

Mad as Hell: The Fans of Bernard Hopkins

Written by Patrick Kehoe

Monday, 07 November 2005 19:00

With the exception of Mike Tyson and Fernando Vargas, no fighter over the last fifteen years has had as rabid and loyal a following as the former middleweight champion of the world Bernard Hopkins. Oscar De La Hoya, Felix Trinidad and Roy Jones – essentially in that order – have clearly been more popular to a greater number of demographic sub-groups than Philadelphia’s “Executioner,” but their collective blood pressure doesn’t seem to spike in quite the same way as B-Hopers. With every perceived or received insult or slight, Hopkins’ fan base seems to experience a wave of shared convulsions.

One hardly has to type the word Duane Ford before being inundated with emails laced with acidic commentary, character assassination and copious invective denouncing and defaming the man believed to have sunk the House of Hopkins. Criticize or minimize anything to do with the person or career of the great Hopkins and you better be ready to duck. Call it passionate veneration or blind faith Hopkins’ fans see their man as *the* champion of his time.

With the result of this summer’s Taylor fight, Hopkins’ fans are, in a word, outraged. The feeling of their man having had his championship stolen remains a raw nerve, a throbbing ache that has not abated. You get the feeling that come December 3rd, when Bernard Hopkins and Jermain Taylor meet to finalize the middleweight muddle, those fans will be near to the breaking point of antic expectation. One of the operative affronts stems from Hopkins having invoked the notion of a conspiracy. For Team Hopkins, the loss to Taylor was tantamount to being a preordained conclusion; something the ex-champion confirmed to himself in the immediate aftermath of the bout. Hopkins was convinced that he had won the fight in the critical championship rounds, a conviction he says was confirmed by the defeated look of the then-challenger at the final bell. In the pressure of the moment it was revealed to the champion what one might call the actuality of confirming events. According to Hopkins, the fighters knew the outcome, judges or no judges, and Hopkins asserts Taylor revealed in those post-fight moments his own internal sense of defeat.

Hopkins’ followers wholeheartedly believe they saw the same look of disgust and defeat after the fight. Upon that perceptual hook has rested a plethora of outcomes. Victimization might never have had so ironic an embodiment, but there he was, Bernard Hopkins, a legend felled not by the generational fists of an incoming force, but by the very system he had always struggled against. Thus, ran the Hopkins line of explanation in the wake of a traumatic usurpation of “his” title as the pound-for-pound champion of global boxing. Hopkins lashed out at this injustice in moral terms seldom preached by a mainstream champion. His ire was relentless and the list of suspects was endless. Boxing as a system, a collective of self-interested manipulators who had never embraced Hopkins as champion, constituted the malevolent brokers who had it in for “The Executioner” – or so he said with venom in the hours and days following his first loss since 1993. Hopkins and his fans looked upon the judging of the Taylor fight as Exhibit A in the case they were enunciating to do with Hopkins being the victim of corporate styled retribution.

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For all the years he had sought to carve out his career as a largely self-propelling independent contractor and outspoken critic of the governance and politics of the sport of boxing, he was now being made to pay the price. Hopkins' fans were adamant about that. And for his rubbing against the grain of controlling interest, Hopkins is much prized, if not much loved. He is admired as a Contrarian, the man who would not put up to being servile or shortchanged by exploitative promoters and hypocritical governing bodies. It doesn't matter the missteps Hopkins made or his acts of betrayal or, for that matter, strategic complicity all along the yellow brick road to his anti-legend. It is said by his supporters, those were reactionary and defensive measures for the most part, necessary sins in a jungle of competing interests.

Whenever Hopkins played off one promoter or manager against another, it was fair fighting given the Darwinian sewers one must navigate to get to the top. Some would argue that any kind of detailing upon that concept misses the larger issue of Hopkins' need and right to survive and prosper. In boxing, you cannot judge someone using ethics, such measuring simply dissolves within the complexity. All of Hopkins' admirers will tell you flat-out that's all one need know about how Bernard Hopkins was forced to do business, to give back in kind all along the road of his journey to middleweight glory. That was part of how one must understand the irresistible grammar of events.

Like Larry Holmes' unceremonious foisting from the summit of the heavyweight thrown – it was said for mocking the legend of Rocky Marciano and his 49-0 legacy – to an heir of convenient salability in Michael Spinks, so too was Hopkins dumped at the threshold of his retiring as middleweight king. HBO, who missed out on the transition of Lewis to Klitschko at heavyweight, were not going to miss out a second time. Call it nonsense, but for some it's durable nonsense, nonsense that rings true. In fact, any one who saw the result against Taylor in favor of the man-child from Little Rock was, as this reporter was deemed to be, a person of visual acuity comparable with the late Ray Charles. One irate Hopkins fan defended the honor of Hopkins by asking if yours truly was happy being Taylor's newest girlfriend. One must admit, that kind of gender morphing was at the very least amusing; and it's desperation to be cruel in making a point signaled just how offended the devotees of the ex-champion feel.

One presumably breathless reader wanted to know if this writer was beyond the age of consent, another wanted to know if the entire history of boxing and rudimentary scoring were beyond my understanding. We need not cite all the particulars, nor repeat all the descriptions of what makes for a Taylor supporter hateful and not worthy of contempt, though they were described to me in most all of the letters sent by Hopkins' supporters. The official result of the fight was inconsequential compared to authentic emotional outrage. There's little about Hopkins' powers for self-promotion and biographical myth-making which might have helped foster this sense of anger and resentment among his followers. If Hopkins is fanning the flames of discontent, he has the right, according to his followers. But no matter what one thinks of Hopkins the flag thrower, the character assassin, the artful dodger, he has linked into a fan base at the level of elementary identification.

He's been big and bad, mean and menacing, boastful and brazen, but in all of his mocking oratory and playful pretentiousness; in other words, he's been himself, duping and conning, scratching and bludgeoning his way from prison obscurity to a minor media personality, boxing's

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24/7/365 anti-hero in leather. Through the disputes and drudgery, he and trainer Bouie Fisher have endured and overcome where his championship peers Keith Holmes and William Joppy ultimately succumb. His profit has been the status of his title reign, showdowns with Trinidad and De La Hoya and the heralding estimation of boxing writers all over the world. Deep and dark his motivations may be, yet his impact has defined his division – the middleweights – for over a decade.

He likes to ‘X’ out his opponents after symbolically feeding them and us a last meal and testament; who among the living dare threatens the great Hopkins? Only the phantoms of boxing history are his real rivals, Greb of Pittsburg, Walker of New Jersey, Monzon of Argentina and Hagler of Italy. Despite having fought for twelve championship rounds, it almost comes across as an affront to Hopkins and his flock that Taylor is mentioned in the same sentence as Bernard the Great. They saw no heir apparent, no usurping of a king on the night of July 16, 2004 at the MGM Grand, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Fans of Hopkins call Jermain Taylor a fraud, a paper champion, echoing the lines of their man, their champion, who remains for them *the* champion. Almost as an afterthought of disregard, they want everyone to ask themselves: “What has this kid done to deserve being champion?” The question itself a fine disregard of the original fight itself. As December 3

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approaches they have no doubts how the rematch will end, how vengeance shall be brought to bare on Taylor and promoter Lou DiBella ... anyone who doesn't have the back of the true champion.

These fans speak in commands. There is no middle ground. You are either for Hopkins or you are against him – one of them. That's just how it is when the whole world's against you; when the other side is blind with fear. They don't even understand boxing. That's why Hopkins will knock this pretender out – because he said he would. Logic falls under the direction of the grand imperative: Hopkins will win.

Yes, the vocal constituencies that comprise Bernard Hopkins' fans base are mad, mad as hell and they want the world to know it. They refuse to concede defeat by collusion or subterfuge; the rematch, in their reckoning, already has a result – a championship regained. Then we will all be able to see the meaning of this man, this champion for the ages. All that emotional investment in the symbol of hard individualism to be reborn, justice restituted.

“Why don't you see it man?” Those words formed part of a perplexed query from one Hopkins fan from California desperate to understand this writer's apparent myopia on the subject of Bernard Hopkins. The image of respectability and “true champion” are ancient history it was communicated to me. Indeed, for the most part they are. They go back to the boxing equivalent of cave paintings, the legend of John L. Sullivan and Jim Corbett and extend through the segregated Jazz Age ethos of Jack Dempsey, the reconstruction awakenings of Joe Louis and turn into public relations television projections with Rocky Marciano. Thankfully, we are never again obliged to view the great Marciano as the failed baseball player, adoring family man and devoted husband, who sacrificed his body to out worked his generation of heavyweights only to bring financial security and post-war Palm Springs luxury to his loving family.

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We now know Marciano was a chronic obsessive, good-natured and generous to his family and friends, but also a money mad exploiter of his own fame, flying about in cargo holds and staying with sycophants, to give speeches or tell stale banquet jokes to Brill Cream hair, gold toothed groupies for cash-only fees and the guarantee of a free hotel room complete with a willing blonde for every night in town. We no longer wrap our sporting heroes in the cloak of inviolate respectability, nor do we need the consoling fictions of middleclass respectability much any more as ethical standardization and codes of behavioral expectation. If there's a line in the sand of tolerable being, it's far from anything approaching a gentleman's agreement or common knowledge.

You can compel all the professional hockey players and basketball players in the known universe to garb themselves as manikins for tolerable viewing, but you cannot make them drink from the milk of human kindness. Hopkins has given as many black eyes as he's suffered. What's more, Hopkins' fans know his faults, can recite most of them from memory, and generally understand the disparity of his words and actions ... and they don't care; for he has survived and prospered, raged and regaled against his own best interests and exploitation equally. Only the larger cartoon of his making of himself into the man of his choosing remains as a defining outline. His natural instinct to hit and hold, scold and reverse himself is not something contradictory to the larger mission of staying a player in the world of boxing.

Hopkins wages his fights and endures, overcomes by any means necessary, just like he learned on the streets of Philadelphia and later in prison. The solitary figure of defiance of his time, his persona a podium and a cell, Hopkins bends only to deflect, circles only to rearm, recites only to demonstrate and endures only to prevail.

"You don't get Hopkins." Perhaps not; I am willing to look at all the evidence, trace back the threads which were made into knotting judgments and reanalyze. Still, it's a sobering and succinct critique upon the literally ten of thousands of words this writer has blotted out over the last seven years on Hopkins. And still it continues this game of accusation and justification, commentary and reporting, assertion and question. Just as it should be!

And remember, dear readers, try and be as patient as possible because we still have the rematch to consider, experience and turn into meanings, myth and musings.