

HOPKINS: I'll Make Calzaghe Look Amateurish

Written by Ron Borges
Thursday, 03 April 2008 19:00

Retirement announcements in boxing are like political speeches. They must be carefully considered and then taken with several grains of salt, a dash of jaundiced eye and a great measure of skepticism.

This is especially true as the days grow short before a big fight or in the moments immediately after one, because in both cases the fighter has been under great stress mentally and physically for far too long to make a clear-headed decision about anything beyond his next meal.

With that caveat then, we now address 43-year-old Bernard Hopkins, who said Thursday afternoon that you may see the last of him, as well as the best of him, on April 19 when he squares off with undefeated super middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe in the ring at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas.

This is a fight for more than whatever portion of the light heavyweight title Hopkins can lay claim to. It is even more than a fight for the roughly \$5 million each man will earn for agreeing to participate in what both believe will be a hard day's night. What it really is, is a fight to further the legacy of one man and to create one for the other. Bernard Hopkins, as he is quick to point out, is the former not the latter.

"Legend?" Hopkins asked no one in particular. "I already got that. Icon? That's the climax. You can't get no higher than that. He has his legacy to prove to people in the United States, who maybe don't know his legacy like they know mine."

After 20 years in the ring, 20 successful defenses of the middleweight title and 20 cries that he's never received his just due (give or take about 20 million such cries), Hopkins seems to feel there is little left for him to accomplish in boxing and no one left to fight beyond the undefeated Welshman. Hence, he concluded, there may be no reason to press on in the most dangerous landscape in sports beyond April 19.

"Whether I want to retire or not I'm forced to retire because I done run out of opponents," Hopkins (48-4-1, 32 KO) said from his Los Angeles training lair. "I don't pick on nobody unless they're 35 or older. I've run out of quality names to fight (in that age bracket).

"Is that a sad thing to retire on top? No! I've done surpassed most people's expectations for Bernard Hopkins. They're going to have to find a place in history for Bernard, so enjoy April 19. It could be the last great fight you see from Bernard Hopkins.

"I ain't talking about no heavyweights. Ain't nobody out there at 160, 170 who brings what I need. If there's people in the game that can bring me a reason to do this I would but there isn't. Money isn't (a reason).

"I know I can stay around another three or four years. Am I embarrassing myself? No. Am I

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winning? Yes. So should I sit around and get a fat stomach in Miami at one of my properties? No. But I just ran out of people to beat. I ran out of people to prove (critics) wrong again.

“That’s a big part of my psyche. If I don’t have that I won’t be me. I train like I fight and I fight like I train. If one thing is missing I’m doomed. I’m literally doomed.

“I got no motivation to fight anybody else (after Calzaghe) unless it’s for money and my track record shows I don’t fight for money. My business decisions show I don’t fight for money. I will not go into the ring predicated 100 per cent on money. If I don’t have that (motivation to defeat the naysayers as well as his opponent) then I’m doomed. I’d be putting myself in the line of danger. To start looking for other things (to motivate him at this stage of his career) is to start looking for the wrong thing. There’s nobody out there beyond him worth it.

“You only can go to the well so many times and get water. I’m going to the well April 19 because there’s a bucket left.”

The implication in that final statement was that while there is not necessarily only one bucket of skill or one bucket of stamina or even one bucket of will left, there may be only one bucket of the kind of self-absorbed motivation that has propelled him from a jail cell at Graterford Prison to a premier place in the world of boxing left. Maybe only one bucket left of the urge to create naysayers where few exist any more while convincing yourself you must show them the flaws in their thinking.

One bucket left, really, of all the hurt and insults and doubting Tomases (Latin fight fans) who have dogged him throughout his career, emotions that still push him out of bed at 5:30 AM to run gut-busting 880-yard sprints with a maniac of a physical trainer named Mackie Shilstone.

One bucket left of anger enough to take him into a boxing ring against a wave of sparring partners half his age, each only having to stay there for three or four rounds while he remains trapped inside for 12 or 15, his arms weary and his chest on fire by the end of their time together.

That is why calling an end to it was on Bernard Hopkins’ mind Thursday afternoon. He’d already risen before the sun to get in his roadwork. He’d already carefully monitored his diet. He would soon be leaving for the gym and another day of hard sparring and pad work. He was 3,000 miles from his wife and daughter, cut off from most of his friends. He was in a self-imposed prison, the kind that turns a man into a fighter in 10 weeks.

Because of all that, Hopkins could think of only one thing beyond Joe Calzaghe – the word enough. Yet, truth be told, in boxing enough is a word with multiple meanings. Enough with two weeks left before a big fight after eight weeks of hard training is not quite the same as enough two weeks after you’ve cashed that \$5 million check and someone is waving another in front of you.

A week after the Calzaghe fight, win or lose, Hopkins will be back in the gym in Philadelphia because he can’t stay away. He can’t get enough of it, to be frank.

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That's what brought him out of retirement the last time, something he first talked about after getting a phone call while he was cleaning out his basement. Basement cleaning is not Bernard Hopkins' thing for long. He'll come to the word "enough" sooner with a broom in his hands than with handwraps on them.

Yet at age 43, he is also a realist who is right about the bucket and righter still about the well.

Go to it once too often in boxing and you can find yourself drowning in a red sea of your own making. And so he talks of no more fights after April 19 while at the same time making clear that he sees nothing to fear in Joe Calzaghe despite the latter's glittering 44-0 record and 10-year reign as super middleweight champion.

Hopkins looks at Calzaghe's biggest wins, a decision dissection over hyped Jeff Lacy and a points victory with some ease after a slow start over Mikkel Kessler to unify the title, and sees nothing to impress him. What he sees instead is a fighter who at 36 will be making his first trip to fight in Las Vegas, boxing's biggest stage.

And he sees something more. He sees a victim.

"To me he's just another left-handed fighter," Hopkins said of the 36-year old Calzaghe. "He just happens not to be African-American or Spanish or Mexican. That's the only difference.

"I been around the best southpaws and trained with the best southpaws in Philadelphia. I don't see anything where I say 'Wow! I should be intimidated.' Joe's defense is his offense. I love a guy who punches a lot. This guy likes to fire. He has a high punch output. I love that. The more he punches the more I like it."

That's because Hopkins is the classic counter puncher, a cagey wise man who has learned over the years every trick, as well as every misdemeanor and felony, in the sport. He is a guy who knows how to use his mind and how to use his head, which in prize fighting are not the same thing.

He knows how to not only counter your attack but move you into his. In short, he knows how to fight and he knows that how you think you're going to fight often turns out to be far from the reality once the bullets start to fly. Victory, then, is often a matter of who adjusts best to the unexpected actions of the other.

"Nobody knows what anybody is going to do until he gets in the ring," Hopkins cautioned. "We'd all be champions if we could talk our way to the championship. I heard it all. Nothing in the game I haven't heard. No style I haven't seen. I been champion since before Joe became a pro.

"I'm gonna prove he is an Ordinary Joe. I'm gonna prove the reason he didn't leave the UK before is he didn't want to be exposed and get his butt whipped by Bernard Hopkins. That's what's going to happen. I swear to God.

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“If you read his book, which I did, it’s very interesting. He thought he’d never have to fight me. He thought I’d retired and he’d never have to deal with The Executioner. But I came out of retirement. That was people’s worst nightmare - Bernard Hopkins coming out of retirement and messing up a lot of plans in boxing.

“I’m not only going to shock you all. I’m going to do it easy. I’m telling you now. Don’t be surprised when I make it look easy. I’ll make him look amateurish.

“His father (and trainer Enzo Calzaghe) is going to have to save his son. A father will do that because he loves him. How many times was I wrong? How many times was I right? Next question!”

The next question, whether Bernard Hopkins is right or wrong about Calzaghe, was the one he’d already answered. The next question was, “What’s next?”

For now the answer was nothing. For now, enough was enough for Bernard Hopkins. Enough of Joe Calzaghe.