

HOPKINS Says Saturday Could Be Last Fight

Written by Rick Folstad

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The old quote machine still hasn't saddled up and trotted off into the sunset of a legendary career.

Despite what the calendar and his hand speed might tell him, Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins isn't ready to walk away from the best job he's had since they let him out of the hoosegow.

And who can blame him? After 20 years and 54 fights, it's got to be tough to suddenly go cold turkey. It's like quitting chocolate. It's not healthy for you, but that's not going to keep you from reaching into the candy jar again and again.

Maybe the only way some fighters retire is when it's the only choice they have.

At 43, Hopkins still has some fight left in him. Or at least that's what he keeps telling us. We'll know a lot more on Saturday night when he fights undefeated knockout artist Kelly Pavlik at Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall (HBO, pay-per-view).

It's a non-title bout at a catch weight of 170 pounds, which is somewhere between super-middleweight and two extra helpings of pie and ice cream.

If Hopkins' fighting skills have slipped, his gift for delivering a sermon hasn't. He still knows how to lecture, how to orate, how to keep everything in perspective by referring to himself in the third person. Which he does a lot.

But that's always been Hopkins' way. Preacher, ex-con, philosopher, fighter - you get to choose which Hopkins you'll remember best when he finally does ride off.

"My motivation (for still fighting) is back pay," Hopkins said on a recent conference call. "I'm a late bloomer in everything in boxing. If you look at my history the last five years have been a blessing for Bernard Hopkins and his family and it reflects that I've done well. I've made some great investments."

Bet on it.

Back pay might be an excuse to fight, but it doesn't sound like a motivator. You have to figure Hopkins has enough tucked away to survive the winter.

Apparently, he wants to keep his current position because he doesn't believe he's over the hill yet, and few other lines of work offer the kind of paycheck he's used to cashing.

Besides, no one has given him a reason to consider quitting. Yeah, he's lost three of his last five fights, but he was not much more than a flip-of-the-coin away from winning all three. And the

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losses were against two of the best fighters in the world - Jermain Taylor and Joe Calzaghe. Win a few close rounds here and there and he's still the middleweight champ of the world.

"If I'm not the same person I was in 2001," he said. "Then I want someone to prove it by putting me on my (butt), by making me look like I shouldn't be in the ring."

Pavlik has the opportunity. He knows dropping Hopkins even for an eight-count would put him in lofty company, up there all alone with a guy named Segie.

In all his fights, Hopkins has only been on the canvas twice, and that was in the same fight against Segundo Mercado almost 14 years ago. Since then, the only time he's been on his butt is between rounds.

"(Dropping) Hopkins would be a huge statement," Pavlik said. "I mean, he's never been stopped. How good a chin does he have?"

How good a right hand do you have?

If this does turn out to be Hopkins' farewell fight, he's going to be missed by those of us who have gotten used to listening to him expound on what it's like to be an ex-con, to live in Philadelphia, to fight for two decades, to be cheered in a parade through downtown Philly, and to fight at a level few fighters will ever reach. We'll even miss Bernard Hopkins always saying "Bernard Hopkins."

Finally, asked if his fight with Pavlik might possibly be his last, Hopkins bobbed and weaved his way around the question.

"Anything is possible," he said. "It's possible that it won't be my last fight and it's possible that it will be my last fight. At 43 - and again, I'm going to use what most people always remind me of, my age - I don't plan for boxing in the future, I just plan to fight in the historic big fights that mean something.

"Enjoy me while I'm here. Enjoy (Saturday) with Kelly Pavlik. Enjoy that night. And then, if Bernard Hopkins feels that he wants to come back and do something after the victory, then we'll deal with that."

Better take a look, Bernard. The sun is almost setting.