

BORGES: Selling Black Vs. White Bout A No Go

Written by Ron Borges

Monday, 18 February 2008 19:00

It would be impossible to say Bernard Hopkins stood mute Tuesday morning during a press conference at Planet Hollywood in Times Square called to launch a three-city tour with undefeated super middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe, but he was, at the very least, muffled.

The two came together to continue hyping their April 19 fight for the RING magazine light heavyweight title Hopkins now holds, a process that began some time ago with an insulting tirade leveled at Calzaghe by Hopkins that did not elevate the discourse on racial harmony in America.

During that exchange, Hopkins taunted Calzaghe, insisting he would “never lose to a white boy.”

Calzaghe pointed out that, unlike Hopkins, he’d never lost to any boy regardless of pigmentation but the damage was already done. Hopkins was vilified in the British press and even some boxing writers in the U.S. took him to task for trying to turn what could be one of the best fights of the year into a racially-charged environment. At a time when a black man and a white woman are battling it out for the Democratic Presidential nomination Hopkins’ comments seemed more than a little out of historic context.

For many years boxing, like much of American life, was rife with racism and that remains the country’s great shame but gone are the days when you could sell a prize fight in such a tawdry way. Judging by how gingerly Hopkins handled the subject when it was brought up Tuesday, it was clear that while Calzaghe may not be getting to him somebody had.

“We aren’t even going to go there,” Hopkins said when asked about his earlier remarks, which he later tried unsuccessfully to claim had been blown out of proportion. The fact is he knew exactly what he was saying when he said it and what the effect would be, which was to call attention to their upcoming meeting.

But like the great defensive fighter he has always been, Hopkins knows when to duck and deflect as well as when to attack and this was a day for the former not the latter.

“He won’t beat me,” Hopkins said, now speaking in code. “It don’t happen in my neighborhood. It’s his job to prove that I’m wrong.”

Calzaghe (44-0, 32 KO) fully believes he’ll do that because of his relative youth (he’s 36 to Hopkins’ 43), higher punch output and what he believes is superior hand and foot speed. What he doesn’t believe is that race will have anything to do with it once the first bell sounds at the Thomas and Mack Center in Las Vegas.

“That was just a stupid comment, really,” Calzaghe said of Hopkins’ earlier remarks. “Was I offended? No. I laughed at it. I won’t lose to any color guy.”

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“All I look at is a guy in the other corner who’s 43. He says he’s had a lot of success against southpaws (11-0 vs. left-handed fighters) but he’s in with a totally different animal with me.

“Maybe he said that to try and get under my skin. He’s a counter puncher so he wants me to lose my head and get careless but I’m not bothered by all that. I don’t fight for country or for black and white. I fight for me and my family. He can’t beat me. He’s in trouble.”

That is something Hopkins (48-4-1, 32 KO) has seldom been in since he was released from Graterford Prison in 1988 after serving 4 ½ years for strong-armed robbery. Later that year he began a career as a prize fighter that has now spanned 19 years, including 10 spent as middleweight champion before losing that title to Jermain Taylor on a controversial decision over two years ago.

A year later, after turning his back on a death bed promise to his mother that he would retire by the time he was 41, Hopkins won the light heavyweight title in lop-sided fashion from Antonio Tarver and then easily defended it against Winky Wright, who many boxing experts consider to be among the top 10 pound-for-pound fighters in the world.

Never once in 53 fights and 19 years, has Bernard Hopkins been hurt, except perhaps by some of the business decisions he made earlier in his career before signing with Golden Boy Promotions. Even now, arguably in his fistic dotage, Hopkins mocked the very notion that such a thing would suddenly now occur on April 19.

“I’m not underestimating Joe Calzaghe no way,” Hopkins said. “That is man’s biggest mistake in life. One thing you can bet your life insurance on is Bernard Hopkins comes in shape and don’t underestimate nobody. I respect my job!

“People want to ask, ‘Is this the fight where Bernard Hopkins becomes extremely old?’ When is Father Time going to kick the door in? Trust me. I’m not in denial. I know anything can happen in the ring. But I got it in my belly to train to win. Is Bernard Hopkins an old fighter or is Bernard Hopkins that preserved fighter who still got the old habit of good habits?

“My lifestyle is my biggest asset and my defense is the most underrated in boxing. Name the fight where I got my ass beat! This ain’t no (shot Evander) Holyfield.

“I’ve been down this road before, they saying their guy going to do this and that. I’m tired of battling at press conferences (where they’re) saying I’m ready to be taken. I know what I’m going to do. I said what I said and I’ll prove it.

“I’m going to punish him. Punish him slowly. It’s going to take his father (and trainer Enzo) to be merciful. I’m going to prove the sands haven’t run out of the glass yet.

“I’ll retire my way, like Frank Sinatra. When I’m gone it don’t have to be written about 21 title defenses or middleweight champion for 10 years or Hall of Famer. Just write M-A-N. That’s what I am. I’m gonna show you on April 19 what a man is.”

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As Hopkins rambled on in a low, menacing tone, Calzaghe paid him little mind. That continued even when the two came together briefly for a set of publicity shots. As they stood staring at each other, Hopkins finally said, "You better be willing to die."

When the RING super middleweight champion responded he would be, Hopkins snapped, "We're gonna see."

Later the lean Welshman was asked about Hopkins' menacing statement as well as the racist tone he now seemed to be trying to disavow and he simply shrugged before stating matter of factly that, "He can be the bad guy now. I'll be the bad guy on April 19. I've been through this before."

"Nothing intimidates me. When you come down to it, you got two fighters in the ring. The best fighter will win. I'd have beaten him at his peak. I'll beat him now. I don't know what it's like to lose. He knows. He's been beaten four times, not me. I wouldn't be coming to America unless I thought 100 per cent in my heart I'd win."

They cannot both be right about that, of course. Hopkins cannot again defy Father Time if Calzaghe is who he says he is and Calzaghe cannot escape the kind of beating Tarver and Wright absorbed when they tried to match wits as well as hits with a muted man who, at the end of the day, couldn't quite keep his tongue totally stilled.

Asked why he was dressed in a black, hooded sweatshirt with a black T-shirt underneath, Bernard Hopkins, the old warrior, smiled the cold, hard smile of someone who has spent all his life in the hurt business and said, "Black? I never seen nobody wear white to a funeral."