

The Side Of Bernard Hopkins NOBODY Knows

Written by Phil Woolever

Tuesday, 21 October 2008 19:00

RARE AIR - Bernard Hopkins is the Fighter of the Year, unless Manny Pacquiao knocks out Oscar de la Hoya within five rounds, or unless Vitali Klitschko signs for a quick return and does the same to Nicolay Valuev.

In case either of those scenarios unfolds I'd consider a tie vote. But under any circumstances Hopkins merits top recognition after tackling Kelly Pavlik for a big loss fumble in classic Ohio State linebacker fashion, and arguably giving Joe Calzaghe enough previously unseen problems and angles to earn the nod on my biased tally and one of the official cards.

I had Hopkins beating Calzaghe, but I understand that watching on TV is nothing like being there. Still, when Bernard scored the first round knockdown I jumped off my sofa squawking, "I knew it!"

In case you haven't gathered, I'm a Hopkins fan.

Why? From a few private observations that make him special among the many top fighters I've been privileged enough to interact with. Call it displayed character.

However you look at it, in an environment that often rewards taking the safest route to a payday, Hopkins was what should be a role model of self confidence against a pair of undefeated, favored opponents. It says a lot about Hopkins's persona that he not only welcomed the assignments, but for the most part carried out both tasks to fulfilling fruition.

Hopkins is officially listed with a 75-inch reach, but taking into account everything he's managed to grasp as a boxer who embodies the term professional, you'd have to give him a proverbial mile for each centimeter. As a fighter, Hopkins has obvious character, too, but that's not what this piece is about.

It's about treating various staff persons at Desert Diamond Casino, whatever their position, like they were something special. The times Hopkins came to the desert as celebrity ambassador for Golden Boy Promotions, he went above and beyond. Through working on the Tohono O'odham Nation for 20 years I know a lot of employees or their families. Just about everyone, from security to food services, had a story about how Hopkins brightened their day.

More than that, this is about "The Executioner" hanging out with a group of multi-disabled students I know during a Tribal event far away from any media. Most of the kids, who showed up unannounced, lack physical motor skills or verbal ability. Hopkins devoted most of his attention to them. All I'm going to say is Hopkins, unpublicized, was great with them for an extended period. That type thing is hard to fake, especially around the Indians I know.

A couple days later, Hopkins was still affected by the stark reservation scenes.

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"I've seen things from Philadelphia or in prison that make me wonder what people are put here for," said Hopkins. "What governments or social programs are for. This is still the USA but it's a different world. It really makes you think."

On another night, Hopkins remembered that my daughter's dog was ill. I guess he could tell it bothered me, because later in the evening he offered an optimistic narrative on the effects of pets on people.

On a lighter note, a couple years later I ran into Hopkins during a pre-dawn workout session in an LA hotel gym. He was helping a foreign tourist, who didn't know who he was, lift weights. You'd think he was the guy's personal trainer.

Later, in a thickly cranked steam room, we talked about a wide range of subjects, from coming back after the much publicized promise to his mother to the tall, micro-bikini'd goddess at the neighboring pool.

Hopkins spoke about going into a training role after he was done fighting. We talked yoga, and Hopkins managed to keep a straight face while I attempted to balance my bloated belly in various positions.

Hopkins even offered investment advice. Considering the circles he ran with, I listened. Since my budget barely covered a car rental and I was crashing in a colleague's room, it remains an unexploited friendly gesture.

Hopkins wouldn't know me from hundreds of different faces he encounters.

That's my point. I've seen him be a decent guy to all sorts of people where there really wasn't anything in it for him. It's what makes anybody a positive participant in society.

I know enough realistic insiders who are much more familiar with Hopkins. I understand he's no saint, and I'm sure all kinds of people could list various transgressions.

I don't want to hear it. I just wanted to document my vote for Fighter of the Year.

Joe Calzaghe can wire all the PR he wants about not having to prove anything against Hopkins again. The only thing that proves to me is that Calzaghe's smart enough not to tempt such an uncertain fate twice.

Me, I'd love to see a rematch, for the selfish reason that I'll probably still be here in Europe, and I'm sure it would be an epic scene. That and I'll wager I could get some pretty decent odds on the American. At the very least, Hopkins has proved to be a worthwhile bet.

POSTSCRIPT: A closing note on classic 160 pounders is much sadder. John Peter Reiss was middleweight champion of Notre Dame in 1956, when the sport shared similar status with the gridiron. Reiss, my father in law, was killed by a stupidly stray shot from a neighboring range in Vermont, where an investigation is still pending. John, a retired English professor, was one of

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those old schoolers who always looked on the bright side of life and the sweet science. In his honor, I'm dedicating this forum to everyone I've met like Hopkins in the game, who make it easy to stay positive about the boxing scene. A pair of other good guys I'm going mention, with prayers for their health, are Chuck Bodak, Oscar's old cut man, and Willie Borchert, who was Louie "The Sharpshooter" Espinoza's manager and trainer. Regarding feedback, let's not consider subjects like Calzaghe-Hopkins 2 here. I'm hoping now is simply a good time for TSS's many thoughtful posters to look back and give a little love and tribute to anyone along the years who's done them right.