

Confident Calzaghe Looks To KO Hopkins

Written by Michael Woods
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More than any other active fighter, Bernard Hopkins has the ability to influence an opponent, both before a fight and during a bout, to do what he wants.

He's a psychological terrorist, using words and actions, as we saw when he shoved Winky Wright a day before their July 2007 bout, to get inside a foe's head.

He tries to make a man question himself, his skills, his ability to combat the Philly vet's ample bag of tricks of the trade. Hopkins, when he was trying to lock down a beef with the unbeaten Welshman Joe Calzaghe, went into his trickeration bag, and pulled out a doozy, on December 7.

"I would never let a white boy beat me," Hopkins said five times at the Mayweather/Hatton weigh-in. "You can print that. I would never lose to a white person."

Playing the race card was a new one for him. Did he do it to insure that Calzaghe would accept his challenge, by stirring up a fury of dislike in Calzaghe's head? Did he know the fight was a given, and do it to inject an immediate element of sensation into the scrap? He knows what the media laps up, and lap it up we did. Did he do it to try and rile Calzaghe, try to distract Joe C from the imminent task at hand, and instead get the 44-0 hitter caught up in the swirl of a race debate?

Whatever the masterful Bernard (48-4-1) was attempting, it seems as though Calzaghe isn't falling for it. On a media conference call on Tuesday afternoon, the 168 pound king, who will try his hand at the 175 pound class on April 19 in Las Vegas, shrugged off Hopkins' psychological guerrilla tactics, and promised to hand the 43-year-old his first conclusive loss since Roy Jones bettered him in 1993.

Calzaghe spoke on a phone from Wales, where he is in his last week of training before he departs to the States for the big US debut. He'll train here for two weeks before getting down to brass tacks at the Thomas and Mack Center.

"I'm looking forward to coming over and making a great fight, even though Hopkins is rarely in a great fight," Calzaghe said. "It'll be a great spectacle and I don't think it'll even be close."

Calzaghe touched on the weight issue. The jump to 175 from 168 will only help him, he said, as carving off those stubborn last few pounds took away from his punching power. In training, he said, his power increase is evident.

The fighter is a tad worried, he said, that US judges and an American ref could hurt him, but nevertheless, he promised to down Hopkins. He will have to box cleverly and also fight on April 19, he surmised, to defeat the vet.

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The challenge of a high grade foe and his American debut has him juiced, he said, and that may be bad news for Bernard. Calzaghe has fought down to lower level foes' reps, but will have no problem getting amped for Hopkins.

Calzaghe, who has been plagued by hand injuries, said he is fully healthy, though we all know that proclamations of health before a big bout must be taken with a shaker full of salt.

The race baiting talk in December, Calzaghe said, didn't faze him in the least.

"I wasn't offended by the white guy stuff," he said. "I know it's all part of the game, it's all part of selling the fight. He made himself look stupid. Besides, he has a white trainer (Freddie Roach). And he will look stupid after the fight."

He expects thousands of his fans to come to Vegas, and expects more Calzaghe fans to be there than Hopkins converts.

Calzaghe skillfully countered a question on Hopkins' supposed mastery of lefties. "How many lefties has he fought? I boxed 37 righties at the end of the day, he hasn't fought me."

Calzaghe is excited to soak up some Vegas sun, as Wales is colder than a witch's boob, but two weeks will be plenty. He'd miss his kids too much if he acclimated in the US longer than two weeks, he said. "Especially fighting an old man," he reasoned. "If I can't beat him I won't show my face in public ever again."

Calzaghe teased Hopkins for having a fighter's face.

"He needs a facelift, he's the ugly one," he said. "It'll be a struggle to make his face uglier than it is. His nose is flat on his face. It's the pretty ones you worry about, Hopkins is easy to hit. He musta walked into a lamppost with a nose like that."

Calzaghe said he wasn't thinking about what comes next, conceding that at his age, that wouldn't be prudent.

He also said his volume of punching would prove a problem for the Philly fighter, who tends to fight in spurts, and try to steal rounds with flurries.

"I will use my speed and outwork him and slow punches down," he said. "In the gym I definitely notice I'm punching harder, I wanna kayo him. I don't wanna win, I wanna KO him."

Calzaghe is counting on Hopkins turning into a geriatric on April 19, he said. "He's very smart, sly, in the way he fights. He moved very well versus Wright, threw the right shots at the right time." Besides, he conceded, he is "no spring chicken" himself.

He's watched Bernard in action against Jones, Tarver and Wright, but will not spend too much time dissecting the tapes, preferring to impose his will on his foe, rather than reacting to what he thinks he might see.

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No, Calzaghe said, Hopkins' head games won't work on him.

"He tries to get into opponents' heads, believe me he's barking up the wrong tree. I'm more experienced. That might work against a 22-year-old kid. I'm enjoying some of his comments coming from an adult. I'm amused. He will try some things at a press conference, little tricks, but if he tries to push my face like Winky Wright, I'll put him to sleep before the fight."

The trash talk, he said, helps sell the bout, so Calzaghe appreciates Hopkins' salesmanship, he said. "Nobody wants to see guys shake hands, it's about confrontation. As with dogs, "It's the quiet one you worry about. Let him keep barking. Let him play the bad guy, I'll be the bad guy the night of the fight."

My take: Calzaghe is confident, as he should be with 44 wins tucked into his trunks, fighting a man who has lost four and drawn once since turning pro in 1993. I'm not sure what Hopkins could do, short of threatening to eat Joe's kids, to pull him into a brain battle before the real tussle. I see Calzaghe concentrating on the difficult, but doable task at hand on April 19. He should be able to outwork Bernard, not allow the round-thief to snag close rounds, by virtue of sheer volume. I doubt that he'll be able to knock Hopkins down, or out, as Bernard is the games' premier survivor at this juncture. But Calzaghe should be able to do what most others have been able to do, and that is impose his will, and his chosen pace, on Bernard, en route to a decisive decision victory.

The fight will be on regular HBO, which is good news for fight fans, and bad news for Time Warner cable, which tucks too much of my money into their belts every year.