

Extras at Taylor-Hopkins II

Written by Phil Woolever
Monday, 19 December 2005 19:00

LAS VEGAS— As the last mega-fight card of 2005, the Jermain Taylor-Bernard Hopkins II event held decisive action that impacted year-end rankings, and the early planning stages of 2006. Along the sidelines there was plenty of elite moving and shaking, and not just among the sweet VIP hostesses.

After Taylor squeaked past Hopkins, some immediate post-fight discussion held that the real middleweight winner had been Winky Wright. Based on Taylor's less than scintillating victory, prominent observers lobbied that Wright could lay claim to being the top talent in the 160 pound division based on recent form and his dominant win over Felix Trinidad last June.

Hopkins was unjustly relegated toward that chunk of retirement village real estate known as Over the Hill.

Most predictions assumed Wright would slap Sam Soliman silly on the weekend following Taylor's triumph. That pounding would increase pressure on Taylor to back up his responses indicating he would soon accept Wright's challenge.

Some handicappers already had Taylor as a considerable underdog to Wright. That theory lasted about a week, or until Aussie Soliman made Wright look ineffective.

Wright showed that he too was susceptible to an off night. Soliman gave him the herky-jerky, made-you-look-bad type fight Wright was renowned for pulling on others.

After Solomon frustrated Wright, suddenly it wasn't so hard for more folks to envision Taylor turning size and strength into very effective aggression against Winky.

So the Taylor-Hopkins rematch did sort things out atop the middleweight division. Taylor is hands down number one. Hopkins is still number two if he chooses to stay active.

There were many complaints about the lackluster contest, but at least it came off, without controversy, outrageous malice, or other negative trappings. Overall it was a good showcase for the sport, especially before the swarming conventions of mainstream USA at Mandalay Bay for the National Finals Rodeo and New Las Vegas Marathon.

Taylor may have actually gotten under the usually taunting Hopkins' skin at the final press conference. By embracing the title, Taylor has rubbed it in, purposely or not. That afternoon, Taylor meant it. Taylor rolled tape of a crying baby (his year-old daughter), then produced a doll with Cry Baby X Hopkins on a pink shirt. Some veteran Hopkins observers felt Bernard was truly steamed.

There was no real bad blood, but Hopkins more than returned the head trip. His response may have put a little extra fire in Taylor when he warned Taylor about leaving his family behind

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through an implication of death.

"I'm going to hug my wife and daughter because there's no guarantee Saturday," said Hopkins. "I know what this business is. No disrespect, but there's no guarantees, so I'd advise Jermain, hug your wife, hug your daughter. Because it's on man, and you never know."

"Is he saying he's going to kill me?" mused Taylor to the gathering. "Isn't he on probation? Where's my lawyer?" Taylor sounded amused, but there was a strong indication he was very pissed.

"Damn. I didn't know it was that serious," said Taylor. "I want this man to go home to his family just like I want to be with my family. I wouldn't even let that come out of my mouth. It just shows how stupid he really is."

In terms of inflicted brutality during the contest, there turned out to be almost the same probability of somebody getting hurt by falling asleep and rolling out of the stands. If there was any rematch clause this time, nobody was talking about it.

Hopkins entered to a James Brown medley of "I Feel Good" and "It's a Man's World." When Hopkins left it wasn't his world any more, but at least he still felt all right. He'll fight again.

It didn't seem Hopkins missed Bouie Fisher. Whether Fisher's absence was all about moolah, as Fisher claimed, or the 77-year-old trainer's health, per Hopkins's side of the story, never became clear.

Nazim Richardson, a Hopkins's camp assistant for around nine years, did a solid job in the corner. Richardson is also the father of 2000 Olympian Rock Allen, 4-0 (4), who conked out Calvin Pitts, 3-5-1 (1), at the end of the second round when Pitts's corner intervened.

It isn't discussed much lately, but a Hopkins-Wright contest could get the New Year off with a bang. After Wright whipped Trinidad, there was much speculation he'd be Hopkins's big final test. The scenario is unlikely now, but it could still be great boxing.

It's still a big notch for Wright, and a winnable goodbye fight if Hopkins wants to erase doubts about his all-time great status.

In the meantime, team Taylor spoke of an Arkansas homecoming against easier opposition next. That could be a spring date.

As for this year, Taylor has a strong claim to Fighter of the Year honors.

Ike Quartey made a strong impression on the undercard. Quartey, now 37-2-1 (31), showed he can still be plenty slick as he pounded Carlos Bojorquez, 25-8-6 (21). Bojorquez absorbed plenty of punishment before Joe Cortez decided going the distance wasn't as important as long-term health and waved it off at 2:12 of the tenth and final frame. Bojorquez managed to demonstrate that Quartey is vulnerable to pressure.

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Also looking good was Israel Vasquez, who blasted out Oscar Larios in their high stakes tiebreaker. 4-1 underdog Vasquez, 39-3 (28), dropped Larios, 56-4-1 (36), in the first frame and never looked back. Larios had a better second round, and showed the skill that made him the first to stop Wayne McCullough, but it wasn't nearly enough. Vasquez couldn't really cut off the ring, but he did two-handed damage all along the way, until ref Tony Weeks had seen enough at 2:52 of the third.

B-Hop's nephew, Demetrius Hopkins also showed progress. Hopkins, now 22-0-1 (9), scored a TKO over outgunned Jesse Feliciano, 13-5-2 (8), at 2:23 the fourth of a scheduled ten.

Throughout fight weekend, scenes from "Rocky Balboa" were filmed live during crowd-related events like the weigh-in and ring walk. Fans were welcome to sign up as extras. It definitely raised the energy level. It was amusing to watch usually stoic commission, promotional, and media characters ham it up once the camera was rolling.

There were ten bells for the recently departed George Horowitz of Everlast Inc., and *The Sweet Science's*

own master scribe Pat Putnam. They would have enjoyed the arena's duked-out ambiance.

Pay-per-view numbers came in at around 440,000 buys. That's respectable numbers at \$49.95 a pop.

HBO executives repeated the new company line, after what was considered a weak year that saw rival Showtime usurp positive word of mouth. They conceded that too many mismatches aired during 2005 while premium events went directly to HBO PPV. The new plan for 2006, admirable if carried out, is to return premier fights to the primary Saturday night series. The number of broadcasts will increase. Boxing After Dark will undergo some tweaking.

A ready looking Hasim Rahman generated a subdued but strong presence as he settled into his role of designated WBC heavyweight champ with new promoter Top Rank. Rahman did a good PR job with many well-wishers who congratulated him but didn't care to discuss much about his future. Considering his recent rollercoaster ride regarding the Klitschko cancellations, bankruptcy, and lawsuits, a wait and see attitude is probably the wisest way to go.

Fight fans won't have to wait long at all to see another series of top flight contests begin in early '06.

Winky will continue calling Taylor out, maybe because Wright recognizes that Taylor may keep improving. For his part, Taylor promises active championship defenses against the very best. Meeting Wright by late summer would be a great place for both men to start, by adding premier opponents to their resumes.

Spring hopes eternal. Cards like Taylor-Hopkins II make it seem like a Golden Age could come again, maybe soon.