

Hopkins-Taylor: When Young and Old Collide

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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One way or another, the end is near for Bernard Hopkins. He will either retire on top or, like the warrior that he is, go out on his shield. Jermain Taylor represents perhaps the best natural middleweight he has fought since Roy Jones Jr.

Hopkins may still be crafty enough to retain his belt and retire as champion. Carlos Monzon, the man whose middleweight title defense record Hopkins has shattered, retired as champion in 1977 after a pair of close wins against Rodrigo Valdes.

Gene Tunney retired as champion. Rocky Marciano retired undefeated. And Bob Foster was still considered the best light heavyweight in the world when he left the ring. The politics of boxing cost him the title and he made a brief attempt to fight at heavyweight. Throughout his career he lost to Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier but was not beaten at 175 pounds from 1963 to 1974.

Hopkins has now gone unbeaten from 1993 to 2005. But, as boxing history mandates, the young generally conquer the old. What follows are several examples of when the champion in winter put his title on the line against the young lion. (Only fights in which the title changes hands, thus excluding bouts such as Rocky Marciano-Joe Louis or Kostya Tszyu-Juan LaPorte).

The champion: After failing to wrest the title from hall-of-famer Nicolino Locche in 1971, Antonio Cervantes would win the WBA junior welterweight crown by knocking out Alfonso "Peppermint" Frazer in 1972. "Kid Pambele" would go on to make 10 successful title defenses. During that time, he avenged the earlier defeat to Locche with a 10th-round TKO and decisioned Esteban DeJesus.

The fight – Wilfredo Benitez W15 Antonio Cervantes, 1976: Cervantes, 30, met the 17-year-old Benitez at the famous Hiram Bithorn baseball stadium in Puerto Rico. While the Cervantes camp might argue that Benitez's split decision win was aided by fighting in his hometown, it was clear that this kid could fight. Cervantes had no answer for Benitez's speed and jab. And while the champion rallied late, Benitez had the savvy and skill to elude his attack and outbox him down the stretch.

The rest of the story: Benitez went on to win titles in three weight classes and had classic chess matches with Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran. He was stopped by Leonard but defeated Duran and lost a majority decision to Hearns. Cervantes won the title again in 1977 and made six title defenses before getting knocked out by another young lion, Aaron Pryor. Locche, Cervantes, Benitez and Pryor are all in the Hall of Fame.

The champion: At bantamweight, Eusebio Pedroza challenged champion Alfonso Zamora and was stopped in the second round. Then, in 1978, he moved up to featherweight and won the WBA title by stopping Cecilio Lastra. He would go on to make 19 successful title defenses.

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Among them were victories over Ruben Olivares, Ernesto Herrera, Royal Kobyashi, Rocky Lockridge and Juan LaPorte.

The fight – Barry McGuigan W15 Eusebio Pedroza, 1985: McGuigan, 25, was a popular fighter on the rise. He was identified with Northern Ireland's political strife because he managed to unite Catholics and Protestants when he fought. The motto of the day was, "Let Barry do the fighting." He certainly did at West London when he met Pedroza, 32. He dropped the champion in the seventh round to turn the tide of the fight. He also staggered Pedroza in rounds nine and thirteen and cruised to a unanimous decision.

The rest of the story: Pedroza fought once more and retired. He made a brief comeback in 1991, going 3-1 before retiring for good. McGuigan made two title defenses and then lost the crown to unheralded Stevie Cruz in 1986. He retired and then attempted a comeback in 1988, going 3-1 before retiring again. Both featherweights are enshrined in the Hall of Fame, although McGuigan's induction has been the subject of debate.

The champion: When Fidel Castro banned professional boxing from Cuba in 1961, Jose Napoles was literally a man without a country. He left Cuba in order to resume his career and wound up settling in Mexico. He won the title from Curtis Cokes in 1969 and, over the course of two reigns, made thirteen title defenses. Among those he defeated were Emile Griffith, Ernie Lopez and Hedgemon Lewis. He lost the title on cuts against Billy Backus and immediately regained it a rematch. In 1974, he lost in a bid to challenge middleweight champion Carlos Monzon and then returned to middleweight.

The fight – John H. Stracey TKO 6 Jose Napoles, 1976: The fight took place in a bull ring in Mexico City with more than 50,000 fans in attendance. Napoles, 35, opened strongly, dropping Stracey, 25, in the first round. But the challenger would not be denied. Boxing behind a stiff left jab, Stracey (a converted southpaw) began battering the champion with one-twos. By the sixth round, Napoles was bleeding from a cut above his right eye and his left eye was swollen shut. The end came with dignity for Napoles, as the referee halted the bout with the champion still on his feet.

The rest of the story: Napoles would never fight again. He retired with a 77-7 record with 54 knockouts. He is a member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Stracey made one successful title defense against Hedgemon Lewis and then lost the crown to future Hall of Famer Carlos Palomino. Stracey once sparred with Napoles and took away important lessons from that meeting. He remembered how effective his jab was and ultimately used that to defeat the champion.

We'll see what happens Saturday night when young and old collide.