

The Fountain of Youth: Five Reasons Why Bernard Hopkins is Still Dominant at 40

Written by Aaron Tallent
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Regardless of what happens Saturday night, Bernard Hopkins' place in boxing history is secure. Win, lose, or draw, "The Executioner" will retire holding the record of an unprecedented 20 consecutive middleweight title defenses.

He will boast wins over Oscar De La Hoya, Glen Johnson, William Joppy, and a prime Felix Trinidad. Hopkins will also be the shining example for transcending two of boxing's norms: experiencing success while maintaining his own promotional independence and remaining a dominant fighter into his late 30s and early 40s.

When was the last time a 40-year-old fighter was number one on virtually all pound-for-pound lists and a 2-to-1 favorite over his 26-year-old undefeated opponent? Only a small number of fighters could make that claim at 35, much less 40.

So how has he done it? The Executioner says part of it is mindset. "The only thing that convinced me of [being 40] is the boxing ring and father time," said Hopkins earlier this week. "That's the only one that's in control of that type of error, not man, you know. People want to, you know, put subliminal messages out there that make you think that. It's like telling a pretty girl that she's not pretty and she's got a low self-esteem. She'll start looking in the mirror and asking herself, am I, you know, I'm not really that pretty like I thought I was. That's not me."

Obviously, there is more to Hopkins success than ignoring the naysayers waiting for him to get old. But it is very hard to create a blueprint that explains how a fighter can extend his career. Oh, there is a library on how to cut a career short, but very little information on how to remain dominant as one of boxing's "senior citizens." However, there are five obvious reasons why Hopkins has been able to find the sport's fountain of youth.

The first and foremost reason for Hopkins success is that he has consistently stayed in shape and maintained his weight throughout his career. There have never been reports of Hopkins packing on pounds in-between fights. Although he fought at light heavyweight early in his career, Hopkins has not made seesaw jumps from one weight class to another, causing his skills to erode when he sheds pounds.

By all accounts, Hopkins also lives a clean life. He does not smoke or do drugs and he has a stable family. If a fighter can keep those priorities of his life priorities in check, then he can count on not destroying his career with nightlife or the buffet table.

Second, many fighters have an inner hunger that is often quelled when they win their first title. Hopkins is not one of them. Part of the reason for that is circumstance. Despite winning the IBF middleweight title in 1994, he did not experience championship success, i.e. money and fame, until he defeated Trinidad and De La Hoya.

The motivation, however, has more to do with Hopkins character. Very few fighters would risk a

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swansong pay-per-view megafight to take on the hungriest young prospect in their division. However, Hopkins wants to prove that he is the best and for that, he should be applauded.

He also deserves a standing ovation for his well-roundedness, the third reason for his success. When it comes to boxing skills, Hopkins may not be great in any one area, but he is very good at everything. "It's bad enough you've got to deal with one or two things that a guy has under his arsenal," said Hopkins, "but when you talk about five, six, maybe ten different things from a young 40-year-old guy that doesn't look like nowhere near the age that people continue to echo, they would never convince me that I am 40."

The Executioner has no apparent weaknesses, other than the fact that he may get old overnight. This has allowed him to deal with any fighter, no matter the style or the age.

The fourth reason is that he has honed his fighting style for longevity. Hopkins spends the first half of the fight moving around the ring and avoiding exciting trades of punches, just so he can study his opponent. In the later rounds, he uses his knowledge from the first six to safely pick apart his adversary.

It is by no means exciting. The Executioner's most recent bout with Howard Eastman left many boxing fans debating on whether or not to catch the beginning of Saturday Night Live. But it is effective.

The tedious tactic requires a great deal of patience. It also requires him to adapt to his opponents' weaknesses instead of fighting the fight they want. This is difficult for many fighters, young and old.

The two most notable fighters who experienced championship success in their 40s also had to develop a style that meshed with their age.

Light heavyweight Archie Moore was boxing's quintessential grand old man. He did not even receive his first title shot until he was six months shy of his 40th birthday, when he decisioned Joey Maxim to win the light heavyweight championship in 1953.

The "Old Mongoose" went on to successfully defend his title over the next eight years. He holds the records for the most career knockouts with 141.

Moore was very quick and hard to hit but he used his famous "armadillo curtain" defense strategy. This involved crossing his arms over his face, giving an opponent no choice but to go for the body, which Moore would make him pay dearly for.

Hopkins does not put his forearms across his face, but he fights with his gloves up high and keeps his chin lowered. This makes him hard to hit cleanly as well.

Two-time heavyweight champion George Foreman also changed his fight style to adapt to his late 30s and early 40s. In 1973, he demolished Joe Frazier in two rounds to win the heavyweight title; he lost it to Muhammad Ali in Zaire a year later. In 1977, Foreman was

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outpointed by the slick Jimmy Young. He underwent a religious conversion and announced his retirement.

In 1987, at the age of 37, Foreman returned to the ring to pay for a youth center in Texas. After fighting a wide range of opponents and receiving a few title shots, Foreman knocked out Michael Moorer in the 9th round in 1994 to reclaim the heavyweight belt. At 45, he was by far the oldest man to do so.

To make his comeback work, Foreman had to alter his style. The first thing he did was to create an effective jab, which he lacked during his first stint as champ. "Besides the jab," said Foreman, "I'd also developed patience, something I had precious little of ten, fifteen, twenty years before. I'd become patient enough to jab, jab, jab for six rounds – then begin landing body shots. I'd learned to pace myself and set up the knockout with precision instead of brute strength." Sound familiar?

But the fifth and maybe the most tangible explanation for Hopkins' discovery of the fountain of youth is simply luck. A fighter has very little say on when he loses his reflexes or that extra burst of speed. Sometimes it happens overnight or with one fight.

Some fighters are blessed with brute strength, a steel chin, or piston-like hands. Hopkins may just simply have the gift of youthful genes.