

## Tarver vs. Hopkins: It's Election Time All Over

Written by David A. Avila

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Decisions. Decisions.

It's bad enough that it's election week, but now boxing fans are forced to pick between a loaded fight card in Atlantic City and another in New York on Saturday, June 10.

Light heavyweight world champion Antonio "Magic Man" Tarver defends against future Hall of Fame middleweight Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins (46-4-1, 32 KOs) at the Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City. The fight will be aired by HBO pay-per-view.

Meanwhile, up north, another pay-per-view show featuring two junior welterweights in the main event will go head-to-head with the Golden Boy Promotions fight card in New Jersey. It's a battle between two promoters as Top Rank's show features Miguel Cotto and Paul Malignaggi in New York City.

In Atlantic City it's a main event featuring Hopkins, a shoo-in for the Boxing Hall of Fame, against Tarver who made his fame by beating another Hall of Fame candidate Roy Jones Jr. twice; the first time by stunning knockout.

Tarver, who took a sabbatical to finish the latest Rocky movie, finally returns to the ring after an eighth month absence from the ring. It's the longest he's been away from a match in three years. Rumors spoke of the Floridian reaching more than 215 pounds.

"I always go up in weight but I always return to form," Tarver (24-3, 18 KOs) said. "It's no problem."

With a high voltage match between Diego Corrales and Jose Luis Castillo getting short-circuited because of weight problems, it's a bigger issue.

Hopkins will be returning to the 175-pound weight division where he suffered a loss in his first fight. He then was sent to prison for more than a year and when he returned to boxing, it was at middleweight where he reigned supreme for 12 years.

"You all know me, you know what I can do. Weight is not an issue," said Hopkins, 41, while in Los Angeles for a press tour. "I love being the underdog."

Not since losing to Clinton Mitchell in October 1988 has Hopkins fought as a light heavyweight. Now, after 17 years, the Philadelphia fighter is returning to 175 pounds to face an opponent who is bigger, stronger and younger.

"He's about to make the biggest mistake of his career. No doubt about it," Tarver said emphatically. "In fact, he's endangering his life."

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Tarver, 37, was chosen by Sylvester Stallone to play a character named Mason Dixon in Rocky 6, a motion picture that was supposed to open this summer but will now open during Christmas. It's an experience that has opened his eyes.

"Working with Stallone showed me a whole new world," Tarver says with zeal. "I can see myself returning to films."

Returning to the ring for perhaps the last time, Hopkins wants to end his storied career with a flourish and do it against Tarver, an opponent seen as the best in his division. After losing twice to Jermain Taylor, in close decisions, the Philadelphia prizefighter wants to close the show spectacularly. He wants to beat a bigger man.

Hopkins is now chasing legendary status. He's accomplished more than any other middleweight in history by defending the middleweight title a record 20 times. He even surpassed his idol the late great Sugar Ray Robinson who had ruled the welterweight and middleweight divisions from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Now, Hopkins once again hopes to one-up his idol by doing what Sugar Ray couldn't do: beat the best light heavyweight in the world.

Robinson had attempted the feat in June 25, 1952 against light heavyweight champion Joey Maxim at Yankee Stadium. It was a hot muggy night that saw Robinson use his speed and alacrity to out-score Maxim. But by the 11th round the constant pressure by Maxim and the unbearable heat, sapped all the energy from the Hall of Fame great. He quit on his stool from heat exhaustion.

Hopkins realizes he can draw comparisons from beating light heavyweight champion Tarver. But it's figuratively a tall order.

"I have a bitter taste in my mouth from my last two fights," Hopkins said. "You're going to have the type of fight that people are going to talk about for years."

Tarver shakes his head at Hopkins promises.

"I'm grossly underestimated," says Tarver. "I'm one of the best fighters in the world."

Tarver feels that since his amateur days he's been in the shadows of other fighters like Jones, Hopkins and others.

"One bad decision during the Olympics and they (boxing journalists) tried to sweep this great career under the rug," said Tarver. "He too will succumb to the heat, but not to the temperatures, but to the heat of the Magic Man."

The heat is on for boxing fans too. Which show do you spend money on: the Atlantic City light heavyweight title fight? Or the New York junior welterweight title fight?

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More decisions.

### Israel Vazquez defends IBF junior feather title

Israel Vazquez (39-3, 28 KOs), the Fighter of the Year for 2005, defends his IBF world title against former junior bantamweight world champion Ivan "Choko" Hernandez (23-1-1, 13 KOs) on the under card of Hopkins-Tarver on June 10.

Vazquez, 28, a native of Mexico City, was selected the best fighter for a riveting upset knockout over Oscar Larios. Vazquez was a five to one under dog and stopped Larios in three rounds last December.

Hernandez, a native of Ensenada, Mexico, is a former junior bantamweight champion who has some notable wins including a knockout of Mark "Too Sharp" Johnson.

### Machito returns

No one else in boxing makes fans laugh more than Hector "Machito" Camacho Jr. (41-1-1, 23 KOs) whenever his name is mentioned. Is it because he's such a terrible boxer?

Definitely no. He only has one loss in his career. One loss.

Basically the speedy southpaw son of the great Hector Camacho Sr. – who will surely be voted into the Hall of Fame when he finally retires – has been willy nilly about getting into the ring for a consistent amount of time. Sure he fought and beat four fighters in the last two years, but he's been looking mighty chunky doing it. It's plain and simple, Machito loves to eat.

The swift southpaw faces Andrey Tsurkan (22-2, 14 KOs) of the Ukrained for the vacant NABF junior middleweight title in Atlantic City.

After losing to Omar Weiss in 2002 following a nationally televised bout against Jesse James Leija when the country saw Camacho opt to quit instead of fight the Texan, basically the fans feel he has no heart.

Camacho's best win in the last few years came against Nelson Estupinan, a hard-hitting Mexican who took Carlos Bolillo's senses with a wicked right hand a year earlier. He also dropped Camacho but found the Puerto Rican boxer's speed too overwhelming. Machito still has talent. But can he fight and win consistently at junior middleweight? He's only 5-8 in height. Lucklily Tsurkan is only 5-8 too. One more thing, Machito is only 27.

### Fights on television

Fri. ESPN2, 6 p.m., Brian Minto (24-1) vs. Danny Batchelder (24-1)

Sat. HBO pay-per-view, 6 p.m., Antonio Tarver (24-3) vs. Bernard Hopkins (46-4-1); Israel Vazquez (39-3) vs. Ivan Hernandez (23-1-1)

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Sat. pay-per-view, 6 p.m., Miguel Cotto (26-0) vs. Paul Malignaggi (21-0); Kevin Kelley (58-6-2) vs. Bobby Pacquiao (26-11-3)