

Bernard Hopkins: He's Made Boxing Work For Him

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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I recently read some quotes former middleweight/light heavyweight champ Bernard Hopkins made to my TSS colleague Bernard Fernandez. For those unaware of the respect I have for Bernard Hopkins the man and fighter, I suggest you read what I wrote about him for thesweetscience.com

back in 2005. I've written about Hopkins from angles that have been seldom covered by the boxing press. It's remarkable the way Hopkins has conducted his life inside the ring and how he's one of the few fighters who made the game/system work for him instead of the opposite. Sadly, many great fighters have left boxing in shambles physically and financially, something that will not happen to Bernard Hopkins. He's too smart!

Hopkins said he has been attending piano recitals for his daughter, Latrece, and has arranged a \$6,000 birthday bash for her - she turns 10 on June 28 - at the American Girl doll store in Manhattan. "I missed all these things before," he told Fernandez.

It must be some feeling walking around being Bernard Hopkins with a clear head knowing all that you've accomplished. That's the way it's supposed to end for great fighters. There's not enough space here to cover all the aspects that make Bernard Hopkins so unique in full detail, so I'll try to be short.

He messed up as a teenager and ended up in prison and made the time serve him instead of him serving the time. When he was released from prison he turned pro. Without the luxury of a high profile amateur career as a springboard Hopkins worked his way up the middleweight ranks. Knowing he didn't have a TV network or corporate money behind him Hopkins understood the importance of making sure he controlled the only thing he had total control over, what happened in the ring. Therefore Bernard never let himself get out of shape and could be called upon to fight on short notice, lessening the chance of him getting knocked off and resulting in him ultimately having to turn his career business-wise over to a promoter or network. He fully understood that once he lost they'd more than likely have no use for him after that.

The thing most often missed when fans and writers look at Hopkins the fighter is, just how high his boxing acumen is pertaining to the business side of boxing and how it's run. Hopkins learned this himself after making a few mistakes early in his career via his dealings with different promoters and managers.

Another hurdle Hopkins had to clear was the fact that he fought a style that couldn't be perceived as eye candy for the average boxing fans, thus making him less appealing to the television networks known for broadcasting boxing. A lot of boxing fans, not all, but a lot don't appreciate Hopkins' style and all the subtle things he did in the ring. It's easy to identify what makes flashier fighters like a Roy Jones unique or big punchers like Thomas Hearn and Julian Jackson with their single shot knockouts. Whereas Hopkins was a mechanic in the ring and great at taking away his opponent's best weapon and forcing them to fight from their weakness most of the time. Hopkins could attack if the opponent wanted box or he could counterpunch and

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take the bullets out of an opponents gun who was trying to induce a street fight and go to war with him.

When it comes to mental and physical toughness Hopkins is on par with any fighter in history. On top of that he was great at getting inside his opponent's head and breaking them down mentally during the fight. I remember him saying before he signed to fight Oscar De LaHoya that he had no doubt that Oscar would agree to fight him. Bernard sensed that Oscar was looking for a fight to boost his legacy, and beating him would cover and excuse De LaHoya's losses to Trinidad and Mosley.

Think about where Hopkins came from and picture him at his daughter's birthday party pondering his career body of work. The guy held and defended the middleweight title more than any other middleweight champ in history. And please, don't even think about retorting that he did it versus welterweights moving up to challenge him. Boxing history is replete with all-time great middleweight champs defending their title against welterweights moving up. Didn't Marvin Hagler lose his title to a former undisputed welterweight champ?

After a ten year reign as middleweight champ Hopkins lost two controversial decisions at age 40 to his former advisor's fighter, Jermain Taylor. Here it is four years later and Hopkins has been stopped two times less in his career than Taylor has been since their last fight. Since losing to Taylor, Hopkins took apart the fighter who basically ended Roy Jones' title tenure in Antonio Tarver, in the process winning the light heavyweight title; this is a claim that neither all-time greats Carlos Monzon or Marvin Hagler attempted to do. That's not a shot at Monzon or Hagler, I realize Bob Foster and Michael Spinks were greater fighters than Antonio Tarver, it's just they never ventured outside of their division and Hopkins did.

As of this writing Bernard Hopkins is five months out from his 45th birthday, and he's probably the best light heavyweight in the world. The last two times he's fought he lost a decision to undefeated Joe Calzaghe who retired undefeated. I thought Hopkins controlled the fight with Calzaghe more than Calzaghe did. Bernard had Joe down and made him look much less than the terrific fighter he was. In his next fight he totally undressed lineal middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik, fighting at a catch-weight of 170 pounds.

Now in the twilight of career and his legacy secure, Hopkins is only interested in big money fights or ones that will dramatically add to his stellar legacy. Basically, Hopkins is playing with house money in that at age 44/45 suffering a one-sided defeat can't hurt his image or historical significance, and a win over a Tomasz Adamek or David Haye would not only add to his wealth, but add to his status as an all-time great by leaps and bounds.

Right now Bernard Hopkins can call the shots in the direction his career takes, something he's been doing for awhile. Basically, he's promoting himself and not paying a manager. How many fighters are on that list in boxing history? He's in a unique position and it didn't happen by chance, it was thought out and planned. The only thing that wasn't planned is the fact that Hopkins whether or not he fights again or retires, is already the most successful older fighter in boxing history. And it goes without say that if he fights again, it'll be a fight in which he deems it the right fight. In other words he'll get paid some additional millions, won't get physically hurt,

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and if he loses he certainly won't get his butt kicked or take a beating, something that has never happened to him in his career.

It's highly unlikely that when Hopkins is in his mid to late fifties that we'll see him afflicted with the ill health so many other great fighters suffered during their later years. Hopkins closed his conversation with Bernard Fernandez saying, "I'm at peace. I would love to stick around for another fight or two, but if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen."

Make no mistake about it, Bernard Hopkins made boxing work for him instead of him being forever indebted to it. That's the way it's supposed to end but usually does not. All time great fighters should strive to leave boxing with their health, wealth and respect. In the case of Bernard Hopkins, he'll even have the wherewithal to enjoy and spend his money.

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