

Jermain Taylor, Winky Wright and Bernard Hopkins

Written by Rick Folstad

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Tell me Jermain Taylor's readings on boxing's Respect-O-Meter didn't jump a few points this week following Bernard Hopkins' brutal dismantling of a befuddled Antonio Tarver in Atlantic City.

That's because Taylor beat Hopkins two times last year and just when you thought it was time for "The Executioner" to hang up his noose and put away his hood, Hopkins moves up a couple weight classes, does his mandatory trash talk stuff and puts a final brush stroke to his brilliant career – wink, wink – by spanking Tarver in a light-heavyweight fight.

Helluva farewell speech.

Though these things never work in the fight game, let's follow the trail and see where it leads: First, if Taylor beat Hopkins twice and Hopkins easily beat Tarver, wouldn't Taylor pummel Tarver? Second, if Tarver beat Roy Jones Jr., and Roy Jones Jr., earlier beat John Ruiz for the WBA heavyweight title, shouldn't Taylor be able to beat Ruiz? Shouldn't Taylor be fighting for the heavyweight championship of the world?

Sure. But first he has to beat Winky Wright.

Taylor (25-0, 17 KOs) defends his middleweight crown against Wright (50-3, 25 KOs) on Saturday night in Memphis (HBO) for a bunch of money, a title belt or two, and bragging rights claiming they could probably lick poor John Ruiz if you followed the silly trail where it took you.

Asked on a recent conference call what the difference was between fighting Hopkins and fighting Wright, Taylor wasn't sure how to answer at first. It was as though it was the first time he'd thought about it, the first time he'd been asked the question. And it probably was.

"How's Winky different?" Taylor said more to himself than the guy asking the question. "Ah, I feel like he's...um. He comes to...Well, how's he different?"

Then he got it.

"Winky comes to fight," Taylor said. "Hopkins comes to maul you and brawl you. He does everything just to try to get you off your game plan. Winky comes to all-out box. He doesn't have time to be running and holding."

It's easy to see that a line of respect has been drawn by Taylor.

"Winky has an awkward style," Taylor said. "And he shows up to fight every time he gets into the ring."

While Wright still doesn't seem to get the respect he's earned, Taylor has already become an

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icon in Arkansas. It makes it easy to sell tickets in Memphis, which is within turkey call range of Taylor's home in Little Rock.

"Memphis is almost home," Taylor said. "It's about an hour from my house."

"It's very much a hometown crowd," said Taylor's promoter, Lou DiBella, who said there could be as many as 8,000 to 10,000 Taylor fans crossing the Mississippi River into Tennessee on fight night. "And it ain't going to hurt Jermain to hear a bunch of people calling the hogs and see a lot of familiar faces. The entire state of Arkansas is Jermain Taylor country."

Taylor said he's become so popular in Arkansas, he can't go to the movies or the mall without causing a fuss.

"But it's home and I love it," he said. "I'm just a hometown guy. I love Little Rock and their support, and I'm giving it all back now. I'm a Razorback, you know what I'm saying? I'm not a big trash talker. I'm not going to embarrass my state by going in there saying I want to kill or hurt somebody. I go in there and go to work."

What Taylor said he had to do was win and look good against a southpaw.

Just what Hopkins did last weekend.