

Bernard Hopkins' Big Gamble

Written by Aaron Tallent

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Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins has nothing left to prove. That is why he deserves nothing but respect for risking millions of dollars to fight Jermain "Bad Intentions" Taylor on July 16th.

Hopkins' business decisions over the years have made the boxing faithful scratch their heads. After his career defining knockout of Felix Trinidad in 2001, he parlayed that victory into "mega-fights" with Carl Daniels, Mornade Hakkar, an almost shot William Joppy, and, for a third time, Robert Allen, before earning a \$14 million payday for knocking out Oscar De La Hoya.

His \$3 million purse for defending his hard-earned, undisputed, unified middleweight championship against Taylor now makes me question his business sense as well. Very rarely should a fighter be questioned for making that much for a bout. After all, it is better than \$300,000 for fighting Joppy.

And this is the fight boxing fans want to see and a fight that Hopkins should take before he retires. As Hopkins told ESPN last week, "Why not capitalize while the iron is hot? We already got people buzzing. He's available right now. It's a win-win situation."

But in this instance, the risk vastly outweighs the reward. Not only is Hopkins risking his title, he is also risking two potential mega-fights, one with the winner of the Glen Johnson/Antonio Tarver bout and, of course, a rematch with Felix Trinidad. Taylor is a risky choice. He is without a doubt Hopkins' toughest opponent since Trinidad.

There is no argument that Taylor is tougher competition than Hopkins' pre-De La Hoya opponents and the wacky Howard Eastman, whom The Executioner dismantled last February. He is even a better middleweight opponent for Hopkins than De La Hoya. When The Golden Boy and Hopkins fought last fall, Bernard was a sleeked down 155-pounds, and his only available option of attack was "stick and move, stick and move."

Having not lost a fight in almost twelve years, Hopkins will be the favorite going into July's bout. He has solidified his legacy and Boxing Hall of Fame status. He has fought the best. He has beaten the best. As Rocky's Apollo Creed once said, he has "retired more men than Social Security."

Retirement and Social Security are the key words here. Hopkins has not faced an opponent on the good side of 30 since Trinidad in 2001. Taylor is 26-years-old, and that is just one of the many reasons he can upset Hopkins.

In his fights with De La Hoya and Eastman, Hopkins fought in spurts, coyly moving around the ring. He spent the first five or six rounds studying his opponents' weaknesses and exploited them to their fullest extent in the later rounds.

In those fights, however, Hopkins had the luxury of not being pressured. De La Hoya did not

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have the punching power to do so, and Eastman was ill-prepared by his own admission. The HBO analysts at that time all agreed that the only way to beat Hopkins is by constantly attacking and not relenting for twelve rounds.

Enter Jermain Taylor. His chin has never really been tested, but he definitely has the youth necessary to go after Hopkins for twelve straight rounds. It is likely that Hopkins will have a difficult time July 16th honing in on Taylor's flaws if he is constantly fending off his attacks.

To apply the pressure necessary to beat Hopkins, Taylor will use his best attribute, his jab, to set up uppercuts and other power shots. The bullwhip that is his left hand is arguably the best in the middleweight division, and Taylor has enough stamina to sling it throughout the entire fight.

Hopkins will not have much room to work with in deflecting Taylor's lashes either. Hopkins' reach is 75 inches. Taylor's reach lists at 74 inches. While The Executioner still has an inch on Taylor, he had more leeway in his fights with Joppy, Trinidad and De La Hoya.

Hopkins is fully aware of Taylor's abilities and has even affirmed that Taylor would own one of the division's alphabet soup championships if he were not in the picture. The boxing public feels the same way, having named Taylor the heir apparent to the middleweight championship almost two years ago.

But like all fighters being groomed for ascension from the club circuit, Taylor faces criticism over the lack of competition he has faced in building a 23-0 record. His last three fights have been a knockout of former IBF junior middleweight champ Raul Marquez, who retired shortly thereafter; a runaway decision against former three-time WBA champ Joppy, who simply gave up in the bout's later rounds; and a third round TKO over then-undefeated Daniel Edouard, which was on the undercard of the Hopkins/Eastman fight.

None of these fighters were anywhere near Hopkins' caliber. However, the argument of Taylor cherry-picking his schedule is unfair. Who is he going to fight? The middleweight division is not exactly deep these days, and no manager worth his or her salt would put an up-and-coming prospect in the ring with Trinidad or Winky Wright in a non-title fight.

Plus, Taylor's undefeated record is not cluttered with garbage opponents. Throughout his career, he has faced one opponent with a losing record. He will definitely give Hopkins his toughest fight in years.

Let's be clear on one thing, though: there is no way that Taylor can knock out Hopkins. The Executioner's chin has proven too durable over the years. But if Taylor can keep bringing it for twelve straight rounds, he could very well squeak out a decision.

Taylor, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, may also have one other advantage: the crowd. If the fight is held in Memphis as speculated, the Arkansas faithful will travel across the Mississippi River in hopes that the future of the middleweight division will bring one home to the Natural State. The overwhelming support will not hurt Hopkins (any man who can beat Felix Trinidad in Madison Square Garden is obviously not affected by hostile crowds), but it will not help him

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either.

Of course, sports writers have been saying the same thing for years: that Hopkins would fall to a younger, stronger fighter. And he has proved them wrong every single time. No matter what Taylor brings, it is very hard to imagine that Hopkins will not be able to handle it.

But you still have to appreciate the chance Hopkins is taking. At this point in his career he could focus on huge money-making fights and no one would think less of him for it. You have to admire him for taking a relatively small payday to leave no unanswered questions to his career before moving on to pay-per-view blockbusters.

"I want to do major fights for the last year of my career," Hopkins also told ESPN, "I want to make a statement on the way out and to have risk there in every fight."

Hopefully for Hopkins, his gamble will pay off.