

If You Think Bad, Bad Will Happen To You

Written by Ron Borges

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ATLANTIC CITY – Bernard Hopkins needs some convincing and there's only one man who can do it.

Try as they might the media will never convince Hopkins of anything and neither will his closest advisors, his friends or the prison guards at Graterford Prison who in 1988 told him they'd see him back in six months.

They're still waiting and Hopkins is too but what he's waiting for is for someone to do to him what no boxer has yet – which is give him the kind of beating that makes him feel inadequate.

Many boxing insiders, including those who like Hopkins, quietly fear that may finally happen Saturday night at Boardwalk Hall, the tattered old Atlantic City arena where Hopkins began his career almost 20 years ago to the day.

That night he lost to a light heavyweight named Clinton Mitchell. Saturday he will step in against undefeated middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik but not at the division's 160-pound limit. He will fight Pavlik at 170 pounds, basically the lower edge of the light heavyweight division, and if one believes in either omens or closure it would be easy to think it is ending where it started for Hopkins - in a ring in Atlantic City fighting above his best weight.

Believe that if you want, and many people do including his former trainer, Freddie Roach, who has made clear he fears for Hopkins' long-term health if he continues to put himself in such challenging positions. At least one man does not however, even though he's a 5-1 underdog in the eyes of Las Vegas oddsmakers.

Hopkins, as stubborn today as he was the day he told those guards he would not be back and made good on that pledge despite the difficulties inherent in walking off seven years of parole for strong-armed robbery, says otherwise. He looks at Pavlik (34-0, 30 KO) and sees opportunity knocking where others see only hard knocks from a 26-year-old puncher who comes to the arena to do only one thing – throw all night, every night. Where others see disaster, he sees opportunity.

"If I'm not the same person I was in 2001 (when he exposed and then destroyed Felix Trinidad) then I want someone to prove that by putting me on my ass," Hopkins (48-5, 32) snapped. "Someone making me look like I shouldn't be in the ring.

"I haven't heard a credible writer say that. I haven't heard someone who is of credibility and that I respect and that the boxing world respects say that. If you think about bad, bad will happen to you. If you think about whether you can do it or you can't do it that becomes another burden on you.

"I don't need that in my life. The only thing I need to know is can I prepare myself mentally and

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physically to do battle and I say 'Yes!'"

The 43-year-old former middleweight and light heavyweight champion successfully defended the 160-pound title a record 20 times during a 10-year reign but has lost three of his last five fights, winning only when facing opponents nearly as old as he was. Yet even in decline he has remained tightly competitive with everyone and arguably did no worse than split against the man who dethroned him, Jermain Taylor, and he dropped undefeated super middleweight champion Joe Calzaghe in the opening minutes of their April confrontation.

Calzaghe won a close decision that night as it appeared Hopkins faded late in the fight for the first time so concerns have grown that one of the best middleweights of his time had finally seen his better days. That feeling is why the reaction to his decision to challenge the 26-year-old Pavlik at 170 pounds has been so universally fraught with worry, especially from Roach.

"Freddie Roach is a guy that is in the top three trainers in the world," Hopkins said. "I had mad respect for Freddie Roach and I still do. Dealing with a guy that's 34-0 with 30 knockouts, I mean he's concerned about me and there are a lot of other people concerned about Bernard Hopkins. But I'll be okay. I'm not a fool. I'm a thinker and I am a guy that will take the big challenges and show people I've been down this road before.

"People are going to see an expert at his craft doing what he does best and it's going to expose a lot of things that Kelly Pavlik's going to have to work on. Kelly Pavlik is the perfect opponent for me."

Certainly there was a time when that would be fair to say for Hopkins has exposed the flaws and failures of many bold, young fighters. He did it to Trinidad, Taylor, Robert Allen, Oscar De La Hoya and even a guy no one remembers any more named Joe Lipsey, who was 25-0 and full of promise the night he faced Hopkins 12 years ago but was beaten so badly he never fought again.

With all that history Hopkins of course believes Pavlik is just another on a list of young men who have no idea what they're coming up against. He may, to an extent, be right about that but the larger question is whether or not Hopkins is still the man he thinks he is.

That question will not be answered until some time Saturday night, a time when it will be too late for either of them to change anything. Certainly Hopkins is the slickest fighter Pavlik has ever faced and the most experienced. He is a hard man in a hard profession, a man who looks at Pavlik and is not blind to his skills and his power and his youth but who sees things there that others do not.

"He's perfect for me because he comes forward," Hopkins insisted. "He comes to fight. He wants to knock Bernard Hopkins out. At least that's what he says. But he's going to find it difficult and that's going to change the fight, I guarantee you. If Kelly Pavlik thinks he's going to beat Bernard Hopkins because he has a right hand he's a damn fool.

"I respect Kelly Pavlik. Even though I talk trash to a fighter I say what I feel. That doesn't mean I

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don't respect him. But everybody has weaknesses. There is no perfect fighter and never will be.

"When I punch I leave myself open. When Kelly Pavlik punches he leaves himself open. Every time you throw a punch you leave yourself vulnerable to get countered. It's who counters first and who gets there (that carries the night).

"You've got an offensive guy and a defensive guy. That's the perfect match. You got a guy who comes forward and a guy that specializes in guys coming forward so he can let them punch so he can punch. That's been my game.

"The Mack truck is coming and can Bernard Hopkins derail the Mack truck? I say I will flatten the tires (first). It will slow up and then it will conk out."

Either that or Bernard Hopkins will need a wrecker to take him home from the arena this time.