

Bernard Hopkins Outside The Ring: The Most Unique All-Time Great

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 11 May 2005 19:00

In 1988, after serving 56 months of an 18 year sentence for being convicted of strong-arm robbery, 22-year-old Bernard Hopkins was released from Graterford Prison. Hopkins told the *New York Times* that on the day of his release a guard said to him, "See you when you come back."

That was 17 years ago and, according to Hopkins, he hasn't so much as spit on the sidewalk. Hopkins, who started boxing at the age of ten, turned professional shortly after his release from prison. Since his debut in October of 1988, Hopkins, fighting as a middleweight, has compiled a glowing record 46-2-1 1-NC. On April 29, 1995, Hopkins stopped Segundo Mercado in the seventh round of their rematch to win the IBF middleweight title. He's made a record 20 consecutive title defenses during his record 10 year reign as middleweight champ.

The totality of Hopkins' ring accomplishments is remarkable. The career of this future hall-of-famer measures favorably with any fighter who has ever held the middleweight title. Hopkins' feats inside the ring only tell part of the story. It's the way he conducts his career outside the ring that makes him unlike any fighter in boxing history.

Bernard Hopkins knows the business side of boxing to such an extent that he literally scares fight promoters and managers. There have been few fighters who have an idea about how the business of boxing operates; they have never taken the time or bothered to learn it the way Hopkins has.

Muhammad Ali knew he was the top draw in boxing and wanted to be paid accordingly. He didn't know exactly where the money came from or how it was divided, just as long as his money was there. Sugar Ray Robinson's strategy was simple: he wanted all the money. He even negotiated some of his own fight contracts. His mindset was to hold everybody hostage (promoters, vendors, television and radio rights) by threatening to pull out of the fight at the last minute if he wasn't accommodated the way he saw fit. He always thought the promoters were holding back on the money and they could be squeezed for more.

Robinson's tactic of playing hardball cost him a third fight with Carmen Basilio. He overestimated his worth for the bout. Ray demanded \$750,000 opposed to the \$500,000 he was guaranteed for a rubber match with Basilio. The money wasn't upped and Robinson-Basilio III never happened.

What distinguishes Hopkins from other fighters who were involved with the business end of their careers is that he prepares for the bargaining table like he does the boxing ring. Sure he's made mistakes, like Robinson overestimating his value, but with the way his career is winding down, he's probably recouped close to what he supposedly lost.

Bernard is one of the few fighters who realizes just how important not losing is. He knew that as long as he kept winning, sanctioning bodies, promoters and even other fighters could never hold

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all the leverage over him. Fully aware that without big money backing him and not yet a superstar, he was always one loss away from being at the mercy of a decentralized system.

Hopkins has often talked about knowledge being the real power. So by practicing what he preached, he went about learning the business of boxing. He knows how much money is involved and where the money comes from. Knowing how the money is divided between pay-per-view and cable television, broadcast rights, advertising sponsorships, along with domestic and foreign sales, makes it much tougher for, as he calls them, "the good 'ol boy network" to bully him.

Hopkins says "They don't want to see things change. They don't want to see you in the front of the bus." These types of remarks, when carried back to the promoters and TV executives, send a clear message that they will not take advantage of Hopkins like they have so many others.

"They don't want you to say, why do you as a promoter have to take \$8 million and I get \$2 million and I'm the one who could get brain damage?" asks Hopkins. "Their attitude is: 'You're from the penitentiary, you're from the city, you should be glad to get \$2 million.' I say that's wrong and that's ignorant."

If there is another fighter equipped to confront the establishment like Bernard Hopkins, I don't know who he is.

Another ingenious move by Hopkins was accepting a partnership in Oscar De La Hoya's "Golden Boy Promotions." Hopkins, along with being a partner, serves as President of Golden Boy Promotions East, who will also promote his future bouts. Talk about a guy seeing the big picture. Hopkins has it covered from A-to-Z.

Hopkins realizes that De La Hoya has, to quote Muhammad Ali, "The complexion and the connection to provide the protection," along with the knowledge to implement some needed changes for the better in the immediate future. De La Hoya must also be credited for having the foresight to see Hopkins' value. He knows Hopkins brings credibility and is capable of reaching fighters who may view Oscar as a guy born with a silver spoon in his mouth who may not have their best interests at heart.

Hopkins recently bought out his nephew's contract from Main Events because he felt the fighter's career was stagnating. "Golden Boy has more fights all around the country," Hopkins says. "We felt it was a way to jump start his career and get him more exposure." Demetrius Hopkins (the son of Bernard's older sister Bernadette) may be too young to appreciate how fortunate he is to have his uncle looking out for him and protecting him.

Inside the ring Hopkins fights hard. Outside the ring he is a strong advocate for the rights of his peers. He appeared before Congress in February of 2003, using his world champion stature to point out the injustices many fighters are confronted with. During his testimony Hopkins said, "My stature has given me the opportunity to buck the system. I have been an outspoken advocate for change. I have rejected multi-million dollar paydays because the terms of the agreement presented to me were not fair. I have this luxury because I have food in my

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refrigerator and money invested in mutual funds. Other boxers cannot do this. It is for them that I have come to testify and hopefully you will keep them in mind when you go back to your offices to consider legislation."

Hopkins framed perfectly what most fighters (those not named Sugar Ray, Iron Mike, Golden Boy, The Real Deal, Pretty Boy or Klitschko) face, especially concerning their own representatives who are supposedly protecting them. They may have someone looking out for them who has good intentions, but not the knowledge or means to make a difference. With the flipside being those who do have the ability to make a difference may act as if they are looking out for the fighter, but really don't have the fighter's interests at heart.

Bernard Hopkins has reached the pinnacle in boxing while managing himself for a majority of his career. Along the way he has made a few mistakes, making him like everyone else who ventured into a field where they had to learn while on the job. It wasn't long ago that Hopkins was being admonished for not parlaying the signature win of his career at the time (against Felix Trinidad) into another super-fight. But he did; it just didn't happen in his next fight. Hopkins knew Oscar De La Hoya, unlike the rest of us, would eventually fight him. Hopkins was right to the tune of \$15 million - and he didn't have to pay a percentage to a manager.

The same year Hopkins earned the biggest purse of his career, he achieved another milestone. He was voted Manager of the Year by the Boxing Writers Association of America. In response to this honor, Hopkins' former advisor Lou DiBella said Hopkins winning Manager of the Year was "nothing short of an atrocity."

Which brings us to the present: Is there another fighter in boxing with more options than the undisputed middleweight champion of the world Bernard Hopkins? Umm...no! Having come out on the losing side in court versus DiBella (and he recently lost the appeal), Hopkins is not done tweaking the promoter. DiBella manages top middleweight contender Jermain Taylor. As reported here in February, Hopkins is fighting DiBella through Taylor. Only DiBella can't or won't accept (although he's too smart not to know) that Hopkins holds all the cards. Hopkins recently told ESPN, "I'm fighting July 16. I do not need Jermain Taylor to enhance my career. I got (junior middleweight champ) Kassim Ouma barking that he wants to fight me. That's an exciting fight, isn't it? I got super middleweight titlist Jeff Lacy begging for the fight, saying he would even come down to a catch weight and I could fight for his title. That's a credible fight, isn't it?"

Hopkins went on to mention Felix Sturm, and as a last choice resort he could fight the IBF mandatory challenger Sam Soliman. "Where's Jermain Taylor going without Bernard Hopkins? How does Lou DiBella think he's going to succeed when I have all these options? If the terms are accepted we fight. If not, we'll look at other options. But I'm trying to make a fight for Bernard Hopkins on July 16."

Hopkins' last sentence says everything about him and why he has been so successful. Even without a fight having been announced, Hopkins has it in his mind he's fighting on July 16. That conveys to me loud and clear that Hopkins has already begun preparing for it.

Here's a fighter who competes in the ring against lions as an all-time great, and at the same

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time has swam with the sharks who yield the real power in boxing outside the ring. At worst, he has only been nicked and scraped by them, instead of being eaten alive.

In closing, Bernard Hopkins ranks somewhere around 7th or 8th amongst history's top-ten greatest middleweight champions.

Yet it is Mr. Hopkins' understanding of how boxing operates - more so than any other fighter - that makes him unique in the history of the sweet science.

* [Read](#); [PART](#)**1** [of Frank Lotierzo's](#)[Series](#) on Bernard Hopkins.