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Just how good is middleweight king Jermain Taylor?

The undisputed middleweight world champion defends his titles against the feared and much avoided Winky Wright on Saturday at the FedEx Forum in Memphis, Tenn. The fight will be televised by HBO.

Southern-bred gentleman Taylor meets Florida's Wright (50-3, 25 KOs) in a fight that now has increased value and interest following Bernard Hopkins epic win last weekend.

Last year Taylor managed to engage Hopkins for 24 rounds and emerged victorious in a pair of encounters with the certain Hall of Fame boxer. Many felt Hopkins' advanced age was the reason that the 27-year-old Arkansas fighter was victorious.

"The rap on Jermain is he didn't look good against Bernard Hopkins," said Lou DiBella, who promotes and advises Taylor. "But who has ever looked good against Bernard?"

Once again Taylor, 27, faces an opponent whose forte is defense, defense, defense. It doesn't seem to bother the always-amiable Arkansan.

"I'm not worried about his defense. He can sit there and defense. I can defense with him too and there would be two guys doing nothing," said Taylor (25-0, 17 KOs) during a telephone conference call last week. "I just feel he don't have nothing coming with just defense."

Wright's prickly defense has gained him victories over elite fighters such as Felix Trinidad and two wins against Sugar Shane Mosley. He was the underdog in each of those matches except the rematch with Mosley.

But can Wright's standup southpaw stance hold up against the sledgehammer punches of Taylor who pounded Hopkins relentlessly? It was volume not quality that captured both decisions for him.

"He's bigger, so what?" said Wright, 34, by telephone. "We ain't wrestling."

Against the hard-punching Trinidad, a fight that saw Wright the underdog by as much as five to one, the Florida boxer jabbed and blocked the Puerto Rican silly. So humiliated by the loss was Trinidad, he has not returned to the ring.

In the two fights with Mosley, the right jab thudded off the Pomona fighter's head all night long.

"He throws a different kind of jab," Mosley says. "It's a high jab off the top of the head."

After the wins against Trinidad and Mosley, offers to fight Wright became scarce. So he fought

Sam Soliman and won by unanimous decision against the Aussie, but more than a few people noticed chinks in Wright's defense.

"He can be beat," said Oscar De La Hoya, who has mentioned Wright as a possible opponent for his final fight. "There is a way to beat Winky Wright."

One fighter who did beat Wright is Fernando Vargas.

"I beat him on my worst day," said Vargas about their encounter back in December 1999 when the Oxnard fighter was drained by having to lose weight the day before. "Imagine what I would do now."

Wright expects to be the enemy when he steps in the ring in Memphis, just across the Mississippi River from Arkansas.

"I've been in front of 20,000 [hostile] people. The crowd won't be a problem for me," said Wright, who fought many times overseas in France, South Africa, Germany and Argentina. "The fans can be chanting but I know there's only two of us inside the ring."

Taylor claims he absorbs the fans energy when inside the ring and hears the Arkansas fans give the Razorback cheer.

"When I step into that ring there is going to be so much energy. All of the energy in the building I think it helps you out," says Taylor, whose fans dressed in red attire made the long trek from Arkansas to Las Vegas, Nevada in the Hopkins fights. He expects more for this fight.

Speaking of Hopkins, immediately after his win over Tarver, he leaned over the ropes to talk to Taylor's new trainer Emanuel Steward to say that Taylor is truly a great middleweight champion and wished him luck.

If Taylor beats Wright on Saturday, a lot of questions will be answered about his ability.

Who fights the winner of Taylor-Wright?

Despite the retirement of Bernard Hopkins, a number of middleweights remain that can offer the winner of Taylor-Wright resistance.

Middleweight prizefighters have always been numerous because that's an average size for most males. Usually middleweights are from 5-7 in height to 6-2. The limit of 160 pounds is about average for most men in the world.

"Middleweights are as fast as featherweights and hit as hard as heavyweights," said Larry Merchant when asked to describe the 160-pound limit division.

Here's a list of capable middleweights in no particular order:

Arthur Abraham (21-0, 17 KOs) – He beat Kingsley Ikeke for the vacant title and successfully defended it against Shannon Taylor and Kofi Jantuah. Many say his strength is his strength. He fights out of Germany, a boxing hotbed in Europe.

Felix Sturm (25-1, 11 KOs) – The tall left-handed boxer has a stiff jab and good defense. Don't match him against Winky 'cause it be like fighting a mirror. But against anybody else it would be an interesting fight. He's tall at 6-1 and has good speed.

Sam Soliman (32-8, 13 KOs) – Forget his eight losses. This busybody can give anybody fits, just ask Winky. The Aussie middleweight takes a good punch, throws punches in bunches and never tires. Anybody who fights him needs to be in tiptop shape.

Sergio Mora (18-0, 4 KOs) – Aside from his unorthodox style of boxing, he has speed and agility. You would think it would be easier to fight him inside, but he loves it close in too. He's a gritty competitor who will surprise a lot of middleweights who take him lightly. Expect him to fight for a world title by the end of next year.

Kelly Pavlik (27-0, 24 KOs) – He's tall, hits hard and now people know he can take a punch too. Against Fulgencio Zuniga he faced a tough no-nonsense prizefighter bent on taking his head off. But the Youngstown, Ohio boxer showed big heart in recuperating from a knockdown early in the fight and pulling away with solid boxing skills. Very impressive.

Edison Miranda (26-0, 23 KOs) – The rock-fisted Colombian meets Arthur Abraham in August to decide the IBF title. His stoppage over Howard Eastman sent shockwaves in the boxing world. He fights out of Miami. That's not a good thing. Too many distractions over there. But so far, the beach bunnies haven't stopped "La Pantera" yet.

John Duddy (17-0, 15 KOs) – It may be too early to claim the Irish knockout puncher can swing with the best in the division, but so far he has looked determined to end every fight quickly and with an entertainment value. He's worth keeping an eye on.

Anthony Thompson (21-1, 15 KOs) – The Messenger looked terrible against Darnell Boone in his last fight, but looked terrific against Adrian Lopez the match before. Will the real Thompson show up? As a welterweight he seemed too listless. With the extra weight he seems to be stronger, but tends to be too calculating.

Andre Ward (9-0, 5 KOs) – He began as a super middleweight and has dropped down to 160. People seem to forget he's around but the kid has big time talent with speed to spare. Lately he's been more focused and respectful of his opponents and it shows in his performance. He looked so-so against Darnell Boone a skillful fighter and was dropped once. But against Andy Kolle he used all of his weapons in forcing a stoppage. Ward is only 22.

These are the guys who should fight the Taylor-Wright winner. Accept no substitutes.