

Hopkins Celebrates 49th B-Day, Looks To Stay Champ Til 50

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Friday, 17 January 2014 13:45



Very few of us are as obsessive-compulsive as Adrian Monk, the fussy and fastidious detective with multiple phobias played by three-time Emmy Award winner Tony Shalhoub in the hit TV series *Monk*. But a lot of people have a thing for nice, round numbers, and IBF light heavyweight champion Bernard Hopkins, who celebrated his 49th birthday on Wednesday, admits to being one of those.

“I do that,” Hopkins admitted when asked if he’s inclined to pump in another three cents of gasoline into his car after it has been filled and the pump reading is, say, \$49.97.

Hopkins (54-6-2, 32 KOs) has been a graybeard, figuratively speaking, for at least a decade, and now he qualifies for that designation in the literal sense. In meeting with the media on his latest special day at the Joe Hand Boxing Gym in Philadelphia, B-Hop’s chin whiskers were decidedly more salt than pepper. And that’s quite all right with the oldest boxer ever to win and hold a widely recognized world title, and who views his ridiculously advanced age in a young man’s sport as a mark of distinction that might never be matched or surpassed.

“I’ve been looking at these gray hairs that been popping up for these last 10 years, but even more now,” said a smiling Hopkins, embracing the deepening of his advance into middle age. “I keep saying to myself, ‘Man, I’m almost 50.’ I should be saying, ‘You’re 49 first. Enjoy 49 while you can.’ But I can’t help but look ahead to that five-oh. Who, as an athlete, would even dream that? I’m still active, still relevant. Very much relevant.”

If all goes according to plan – and at Hopkins’ age, there is always the possibility that plan could change quickly and perhaps irrevocably on any given fight night – he will take unto himself another slice of the 175-pound championship pie in a unification bout with WBA champ Beibut Shumenov (14-1, 9 KOs), probably in April. Like Hopkins, the 30-year-old Shumenov, a native

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of Kazakhstan who now resides in Las Vegas, is part of the Golden Boy promotional stable, so that pairing figures to be relatively easy to put together.

And should Hopkins defeat Shumenov, as he has any number of much younger fighters who believed the old man surely had to be running on empty? Well, he said he wants to take on the survivor of another anticipated light heavyweight unification showdown, between WBC titlist Adonis Stevenson (23-1, 20 KOs) and WBO ruler Sergey Kovalev (23-0, 21 KOs), for the right to be hailed as the undisputed champion of the division. It is a distinction Hopkins held when he defeated Felix Trinidad on Sept. 29, 2001, to fully unify the middleweight crown.

Making Hopkins-Stevenson or Hopkins-Kovalev wouldn't be quite so simple, given the frosty and mostly non-existent relationship between Showtime, which has aligned itself with Golden Boy and thus Hopkins, and HBO, which has dibs on Stevenson and Kovalev. But Hopkins, maybe voicing his own birthday wish, said he anticipates a thaw in the HBO/Showtime Cold War.

"I'm going to have two belts," said Hopkins, apparently convinced that Shumenov will tumble into the crafty master's trick bag as readily as had his two most recent victims, Karo Murat and Tavoris Cloud. All the reporters will say, 'Well, Adonis Stevenson (who has called out Hopkins) beat the man (Chad Dawson) who beat the man (Hopkins),' and that's true. But the fans are going to want to see us fight each other.

"Look, Stevenson (B-Hop's pick to defeat Kovalev, if and when such a matchup occurs) and Kovalev are going to fight because HBO is going to make them fight. HBO just signed Kovalev to a three-fight deal. I'm going to be there when the Cold War ends, and who knows, it could end tomorrow. If I have two belts, people are going to want to see me fight the other guy with two belts. Rarely in the sport of boxing do you become undisputed. How historic would it be for me to become undisputed light heavyweight champion of the world at almost 50? You'd have to put me in a different history book."

Hopkins said he wouldn't even have to "bang that drum," because the louder banging would probably be done by the Stevenson-Kovalev winner.

"I want to be the best and I want all the belts," continued Hopkins, who has yet to be stopped or

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even be on the wrong end of a major beatdown during his legendary, 25-year pro career. “They (Stevenson or Kovalev) can leave over there (HBO) and come over here (Showtime). Or I can leave and go over there, which I already went on record as saying I would do, if it came to that. But I’m in it. I’m relevant. I don’t *need* those guys to legitimize my career. But if either of them were to beat Bernard Hopkins and do what they’ve been doing to 80 percent of their opponents, which is knocking them out, he’d be an instant star by doing something that’s never been done.

“You hear about these big punchers, and they might have a point. But the end of the day they’re gonna be cautious about how boldly they say it. I’m ready to walk that tightrope with no net. I’ve done that all my life.”

It is a life that Hopkins never expected would be where it is now, and not just that part of it that takes place inside the ring. Remember, Hopkins served 56 months on a strong-arm robbery conviction that strongly hinted at a brief, violent and unglorious end.

Asked if he could even have dared to dream that he would become what he has back on Oct. 11, 1988, when he made his pro debut in losing a four-rounder to one Clinton Mitchell in Atlantic City, Hopkins shook his shaved head and said, “No. Who can plan that far ahead, anyway? I remember when I didn’t think I would live to 18 or 19, and I really believed that. Fifty? If you knew me before boxing, before Graterford (the Pennsylvania penitentiary where Hopkins did his stretch), you would have said, ‘This kid ain’t gonna make it to 19. Either he’s gonna kill somebody or somebody’s going to kill him.’”

Hopkins is as proud of the fact he didn’t fall into the familiar traps and temptations that clouded his youth as he is of his boxing accomplishments. He dedicated himself to staying clear of trouble, and to his calling, which is why – more than talent – he has lasted as long and as commendably as he has.

“You see this six-pack?” he said, raising his shirt to reveal an impressively sculpted abdomen. “I ain’t even fighting until April. I’m 168 now, and I fight at 175. I should be walking around now at, what, 190? That wouldn’t be embarrassing because you’re supposed to be a little overweight when you’re not fighting.”

Maybe Hopkins is apt to pack on a pound or two after treating himself to some sugary birthday

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fare, but it won't be the cheesecake that has been his guilty pleasure on those rare occasions when he took a day off from his extremely health-conscious diet.

"I'm tired of cheesecake," he announced. "I'm going to switch. But it'll be something nice."

Once those calories are counted, though, expect Hopkins to go back to a disciplined countdown of a different sort. Yeah, the late Rocky Marciano was one of the greatest heavyweight champions ever, but Adrian Monk surely would understand that The Rock's legacy would seem even more imposing if he had made it to 50-0 instead of calling it quits at 49-0.

"Fifty is different from 49," Hopkins said. "Forty is different from 39. I'm not the same guy today that I was at 25, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. I think I'm *better* now than I was 10, 15 years ago, even though I was successful at that time. Younger isn't always better."

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Radam G says:

Happy B-Day to the GOAT Ali and B-Hop! Holla!

amayseng says:

A true Idol when it comes to dedication, health and nutrition. He should be an example for everyone.

The Shadow says:

[QUOTE=amayseng;42595]A true Idol when it comes to dedication, health and nutrition. He should be an example for everyone.[/QUOTE]

Indeed! How he's not the poster boy for every nutritional brand I will never know.

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[QUOTE=The Shadow;42596]Indeed! How he's not the poster boy for every nutritional brand I will never know.[/QUOTE]

Me either. Why isn't ESPN or some company of such high athletics not putting him out there for young kids to see?

He has so much knowledge and experience to pass on.

I think his whole life is a success story, all he overcame, becoming a better person and proved we all make

mistakes and have the opportunity to better ourselves.