

Have Fun, Will Travel, Says B-Hop

Written by Bernard Fernandez

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Bernard “The Executioner” Hopkins’ postfight press conferences have always had a surrealistic quality, but his musings about his past, his future, and the state of boxing in general following Wednesday’s 12-round unanimous decision over Enrique Ornelas made for an especially intriguing verbal zigzag.

Hulking basketball star Shaquille O’Neal once proclaimed himself the “Big Aristotle,” which presumably leaves room for a philosophizing Hopkins to associate himself with other ancient deep thinkers such as Socrates and Plato. How’s “Less-Large Sock-rates” grab you?

B-Hop’s unofficial degrees, of course, are from the School of Hard Knocks and University of Graterford, where the course selections include How to Avoid Getting a Shiv in the Back 101 and Advanced Theory of Kicking Some Bad Dude’s Ass in the Exercise Yard to Get Respect. Those subjects are not in the curriculum at Temple University, the North Philadelphia institution of higher learning in whose campus arena, the Liacouras Center, the 44-year-old Hopkins (50-5-1, 32 KOs) schooled Ornelas (29-6, 19 KOs), 15 years his junior, on the basic principles of the pugilistic arts. The official scorecards had Hopkins romping by margins of 120-108, 119-109 and 118-110, which is worth at least an A-minus no matter what the grading system.

“When the fourth or fifth round started coming, my engine really warmed up and I started feeling great and I let those hands go,” said Hopkins, whose unlumped face again bore no physical evidence that he’d been hit very hard or often.

Ornelas went the distance, which has to be a source of satisfaction to him even though Hopkins isn’t as much of a finisher as he once was, his streak of bouts without a stoppage now standing at eight.

“I give him a lot of credit,” Ornelas said of the old master. “He’s one of the best.”

It was a homecoming in more ways than one for Hopkins, given that Temple’s gritty North Philadelphia location is within siren distance of the high-crime “Badlands” area where many of this fighting city’s better-known boxers learn that fast fists can provide the ticket to something better than drugs, violence, desperation, death and repeat visits to the Big House. And, no, that isn’t a reference to the Liacouras Center.

Hopkins has been lecturing about the dangers of life on the street for some time now, and if you can overlook his woeful sense of geography – referring to Roy Jones Jr.’s first-round technical knockout loss to Danny Green in Sydney, Australia, he mentioned how difficult it is for American fighters to win in Europe – much of what he says makes as much sense now as it did years ago, when he a junior instructor instead of a tenured professor.

“Bernard is one of the smartest guys I know,” says Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer, the former Swiss banking executive who is a pretty bright individual in his own right.

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The plan concocted by Hopkins and Schaefer had been for B-Hop to scrape off 14 months of ring rust against Ornelas, proceed to a March 13 rematch with Jones – who outpointed Hopkins in 1993 for the vacant IBF middleweight title – and then bulk up to 203 pounds or so for a challenge of WBA heavyweight champion David Haye. As exit strategies go, every step seemed reasonable. Hopkins has said his perfect farewell to the ring wars would be to win a heavyweight title, a dream dating back several years to when he first suggested getting it on with big, strong but lumbering WBC champ Oleg Maskaev.

But the middle link in the chain was removed when Green exposed the way-over-the-hill Jones as the relic he has become since his luminescent 1990s heyday, as if most fight fans didn't know that already. All of a sudden Schaefer and HBO pay-per-view chief Mark Taffet were left to brainstorm a feasible Plan B for Hopkins, one in which a "historically significant" candidate could step in to replace Jones.

Hopkins is persistent, though, and his desire to settle that old score with RJJ remained strong despite the Pensacola, Fla., native's Blunder Down Under. The notion that he'll one day retire without opening a can of payback against Jones clearly is one he isn't willing to accept just yet.

"Being a legend, being a future Hall of Famer, I think Roy should at least have been given the benefit of the doubt," Hopkins said of Jones, who was decked by an overhand right from Green and was taking more unreturned shots than a paper target at a Marine Corps firing range when British referee Howard Foster stepped in at the 2:02 mark. "He lost on his feet, not on his back.

"(Green) was pounding away and got some shots in, but I think some of those were missing. I don't think the ref should have stopped the fight. When you have someone like Roy Jones Jr., he deserves to get the benefit of the doubt. (Joe) Calzaghe had him hurt worse than that, but they didn't stop that fight.

"I think I can still fight him."

Asked if Hopkins-Jones II is still doable, Schaefer and Taffet looked around the packed Al Shrier Media Room uncomfortably, as if they might find an answer in someone's face that would serve to mollify Hopkins. But of course they know that the idea of Jones going against Hopkins or any other top-flight fighter is now as extinct as the dodo bird, and selling such a matchup -- particularly on pay-per-view or an on-site venue – wouldn't fly even in Jones' comfort zones of Pensacola and Biloxi, Miss.

"Roy Jones Jr. is still on that list," Schaefer finally allowed in saying that representatives of eight fighters already had contacted him concerning a possible go at Hopkins. "He has not been eliminated. But Roy Jones has dropped from the top of that list to the bottom."

Which is code-speak for saying that Jones should not expect his agreement to fight B-Hop to rise from the dead like Lazarus.

Upon further review, as NFL referees are wont to say, even Hopkins more or less conceded that Jones' ship has left the dock, struck and iceberg and sank. At his best, Jones probably was

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the most gifted fighter of the last quarter-century, but his unorthodox style, which was exciting for as long as his reflexes were nearly supernatural, left him vulnerable when his reaction time began to slow, even imperceptibly. The old saying – “He does everything wrong, but it turns out right” – can be a career-killer when you continue to do everything wrong, like drop your hands to your sides and lean straight back to avoid punches – and the results start coming back wrong, too. The Jones his fans will always choose to remember fondly would not have lost to Antonio Tarver, Glen Johnson and Green, and probably not against Calzaghe, had he remained longer at the very top of his game.

“I don’t like kicking somebody when he’s down, but Roy Jones Jr. didn’t have the basics,” a more reflective Hopkins said upon his return to reality. “He didn’t need them. He was that good. But he never learned the ABCs -- basic jab, good defense, hit and not get hit.”

So how does Team Hopkins fill in the blank created by Jones taking his leave? There are several possibilities for the public to speculate about, all of which fall into one of three categories: Guys that Hopkins might want to fight but don’t necessarily want to fight him; guys that want to fight Hopkins but he doesn’t want to fight for reasons rooted in finance and legacy, and, the shortest list of all, those whose participation in such a bout would seem mutually beneficial.

Danny Green, as the guy who took down Jones, might seem a logical choice. He’s got a minor cruiser title and is the most recent man to beat the man. But consider this: Did Kevin McBride become a household name after he thrashed the remnants of Mike Tyson? Did Trevor Berbick after he beat the Muhammad Ali who stayed too long at the fair? Such a fight might make financial sense only if Hopkins traveled to Europe, uh, Australia, but Schaefer seems indisposed to take Hopkins there either literally or figuratively.

It is possible, of course, that Hopkins, who has said he would again enlist the services of noted nutritionist and physical-conditioning guru Mackie Shilstone to pack on pounds the proper way, could proceed directly to Haye. But Hopkins just ended a 14-month layoff since his Oct. 18, 2008, conquest of Kelly Pavlik and he probably isn’t disposed to sit around nearly as long while Haye fulfills his mandatory against two-time former WBA heavyweight champ John Ruiz.

Could former IBF cruiserweight titlist Tomasz Adamek, a one-time target, drift back onto Hopkins’ radar?

“The Adamek fight probably is gone,” Schaefer said. “Bernard only wants to do historically significant fights. As the cruiserweight champ, Adamek brought some historical significance to the table. Now that he’s moved up to heavyweight, I don’t that Bernard would want to fight him with no title involved.”

Undefeated light-heavy Chad Dawson probably is the name most often mentioned by fight fans, but Hopkins – who no doubt is aware that Dawson, for all his talent, has yet to establish himself as a box-office attraction _ places him in the category of not-quite-ready-for-prime-time players. In a sense, Dawson reminds Hopkins of former WBA junior middleweight champ David Reid, the 1996 Olympic gold medalist from Philadelphia who was rushed up the ladder too soon

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and flamed out.

“They’re trying to make stars out of people that can fight, but they haven’t been given a chance to blossom,” Hopkins said in what seemed like a dig at HBO’s apparent eagerness to hurry along the next batch of marquee fighters before they’ve fully mastered the nuances of the hardest sport.

“We got a microwave society. Pop, pop, pop, pop, they’re great champions. They give them belts, they give them titles, and they call them great. Don’t they understand what ‘great’ means? I just sit back and laugh. I mean, Jermain Taylor could have been great. But they fed him steak before he had all his teeth.”

So why the need to rush potentially excellent fighters into positions of prominence?

“Lack of patience. Greed. Arrogance,” said Hopkins, who said his Golden Boy partner, Shane Mosley, would use his experience to undress Andre Berto. “That’s why you have these guys falling off and not having longevity. (They don’t) learn their craft. They become a champion and can’t keep the title. I held my (middleweight) title for 10 years. Twenty defenses, man! I think what’s happening now is sad. Everybody wants that bird in the hand now, but this is a rough way to make a living. You got to train hard and live right if you want to stick around.”

Hopkins’ words might be spot-on in many cases, but kids who have been told they’re all that from the time they received their first amateur trophy don’t want to be preached to about patience. Dawson has called out Hopkins to fight him “or get out of my division,” and even out-of-left-field possibilities like identical twins Eric “Murder” Mitchell and Aaron “Homocide” Mitchell were at the Liacouras Center, sneering, “Why don’t you give a Philly guy a chance?” at their fellow homie.

The Mitchell twins are 40, which probably means they’re as fully developed as they’re ever going to be, but they come up way short for historical significance. Their odds of boogeying onto Hopkins’ dance card are roughly the same as yours or mine of hitting the Powerball lottery.

So who’s left that meets all the criteria?

“I hear Joe Calzaghe is getting the itch to fight again,” said Schaefer of the Welshman who edged Hopkins on a split decision on April 19, 2008.

But the trendy pick as Jones’ fill-in might be found north of the border, in Montreal. IBF super middleweight champion Lucian Bute, the Romanian southpaw who has become incredibly popular in his adopted home province of Quebec, is undefeated, he has a title in a division that Hopkins has never fought in and he draws like gangbusters in French-speaking Canada. Bute is coming off an emphatic, fourth-round knockout of Librado Andrade – who, coincidentally, is Enrique Ornelas’ brother – and HBO seems disposed to give him the star buildup.

Hopkins has fought only once as a pro out of this country, an experience he’d just as soon forget, but he said he can be convinced to rummage around for his passport if the opponent is

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interesting, able to add to his legacy and, of course, good for his bank account.

“I’m not afraid to go out of the country,” Hopkins said. “I been to Quito, Ecuador, in 1995. Quito, Ecuador, ain’t Hawaii. It’s a Third World country, trust me. I fought an Ecuadorean (Segundo Mercado), came off the canvas twice and got a draw.

“At this stage of my career, if they want to lure me over there for something they would check me into a mental hospital if I didn’t take it, I got no problem with it. I’ll fight anybody as long as they got a ring.

“I’m having fun, don’t get me wrong. But I’d have a lot more fun with a big check in my hand.”