

Inka-Dinka-Doo, What an Ending

Written by Michael Katz
Monday, 12 June 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, June 12 – It has taken me a couple of days of searching for the right tone to take with Bernard Hopkins's masterly domination of Antonio Tarver. I certainly didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth – twas another night to be grateful for Graterford's greatest alumnus – but there were two problems.

(1) Let us not interpolate Hopkins's performance against Tarver into believing that it flatters Jermain Taylor into being a strong favorite over Winky Wright this weekend. Styles make fights, remember. More on this later in the week, health permitting.

(2) Additionally, let's not go overboard and declare Hopkins the greatest thing since peanut butter and jelly. Before Tarver, he was one of the best middleweights in history – and if I stubbornly refuse to put him in any top ten, it's only because the division is replete with greats. Certainly Hopkins would have been difficult to handle for any of them, Sugar Ray Robinson included. This latest victory, for my money (much of which is owed directly to Hopkins for bouts with Felix Trinidad Jr., Oscar de la Hoya, Jermain Taylor and Tarver), can not be classified as particularly brilliant for one simple reason:

Tarver was a shot fighter.

There was nothing there. Nothing. No snap, no crackle, no jab. He said afterwards "sometimes you wake up in the morning and it's not your day." Give him credit; it was his only offer of an excuse. The man who ended the long reign of Roy Jones Jr. as boxing's No. 1, at age 37 was more diminished than Hopkins at 41 – and Hopkins started off much higher.

Tarver, now 0 for Philadelphia – I am assuming he lost to Rocky Balboa, too, but please don't tell me the ending – looked like an old man in both his fights with Glencoffe Johnson. During last year's rubber match with Jones, Emanuel Steward on HBO pointed out that Tarver looked ready to go. Against Hopkins, he never seemed ready to start from the first tactical surprise rush in the opening round.

Of course Hopkins had a lot to do with Tarver's poor showing. This is always the problem with analyses – how to balance one man's performance with the other's. Let's start with the physical glow about Hopkins, courtesy in no small part, I'm sure, to the conditioning guru, Mackie Shilstone. After looking at the suddenly muscular Hopkins, Steward said it was obvious that the long-dominant middleweight should have moved up years ago. Not only did Hopkins look better even sitting down, he had so much more energy than he did in the two fights with Jermain Taylor. There was no need to conserve himself until the stretch this time. He went right at Tarver in the opening round and never really let up. It was a brilliant front-running effort, worthy of Beau Purple upsetting Kelso. And like the horse racing upsets of yore, look for the trainer. It wasn't the Hall of Fame trainer, H. Allen Jerkens, the master of the upset – he beat Secretariat once with Onion – but one of Hopkins's old knockout victims, John David Jackson.

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No knock on Naseem Richardson, the longtime assistant who took over when Hopkins dismissed Bouie Fisher (who notably picked Tarver), but I believe I discerned the fine tuning of John David, who had been one of my favorite boxers, last Saturday night. Months ago, at the Sugar Shane Mosley-Fernando Vargas rematch press conference in Vegas, Jackson told me he would love to work with Hopkins for this fight because he was sure he could give him a couple of pointers based on many rounds of sparring with Tarver.

Since Mosley was a “partner” in Golden Boy Productions, as is Hopkins, I said it didn’t seem too difficult to get that assignment. Jackson did.

He had explained to me that Tarver, unlike most southpaws, does not tuck his head to the right after he throws the jab. He goes the other way. Jackson then got up and demonstrated how Hopkins had to stay low and then counter the jab, not with straight right hands the way he usually did against left-handers, but with looping shots. After a couple of rounds of feeling Hopkins’s counters, Tarver virtually gave up throwing his jab. No jab, no straight left hand to follow. He was completely disarmed.

And when Hopkins gets an edge, it is all over. No one is better at exploiting physical and tactical advantages, no one is better at making them psychological edges as well. Once he gets an opponent by the proverbials, it is game, set and match. For a while, my bet at 4-1 on Hopkins by decision looked in jeopardy because it appeared he was on the way to a knockout of a man who had never been down before last weekend’s fifth round in Atlantic City.

Maybe, if he had gone all out, Hopkins could have scored the knockout. But if there is nothing else we’ve learned about him, is that he is very content to win on points and not take any unnecessary risks. The longer the fight went, the better he looked. If this was the end – and my bet is that it was, that we shall never be privileged to watch his ring mastery again – it was a great way to close a 20-year-run.

Many of Hopkins’s middleweight victories were static, dare we say “boring?” Not this one. The danger of Tarver’s big left hand was always there in our minds, and Hopkins kept us enthralled by never really letting up on the pedal. There was no coasting here.

Now it appears that both these ancient warriors may have said goodbye Saturday night. Tarver seemed unsure whether he should continue his career; he may realize it just isn’t there anymore. He’ll always have Paris – well, okay, Roy Jones Jr., when he fizzles. One fight guy told me not to be surprised if HBO, with Tarver out of the picture, is not hot to retain the services of Joe Calzaghe. No, if Jermain Taylor gets by Winky, there’ll be a big fight for the oft-injured Welshman without having to face Glen Johnson or one of the faceless other light-heavyweights.

As for Hopkins, I think he has been sincere all along about retiring. If he had gotten the decision the first time against Jermain Taylor, he might have been able to fit Tarver in before his 41st birthday, after which he had promised his late mother he would not fight.

There is no way he could have a better ending than last Saturday to a career that should be celebrated wherever tough kids get in trouble and think there’s no way out. Hopkins has

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personified the great American dream in his 20 years after Graterford, one of the toughest prisons in Pennsylvania. Yeah, he's made mistakes and he's hurt people, but he did it his way and since he probably still has his first dollar, I believe this was it.

Yes, when Larry Merchant of HBO asked him in the ring what if someone offered him \$20 million, Hopkins replied he would come out of the grave for that kind of money. I think he knows, though, that Momma would have to give him a spanking.

And besides, there's no one out there who could make him that kind of money. So as the great James Durante would say exiting his show, "Goodnight Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are."

PENTHOUSE: Team Hopkins, especially its leader, for one to remember him by fondly. Not that Bernard will ever let us forget in the years to come. But let us not forget the other big winner Saturday night, Miguel Cotto. Paul Malignaggi is getting all kinds of praise for his gritty performance and one wonders what this fight might have been had the brash kid from Bensonhurst not been accidentally cut in the opening moments. There were a couple of rounds, especially the ninth, when Malignaggi showed why at 4-1, which is what I gladly took, did in fact have a shot at the big upset. Saying that, however, let us give Cotto his due and not criticize him for not knocking out the brave Malignaggi, who made it easier by standing in front of him. Cotto hurt his left hand – he certainly didn't use it as often after the fight reached the halfway mark – and he showed again he could be hit. But he also showed that the strain of making 140 pounds doesn't stop him from maintaining his poise and stamina. And he showed that he could keep up with someone as quick as Bensonhurst; Billy Giles, Malignaggi's trainer, changed his tune from calling Cotto "slow and one-dimensional" before to "I didn't realize how fast he was" after. And the left hooker from Puerto Rico hurts people when he hits them. Malignaggi will be out for six months, by which time the chances are that Cotto will have moved up to welterweight. I'd love to see him against Ricky Hatton, Antonio Margarito or the winner of Carlos Baldomir-Arturo Gatti.

OUTHOUSE: Lou DiBella doesn't need me to put him in here, especially since he hasn't done anything wrong (that I know about). He's in here because that's probably how he's feeling, a bit crappy, because not only did Malignaggi get busted up, the fighter he probably has the least use for, Hopkins, scored an impressive victory down the Garden State Parkway. He can bounce back, of course, if Jermain Taylor manages to get by Winky....The losses by a couple of "Magic Men," as Tarver and Malignaggi bill themselves, was probably the worst night for the profession since that tiger mistook Siegfried and Roy for cat food.

DISS AND THAT: So in the opening bout on the Atlantic City pay-per-view card, there was Larry (Hap) Hazzard's favorite judge, Jean Williams – you remember, the lady who gave the round to Evander Holyfield despite the battering he took from Lennox Lewis – still working in his state. Puff for puff, Hap has to be the most arrogant man in the game....Tim Ryan was a welcome voice and the reason he sounded so tired doing the Garden show was because he was shuttling back and forth from his duties at the French Open. I mean, giving up a Paris dinner to work a Kevin Kelley farewell does not seem fair....But no excuses for saying that after five rounds he had Malignaggi ahead. After five rounds, watching in the comfort of my living room, I had Cotto winning by shutout....I ended up with a 116-112 card, giving one round even because

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who the hell can tell from television....Wally Matthews did a fine job working with George Foreman. The key was he didn't try to ridicule the often ridiculous former heavyweight champion and instead tries to draw out knowledgeable opinions....Read somewhere that the reason Oscar de la Hoya didn't announce his decision last Saturday about whether or not he was going to face Floyd Mayweather Jr. was that both sides were too far apart in talks. Camp Mayweather informs that there haven't been any talks, so the read must be that Oscar still isn't 100 percent positive, one way or another. Hope he makes up his mind before global warming melts Greenland.