Was it poison?

Voodoo?

Or God forbid, maybe the inevitable decline that comes from aging is responsible for Antonio Tarver's subpar performances of late.

The last option seems the most likely, as the Magic Man turns the big 3-9 on Nov. 21st. But he's not hearing it.

Tarver (25-4, 18 KOs), who takes on relatively untested Danny Santiago (29-3-1, 19 KOs), a Bronx-born Floridian on Dec. 1 at Foxwoods in Connecticut, on a free Showtime card. The Magic Man basically implied that he was poisoned before his June 2006 bout with Bernard Hopkins on a conference call on Tuesday afternoon to hype his IBO title fight.

He didn't try to make the "I wuz doped" excuse to explain his showing against Elvir Muriqi this past June. In that effort, the Tampa-based southpaw won a majority decision against a man not generally regarded to be in the same skill class as the fighter who holds two wins over Roy Jones, and a nod over Glen Johnson.

For the Muriqi fight, Tarver explained that the judges were blind, or stupid, or both. Furthermore, the former IBF, WBC and WBA light heavy titlist said, this has been a persistent thorn in his side, basically since he exited the womb.

Bad, blind, old-ass judges, who aren't sophisticated enough to see the intricate craftsmanship in front of their eyes, should get tested by commissions to insure their eyesight hasn't deteriorated, the fighter said.

"They don't understand ring generalship," he railed.

Count me amongst the simpleton saps, because I thought a case could be made that Muriqi pressed the action, and was busier that night than an underinspired Tarver. "Muriqi landed no real shots," Tarver said, and pointed to his unmarked face as proof.

It sure as heck sounded like Tarver could be setting up for another subpar outing against Santiago, as he spent most of his time railing against the career-long judging conspiracy against him, and lobbying for a rematch with Hopkins. No, he said, he wouldn't overlook the 34-year old Santiago, whose best win stands out as a 2004 TKO4 win over Muriqi.

Quickly, though, it was back to Hopkins.

HBO is "trying to hand Hopkins to Calzaghe," said Tarver, who doesn't believe Hopkins, who

he alleges is a dirty fighter, is an ‘A’ level draw, or fun for fans to watch.

Their meeting, Tarver said, is still perplexing to this day.

“I was a shell of myself,” he said. “Whether it was the weight, or I was overtrained. Hopkins has never been in with the Magic Man.”

If Hopkins and Calzaghe do get it on, Tarver maintains, the winner will need to challenge Tarver. “The winner has to see me,” he said.

Back to the conspiracy.

“Coming in, the judges will not be looking in my favor,” he said. “I got to knock people out. I beat Glen Johnson (Dec. 2004, SD loss), I beat Roy Jones the first time (Nov. 2003, MD loss). It’s ridiculous. They rob me.”

A little later, he went whole hog. “Every time, there’s judges in somebody’s pocket,” he said, then backed off the bribe charge.

Tarver described himself as “lethargic” and “lifeless” against Hopkins, and referred obliquely to a theory his sister floated. “It was more than being mentally and physically wrong with me,” he said. “Somebody took my soul. I had no life in my eyes, no emotion, no spirit. I can’t put my finger on it. He shoulda killed me that night.”

What about it, were you drugged, then?

“I wouldn’t put that out there,” he said. “I felt like something was terribly wrong. I have no proof.”

Could it be age, perhaps, maybe?

“It hasn’t entered my mind,” he said. “I’m getting better.”

Tarver does not comprehend that he doesn’t win any friends, among the press or the judges, when he labels the arbiters dolts. “Maybe we need to get some younger guys,” he suggested.

If he gets past Santiago, Tarver said, Hopkins should give him another crack, with a 50-50 purse split.

“But he’d never do anything like that,” he said.

“It’s never been about money for me,” he stated, right after laying out his monetary demands.

Then, three minutes later, Tarver said that “at the end of the day, it’s all about money” in the context of the Roy Jones/Tito Trinidad January PPV event.

The underdog, meanwhile, said that Tarver’s been on his radar for many years, even if he

wasn't a minute blip on Tarver's screen.

Tarver has been rumored to be signing on to fight Chad Dawson, the WBC light heavy champion, but that compelling matchup hasn't come about because of…you guessed it…money issues.

Tarver was supposed to take on the more highly regarded Australian Danny Green on Dec. 1, but Green took a match with WBA titlist Stipe Drews instead, and blamed Tarver for being indecisive on signing a contract.

Santiago, in contrast, came off as a classy gent, as he pondered that maybe Murqiqi trained like the dickens for Tarver, and only in regulation fashion for their meeting.

I'll say this for Tarver, he did make for a lively call.

But I'd love to set him up with one of my favorite characters, the acerbic Scottish-born chef and reality TV god, Gordon Ramsay.

I'd love to see the look of incredulity on Ramsay's face as he took in Tarver's rantings and inconsistent viewpoints and assertions, and the look on Tarver's face when Ramsay gave him the what for, and ripped him a gaping new one.

That, I'd pay PPV money for.

SPEEDBAG I'm eager to check out the Cotto fight on the tube. I was at MSG and I thought Cotto pretty clearly outboxed Mosley, who it has to be said, fought as well as could be expected any 36-year-old could've. But even being "close," in the fourth press row, I had a hard time deciphering which shots were landing clean. I admit, I think I can do a better job in coverage off TV.

--Did y'all see the Youtube heavyweight champion Kimbo Slice in action on Saturday on Showtime? The new-to-MMA bruiser should really do the right thing, and pay for a new set of shorts for his foe, Bo Cantrell, who seemingly soiled his skivvies when Slice came at him in the opening seconds. Slice landed a sharp right to the chest, and followed with a forearm/elbow that looked like it grazed the head of Cantrell (10-11). The loser went down like he'd been maced, and started tapping before Kimbo went in for the kill. Sorry, I have regard for ANYONE stepping in to the ring or cage…provided they give an honest effort. Cantrell should've just saved us all 20 seconds and tapped out when his name was announced. Weak.