

Hopkins-Tarver: Staying Intellectual in Atlantic City

Written by Phil Woolever
Saturday, 10 June 2006 19:00

After completely dominating Antonio Tarver for 12 rounds, you could tell that a still fresh looking Bernard Hopkins wanted to gesture triumphantly at the final bell, to the adoring crowd at Boardwalk Hall.

Hopkins held back, continuing the professional discipline he showed all night, and waited for the unlikely result to be official. It was like a well-worn horseplayer watching the payoff on the tote board before heading to the betting window.

All judges favored Hopkins an accurate 118-109. With his thumping triumph, "The Executioner" can cash in on history.

Forty-one-year-old Hopkins, now 47-4-1 (32), made a late delivery of his promise to retire, but if he does hang up the gloves he couldn't go out in much more impressive fashion.

"I told people they'd be surprised," said an unmarked Hopkins. "I knew I could fight at this weight five or six years ago."

"Sometimes you wake up and it's just not your day," mused Tarver in a monotone. "I was flat. I saw openings but I was a step too late every time. Bernard had a great game plan and he stuck to it."

Tarver promised to send Hopkins packing into retirement with an unpleasant taste in a bloody mouth. Instead, Hopkins kept an unstained grin and it was Tarver, 37, who sounded like he'd had enough.

Tarver, the consensus Light Heavyweight Champion, bet \$250,000 for charity that Hopkins would be overwhelmed within six rounds.

Quite the opposite occurred. By the fight's halfway point, a confused, backpedaling Tarver needed a knockout to win.

Both men came in at an official weight of 174. Each boxer's personal mass and density offered unclear clues as to what might transpire. As the one-sided match unfolded, it was Hopkins who carried the meaningful muscle.

Whether or not Tarver ever reached an often reported girth of around 220 pounds during filming of Rocky Balboa was never verified, but considerable added weight on Tarver was obvious to anyone who saw him around that time period.

Playing a heavyweight champ, Tarver employed the Robert DeNiro in Raging Bull method of physical presence. In tonight's real life role, Tarver had to make a 175-pound limit. Whether or not dropping substantial size since finishing his movie project hindered Tarver's effort remained

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one of the fight's primary intrigues.

Hopkins stood eye to eye and put a little jail yard psyche in Tarver's face leading in to the contest. The shiny top of Tarver's shaved head definitely didn't look like too distant a target.

For Hopkins, the night was a return to the roots of his pro debut on 10-11-88 in the same town. That fight, a loss, was Hopkins's only other fight above the middleweight ranks.

Talk about a full fistic circle.

Heavily favored Tarver entered to many boos but kept a confident smile. It didn't last long. Tarver wore a shaded brown ensemble, and a strong looking Hopkins quickly tanned his opponent's hide to match it.

Tarver kept his jab working in the opening frames, but Hopkins was effective with right hand counters, and kept a glove by his jaw to shield from Tarver's looming left hand.

Hopkins moved side to side well as Tarver advanced without landing much. Hopkins danced outside the danger zone and established his own range for increasing lead rights. The hit and run pattern stuck all night long.

"Stay intellectual," guided Hopkins trainer Naseem Richardson, who did a great job of keeping his charge perfectly focused all night long.

By the third, Tarver looked like he knew he was in over his head and held on. Hopkins picked off most punches fired his way, and scored with stinging hooks. Both Tarver's eyes looked tender and he blinked throughout the fight as if he'd been maced.

In the fifth frame, a huge straight counter right sent Tarver stumbling. It was ruled his glove had touched the canvas for a knockdown, adding to Tarver's scorecard dilemma.

As the rounds wound down, Tarver looked dazed and remained unable to mount his own offense. Heading into the stretch, it made sense for Hopkins to play it safe, but he remained the one who initiated any action.

Tarver managed to put together a few glancing combinations, but nothing near enough to stem the tide. Turning it would take a miracle "The Magic Man" just didn't possess.

By the contest's conclusion, barring scandal, announcing the winner was a mere formality. The cheers for Hopkins's wide unanimous decision will hopefully be the perfect swansong for a fruitful farewell.

"I felt like I had everything ready coming in but it just didn't happen" said a swollen faced, shell-shocked Tarver. "I love boxing, but this is a tough business. I don't know [what's next]. I've got a lot of thinking to do."

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“I never gave him a clear target,” summarized Professor Hopkins. “He’s got a good punch, but I’ve got a decent, underrated chin. I made up my mind this is it for me. Thanks to Philadelphia and to everyone who’s supported me over the years.”

Whether or not the curtain goes down on either man’s career, there was a big impact on each’s public persona. That’s usually the case in the high stakes realm of pay-per-view entertainment.

As a result of tonight’s one-sided action, Hopkins can ride off into the Philly sunset with rare distinction.

For the shattered Tarver, it was a star-crossed night, indeed.