At roughly the time junior welterweight king Kostya Tszyu quit on his stool last month in England – a shocking TKO victim to the young, powerful fists of hometown hero Ricky Hatton – hotshot Jermain Taylor's chances in his title fight against middleweight champ
Bernard Hopkins seemed to improve without "Bad Intentions" having thrown a punch.

Tszyu, the junior welterweight's top dog for the previous four years, was also among the best pound-for-pound fighters in boxing. His reputation was that of a classic, classy destroyer.

But that made no difference to Hatton, who was fiercely determined and, perhaps more telling, nine years younger. As a result, Hatton dominated the aging king – right up until that unceremonious conclusion before the final round.

Tsyzu, like hundreds before him, learned that only Father Time is invincible.

Hopkins could be due for the same history lesson when he meets Taylor Saturday at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

Certainly, Hopkins is a physical marvel. He's 40 years old, but has the lean, muscular body of a man 20 years younger – an indication of his Spartan-like lifestyle. He has made 20 defenses of the 160-pound title – a record – and has dethroned the best competition of his era, including Glen Johnson, Felix Trinidad and Oscar De La Hoya.

But, as the saying goes, every dog has its day.

How will "The Executioner" cope with a fighter 14 years his junior, a fighter equipped with blazing fists and the same fierce determination that exulted Hatton? After all, the Philadelphian hasn't faced overwhelming competition lately.

In recent years, he has enjoyed significant advantages in dethroning fighters who were either limited (Howard Eastman), smaller (De La Hoya), aged (Carl Daniels), or outright pathetic (Morade Hakkar).

That's why Taylor represents Hopkins' most formidable challenge since Felix Trinidad in 2001.

Who will win? For the answer, perhaps it's best to examine "Experienced champion" vs. "Youthful contender" showdowns of the past.

Thomas Hearns KO 2 Pipino Cuevas, WBA welterweight title, Aug. 2, 1980, Detroit, Mich.: Cuevas was perhaps the most feared puncher in boxing going into the 11th defense of the WBA welterweight strap he won from Angel Espada four years earlier. Ten of those 11 championship victims never heard the final bell, a result of Cuevas' devastating left hook. The punch had been responsible for broken eye sockets, busted ribs, shattered noses and enough ripped-up

speedbags to fill an Everlast morgue. His tremendous power and ferocious killer instinct made up for a serious lack of boxing skill. His two left feet made him look as graceful as a newborn calf. But that didn't matter much to the Mexico City native. He was a killer in the ring, seemingly unconcerned with feints and parrying and bobbing and weaving. He was there to knock the other guy flat. But Cuevas turned pro at 14, won his first world title at 18, and was a well-traveled 22 by the time he met up with the "Hitman." Hearns, only a year younger but much fresher, was also a devastating puncher – strange for a guy who stood 6-foot-1 and weighed 147 pounds. But, under the tutelage of trainer Emanuel Steward, "The Hitman" had become a right-handed gunslinger since his stick-and-move amateur days. His challenge of Cuevas was much-anticipated because of the TNT both fighters flaunted, and oddsmakers figured it was a pick ‘em affair. As it turned out, only one fighter got to detonate their bombs. Because of the unbeaten Hearns' size advantage and amazingly quick reflexes, a shell-shocked Cuevas never came close to connecting. Detroit's Hearns, meanwhile, turned Cuevas into his own personal punching bag, bouncing right hand after right hand off of Cuevas' previously impenetrable chin. In the second round, two right hands made Cuevas an ex-champion, and Hearns became boxing's new star. Cuevas was later enshrined into the Hall of Fame. Hearns, one of boxing's most entertaining practitioners, will be elected into it as soon as he stops this ridiculous comeback talk. Advantage: Youth.

Alexis Arguello KO 14 Ray Mancini, WBC lightweight title, Oct. 3, 1981, Atlantic City, N.J.: Going in, the stage seemed set for a young, charismatic matinee idol to take the reigns from the distinguished veteran. "Boom Boom" Mancini had captured America's heart with numerous appearances on national television. And sitting at ringside every fight was his father, Lenny – whose own promising boxing career was cut short by World War II. Mancini, of Youngstown, Ohio, set out to win the title for him. Not that he was in easy. Arguello was a three-time world champion and considered one of the best fighters in the game. Like Hopkins, he didn't seem at all ready to be toppled – despite his long career. For a while, though, it appeared Mancini might be successful. He used his strength and boundless energy to bull his way inside and bang away at the taller Arguello's midsection. And, for seven rounds, the fight was competitive. Then Arguello's experience and class began to show itself. Soon the Nicaraguan great began exploding right hands off of Mancini's chin, and "Boom Boom" had no answer. Once the fight entered the championship rounds, Mancini began to gulp for air in the deep waters. Arguello was in complete control when he almost decapitated poor "Boom Boom" with right-handed barrages in the 13th and 14th rounds. Referee Tony Perez eventually came to the rescue and, afterwards, the gentleman boxers embraced. As it turned out, Lenny Mancini didn't have to wait much longer for his world championship. His son beat Arturo Frias seven months later for the WBA title, and went on to enjoy a solid career. Advantage: Experience.

Salvador Sanchez KO 15 Azumah Nelson, WBC featherweight title, Aug. 21, 1982, New York, N.Y.: No one had any idea about this Azumah Nelson guy going into his challenge for Sanchez's WBC 126-pound title in the summer of '82. He was undefeated at 13-0, but completely untested. Sanchez, meanwhile, had reigned as king featherweight for the previous two years, after taking the crown from old warhorse Danny "Little Red" Lopez and reeling off nine title defenses. The Mexican had already established himself as a legend, most notably by destroying Puerto Rico's previously undefeated Wilfredo Gomez in a battle of little giants in 1981. A year later, Sanchez had grown so dominant that he was considering a jump up to

lightweight to challenge Alexis Arguello. But first he had to get past this unknown from Ghana, Africa. And it was almost the end of his reign. Nelson jumped out to an early lead with a tremendous work rate and a skill-level that no American boxing authority suspected he possessed. Except for a mid-rounds knockdown, Nelson was taking the fight to Sanchez, whose silky-smooth counterpunching skills were being negated by Nelson's pressure. But, as the fight wore on, Nelson began to tire – and like a true veteran, Sanchez took advantage. He finally stopped the gritty Nelson in the final round, as he saved his title in the most dramatic fashion possible. Three weeks later, Sanchez died in a car accident in his native Mexico at the age of 23. Nelson won Sanchez's old belt a little more than two years later, and became a two-division champion – and a Hall of Famer. Losing to Sanchez only made him greater, and turned him into "The Professor." Advantage: Experience.

Larry Holmes W 12 Tim Witherspoon, WBC heavyweight title, May 20, 1983, Las Vegas, Nev.: Holmes had already etched his name in the history books by the time he faced the green Witherspoon in the desert in 1983. He had made 14 defenses of the title, turned back every conceivable challenge, and become an all-time great in the process. At age 33, he was considered just past his peak after turning back the challenge of undefeated power puncher Gerry Cooney a year earlier. And though he looked uninspired in a decision over Lucien Rodriguez two months before facing Witherspoon, he was still installed as a big favorite over the undefeated (15-0) challenger. "Terrible Tim" was considered a talented fighter, but was thought to be more prospect than contender. He had power and ability, but hadn't exactly been sensational in his march to his first world title shot. In fact, there were times he looked downright bored. He was ready for his challenge of Holmes, however, and provided the champion with one of his most difficult evenings. Witherspoon boxed evenly with the multi-talented champion, and even rocked the Easton, Pa., native in a ninth round that is one of the greatest three minutes in heavyweight history. Holmes, as always, showed grit, and used his guile to pull it out in the championship rounds. A lot of people thought Philadelphia's Witherspoon was ripped-off, but the split decision seemed fair. Holmes faced a similar challenge from Carl "The Truth" Williams two years later, and won that one by close decision as well – in what would be his final title defense before losing to Michael Spinks. Witherspoon won both the WBC and WBA titles, but never enjoyed the outstanding career that seemed inevitable in his special night with Holmes. Advantage: Experience.

Barry McGuigan W 15 Eusebio Pedroza, WBA featherweight title, June 8, 1985, London: Pedroza was boxing's longest-reigning champion, along with heavyweight king Larry Holmes, and was making the 19th defense of a crown he won in 1978. In beating a roll call of the era's best featherweights – Juan LaPorte, Rocky Lockridge, Jose Caba – he had developed a reputation as one of boxing's most resourceful champions. Whether he boxed, punched or threw an assortment of illegal tactics at his opponent, he always won. But the once-beaten McGuigan represented his most dangerous challenge in years. Not only was he a big puncher, he was a swarming fighter who liked to get inside and punish the body. And while Pedroza could box, he often ignored his physical advantages so that he could rumble on the inside. Against McGuigan, however, it really didn't matter whether he tried to box or not, because the Irishman was simply too young and strong for the old veteran. McGuigan dropped him hard in the middle rounds, and it was a tribute to the Panamanian's heart that he lasted the full 15 rounds. The decision was a formality. McGuigan, the beloved "Clones Cyclone," won going

away – and ended one of boxing's all-time great title reigns. Pedroza fought a few more times, but was never a factor again. McGuigan lost his title a year later in a huge upset to Texan Stevie Cruz – and was never the same. Advantage: Youth.

The final tally: 3-2 for experience. This speaks well for Hopkins, who is perhaps the smartest fighter in boxing – and will surely use that intelligence to confuse Taylor and take him to the late rounds where he is most vulnerable. Nothing, however, lasts forever. And Arkansas' Taylor could be the Hearns and McGuigan of his era.