LAS VEGAS - The right hand will tell the story. Whose right hand is the unresolved issue.

Despite the fact that the bulk of boxing insiders are favoring undefeated super middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe over RING magazine light heavyweight belt holder Bernard Hopkins Saturday night most seem to be doing it uneasily. Ask most anyone for their take on things and first you'll hear them extol the many virtues of Calzaghe, who at 36 has not lost a fight in 18 years and is 44-0 as a professional with 21 successful defenses of the 168-pound title before deciding to move up to 175 pounds to challenge Hopkins.

They talk of his speed, quickness, stamina, superior work rate and cleverness out of the left-handed stance as well as his strong chin. Then the shuffling of feet begins and the tone of the conversation makes a subtle shift to attempt something one cannot do in Las Vegas. It turns to hedging your bet.

The 43-year-old Hopkins' craftiness is mentioned. So too his 11-0 record against southpaws, including wins in his last two fights over Winky Wright and Antonio Tarver.

It is soon enough pointed out that Hopkins is a young 43, a man who has never abused his body and never had it abused by an opponent. And, of course, there's his ability to use his head both for thinking and with more nefarious intentions. In the end, most of the time the nod still has gone to Calzaghe but with a caveat the size of the Grand Canyon to cover a Hopkins' victory by decision.

However it goes (and it says here Calzaghe by decision) what will decide the outcome is the right hand of each man. The one who lands it most successfully will win not solely because of the damage it does but because of what its presence in the face of his opponent does to change how the fight is contested.

Hopkins' wily chief second, Freddie Roach, has told friends he is extremely confident of the outcome. The belief is he has found what they all feel is a serious breech in Calzaghe's defenses, a flaw that a fighter as skillful as Hopkins will be able to exploit in a manner fatal to Calzaghe's hopes.

For a southpaw like Calzaghe being hit with a straight right hand is the most dangerous thing he must contend with against an opponent with an orthodox stance like Hopkins'. It was such a right hand that befuddled Tarver and broke down Wright's normally superior defenses when they lost to Hopkins while both enter the ring as betting favorites.

Calzaghe has been victimized by such right hands before, including in the early rounds against his last opponent, Mikkel Kessler. But he has always been able to figure out counter measures, the most common one being his own high volume of punches eventually slowing down his opponent's interest in throwing himself and that is where his right hand will come into play on

Saturday.

Against Jeff Lacy, according to CompuBox statistics, Calzaghe threw an average of 79 punches a round. Against Kessler the volume was an even higher 84 per round and 1,010 for the fight. That's a year's work for Hopkins.

Lacy was far easier to combat than Kessler however because his defense was shoddy and he was a plodding, one-dimensional opponent with little head movement who simply walked forward time and again only to be lashed by Calzaghe's power punches.

Kessler was a different matter. Early in the fight he was especially effective with counter right hands and an uppercut on the inside so Calzaghe more than doubled up the rate at which he threw his jab, averaging 44 jabs with his right hand per round in that fight while only averaging 22 right jabs per round against Lacy.

The jab was key against Kessler because it began to slow down his offense and set up what would prove to be the most important punch of the night, a left to the body that stopped Kessler dead in his tracks and changed his entire approach for the rest of the night.

If Calzaghe can be effective with his right jab it will severely limit Hopkins' ability to do what he wants to do – which is to turn this into a stinking, inside fight with more holding, wrestling, head butting, elbowing and, occasionally, clean punching than actual boxing. More importantly, an inside fight takes away Calzaghe's greatest weapon, which is the high volume of punches he's known for and the tiring effect that has on an opponent.

Calzaghe's intention is to throw punches at such a high rate that Hopkins is forced to work harder than he would like to counter him or into a defensive shell. Either way it takes the play away from the champion.

"He'll need a respirator to keep up with me,'' Calzaghe said this week.

Hopkins, in contrast, wants to slow the pace of the fight, using a fistic version of the four-corner offense. The most effective way to do that is to get inside but the other way is to land a straight right hand when Calzaghe tries to flurry or jab. Do that with alarming regularity and Calzaghe's work rate will slow to a crawl and the advantages will then all swing to Hopkins.

One opponent who was able to do that was Sakio Bika. Bika lost to Calzaghe but the fight was more difficult than Calzaghe expected because it was fought at a pace well below his normal work rate. That was as much Bika's doing as from any disinterest on the part of Calzaghe.

Hopkins has long been the master of taking away from his opponent whatever he does best. In the case of Calzaghe, what he wants to take away is that inclination to throw 70 to 85 punches a round, round after exhausting round. It is difficult to go on the offense if you're always on the defense and no one understands that better than Calzaghe and his father, Enzo, who has trained him throughout his career.

For Calzaghe to do that against Hopkins his right jab will have to be steady and well placed. For Hopkins to counter it, he'll need to land his own straight right hand. Not as often as Calzaghe's jab but often enough to make him hesitate about throwing it at all as the rounds move along.

"He'll do things to try and stop me (from doing what he wants) rather than do things himself,'' Calzaghe said of Hopkins' expected approach. "He'll try to lull me into a messy, dirty fight and try to nick it (win a close decision).''

In other words, Calzaghe believes Hopkins' first plan will be not to use his offense to attack the younger man but rather to use his skills, angles and right hand to take away from Calzaghe what he does best offensively, which is punch in high volume.

Much of the latter part of Hopkins' career has been successful because he lived up to his nickname, "The Executioner,'' but not in the traditional way. Hopkins does not come to the arena to take you out. He comes to take you out of your game and thus out of our comfort zone.

He comes to do small things that make it difficult for you to feel safe doing the big things you've relied on for your success. Once you grow tentative, confused and frustrated, then Hopkins goes to work on you.

When Hopkins fought Jermain Taylor he did not win on the scorecards even though many observers felt he did no worse than split the two fights but either way he successfully slowed the younger man's punching rate from an average of 50 punches a round in earlier fights to 35 a round against him. As Taylor grew more daunted, Hopkins did more damage, but not until then.

Hopkins did the same to Tarver, who averaged nearly 65 punches a round against Roy Jones, Jr. and Glen Johnson yet could barely muster half that (36 a round) against Hopkins in a fight he lost by a wide margin.

Hopkins was not as successful in that approach with the clever Wright but still did succeed in slowing him down. CompuBox's statistics reveal against Taylor, Ike Quartey and Sam Soliman, Wright averaged 64 punches per round. In his loss to Hopkins, he was reduced to 51 1⁄2 punches per round and lost the decision. If Hopkins can do something similar to Calzaghe, say reduce his punches per round into the high 50s or even low 60s, he will have taken away his best weapon.

If Calzaghe begins to panic from being hit by unseen right hands that blunt his offense, then Hopkins can begin to go to work. But he can't do any of that if he's eating a hard right jab himself that sets Calzaghe free to throw the number of punches per round he's used to because he'll be spending too much time covering up from one flurry after another. They won't have to be hard flurries, just endless ones, for Calzaghe to do what he needs to do to win.

"I've fought better fighters, faster fighters, harder punches than Bernard Hopkins,'' Calzaghe has said several times this week. "This guy has two things going for him. He's probably the biggest name I've fought and he's the oldest. I'll give him that.''

If Joe Calzaghe intends to win his first fight in the colonies he better give Bernard Hopkins more than that. He better give him a steady diet of right jabs. And he better avoid the counter right hand that will come back at him because if he doesn't he'll look up at the end of the day like Tarver, Wright. Taylor and Felix Trinidad and have no idea why he didn't fight his fight. He'll just know he lost the one Bernard Hopkins forced him into.

"Don't be surprised when I make it look easy and I make him look amateurish,'' Hopkins said of Calzaghe. "I love a guy who punches hard because I don't have to do much work. When you fight a guy like Winky Wright you have to get the turtle out of its shell. This guy likes to fire, he likes to punch. I like that.

"He wants to throw 1000 punches in a fight. That's a 1000 times he's open to get hit. That is what will help me shine.''

Hopkins is extremely difficult to hit clean because his defense is sound and nothing happens in the ring that he hasn't seen – and countered – before. He makes adjustments throughout a fight so that what an opponent sees in the first few rounds is nothing like what he finds himself combating later in the fight, thus forcing his opponents to be thinking and recalibrating their own attacks time and again.

It is difficult to adjust, however, if an avalanche of punches are coming at you. Then again, it's hard to throw that volume of punches if whenever your hands move your opponent's right ends up in your face or in the side of your ribcage.

Hence, in the end, one thing is for certain. To be right, Joe Calzaghe and Bernard Hopkins both have to land their right. The one who does most consistently will have that hand raised when the night is over.