

Bernard Hopkins 10-Year Title Reign: Unique and Complete

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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As a high school junior during the winter of 1982, Bernard Hopkins was convicted for strong-arm robbery. He was sentenced to 18 years in the state penitentiary. During the 56 months he was incarcerated, Hopkins turned his life around. As prisoner Y4145, Bernard earned his GED and won the national penitentiary middleweight championship three times. In 1988, Hopkins, a model prisoner, was granted parole.

On October 11th, 1988 in Atlantic City, fighting as a light heavyweight in his pro debut, Hopkins lost a four-round majority decision to Clinton Mitchell. After a sixteen month layoff, Hopkins returned to the ring eleven pounds lighter, fighting as a middleweight under the guidance of respected trainer Bouie Fisher. On May 22, 1993, riding a 22-fight win streak, Hopkins lost a unanimous decision to Roy Jones in his first crack at the middleweight title. A year and a half later he got a second shot at the title; this time he fought to a disputed draw against Segundo Mercado for the vacant IBF title.

On January 8, 1995, retired legendary middleweight champion Carlos Monzon was killed in a car accident at age 52.

On April 29, 1995, Hopkins stopped Mercado in the seventh round of their rematch to win the IBF middleweight championship. At the time of his death, Monzon had held the middleweight title longer and made more successful defenses than any other middleweight champion in history. Today, it is Bernard Hopkins who holds that distinction, having broken Monzon's two extraordinary records.

As of this writing, Hopkins is closing in on Monzon's record of going undefeated over the last twelve years, seven months of his career before retiring. If Hopkins remains undefeated through February 1, 2006, he'll surpass Monzon's last significant record.

In his last fight Hopkins defeated top contender Howard Eastman to extend his record-setting number of consecutive title defenses to twenty. Only three other middleweight champions in history have made ten or more . . . and let's consider these other facts about Mr. Hopkins:

- The only middleweight champion in history with 10 or more successful title defenses who has never been down as champ.
- The only middleweight champion in history to win a title fight after his fortieth birthday.
- Ranks third in boxing history, behind former heavyweight champ Joe Louis (eleven years, seven months) and former featherweight champ Johnny Kilbane (eleven years, four months) in length of title reign.
- With 20 title defenses, Hopkins joins Joe Louis (25) Ricardo Lopez (24) and Larry Holmes (20) as the only champions to make 20 or more defenses of a world title.

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- The only fighter to have stopped both Oscar De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad has just started to get props as an all-time great. However, there are some who may argue against Hopkins being a top-ten middleweight great.

One of the arguments disputing Hopkins as one of histories greatest 160-pound champions seems to apply to him more than it does other fighters. The fact that Hopkins wasn't the unified champion his entire ten year reign is used to water down his legacy. Hopkins didn't officially become the undisputed champ until September 2001.

During Hopkins first six years as IBF champ, Keith Holmes held the WBC middleweight title for all but an eleven month interval from March of 1996 until losing it to Hopkins in April 2001. The WBA middleweight title was held by William Joppy from June of 1996 through May of 2001 when he lost it to Felix Trinidad. Hopkins defeated Trinidad in September 2001 to unify the middleweight title. The point is Hopkins has been the best middleweight in the world since winning the IBF title.

Trying to denigrate Hopkins for being the unified champion for only 40% of his title reign is ridiculous. Larry Holmes never unified the heavyweight title during the seven years he was champ, but it hasn't tarnished his legacy.

Some attribute Hopkins success to the mediocrity of his division, but the middleweight division Hopkins dominated was no more pedestrian than the heavyweight and light heavyweight era's that Larry Holmes and Roy Jones ruled.

Another argument that rings hollow against Hopkins is that his signature wins have been against great fighters who moved up in weight to challenge him. Those making that claim need to brush up on middleweight history. Many past middleweight champs defeated fighters moving up to establish their legacy. The former champs Hopkins is most often compared to, Monzon and Hagler, also have a history with welterweight champs. Monzon defeated two great fighters as middleweight king, Emile Griffith and Jose Napoles, considered two of the greatest welterweight champions ever.

If Hopkins' claim to greatness is beating welterweights, what's Marvin Hagler's? Hagler's signature wins are against 32-year-old former lightweight champ Roberto Duran. In that fight, Hagler needed to rally in the final three rounds to secure the decision over Duran. The defining fight of Hagler's career is his stoppage of former welterweight champ Thomas Hearns (who was stopped by Sugar Ray Leonard four years earlier).

Hagler, who held the unified title for more than six years, lost it to Sugar Ray Leonard in his last fight. The Leonard who took the title from Hagler had only fought once in five years and hadn't fought above welterweight in six. Anyone who thinks Hopkins' claim as a great was established against smaller fighters moving up in weight must view Hagler the same way.

I'm not saying Hopkins would've beat Monzon or Hagler. He no doubt would've been a betting underdog. I just don't see it as a mismatch. The fact is Bernard Hopkins is one of the top-ten middleweight champions in history. But Hopkins is much more than a champion who had

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longevity and compiled numbers. He's a complete fighter inside the ring.

Hopkins possesses the things that can't be seen on the outside but are essential to every great fighter. He's super tough mentally and physically and has total belief in himself. He knows exactly what he wants to do. Hopkins understands how to apply strategy in the ring and how to force his opponent to fight from his weakness instead of his strength.

Physically, Hopkins is stronger than he is given credit for and he also has a concrete chin. He can fight inside or outside and has enough power to trade and get rough if he has to. Counterpunching is his forte and taking the fight to him aggressively is almost ring suicide. Yet, if forced to, he can be effective attacking and stalking his opponent and methodically breaking him down.

Hopkins stays in excellent condition and is well informed of what the other middleweights are doing. He has a boxing acumen unmatched by any active fighter. What makes him even more formidable to his peers is the fact that he has a plan and knows how to implement it during his bouts. Bernard knows exactly what it will take in order for him to get the job done - whether it's how much he has to weigh by a certain date, enabling him to execute the fight he has mapped out, or what side of the hotel to book his room on so he can rest without distractions.

Bernard Hopkins is definitely an all-time great, based on his ability as a fighter in the ring and the monumental accomplishments he reached as middleweight champion.

Q: What do George Foreman, Oliver McCall, Riddick Bowe, Bruce Seldon, Frank Bruno, Frans Botha, Mike Tyson, Michael Moorer, Evander Holyfield, Herbie Hide, Henry Akinwande, Lennox Lewis, John Ruiz, Roy Jones, Hasim Rahman, Chris Byrd, Wladimir Klitschko, Corrie Sanders, Vitali Klitschko and Lamon Brewster share with undisputed middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins?

A: All of them have held a piece of the heavyweight title during his ten-year reign as middleweight champion.

* [Read PART 2 of Frank Lotierzo's Series on Bernard Hopkins.](#)