ATLANTIC CITY – The emotion, for a moment, overwhelmed Bernard Hopkins Saturday night. Not the emotion OF the moment but rather the pent-up emotion from all the years spent fighting not only other boxers but also the doubters and the deniers and the demagogues who seemed hellbent on never acknowledging his skill or his will.

Grudgingly, after 20 years of prize fighting, at least some of his real and imagined critics had begun to concede that the former middleweight and light heavyweight champion could fight a bit, yet by the end of last week he still found himself a better than 2-1 underdog against undefeated 26-year-old middleweight title holder Kelly Pavlik. Denied once again, marginalized by media members who should have known better and minimized by odds makers who had lost betting against him so many times before yet never seemed to learn, Hopkins grew obsessed and upset. Would they simply never see who he was?

So it came as no surprise then that after Hopkins had totally undressed Pavlik for 12 rounds at Boardwalk Hall he stood on the ring apron for long minutes, staring down with arms crossed at his tormentors in the media. Then his lip began to quiver and tears began to well up in his eyes as he shouted at them, “I’m tired of proving myself!’’

Not as tired as the battered and broken Pavlik felt sitting slumped in his corner with his left eye lid sliced open, his nose bleeding, his right eye swollen and his heart broken after failing to do the same against a 43-year-old opponent he thought he was going to knock out.

Hopkins has left many men in a similarly bewildered state of mind after encountering them inside a boxing ring. He not only beats people up physically, he breaks them down mentally until, as Pavlik found himself, they are unable to perform and don’t quite know why. All they know is that they could not recognize what they had become the night they mixed with Bernard Hopkins.

“I just couldn’t get off,’’ Pavlik said after losing a lopsided 12-round decision that did not cost him his middleweight title because it was contested at a catch weight of 170 pounds but cost him much more - his confidence in himself.

“I don’t know why. It wasn’t because of Bernard’s slickness. There was just something wrong with me tonight. I couldn’t throw the double jab and I couldn’t do the things I normally can do in the ring.”

For long-time observers of Hopkins’ work, such words are not unfamiliar. Felix Trinidad was just as badly beaten and just as equally bewildered later as to how it happened. William Joppy was beaten into a silent pulp, his face resembling a gargoyle’s at the post-fight press conference.

Antonio Tarver looked much like Pavlik did Saturday night when he fought Hopkins. Unable to pull the trigger. Unable to get out of the way of Hopkins’ stinging jab and quick right hand.

Unable to find Hopkins or figure out a way to avoid him. Unable, frankly, to win if they'd fought for 12 days instead of just 12 rounds.

Pavlik (34-1) came into the ring expecting to find a defensive-minded old man in front of him. Instead he found a beehive of activity, Hopkins taking the play from him from the opening round by landing his jab, body shots and right hand counters whenever Pavlik moved too close to effectively land his jab, not only smothering his own offense but opening up Hopkins'.

Fighting at 170 pounds for the first time in his life, Pavlik seemed to move in slow motion, listless from the start and beaten to the punch time and again by Hopkins' far superior hand speed. It was like watching a clinic. Or a mugging.

That Hopkins could win was not as remarkable as the domination he exhibited, winning every round on one judge's card and all but one on another's. There was no disputing those numbers, just as there had not for long been a dispute between Pavlik and Hopkins. This was a fight for only about three rounds. After that it was assault with a dangerous weapon – the mind of a master.

Hopkins had studied Pavlik on tape for long hours, finally concluding that he did not react well or quickly enough if his opponent moved to the right, away from his right hand. In Hopkins' opinion, Pavlik was unable to punch effectively across his body and could not move his feet quickly enough to get back into proper punching range if his opponent moved away to the champion's left.

It was a small tactical advantage discovered by doing his homework and when it was coupled with Hopkins' defensive superiority, perfect timing and astute judgment of proper punching distance there was nothing left for Pavlik to do but submit. He did it slowly, like a big oil tanker slowly slipping underwater after a hole had been opened up in its stern, but in the end he was swallowed up.

"If you noticed, I spent the night going to my right, which is his left, and he couldn't handle it,'' Hopkins said. "His footing couldn't adjust going that way.

"I had to be patient and I had to be consistent to not deviate from going that way even if I didn't work on that split second or that minute. I'm a boxing student. I study tapes from the old and the new to today. He couldn't throw across his body with the right hand.''

It is his attention to such detail as much as his superior talent that has allowed Hopkins to thrive for so long and it was what allowed him to seemingly beat both time and Pavlik, defying both with arrogant aggression and astute boxing. Together it was a lethal combination for which the Youngstown middleweight had no counter measure but to accept the assault he was under until the final bell sounded and he was free to return to 160 pounds and a life without the presence of a predator like Hopkins.

But Pavlik almost didn't get to hear that last bell. After having lost both 11 rounds and his resolve, Pavlik nearly lost consciousness in the final round when Hopkins blitzed him early,

snapping his head back and buckling his knees with another right hand as he held on.

“I wanted to stop him because they have been saying I’ve been playing it safe because of my age,’’ Hopkins (49-5-1) said. “I wanted to pick it up.’’

They didn’t have to pick up Pavlik but they nearly did in those final three minutes, when Hopkins weakened his knees and then attacked Pavlik with a flurry of punches which nearly finished him. Hopkins did not get that satisfaction but there wasn’t much else he missed. He had, once again, not only won but proven so many experts wrong about him.

“I think this was the best performance of my career,’’ Hopkins said. “Styles make fights. He’s a great fighter but I knew my style and quickness was being underrated. I could feel his power but he never hit me flush because I made sure he never hit me flush. I didn’t want to get hit flush.’’

What he wanted was to hit Kelly Pavlik flush, which he did about 150 times. He hit him flush with the jab. He hit him flush to the body. Most of all he hit him flush with counter right hands that at first negated Pavlik’s jab and ultimately took it away from him completely, turning it into a pawing, open-handed defensive punch in the final three rounds that seemed more interested in catching anything that might be coming back than in doing any telling damage to his opponent.

That, in the end, is what Bernard Hopkins did best. He turned one of the sport’s most powerful punchers (30 KOs in 34 victories) into a hesitant and discouraged amateur, a graduate student amazed to suddenly realize how much he didn’t know about his chosen field.

Same could be said about the many who once again had doubted Bernard Hopkins.