

CALZAGHE: Hopkins A Spoiled Little Girl

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 21 April 2008 19:00

LAS VEGAS – The black baseball cap was pulled down low on Joe Calzaghe's forehead. At least as low as it could go before running into a small range of purple lumps put there by the head of Bernard Hopkins.

The right side of his nose had a band-aid covering a few staple stitches that had been used to close a small cut and his left eye was bruised. All of these marks came from a fight but few, it seemed, from a boxing glove.

That, at least, was the opinion of the undefeated super middleweight and now RING magazine light heavyweight champion on the morning after he'd won a split decision from the 43-year-old Hopkins by weathering an early storm and a late magic act in which, Calzaghe insisted, Hopkins tried to make himself disappear.

It had been an odd night of frustration, ferocity and fear, emotions that often teem just below the surface of a major prize fight. Certainly Calzaghe felt them all at one point or another but after surviving a flash knockdown in the first round from a right hand he still had not seen, he felt he found a way to make the self-proclaimed "Executioner" do something he had never done before. He'd made Bernard Hopkins look for a way to execute himself.

"What a crap actor," Calzaghe told a small group of media gathered in his suite at Planet Hollywood last Sunday morning.

Planet Hollywood is the latest casino to venture somewhat unsuccessfully into boxing promotion, losing an estimated \$4 million to \$5 million on the fight even after the fight's promoter, Oscar De La Hoya, agreed to give back \$2 million of the site fee paid his company for delivering the event. Rumors swirling around the hotel were that both Hopkins and Calzaghe had also taken a hair cut, having their purses trimmed equally to help make up some of the short fall. One never quite knows for sure about such things because rumor is as much a part of boxing as roiling emotion and Calzaghe never addressed the issue. Though a businessman, money was not yet on his mind for even hours after his victory, he was still a fighter first.

Still a fighter fuming on this sunny Sunday at the way Hopkins had first tried to bully him and later looked, in his opinion at least, for a way out of a fight he realized might be slipping away from him in the late rounds.

"He looked like he'd been shot in the balls, not hit," Calzaghe said about Hopkins falling to the floor early in Round 10 claiming a low blow. Referee Joe Cortez gave Hopkins more than three minutes to compose himself, a break Calzaghe felt he didn't deserve but sorely needed. To be fair, it seemed perhaps Cortez agreed with Calzaghe's point of few to some extent because he refused to take a point away from him either then, or later, when Hopkins tried to claim he'd been hit low again.

CALZAGHE: Hopkins A Spoiled Little Girl

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 21 April 2008 19:00

“At the end of the day he got beat,” said Calzaghe (45-0), an edge of irritation still in his voice. “What can he say? An American referee didn’t take a point away. Those were phantom low blows. He was faking then. All he did was go backwards and try to steal the fight.

“To be honest, I did hit him in the balls in the second round. THAT was proper deliberate. He’d knocked me down (in round 1) so I had to give him a dig, didn’t I? But the 10th – that was a lie, that one.”

What Calzaghe feared at that late juncture was that the Big Lie might soon follow it. The kind of lie that has too often turned fights of this magnitude into gross inequities that turn off fans and reduce the sport to one filled with Doubting Thomases. Or, in this case, Doubting Joes.

“I was worried they might say he couldn’t continue and we’d get a technical draw or something,” Calzaghe said. “He was so knackered (tired). I could tell he needed a rest.

“He’s a cheat. He took three minutes off when I didn’t touch him and he needed a rest. Cortez should have been firmer. Hopkins is just a spoiled little girl, isn’t he?

“I felt all along he was all mouth. He’s a bully and they don’t like being bullied (back). He was a bit surprised when I roughed him up and gave him a bit of his own medicine.”

How one prepares to do that to such an opponent was part of the difficulty for Calzaghe. The former middleweight and light heavyweight champion is well known as a slick inside fighter who not only knows well the Marquis of Queensbury rules but more importantly how to circumvent them. To get ready for such a man, Calzaghe said, presents its own unique training problems not easily solved by sparring partners or strategy sessions.

“You don’t prepare for it,” Calzaghe said of Hopkins’ sometimes borderline tactics. “You can’t get sparring partners to come in and use their head (butt) on you or use rough tactics.”

According to Calzaghe, the process of preparation must be handled in other ways and at other times. For him, that process began at the weigh-in, when he refused to back down from Hopkins’ cold stare. At one point Hopkins said, “I’m gonna take you to D block,” a reference to the block at Graterford Prison, where Hopkins spent nearly five years of his young life that is reserved for the most incorrigible of inmates.

Such talk might have caused anxiety to some opponents but after leaving the stage Calzaghe turned to a friend and asked, “What the f*%^ is D block?” So much for intimidating a man from the hard Welsh countryside.

“I could tell at the weigh-in he was worried,” Calzaghe claimed. “I said to him, ‘This is your last fight. This is the end for you now.’ He didn’t say anything at all.”

Sitting relaxed in the way victory and an \$8 million payday can make a man, Calzaghe smiled mischievously when asked if Hopkins had talked to him during the fight when they were at close quarters.

CALZAGHE: Hopkins A Spoiled Little Girl

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 21 April 2008 19:00

“Nah...well, he said ‘Ow,’” the new linear light heavyweight champion remarked. The room exploded, laughter with a British accent resounding off the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. “At the end of the day he held for most of the fight. If I didn’t try to make the fight there would have been no fight.

“I’m one of the few (British) fighters to come over here (to America) and win. I’ve achieved more in my last two fights than in the last 10 years. I beat Mikkel Kessler to become undisputed super middleweight champion and I came to America and beat a so-called legend.

“There’s not much else for me to accomplish. Maybe one more fight but every time I say one more fight it’s two more fights. Let’s just say this is my last year. After 25 years in boxing, at the end of the day, it’s time to cash it in.”

Frank Warren, who has directed Calzaghe as both his manager and promoter for much of his career, said later it is unlikely he will fight twice more before the end of the year and so is leaning toward one final big night in London or Cardiff, Wales in a showdown with aging Roy Jones, Jr.

Calzaghe would be well content with that. When asked if he might be willing to slip in a fight with Felix Trinidad first he smirked and said, “Ah, why? He just got his ass kicked by Roy Jones.”

If Calzaghe and Warren could find a way to convince middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik to move up in weight however, both would love to accommodate the young American power puncher, but neither believe that is likely. So that leaves Calzaghe with one last night in front of a huge crowd back on familiar soil against a guy not unlike Hopkins.

Jones is not the kind of fighter who abuses the rules in the way Hopkins has long done, but he is the same sort of aging legend. At 39, Jones is no longer what he once was just as Hopkins was not. Then again, at 36, Calzaghe would admit neither is he.

Calzaghe in fact insisted he was disappointed in his own performance against Hopkins, especially being dropped in the fight’s first minute by a sneaky right hand behind a left jab that slammed into his face and sent him skidding to the floor. He wasn’t hurt but his feelings were.

“I made a mistake,” Calzaghe said. “I knew he had a good right hand. It was a bit of a shaky start. I was disappointed by my performance. I was in great shape but I didn’t feel 100 per cent. I ain’t a robot.

“He had a style that made me not look very good. I had to force the fight and when you do that you can get caught, but by the 10th round he was really struggling bad. At the end of the day he lost.

“How many fighters retire undefeated? They don’t because they want to go on. I hope I’m smarter than that. To be undefeated for 18 years, what else is there to achieve? I’m semi-retired already.”

CALZAGHE: Hopkins A Spoiled Little Girl

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 21 April 2008 19:00

For a moment Calzaghe seemed to turn reflective. He said after the victory Saturday night he thought back to the weeks before his fight with Jeff Lacy, a one-sided assault on the then undefeated American super middleweight champion that first seemed to raise the world's consciousness concerning the Welshman's long-ignored skills.

Tormented for most of his career with bad hands, Calzaghe called Warren several weeks before that fight and said he'd injured his wrist and wanted to pull out. That had become the biggest criticism of him at that juncture of his career: that he was an injury-prone warrior reluctant to fight when not feeling in fine fettle.

Warren said he would never have tried to force Calzaghe to fight against his will but said he cautioned him, making clear that if the fight did not come off as scheduled it would very likely not be made later and his career and reputation would suffer the consequences.

"For years never getting the big fights and then beating Hopkins here brings you back," Calzaghe said. "I was thinking about if I'd pulled out of the Lacy fight what might have happened."

Warren, sitting next to him, nodded knowingly before saying, "That was the real crunch time in Joe's career. I spoke with him on the phone. I'd never insist he fight if he was hurt but he needed to hear (the consequences of not fighting).

"All those years we'd tried to get Bernard Hopkins, Roy Jones. It's a great feeling to be in this position now."

It is a position Joe Calzaghe won't soon forget. A position Bernard Hopkins promised him he'd never be in. Promised, frankly, in the most vile and ungracious way.

Last December, Hopkins briefly tried to turn the fight into a commentary on race relations but Calzaghe refused to respond. Even after it was over and his hand was raised Calzaghe initially did not acknowledge the ugliness that had flowed like an angry sea, at least in the U.S., just below the surface of the fight because of Hopkins' promise that he would "never lose to a white boy."

When Hopkins refused to give him any credit for his victory even after the fight however, Calzaghe could take it no longer. As Hopkins continued to insist he had not lost but been victimized by myopic judges and boxing politics, Calzaghe finally snapped, "You lost to a white boy, man!" he stated firmly as Hopkins stood at the podium.

Three times he said it, a hard edge to his words, as Hopkins turned and left without responding. The next day, sitting with a small group of familiar faces in his suite, Joe Calzaghe brought it up again without being asked. For months he had insisted Hopkins' remark had not bothered him and maybe it hadn't. But it hadn't been forgotten either. Not even sweet victory could yet do that.

"At the end of the day, he got his ass kicked by a white guy," he said again with obvious

CALZAGHE: Hopkins A Spoiled Little Girl

Written by Ron Borges
Monday, 21 April 2008 19:00

satisfaction.

Then Joe Calzaghe smiled.