

What A Difference 17 Years Makes

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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For the purposes of establishing a historical perspective, let us take a journey back in time to 1993.

Federal agents besieged the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, initiating a bloody, fiery confrontation that left six G-men and 72 cultists dead ... South Africa adopted majority rule, effectively ending apartheid ... The median U.S. household income was \$31,241, and unemployment was at 6.9 percent ... An Israeli-Palestinian accord was reached (but, alas, not for long) ... The Best-Picture Oscar went to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, the Best-Song Grammy to Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* ... A 13-year-old boy accused Michael Jackson of fondling him, with an out-of-court settlement reached ... The Cowboys trounced the Bills in Super Bowl XXVII, the Blue Jays beat the Phillies, four games to two, in the World Series ... Actress Audrey Hepburn, jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie, Italian director Federico Fellini and iconoclastic rocker Frank Zappa bade farewell to this mortal coil.

In boxing, the big news that year was Evander Holyfield regaining the unified heavyweight championship by outpointing Riddick Bowe in the second of their three classic matchups, the "Fan Man" bout at Caesars Palace. And for fight fans who believe that good things really do come in small packages, there was Michael Carbajal twice coming off the floor to knock out Humberto Gonzalez in seven rounds to unify the junior flyweight title.

Look around at what's happening today and one might conclude that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Evander Holyfield slogs on at 47 and is prepping for a January showdown with 41-year-old Francois Botha for a meaningless trinket, Botha's WBF heavyweight belt, in Kampala, Uganda. Clint Eastwood continues to make good movies, Eric Clapton to strum that ax as few ever have, and we're still talking about the national unemployment average and the late Michael Jackson. The Phillies were in the World Series again this year and South Africa is going to host soccer's World Cup.

And, in advance of one of the longest-delayed rematches boxing fans have ever waited upon, Roy Jones Jr. and Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins participate in separate, Versus-televised bouts Wednesday at different sites around the globe. Should Jones (54-5, 40 KOs) snare the IBO International cruiserweight title held by Danny Green (27-3, 24 KOs) – that fight actually takes place in Sydney, Australia, on Thursday afternoon, allowing for the crossing of the International Date Line – and Hopkins (49-5-1, 32 KOs) gets past Mexico's Enrique Ornelas (29-5, 19 KOs) at the Liacouras Center in Philadelphia, the two aging legends would vie for profit and legacy on March 13, 2010, at the MGM Grand.

Jones and Hopkins are sure-fire first-ballot inductees into the International Boxing Hall of Fame whenever they become retired long enough to qualify to induction, which could be some time down the road given each man's disinclination to acknowledge the date on his birth certificate or

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to surrender the spotlight. The hype machine already is turned on high for Jones-Hopkins II, with representatives of both fighters breathlessly extolling the fighters' age-defying skills and fact that they've been posturing at one another since the second year of the Clinton administration. The Israelis and Palestinians might have made peace for a little while, but RJ and B-Hop never really did.

"I think it's a big fight, a super fight," said Richard Schaefer, CEO of Golden Boy Promotions, which handles Hopkins. "I believe it is a fight the American public will embrace. Both of these guys are superstars. They're ring royalty.

"At this point both Bernard and Roy realize this is the fight people want to see. They don't want to see Bernard Hopkins fight anybody else, and they don't want to see Roy Jones fight anybody else."

There is, of course, a chance that neither man will do what's necessary to keep the appointed date. Jones is fighting out of the United States for the first time since he got jobbed out of the gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, so you have to wonder if the scoring Down Under, if the outcome goes to a decision, could possibly be as scandalous as the home-nation nod that went to the South Korean, Park Si-Hun, Jones punched lopsided in the Olympic final. Hopkins isn't as likely to be victimized by pencil, but Ornelas has a hard enough punch that the possibility of his landing a wild shot can't be dismissed.

So what happens if Jones and Hopkins win as expected? Can their rematch be as big or bigger than their initial confrontation, which took place on May 25, 1993, at Washington's RFK Stadium?

Quite frankly, the fight and the buildup should be greater than the original which, lest anyone forget, was an undercard bout in support of WBA/IBF heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe's defense against lottery winner Jesse Ferguson. Jones, marked for greatness since his star turn at the Olympics, had not yet achieved superstardom while Hopkins, not far removed from his hardscrabble Blue Horizon days, was an up-and-comer who had yet to firmly establish his ring identity. Few could have anticipated that he would blossom into the immortal he became.

Yet fighters who have not entered their prime can engage in a highly entertaining scrap. Both Jones and Hopkins had demonstrated enough talent that there were those – myself included – who were certain they'd produce more back-and-forth fireworks than could be expected in the main event, in which Bowe was a 21-1 favorite to blow through Ferguson, whose bid for the title was solely the result of his upset of an out-of-shape Ray Mercer a few months earlier. The controversy attendant to Ferguson's victory – audio of the HBO-televized fight raised questions as to whether a desperate Mercer, during clinches, attempted to bribe Ferguson to tank – gave the pairing a sort of man-bites-dog quality.

Ferguson, a sparring partner to the stars who on his own merits barely qualified as a fringe contender, made the most of his proverbial 15 minutes of fame. When Ferguson weighed in at a taut 224 pounds, 12 fewer than for Mercer, and Bowe came in at 244, the second-heaviest poundage of his career, Ferguson's co-manager, Seth Braunstein, saw it as proof that his guy

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was ready to spring another upset.

“This is exactly where we want Riddick Bowe,” Braunstein chortled. “Less-than-perfect condition. Heaviest of his career (well, almost), soft like butter.”

Unfortunately for Ferguson, the buttery-soft Bowe packed fists of iron. He floored Ferguson with a left hook to the jaw late in the opening round. Ferguson arose at the count of nine – or maybe 11, since the official timer seemed a bit slow on the trigger – just in time to be saved by the bell.

It was but a momentary respite. Bowe rushed out to begin the second round, connected with an overhand right and Ferguson was back on the canvas. Referee Larry Hazzard counted to four, decided there was no need to go any higher, and waved off the mismatch after an elapsed time of 17 seconds.

At least Bowe’s victory, as one-sided as it was, featured a couple of knockdowns. Jones and Hopkins, for all their blustery pre-fight talk, each fought so cautiously you’d have thought they were playing chess instead of vying for the vacant IBF middleweight championship.

Hopkins, a 4-1 underdog despite coming in with a 21-1 record that included 16 victories inside the distance, was not nearly as aggressive as he’d been on his way up the ladder. Maybe that was because Hopkins, the ex-con, still thought of himself as the outsider while Jones was the guy with the big name, Olympic pedigree and HBO contract.

“I came up from the bottom of the barrel,” Hopkins had said in the days leading up to the Jones fight. “The odds are always against a guy like me. I wouldn’t know what to do if I was the favorite.

“What’s going to happen when somebody presses Jones? When somebody hurts him? Nobody’s pressed him or hurt him before. I’m going to press him. I’m going to hurt him. I want to see how he reacts.

“I don’t have a gold medal. I don’t have a silver medal. I’m just an inner-city kid who had to overcome a world of adversity. People said I wouldn’t make it to 21, but I’m still here. I was a neighborhood bully. I’d walk down the street and people would scatter. I was a good guy that went bad. Now I want to be a bad guy that went good.

“I’m damn lucky. God loves me. But you know what would really make it great? To be able to walk down the street and have people say, ‘There goes the middleweight champion of the world.’”

It didn’t happen for Hopkins that night. He lost a lackluster unanimous decision to Jones, who later claimed he was fighting with only one good hand. Whether that was true or not, Jones-Hopkins I was not a time-capsule kind of bout. We remember it not for what it was, but for what it should have been, given the subsequent successes of the combatants.

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Hopkins, of course, got a second shot at the IBF 160-pound crown on Dec. 17, 1994, when he traveled to Ecuador to take on Segundo Mercado, a scrap which ended in a draw. When they fought next, on April 29, 1995, Hopkins whacked out Mercado in seven rounds to begin a title reign that would span 10 years and a division-record 20 defenses.

The onetime street tough evolved as his status improved, smoothing some of his rougher edges as he transformed himself into a slick-boxing technician whose stoppages were more the result of accumulated damage than of full-frontal assaults. That he has remained near the top of the pound-for-pound ratings as he approaches his 45th birthday (Jan. 15) is a testament to his guile and resiliency.

But while Hopkins has reinvented himself in some ways, his disdain for Jones has remained constant. Maybe it's because he blames himself for not going after the preening Pensacola, Fla., native more aggressively, or perhaps it's because he continues to resent Olympic pretty boys who turn pro with hefty contracts, high visibility and a sense of entitlement.

The 50-50 split, which increases to 60-40 for the winner should he score a knockout, adds to Hopkins' incentive to take the kind of risks against Jones that he didn't in 1993. Besides, B-Hop now knows how Jones reacts when he's hurt. He saw Antonio Tarver and Glen Johnson drill him like Hopkins has hankered to do for these past 17 years. Revenge is a dish best served cold, and this entrée has been kept on ice for what seems like forever.

Jones also has changed somewhat. In 1993, his bravado was leavened by just a touch of humility, a perceived weakness of character he has long since erased.

"There are a lot of fighters I've tried to pattern myself after, but I admire (Muhammad) Ali the most," Jones said prior to the Hopkins showdown. "I also like Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, Howard Davis Jr., Wilfred Benitez, Marvin Hagler and (the late) Salvador Sanchez. I've taken small things from all of them. I don't try to be exactly like any of them."

The Jones of today probably would rather sew his lips together than to suggest he borrowed anything from anybody. He would have fans believe he is a creation entirely of his own making, a paragon of ring virtuosity for others to emulate rather than the other way around.

No, these are not the same fighters they were in 1993. In some ways, they're not as good, in some ways better. But if they're to go out together, at least it is in the marquee attraction and not as a preliminary.

Let's hope that Danny Green or Enrique Ornelas doesn't gum up the works.