

## Halloween's Early For Hobgoblin Hopkins

Written by Bernard Fernandez  
Sunday, 19 October 2008 19:00

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ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.-- It is that time of year. The late-October autumn air on the East Coast is crisp and cool, and throughout America kids are looking forward to trick-or-treat. Go into any neighborhood and you'll see jack-o-lantern faces carved into pumpkins, ghosts fashioned out of old bedsheets hanging from tree branches, cardboard witches taped to front doors.

Only two of Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins' 55 professional bouts have taken place in October, but in a very real sense this is his special time, too. Why? Because he is boxing's equivalent of Michael Myers, the impossible-to-kill night stalker of all those "Halloween" movies, the bogeyman who offed an inordinately high number of unsuspecting teenagers and routinely transformed Jamie Lee Curtis into a screaming, quivering mass of terrified victimhood.

Saturday night, in that haunted mausoleum known as Boardwalk Hall where he has done some of his best work, boxing's ageless hobgoblin again came out of the shadows to spoil someone else's party. This time it was the much-younger Kelly Pavlik --OK, so he isn't exactly a teenager--who was executed. And that grimacing older fellow playing the role of Jamie Lee Curtis was Top Rank founder Bob Arum, who didn't shriek out loud but looked like he just had swallowed a whole mess of something foul-tasting. Hopkins' ridiculously easy, 12-round unanimous decision over Pavlik hadn't followed the predicted script that called for him to finally be battered senseless and forever dragged from his bully pulpit.

"At least (Pavlik) gets to keep his titles," a glum Arum said of Pavlik's retention of his WBC and WBO middleweight belts that were not on the line in the 170-pound catchweight bout.

When will they ever learn? Arum has been bewitched, bothered and bewildered by Hopkins before. A few years ago, when Arum still had some promotional dibs on his once-favorite cash cow, Oscar De La Hoya, he promoted a Las Vegas doubleheader in which the Golden Boy and Hopkins were featured in separate bouts. The idea was that De La Hoya would remain loyal, Hopkins would also join the Top Rank fold and everyone would profit nicely from the arrangement. But De La Hoya formed his own company, took Hopkins with him and Arum, who can hold a grudge with the best of them, was left to simmer longer than Grandma's home-made soup.

Of course, Hopkins has had that effect of any number of exasperated promoters who have tried to make him toe their company line. This guy not only marches to the tune of his own drummer, he has his own percussion section. Butch Lewis can't string together five or six words, when speaking about Hopkins, that do not include at least one expletive. Try as he might, even Don King never could bring B-Hop to heel. Lou DiBella still bristles when he thinks about what he believes to be Hopkins' acts of betrayal. And Dan Goossen regards his brief but stormy association with Hopkins as something along the lines of a Greek tragedy.

"My biggest disappointment in boxing," Goossen has often said of the pitched battles he waged with his most recalcitrant client behind the scenes. This from a guy who worked with Mike Tyson

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when Leg-Iron Mike was at or past the point of total mental meltdown.

To Hopkins' way of thinking, promoters – well, perhaps not Golden Boy, in which he is a limited partner and, at least for now, on kissy-face terms – represent boxing's power structure, which he claims is hell-bent on making fighters indentured servants with little or no charge over their own destinies. Other than beating up or embarrassing their gloved minions in the ring, there is nothing Hopkins enjoys more than tweaking the noses of those he is convinced have pooled their considerable resources to drive him from the sport.

So there Hopkins was, Michael Myers resurrected for the umpteenth time, chortling over the fact he had again rained on the parade of a perceived enemy. To the Philadelphian's way of thinking, spoiling the undefeated record of Pavlik, Top Rank's current marquee attraction, wasn't just an isolated thundershower drenching Arum's suddenly soggy operation; it was the landfall of a Category 5 hurricane capable of blowing a familiar tormentor right off the map.

"After Oscar beats (Manny) Pacquiao ... look, I don't want to wish nothing bad on anybody, but that might be the end of Top Rank," said Hopkins, who might not daydream of such an outcome but clearly would not be despondent were it to come to that.

No wonder the Arums, Lewises, Kings, DiBellas and Goossens probably offer up nightly prayers that their favorite deity, or fate, humbles Hopkins, or at least makes him grow old fast. Hasn't this codger been on the verge of retirement now since, what, the first Clinton Administration?

"A few years ago we were here (at Boardwalk Hall) with our jaws on the floor, marveling at Bernard's performance against Antonio Tarver," said Mark Taffet, the HBO Pay Per View chief. "We had a beautiful retirement party for Bernard. I still have the big banner on our 11th floor at HBO. We made a beautiful framed photograph of that fight. But here we go again.

"I think I'll ask Bernard for the \$48 (cost of) the frame. I mean, where does he go now? I can't believe anything this guy does. He continues to amaze us."

Truth be told, Hopkins is the most accomplished fortysomething fighter the world has ever seen, and the competition for that designation isn't even close. OK, so George Foreman flattened Michael Moorer to win the heavyweight championship for the second time at 45, unquestionably an inspiring feat, but Big George had lost every round until he delivered the takeout shot in Round 10, and he took terrible beatings in post-40 matchups with Alex Stewart and Axel Schulz, even though he won dubious decisions in those bouts. Archie Moore, the "Old Mongoose," was the light heavyweight champ well into his 40s, but a French-Canadian fisherman with rudimentary skills, Yvon Durelle, knocked him down *four* times, including three in the first round, in their Dec. 10, 1958, first meeting in Montreal. Hopkins has been on the canvas exactly twice in his entire career, both of those coming in his Dec. 17, 1994, matchup with Ecuodorean Segundo Mercado, in Quito, Ecuador, for the vacant IBF middleweight crown. Even those flash knockdowns probably owed more to the thin air in Quito, which is 9,350 feet above sea level, and the fact Hopkins arrived there only four days before the fight, not nearly enough time to get acclimated to the altitude, than to the power in Mercado's punches. Nonetheless, Hopkins salvaged a draw and he battered Mercado en route to a seventh-round TKO 4½ months later, in

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Landover, Md.

Almost from the time he broke through to the throne room Hopkins has busied himself making enemies, which might seem counterproductive until you examine those emotions which fuel his internal fire.

Hopkins is one of those athletes who seems happiest when he's unhappy, like tennis' John McEnroe. He doesn't get mad, he gets even. Even the slightest provocation can get Hopkins stoked, and nothing lights that particular fire like the notion he is being dismissed, disrespected or disenfranchised.

Take his Sept. 29, 2001, battle with Felix Trinidad for the undisputed middleweight championship of the world. Everybody remembers how Hopkins twice grabbed and threw down the Puerto Rican flag at open-to-the-public press conferences, but the key to his finest performance ever, or at least until the dismantling of Pavlik, was Hopkins' controlled rage at discovering that his own promoter, King, had had the Sugar Ray Robinson Trophy pre-engraved with the name of Trinidad, another King client, on it.

Like fellow paranoids Richard M. Nixon and Bobby Knight, Hopkins reads and listens to every negative thing anyone has written or said about him. He has compiled an enemies list, at least in his mind, and it pleases him greatly when those who would draw pleasure from his toppling are again left red-faced and embarrassed.

"They say Bernard is old," Hopkins said at the postfight press conference early Sunday morning. "Yes, I am. They say Bernard is finished. They ain't saying that now.

"I'm tired, man. I'm tired of proving myself to the same naysayers. Don't y'all know you motivate me? I mean, what do I got to do, kill somebody? I'm the most underrated fighter when it comes to defense, when it comes to offense, when it comes to my heart. That's why I always fight like I have to prove something."

From a technical standpoint, Pavlik – who went off as a 5-1 favorite – probably was toast once Hopkins, who studies film as if he were Roger Ebert, detected that the Youngstown, Ohio, fighter's big right hand was neutralized whenever he had to throw his payoff punch across his body. That's why B-Hop continually moved to his right. But for emotional purposes, his victory might have been assured when one Internet writer beseeched Pavlik to "do boxing a favor" and "forever free him" and other dissidents of the torture of watching Hopkins, a defensive genius, make good fighters look bad.

Trash talker supreme that he may be, nothing inspires Hopkins like being on the receiving end of a really mean-spirited insult.

So what if nine of his last 10 bouts have gone the distance, the exception being his ninth-round knockout of De La Hoya on Sept. 18, 2004? Hopkins is allowed to evolve, just as a strikeout pitcher has to resort to guile as he loses steam off his fastball. What we get nowadays is more a recital of chamber music than a KISS concert, but that does not detract from the fact he still

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produces classic material. Asked what it was that Pavlik found troubling about Hopkins' unorthodox style, Pavlik's trainer, Jack Loew, said, "Kelly had trouble adjusting to everything."

If Hopkins has his way – and, gee, doesn't it seem as if that happens quite a bit at this late stage of the game – then another aging legend, Roy Jones Jr., will find a way to win his Nov. 8 fight with Joe Calzaghe in Madison Square Garden, paving the way for a rematch of Jones-Hopkins I, which took place way back in May 22, 1993? Jones won that fight, for the vacant IBF middleweight championship, by close but unanimous decision.

"I'd like to fight Roy Jones again before I die," Hopkins said.

Might be a long time coming. After all, everyone knows that you can't eradicate the common cockroach, Michael Myers and Bernard Hopkins.