Written by Michael Woods
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I'm writing a story for a special edition of ESPN Magazine on Muhammad Ali's coda, the last two fights, against Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick. We saw after Holmes owned him, and Berbick outworked him, and Ali finally figured out what most everyone knew, that his days as the Greatest were over. To his dismay, he realized he was not immortal, not immune to the lash of Father Time.

In doing research, I was looking at YouTube clips of fights toward the end of his majestic run, and I came across a clip of the Ali-Richard Dunn fight. Dunn was a no-hoper Brit, but Dick Enberg and Joe Garagiola were portraying him as someone who stood a chance of taking down Ali. Every time he lost, which was pretty often, his final mark reads 33-12, Dunn got stopped. But Enberg and Garagiola had a narrative to present, and accuracy wasn't necessarily part of that parcel. Young(ish) Larry Merchant joined the two, and back then, in May 1976, Larry was Larry. He made it clear that Ali would eat up the Yorkshire man, like pudding, and shook his head, making clear his stance, when Enberg and Garagiola played up the chances of the mega-underdog.

I cracked up, because I saw that Larry has always been Larry. He doesn't shrink from offering his opinion, even if it veers from the accepted storyline.

HBO's poet laureate chatted with TSS on Wednesday, and offered us his trademark brand of candor. The first topic we discussed was Bernard Hopkins: would the old man finally look like an old man, not a genuine athletic aberration in an age where aberrations are nearly always grounds for suspicion (re: suspicion of PED use)?

"I think Bernard is capable of making it a very rough fight," said Merchant of the Saturday night showdown in Canada pitting Hopkins against hometowner Jean Pascal, which runs on Showtime. "I think Pascal, who is favored, is capable of beating Bernard. But Bernard has a way of negating his opponents' strengths. He does that better than anyone. He has a way of stinking out the joint, and trying to have us think he's spraying perfume."

So, will he be the skunk wrecking Pascal's party on Saturday?

"If I had to bet, I'd bet the younger guy, highly motivated, the guy fighting at home."

Agreed..I've seen slippage in Hopkins in his last two fights, and though Pascal isn't in his league, peak versus peak, he will be able to out-busy (is that a word? It is now, LOL) Bernard and perhaps inject some ugly reality into Hopkins of the variety Ali felt in the Bahamas in 1981. Then again, we'd not be surprised if he pulled it off; as Richard Schaefer has said, you'd be a fool to bet against Bernard.

Merchant also weighed in on the topic of Pacquiao, his next foe, and the likelihood that Shane Mosley, at 39 waaay past his prime, and 2-2-1 in his last five outings, will get the gig.

Will the public buy Mosley as a plausible foe, I asked Merchant?

"How about Pacquiao against Clottey, is that sellable?" he answered rhetorically. "Pacquiao is one of those guys to transcend boxing. A certain number of people will watch his next fight, regardless of who he's fighting. He's critic proof, no matter what you say about an opponent who (may not be worthy). His fights are an event, the way you used to think of the heavyweight division. I saw Beyonce talking about Pacquiao on TV, how he carries himself!"

So, is he down with Mosley getting the nod as the next lottery winner, er, opponent for the Congressman?

"In my view I think Marquez has earned the shot, and it's interesting that they've moved the date to Cinco de Mayo," he said. "The narrative is there, the story of the first two fights, and his last two fights, that said, it doesn't mean it would be the best fight. But in terms of narrative, hey Marquez is more fun for everybody. But after the bell rings, you don't know."

Merchant offered some inside dope on Team Manny. "I can tell you that inside the Pacquiao camp, they think Mosley is the most dangerous of the three foes on the short list (Marquez, Mosley, Andre Berto)."

Merchant asked me what I thought Mosley vs Katsidis would look like, to compare the worth of Mosley and Katsidis. Marquez as we know stopped Katsidis in round nine on Nov. 27. I told him I thought Mosley was just about fully shot. "In my mind, Mosley would stop Katsidis, and maybe Marquez too," Merchant said. "When guys come straight to him, he can still fight."

Interesting point; in his last two outings, both quite subpar, Mosley faced cuties, Mayweather and Sergio Mora. That didn't play to his strengths, it could be argued.

Merchant says we shouldn't really factor in his lack of effectiveness against Mora, as "Mora is a stinkout artist."

"It's a given a veteran fighter can look ten years younger against a guy who comes at him, and ten years older against a mover," the analyst said, while acknowledging the frustration of fans who share my take, that Mosley can't transfer his still considerable will into a performance that will test Manny.

Ah, but Pacquiao can make a guy look like a 12 year old who just tried on the gloves for the first time, or a 60 year old better suited for a leisurely stroll on a treadmill than a severe test against the hurricanesque Filipino.

Larry still gives the California based vet a shot, if he gets the slot. "If Mosley can take a shot as good as Margarito, and he always had a great jaw, he still has more weapons than Margarito. That's their (the promoters' and Team Pacquiao's) thinking.

Word to the wise...Ali's ability to take a punch was cited by most everyone who gave him a hint of chance against Holmes in 1980. And we all know how that went..

Happy holidays, Larry, thanks for taking the time to share your opinions and knowledge with TSS Universe.

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