

Let's Do the B-Hop Again

Written by Phil Woolever

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Attempting to determine which man has more to lose when Jermain Taylor and Bernard Hopkins clash again Saturday night is as difficult as making the call on who will triumph in the rematch or even who deserved the nod last July.

For Taylor, the future is at stake. A repeat victory over Hopkins means a bigger piece of history.

Taylor could subsequently engage some relatively safe challengers like Ike Quartey while gaining marketability, then add piles to his bank account with payday opponents like the winner of Shane Mosley – Fernando Vargas, leading up to a mega-fight with Jeff Lacy.

For Hopkins, the past is at stake. A glorious past tainted by a split decision, fair or not. A revenge victory over Taylor means a bigger piece of history for him, too. If Hopkins is indeed the all-time great he was pegged to be before Taylor put the skids on his 20 title defense winning streak, the old boy should find a way to win, big.

Since the first fight, Hopkins has emerged bitter but more determined than ever. He wants his marbles back. Unless Taylor completely and immediately implodes after the holidays, he'd be recognized as a quality close to a Hall of Fame career. Hopkins wouldn't have to worry about criticism for his grand finale against mild opposition.

Taylor- Hopkins II is one of those intriguing scenarios with many feasible conclusions, as close as the split second it takes for a punch to land or miss. There's really no way to know what's likely to transpire, unless, as some including Hopkins have implied, it's a set-up. If so, how much we'll never know. The first fight looked like a legitimate, squeaker win for Taylor, but the argument for Hopkins was certainly realistic.

"This is going to be the storybook ending to my American dream," said Hopkins, "Certain things you can't turn the other cheek on."

Hopkins fudged a little on retiring by his forty-first birthday this January, now reportedly indicating he wants a farewell bash not long afterward. He was quoted saying Taylor will be his last "meaningful" ring battle, with a goodbye gala early in the year. Whatever happens Saturday night, Hopkins will fight again as a pro at least once more.

"I don't think anybody's going to bust my chops for being an hour late on my promise (to retire)," said Hopkins.

The latest dismissal of Bouie Fisher shows Hopkins has kept his latest game face on, financial motivations aside. Hopkins didn't appear to enter the ring in that fine-tuned frame of mind last time. Complacency can be as eroding as time.

Taylor has progressed in handling his newfound attention. He's getting more and more

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comfortable in the spotlight and he won't surrender his undefeated slate easily. Taylor has grown more callused in his respect toward Hopkins, with some real resentment possible for the way Hopkins refused to give him proper post-fight due.

When Taylor says he wants to erase any doubt, you can count on him giving everything toward that end. Which could be the new kid's demise. If Hopkins can get inside Taylor's head and get him throwing wildly, there will be no doubt for sure. Except Taylor won't be happy.

"I'm gonna take it out of the judges' hands this time," said Hopkins.

"Anybody that knows the real me knows I'm going to take care of business, no question," said Taylor.

We have here the classic conflict of youth versus experience. It's still just a matter of whether Taylor's strength can overcome Hopkins's guile. Clues to the rematch come based on how you scored the first affair, but no head-banging hints get any clearer.

The odds are basically pick 'em all around. Our handicapping logic leans a little to Taylor, but you'd still have to be crazy to bet against Hopkins. Crazy isn't always bad.

So, the foundation is set for a great night at Mandalay Bay to wrap up what's been a fine fistic season for most of 2005. We could see the Fight of the Year for an early winter treat. Let's hope nothing spoils it. Win, lose, or not such a long shot draw, may Hopkins go into that sweet sunset with the class he, Taylor, and the sport deserves.