Minutes after making the record-extending 20th consecutive defense of his undisputed middleweight title, the boxing world was abuzz over who Bernard Hopkins would fight next. Hopkins has certainly come along way since stopping Felix Trinidad as a 3-1 underdog more than three years ago.

It’s hard to believe there was a time when Hopkins was the least appreciated champion in boxing. With his win over Howard Eastman this past Saturday night, Hopkins joined an elite boxing fraternity. He is one of just four champions to make 20 or more successful world title defenses, and one of only four fighters to win a world title bout at age forty or older, along with George Foreman, Archie Moore, and Bob Fitzsimmons.

With his legacy as an all-time great solidly in place, Hopkins is looking to do one of two things. He either wants to break the bank earning a record payday, or he wants to make history. The fight that could add Hopkins' name to another page of boxing history would see him moving up to fight undisputed light heavyweight champion Glen Johnson. Hopkins stopped Johnson eight years ago when Johnson was undefeated in 32 fights.

A win over Johnson would make Hopkins the first middleweight champion in history to move up and in his first fight beat the reigning light heavyweight champion. Something only the great Sugar Ray Robinson attempted, but failed to do when he couldn't answer the bell for round 14 against light heavyweight champ Joey Maxim 53 years ago.

If a fight with Johnson can't be made, a rematch with three time champ Felix Trinidad would be a huge pay-per-view event. A second fight between Hopkins and Trinidad could net Hopkins the biggest purse of his career. Trinidad, who lost his portion of the middleweight title to Hopkins, only fought once after that loss and retired for two years. Trinidad returned to the ring late last year and stopped Ricardo Mayorga in eight rounds. Tito has said through the media that the main reason he came back was to seek a second fight with Hopkins. The perception of Trinidad being unbeatable was shattered by Hopkins back on September 29, 2001. Hopkins methodically took Trinidad apart and dominated him throughout the fight before stopping him in the 12th round.

If fights with Johnson and Trinidad can’t be worked out, there is Jermain Taylor. At 26, Taylor is currently being touted by many boxing observers as the heir apparent to Hopkins for middleweight supremacy. Taylor fought the co-feature on the Hopkins-Eastman card and looked impressive stopping undefeated Daniel Edouard in three rounds. After beating Edouard, Taylor said he's tired of waiting and wants to fight Hopkins next. "If we get the opportunity [to fight Hopkins] we're going to take it, because we think Jermain is ready for it," said Lou DiBella, Taylor's promoter. "Bernard's great. But he's a great 40-year-old fighter."

As I wrote before Hopkins fought Eastman and Taylor fought Edouard, I believe DiBella, who currently calls the shots for Taylor, believes Hopkins is ready to be taken. And that is by no

means false optimism on DiBella's part. Hopkins did not physically overwhelm Eastman in their fight. He was calculating and purposefully called on his ring savvy and the experience gained from winning 19 championship fights over the last 10 years. In the end it was Hopkins superior ring generalship and poise that Eastman couldn't overcome, more than Hopkins physical superiority.

At age 40, Hopkins is no longer the same fighter physically who stopped Trinidad, but nothing gets him out of his game and he never panics or loses his cool. And like many other past great fighters, when their physical strength and skills began to erode, they found other ways to win. Which is exactly what Hopkins did against Eastman in his last fight. Eastman was capable of giving Hopkins a very hard fight physically. Only Hopkins got into Eastman's head and planted seeds of doubt. Hopkins making Eastman slightly doubt himself may have been just enough to keep Eastman from fighting at a measured pace, so Hopkins didn't have to tax his 40-year-old body having to fight him off.

If Bernard Hopkins has any intention of fighting Jermain Taylor before he retires from boxing, he better fight him in his next fight, or he should never fight him. Hopkins is now at the point in his career where he could show up in his next fight as an empty package. He's probably not there yet, and that's why he should fight Taylor next. With each passing day Hopkins gets older and Taylor has someone else tell him that Hopkins is ready to be beat to help boast his confidence.

If you compare Taylor and Eastman, it's not hard to make a case for Taylor being the more formidable opponent. Taylor is physically bigger, he hits harder with both hands, has a better jab and throws more punches. He’s also 26, eight years younger than the 34-year-old Eastman. Something else Taylor has that Eastman didn't is the benefit of seeing the mistakes Eastman made and learning from them. If nothing else, Taylor's brain trust must have seen that if he is to have any chance at all to beat Hopkins, he has to take the fight to him starting in round one.

Taylor has to push the fight and set a fast pace. Anything short of that will result in his being schooled by the master up close and personal. Taylor cannot beat Hopkins in a fight that is fought at a measured pace. He can't outthink Hopkins, nor can he try to anticipate what he'll do and then react to it. That's a sure plan for disaster. Taylor has to take full advantage of the only asset he has over Hopkins: his youth. By forcing Hopkins to fight, it reduces the chances of Hopkins setting traps for him and getting into his head.

I believe that Jermain Taylor's 26-year-old body is capable of beating Bernard Hopkins' 40-year-old body. Although I don't see it as a given, it's very likely from what transpired in each of their last fights. But Hopkins may still have just enough left physically, combined with his experience and toughness, to get past Taylor. That's why Hopkins should fight Taylor next, before Taylor fully develops as a fighter mentally and emotionally.

If Hopkins fights Taylor and beats him, a fight with Trinidad will still be there. And if Johnson beats Tarver again in their rematch, then the fight with Johnson will still be an option. And Hopkins doesn't have to be quite as good physically for either Trinidad or Johnson, the way he would have to be for Taylor. With Johnson being 36 and Trinidad being 32, they could easily

show up in their next fight with nothing left but their name. And let’s not forget that Hopkins shutout Johnson and Trinidad before he stopped them when they fought. So he's already inside their head having defeated them in a convincing fashion.

If Hopkins has it in his mind that he wants to fight Taylor before hanging up his gloves, these are the waning moments of what's left of his last chance to beat him. Everyday the fight is prolonged, Hopkins gets older and Taylor gains experience. The next time Bernard Hopkins defends his undisputed middleweight championship, it should be against the fighter deemed by many to be his successor, Jermain Taylor. Or he should never fight him.