Was probably the world's best middleweight as much as two years before he won the title. Signature fight: KO 3 Thomas Hearns (1985).

3. Julio Cesar Chavez: How can you argue with a guy who went 90-0 before suffering his first loss? In his prime, Chavez was the closest thing to perfection as his era ever saw. A brutal body puncher, Chavez wore his opponents down with hard, deadly-accurate punches and an unyielding will to win. And, before he was knocked down by Frankie Randall in 1994, was hardly even hurt. Was handed a few gift decisions, but what great fighter wasn't? Capable of defeating any 130 to 140-pound fighter in history. Signature fight: KO 12 Meldrick Taylor (1990).

2. Pernell Whitaker: "Sweet Pea" wasn't always appreciated in his prime, and his safety-first style turned off the purists. But when you defeat the likes of Azumah Nelson, Buddy McGirt and Julio Cesar Chavez (yes, it was a win) and grab titles in four different weight classes without hardly losing a round, you can't be denied. Whitaker was untouchable as a lightweight, and was out of his weight class at welterweight and junior middleweight. But he still made guys swing at air. The epitome of the classic southpaw stylist. Signature fight: D 12 Julio Cesar Chavez (1993).

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1. Sugar Ray Leonard: Speed. Power. Smarts. Heart. Endurance. Sugar Ray had it all, and served the nickname well. He defeated Wilfred Benitez in 1979 for his first world title, then lost to Roberto Duran via decision. He came back and wasn't humbled again for another nine years. Along the way, he defeated an awesome array of skilled fighters: Duran in the rematch, Ayub Kalule, Thomas Hearn, Marvin Hagler. He won titles in five weight divisions (with an asterisk, because he won two in one night), and wasn't dominated until he met a much younger Terry Norris in 1991. He made Duran quit, the first Hearn fight was legendary and the Hagler victory was perhaps the greatest comeback in boxing history. Whether you loved him or hated him, you can't deny Sugar Ray's greatness. Signature fight: KO 14 Thomas Hearn (1981).

So there you have it. Hopkins stands as the sixth-best fighter over the last 25 years. It would have been hard to imagine that in his loss to Jones, or his draw with Mercado, or even during his early title reign, when he was one of boxing's more invisible, underappreciated champions.

Now, he is visible, and very appreciated.