

A Left Hook By Any Other Name

Written by Rick Folstad

Thursday, 20 November 2003 21:00

Listen carefully and you can hear a certain rhythm in the way Bernard Hopkins speaks. He doesn't talk in rhyme or in fragmented sentences and he doesn't bore you to death saying silly things. Instead, his words come at you in a steady stream, almost like a lullaby, a prefight soliloquy on the thoughts and virtues of Bernard Hopkins (42-2-1, 31 KOs).

He could put you to sleep if you weren't concentrating so hard on trying to understand what he was saying. Because "The Executioner" has a tendency to ramble, and if he tells you more than you wanted to hear, well that's OK because he also never lacks an opinion. He's fun to listen to if you're not really waiting for an answer.

One of the rare undisputed champions of the world, he faces WBA middleweight champion William Joppy (34-2-1, 25 KOs) on Dec. 13 at the Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City.

He said it's his 17th title defense and he's gunning for 20 before he finally saddles up and rides into the sunset, no doubt brought to you exclusively by the Bernard Hopkins Sunset Company.

One of the best fighters in the world, he's not too concerned with Joppy. At least that's how he sounded on a conference call this week. Asked what he was expecting from the WBA champ, he said Joppy's recent performances were "self-explanatory."

"His (fifth-round TKO loss) to (Felix) Trinidad didn't help him and in his fight with (Howard) Eastman, he should have lost that one, too" Hopkins said. "I don't think he's on anyone's pound-for-pound list."

So why is he fighting him?

"You have to follow the rules when they make them," he said, referring to the fact that Joppy is a mandatory challenger. "I just follow the rules to keep my status."

That was about it on the subject of William Joppy.

After that, Hopkins talked about more important things, like where he came from, what his childhood was like, who he wanted to fight and who was ducking him.

He talked about short purses and promoters and about Miami (where he was training) and Philadelphia (where he was from).

One of the few other fighters he paid homage to was IBF junior-middleweight champ Winky Wright, who has come out and challenged Hopkins.

"Winky Wright is the only guy out there with enough heart to ever mention my name," said Hopkins, who, like Roy Jones Jr., likes to talk about himself in the third person. "You don't hear

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Oscar De La Hoya calling Bernard Hopkins out unless it's four or five fights down the road. You don't hear Sweet and Low ("Sugar" Shane Mosley) calling me out. You never heard (Fernando) Vargas mention my name. Winky Wright is the guy calling Bernard Hopkins out, and I give him a lot of respect for that. The rest are scared. That's the only excuse they're going to have."

Hopkins also said his past is what keeps him in line, what provides him with perspective.

"Bernard Hopkins understands where he's been and that's what keeps me in check," he said. "It's where you came from and where you are now. I realize Bernard Hopkins has come a long way. I'm a premier fighter and a future hall of famer."

Some of his other nuggets included: "I recognize life. I understand that no matter what you do, you'll never please everyone." He also said, "When you got the chickens, you don't have to look for the fox." And this one: "I don't have a wish list (of fighters he wants to face). I have the biggest prize in boxing, the undisputed title."

Meanwhile, a surly Joppy took his turn when Hopkins was done.

"Bernard Hopkins is living off one fight - Felix Trinidad," he said. "Before that, he had no respect as a fighter. His whole career, he's looked like s---."

Joppy sounded like he was talking about the guy who just shot his dog.

"Hopkins is a basic fighter who can't handle my skills at all. He can be knocked out. He doesn't have the chin everyone thinks he does. If he had a way out of this fight, he'd take it. You'll be able to count on two hands the number of times he punches me."

No soliloquy, but the point is well taken.