Sometimes we can delve too deeply interpolating and distorting essence or trace so close to the contours of design we merely copy shadows. Getting a clear image of a fighter -- worth embodied by deed, the standing of a champion -- merit realized against peerage, and the trajectory of a career -- potential divided by possibility remaining, makes for a project of intense analysis.

And yet we want to just enjoy the champions as they fight and defend, taunt their generational adversaries and posture themselves against all of the myths and legends of the sport that they will never face in a boxing ring. When we try to see the truth of the boxer who is the WBC/WBO middleweight champion, Jermain Taylor, we cast a gaze beyond the expectations and the limitations, the achievement and the questioning. This is a fighter who is toiling now, in his prime, trying to finalize all of the elements of craft and reputation that will construct his eventual legacy. So we gaze, interested, waiting.

Yet something strikes us oddly about Taylor, powerful and successful though he continues to be, defending and reigning high among middleweights; high and mighty or a high wire act, high on agendas like fighting the best of the best out there, as he says. Why does the picture of Jermain Taylor remain so fragmented, as if in his incomplete state of being he's still good enough to best the rest, looking good, then better, but never at his best, the best we still envision for him? Why does this man who seems so plaintively right there, simple, reticently direct still elude us, his ring performances becoming a puzzle?

Perhaps, we were always looking to find something of a colossus in the young man from Little Rock; the named place of near contradiction so like his moniker of "Bad Intentions," because the self-labeling has not yet materialized, as if he's stuck at the level of intention. His career to date a poster for the champion he hopes to become? Sure, he's ambitious, but yet so measured, tongue-tied shy, only able to express himself in starbursts of forced emotion, like his reactive boxing flurries. And knockouts have not come Taylor's way, of late. Despite his furry of tenacious effort and withering flurries, he -- the champ -- does not overwhelm his foes. The talk amongst boxing writers before the homecoming title defense at the Alltel Arena in Little Rock, Arkansas, basically conceded that finally Taylor was going to have his knockout title defending win, live and simulcast on HBO in HD: hot damn! The sometimes playful but always perpetually combative Kassim Ouma was there, for the full 12 rounds, basically right where Team Taylor had predicted he'd be, right in front of the champion waiting to be hit and hurt. Ouma closing, wading past what ever of the champion's blows could be parried, avoided or absorbed, was more than true, it was guaranteed due to the Ugandan's size, fighting style and compunction.

And hit Ouma Taylor did. Repeatedly, with force, to the head and midriff and even between the gloves to the point of the chin, the champion's punches slammed home. The punches coming not as a torrent ala Ray Leonard or Hector Camacho, but more in the manner of a Terry Norris, selectively served to explode as dynamite to alternating regions of Ouma's awaiting anatomy. Yet the more the champion loaded up to detonate gloved distress the more he seemed to expel

at the expense of inflicting damage. It's true, fighters might not topple over at the impact of Taylor's signature blows, but, one suspects -- all the same -- his opponents aren't feeling too lively after the cameras are turned off, showered and dressed, the impact of a night with Taylor must come back into their systems like venom of poisonous recirculation, deep into tissue and the vital organs.

But the fans crave the big blow, the definitive ending marking the clearest statement of dominance. That's what tradition tells us. That's what champs do; they knock guys out, turn contenders into defenseless heaps. Taylor desperately wanted the knockout finish for his hometown fans, too much, and he swatted the air with recklessness over the first two rounds as proof. Ten rounds later, at the close of the full 12, no knockdown, no knockout had been executed. And still the effort was there, the striving and desire of a man sensitive to the speculations as to his championship quality and the criticisms of what he's managed to make happen, thus far, as the main man in the world of middleweight boxers. The words Bernard Hopkins had uttered to try to deflate the "heir apparent" in the lead up to their July 16, 2005 showdown -- yes, he's got youth on his side, but, in boxing terms he's still a boy -- almost seemed to list, flutter just above the action like a truth telling specter, the man-child Taylor still fighting without total professional composure and honed deliberation.

He kept his title: Jermain Taylor, middleweight champion, WBC/WBO, if you need the distinctions of political endorsements. His Arkansas fan base had their fill, ten thousand strong at the arena, and rhyming his name with JT, bad intentions to be left for another night, for Winky or that Welshman JC. Hopkins' unrealized threat echoes back to us: the truth will be told all over his face and when he's brought to his knees. Taylor's record remains intact, made to bend only when he's allowed for angles to be bisected, counters to be measured; traps he sets to be sprung from off the ropes. Even though boxing at ring center he can dominate, even Ronald Wright. Thus you are made to wonder why does this guy six-foot-one and streamlined, with power and the ability to prepare so completely, why does he still manage to limit his total effectiveness. Why?

Winning fights can be art or escape, wrath or survival, calculation or miracle. Jermain Taylor winning middleweight title defenses seems to follow a plan that no one has written, a story improvised at the demands of last second emotions, completing a narrative, but with its ending lacking the overall full impact of excellence.

Maybe we have dreamed of a career for Taylor too large for him to fill, a picture too classical for him to fill. The man who dared to follow Hopkins: Jermain Taylor. The facts of his ring accomplishments tell us that in his last six professional fights (William Joppy, Daniel Edourad, Bernard Hopkins, Bernard Hopkins, Ronald "Winky" Wright and Kassim Ouma, in that order) he's been undefeated and only once held to a draw, in what amounts to one of the most torrid big fight stretches in boxing over the period from December 2004 until December 2006. Yet we want more from Taylor. There have been moments of drama and check points during this stretch, which only his bravery applied has managed to keep him whole, brimming with undiluted promise. As a fighter Jermain Taylor still exists in the future; the full terms of reference regarding his career adding up and unfolding as if in super high definition slow motion replay, preview.

Two years ago to this month, the characterization of Taylor, as he headed into his bout with former longtime WBA middleweight titleholder William Joppy was of THE contender on his way up, the guy with the golden jab. Jermain Taylor, in 2004, was The Contender. Tactically and aesthetically, Taylor was the middleweight with the jab. That left lead was his ticket to someday landing him a shot at the legend of Bernard Hopkins. Promoter Lou DiBella, ensconced in his Manhattan office, dreamed of the night his guy would take down the House of Hopkins, brick by burdensome brick. First, Taylor had to look a champion against a former champion, that inevitable audition hungry fighter's live for, inhale. Though he battered and blanketed Joppy with almost every punch he wanted, it was that left lead that carved and clubbed his way to the threshold of the middleweight division's royal chamber. Funny, how the Taylor signature punch for twenty-three fights began to erase itself soon after, lost in what his trainers and he felt was a more devastating arsenal.

Manny Steward who took the place of Pat Burns in the Taylor corner as trainer (before the Wright fight) has tried to give symmetry to the young champion in the ring, with reminders of structural flaws to be corrected: balance issues. Taylor, trying to turn the tricky corner from being a retreating jab enthusiast to a boxer-puncher capable of right hand attacks or surgical body tattoo artistry, had to learn to punch from different angles balanced, weight shifting for maximum power. Command ring center with the jab, jab and jab and lay down the law with right hand power then jab, jab until you need to clean up with the hook or send a message with an uppercut from downtown. Boxing Made by Manny. Motor City Madness! Thomas Hearns LIVES!

Promise.

So far, Taylor has remained lost in transition. Remember the fighter who stormed out for round two against Bernard Hopkins in their first fight, all rash power hitting and conductive electricity almost short circuiting Hopkins right then and there? Then think about the guy with the belt facing Ronald Wright, who took mainly what was offered, ramming Wright's body with thundering force and looking more the champion down the stretch. What we got were fragments, moments of daring and discharged not connected, not immediately repeated, patterned.

Pure promise.

Jermain Taylor, the champion in progress, hasn't graduated yet and still he reigns. Wonderful news for anyone associated with him or proud to cheer for him can hear. The air about him spells out champion, no matter how irritating that must be for Wright. He doesn't rock the imagination, doesn't emit a sense of awe. Yet he remains the almond-eyed gentleman from Arkansas with the title of middleweight champion who takes to the body in clusters, mostly abstaining from the dictates of his classic jab, still trying to master the old one-two with a Hearns like kick at the end of it; Manny has his man but the message has not yet been downloaded, made second nature to this middleweight who still, for all the world, looks more like the man than any one else has a right to.

I know that what I need to do is fight the very best fighters in the world and I will. That's all I want to do. That's what I want.

Promises, promises.

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