

A Few More Rounds

Written by Tim Graham
Tuesday, 12 July 2005 19:00

Twenty is such a nice, round number.

Seems like an appropriate time for the ride to come to a stop.

Bernard Hopkins, at 40, can't last forever.

And you already can see where I'm going with this. The storyline is old and tired, and it hasn't exactly held up well over the years. "Age finally will catch up to Hopkins, and (insert name of young upstart here) will end the middleweight champ's record-setting reign at (insert number of consecutive title defenses here)."

As many times as it has been predicted, Hopkins has crammed it back down our word holes.

It happened so frequently we stopped doubting him and started to believe time actually does stand still for one man.

Yet here it comes again.

This time, insert the name of Jermain Taylor and leave the record at 20.

Hopkins and Taylor will meet Saturday night at the MGM Grand Garden in a classic battle between savvy and youth, an all-time great against a rising star with all the tools to maintain the middleweight mantle for a long, long period himself.

Taylor in many ways is unlike many of Hopkins' recent opponents. Taylor isn't coming up in weight, doesn't wear cement shoes and can jab like the dickens.

For the 2000 Olympic bronze medalist, any success will come from the jab. His is multidimensional, one of the best in the business today. He can use it to score consistently, knock an opponent back, throw off timing or set up a crushing right.

Hopkins, however, can negate Taylor's jab by working his way inside, where the youngster would be greatly overmatched against the old master and totally unprepared for what would transpire under intimate conditions. Taylor won't be able to compete if he's pressured in such a way, forced to sort through all the shoulders, elbows, forearms.

"He's a crafty fighter," Taylor said. "On the infighting he's dirty, he holds a lot, and he fights off you. If you wait, he sneaks up on you. He's a smart fighter and I give him credit for that."

Taylor must avoid this with constant lateral movement, keeping Hopkins in the center of the ring and at the end of that wicked jab.

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But this match may come down to more than simple X's and O's. After all these years of Hopkins geriatric defiance, this might be the night he finally succumbs to Father Time's relentless, Jason Voorhees-like pursuit.

A wise boxing observer pointed out to me after Hopkins' victory over Howard Eastman in February the champion demonstrated a disconcerting flaw for the first time. Hopkins frequently squared up with his chin in front of his knees and that led him to fall forward during exchanges more than before.

That, my old pal noted, was a telltale sign of a fighter whose legs are starting to go and indicated a susceptibility to uppercuts.

Of course, there is a chance Hopkins can overcome a physical deficiency on guile alone. The experience factor is a substantial one for a legend who has assembled a resume – and a birth certificate – worthy of two careers. In world title fights alone he is 20-1-1. That's a career in itself. Taylor, who will turn 27 next month, has fought professionally only twice more than that.

Hopkins is comparing Taylor's challenge to that of John "The Beast" Mugabi to Marvin Hagler in 1986. Mugabi was a 26-year-old star in the making and ranked No. 1 across the board with a 25-0 record. Hagler was only 32 but had been through the wars and would head off into the sunset after fighting Ray Leonard just a year later. Hagler controlled the fight and eventually knocked out Mugabi in the 11th round.

The Hagler-Mugabi analogy, Hopkins said, "is perfect because he's bigger, he's strong, he's not scared, he's coming forward. Isn't that the same type of blueprint to Hagler and Mugabi? (Analysts said 'Mugabi is) dangerous. Hagler's gonna get tested. Oh, let's not forget Hagler's slowing down. Hagler's old."

Hopkins also has related Saturday night's matchup to his first title shot, when he lost to Roy Jones Jr. in 1993 (Taylor was only 14 years old). Hopkins admits Taylor likely is the heir to the middleweight throne, but the champ insisted it won't happen this weekend.

"I watched his Jones fight, and he had nothing," Taylor said of Hopkins. "He was just slow. As far as me, I know I'm a lot faster and a lot stronger than Bernard. So if that's what he comparing it to it's going to be a long fight."

That's about as bold as Taylor has been during prefight media sessions. He has taken the prudent approach and has declined to get into any trash talking competitions with Hopkins. A possible hazard for any young fighter about to enter his first world title fight is to become overwhelmed by the moment, and against a psychological warfare expert such as Hopkins, the potential to become wrapped up in the nonsense increases exponentially.

"I'm just going to stick with the things that I do, no trash talking, just having a good time and boxing because that's what I love," Taylor said. "You don't have to be mad to go in there, box somebody and win. Like basketball, you don't have to be mad to hit a lay-up. I love the sport of boxing, and I'm gonna go in there and have a good time and win just like I always do."

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If he's not engulfed by either the moment or Hopkins' infighting acumen, then Taylor will win.

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WELCOME BACK: What a joy it is to see one of the sport's finest people back in action. Vernon Forrest will ease back into boxing's waters when he fights unheralded Sergio Rios, a pug with only seven pro bouts to his name, on the Hopkins-Taylor undercard.

Forrest, whom I had the pleasure to make a last-second nomination for the Boxing Writers Association of America's Marvin Kohn Good Guy Award he won in 2004, hasn't fought in two years. The Viper seemed to vanish after Ricardo Mayorga beat him in successive bouts.

"Don't call it a comeback," Forrest said. "I've been here for years.

"It's been a long time coming and a lot of ups and downs and a lot of disappointments in trying to get back."

The two-time welterweight champ has undergone three major operations during his hiatus. He had multiple rotator cuff surgeries to repair left shoulder pain that nagged him throughout much of his career. He also underwent left elbow surgery to correct damage indirectly caused by the bum shoulder. He had been incorrectly throwing punches to overcompensate for the shoulder problems.

Forrest said he probably needs one more surgery on his elbow, but he's already 34 years old and can't afford to let the world pass him by.

"It's been two years now," Forrest said. "So it's like you gotta kind of play with the pain and deal with the issues and go forward."

His goal is to avenge his losses to Mayorga, but he realizes that can't happen for a bit. Consider it a Triple-A rehab assignment.

"I'm going into the minor leagues for now," Forrest said. "I want to build up my physical confidence, and with my physical confidence comes my mental confidence. Then I'll be more prepared to fight all the big guys out there."

THIS OLD HOUSE: Mike Tyson's former home in rural Northeast Ohio, just down the road a piece from my parents' house, has been put up for sale on eBay for \$3.5 million.

The listing called the area suburban. Sure it is, if Amish country is considered suburban. Rest assured, if Jebediah and Ezekiel had any idea what Mike Tyson did with his spare time they'd be glad he had vacated the area.

The 25,000-square-foot manor comes with 65 secluded acres and features 22 rooms, zebra-striped carpeting, a 10,000-foot indoor pool, basketball court and 10 garages.

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The wrought iron driveway gates are adorned with "Mike Tyson" across the top, just like they did that night in 1991, when a future boxing writer, while on a teenage rampage with equally misguided friends, got the sudden urge to find out if the fence was electrified. It wasn't, and the guards weren't amused.

BURNING QUESTIONS: How much more frustrated is Joe Mesi feeling about his situation now that DaVarryl Williamson is the IBF's mandatory for champion Chris Byrd? Mesi, sidelined by a medical suspension, starched Williamson in 96 seconds less than two years ago.

Isn't it comical to hear Don King whining about WBC champ Vitali Klitschko dodging the winner of the Hasim Rahman versus Monte Barrett interim title fight? Don, maybe if you hadn't put Andrew Golota into eleventy-five straight title bouts, some of your top contenders could get shots, too.

QUOTEMARKS: "I heard about ESPN through the name Mike Tyson, trying to see how he looked. He made ESPN and Showtime. He made those companies, and they let a big industry like that be mismanaged. He was an industry, and they just let it fall. They didn't (schedule matches for Tyson) like he was the heavyweight champion of the world. Then to just keep overmatching him ... That's what you call mismanagement of a commodity." – George Foreman to the *Houston Chronicle*

"People can be hypocritical. At one moment they like somebody and then another moment they'll spit on them. And then say 'Excuse me, I'm sorry.'" – Hector Camacho on getting booed after winning a decision over late sub Raul Munoz in Tucson

"I'm no longer willing to fight windmills. I no longer believe you can change this sport. All you can do is function within the parameters of it the best way you can." – Promoter Lou DiBella to the *New York Daily News*