Jermain Taylor, 24-0, Little Rock, 160, captured a split-decision and with it the undisputed middleweight world championship over defending champion Bernard Hopkins, 46-3-1, Philadelphia, 160 in Las Vegas Saturday night.

He did it by outworking the champion, who seemed intent on waiting to the latter half of the fight to show up.

Coming into the bout, a considerable number of boxing writers picked the young stallion Taylor despite the fact that Hopkins sits close to the top of everyone's top pound-for-pound list. Such is the lot of a 40-year-old fighter.

Hopkins has always defied the axioms of boxing promotion – and in fact he was not promoted into success. He started late, he lost his first pro fight, he didn't have matinee idol looks et cetera … You get the picture.

But, what he always did with consistency was win.

Saturday night proved to be the night that his just-enough-to-win pattern of the last few years was not as attuned to the judges' collective desires as usual.

Taylor opened the bout much as expected, landing quick jabs and generally outworking the cagey Hopkins. In the second, Taylor caught Hopkins slightly off balance and forced him to the ropes with a left hook that gave the appearance of staggering the champion.

Throughout the first four rounds a pattern developed with Taylor landing while Hopkins watched and only occasionally countered.

A cut that opened on Taylor's scalp due to an unintentional clack of head bled throughout the contest but proved to have no effect on Taylor's willingess to engage Hopkins.

Starting in the middle rounds, Hopkins stepped up his counters, though he was consistenly outworked. Taylor landed jabs and right hands, though he often punched wide and missed opportunities that he set up with his jab.

Hopkins really started punching and landing in the ninth round. He seemed to realize that he needed to step up the attack, and in truth Taylor was sucking for air. Unfortunately for Bernard, as tired as Taylor appeared, he kept fighting back hard.

Hopkins clearly won rounds 10 and 11 with sharp counters to the head of the fading Taylor.

Taylor summoned his final reserve for the 12th round and again pressed Hopkins into fighting longer and harder than he wanted. While two of the three judges scored the final round for

Hopkins, it appeared to this observer that Taylor again outworked a champion who fought only in spurts.

Scoring of the fight was 116-112 Hopkins; 115-113 Taylor; and 115-113 Taylor. *The Sweet Science*
scored the bout 117-111 Taylor.

After 20 successful title defenses, including crushing wins over Oscar De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad, Hopkins place in the boxing's pantheon is secure.

Prior his title defense against Trinidad, he was the underdog. Trinidad, unbeaten at the time and himself considered a top pound-for-pound champion, was to be too young for Hopkins who many thought was ripe for the taking. Of course, Hopkins was dominant in the bout, stopping Trinidad convincingly. His victory over De La Hoya was equally devastating.

Just as fellow 20 title defense champion Larry Holmes proved a couple of decades ago, it ultimately paid to be better than everyone else; it paid to fight only to win, not look good; and it paid to have absolute faith in his own abilities.

Taylor came into the bout on the strength of an undefeated record that consisted of a mix of journeymen and former contenders. His biggest victory was a shutout over former WBA beltholder William Joppy (W 10, Dec. 4, 2004), though most would agree that Joppy was on the wane.

The former Olympic bronze medallist clearly could not point to a resume as the source of a portion of the boxing public's belief that he could be the man to beat the man.

What he possessed going in was a Larry Holmes-like jab, speed, speed, and more speed. He also ostensibly had the ability and willingness to fight for three full minutes of each round, something that Hopkins dispensed with long ago (though as cleverly as anyone in the game).

While it was in fact Taylor who seemed to fade down the stretch, he clearly did enough to win the decision and figures to be the favorite in any rematch. He will learn far more from this fight than the old pro and now he knows without doubt that he can perform over the full distance against one of the legends of the game.

Of course Hopkins thinks he won, as evidenced by his post-fight interview with Larry Merchant. How could we expect anything else?

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Oscar Larios, 56-3-1 (36 KOs), Mexico, 122, became the first man to stop tough guy Irishman Wayne McCullough, 27-6 (18 KOs), Las Vegas (via Ireland), 120, to retain his WBC super bantamweight. The bout was stopped by a combination of McCullough's cornerman Freddie Roach and the ringside physician at the conclusion of round ten. Although he was never staggered or noticeably hurt, he took an inordinate number of punches as Larios appeared to

pull away in the fight. Like the true warrior that he is, he complained bitterly about the stoppage. McCullough had a few good moments in the bout and had Larios cut over both eyes. His punch output was characteristically high, but Larios more than matched the volume and mixed harder punches and boxing to gain and sustain the edge.

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Fernando Montiel, 31-1-1 (24 KOs), Mexico, 115 successfully defended his WBO junior bantamweight title with a clear-cut decision over Evert Briceno, 21-3 (17 KOs), Nicaragua, 115. Montiel used constant movement and controlling combinations to keep his tough, but limited, opponent off-balance. Briceno, who was a substitute with only a couple of weeks notice, comported himself well, all things considered; he never gave up and was the aggressor throughout. His much slower hands and inability to cut the ring off were the difference in the fight. The scoring was 118-110; 117-111; and 117-111, all for Montiel. *The Sweet Science* scored the bout 118-110.

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Former welterweight champion Vernon Forrest, 36-2 (27 KOs), 154½, Atlanta, scored a second round knockout over hapless Sergio Rios, 8-2 (6 KOs), 154, Mexico. The bout represented a return from a two-year layoff and was clearly a tune-up for a tune-up. He surgically repaired left shoulder held up well as Forrest easily snapped out jabs followed by sharp right hands. The bout was stopped at 2:43.