When Bernard Hopkins hooked up with Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions in November 2004, jokesters took bets on how long that union would last.

Hopkins had recently come off a severely contentious beef with his former advisor, Lou Dibella, in which he had accused Dibella, then heading up HBO's boxing department, of demanding a bribe to place Hopkins on an HBO card.

Dibella fought that slur, and won a judgment in court, in November 2002. The court ruled that Hopkins should pay Dibella $610,000 in damages for making the accusation.

How long, people wondered, before a Hopkins/De La Hoya marriage would hit the rocks.

Well, the union has lasted longer than most would have guessed, and Hopkins has been a solid addition to the GBP family. He's a fascinating persona, a skilled orator, and is a more effective spokesman for the company than Oscar, who detractors say can come off as inauthentic, and Richard Schaefer, who can come off as too CEO-ish for the blue-collar sport.

That is, until Hopkins played the race card, in a shocking fashion for the year 2007.

Last Friday, while jawing with Joe Calzaghe in the Mayweather/Hatton media war room at the MGM, Hopkins went there, and played the race card as he tried to fan the flames of interest for a Calzaghe/Hopkins scrap in 2008.

"You're not even in my league!" Hopkins shouted at Calzaghe. "I would never let a white boy beat me. I would never lose to a white boy. I couldn't go back to the projects if I let a white boy beat me."

Yikes.

I'm pretty certain most of you guys heard about this, but there wasn't quite the resultant furor that I would've figured there would be.

Some columnists took BH to the carpet, but part of me wonders what the hoopla would've been like if the roles were reversed. Imagine if Calzaghe had said, "I would never let a black guy beat me."

Woo-ee, that would be a John Rocker-type reaction, wouldn't it?

Nope, the playing field isn't level when it comes to playing the race card, and I'm not going to say it should be. Sure, on one level it's easy to say racist, or race-related comments like Hopkins tossed out there are wrong. Coming from anyone, in this day and age, with the strides

we've made, it's wrong. But my ancestors from England, and Ireland, and Germany weren't chained up, kidnapped and sold off to work as slave laborers. How would I act if that were the case? Impossible for me to walk a mile in those shoes...

However, I admit I would've liked to see Bernard disavow that race card proclamation, say that he made those comments in the heat of trash-talking battle, and offer an apology to Joe C.

I actually contacted Hopkins' publicist, and asked if he'd like to chat about the comments, and clarify the remarks. The publicist said Bernard is on vacation at this time, and would not be available for an interview.

The comments beg the question: is Bernard Hopkins racist? The last more pale- skinned person he fought was Oscar and before that Hakkar, and before that, it was probably back in the early 90s. When facing a non-black fighter, does he truly gear himself up to a different extent, because he can't bear the thought of losing to a "white boy." Does he see himself as a better breed of fighter, better than a white fighter, because he's black? Hopefully, we'll hear from him, and he can make clear his views on this subject soon.

So we're left to theorize, and I suspect, because that's all I can do until Hopkins revisits the issue, that Hopkins wants us to theorize. He's as effective in the ring as any almost 43-year-old has any right to be, but his effectiveness as a fighter has diminished in the last few years.

So to make up for that, and keep people talking about him, I believe he's more inclined to pull off a publicity stunt, as when he provoked Winky Wright into a physical beef before they tangled in July. I think perhaps the race-related comments to Calzaghe are cut from the same cloth, meant to get people buzzing. It succeeded, to a point.

Many pundits are hesitant to go there when it comes to discussing race, because it remains a hot button issue that can hit the nuclear level in the blink of an eye. So the race rant did get a bit lost in the megafight shuffle over the weekend.

I received an email last week after I raked PBF thru the coals for his profane Youtube rant. The writer said I wasn't comfortable with Floyd's behavior because I'm white, and whites were responsible for forcing blacks into slavery, so Floyd can say and do whatever he wants. I had conceded in the Youtube piece that as a Caucasian, I am in no position to be able to comprehend what it's like to be black today.

But there are those that can argue, with some persuasiveness, that Bernard should get more of a free pass for making race-based comments, because he's black. It wouldn't be a stretch to ponder that maybe Hopkins does ponder issues of race, and racial inequalities, more than a white man of means does. Do you believe that a white man, with a more ample fund for defense, would necessarily receive the same sentence as Hopkins did for a strong-arm robbery, even if the raps on his sheet were piling up?

Does that excuse his comments? Nope.

But could his life's arc, and a stint in a penitentiary where he had to feign insanity to prevent being raped, contribute to a mindset where its us vs. them, black vs. white? It could.

But excusing this group from a standard, and not that group, that's a slippery slope. We are all in this mad muddle we call life together, and there must be common standards that are applied equally. Because that's all any of us can hope for: to be judged on our merits, on how we act and treat others, not on an arbitrary trait like the color of the skin we happen to be born with.

Bottom line here...so many columnists are quick to judge. I can go there myself. I hammered PBF pretty good last week for his profane and flamboyantly braggadocious behavior.

But there are very few angels walking this earth. We screw up. We harbor prejudices. We say things we wish we could take back.

I do hope that Hopkins gets back from vacation, and explains why he used that loaded terminology as he scrapped verbally with Calzaghe in Vegas.

I do hope that he apologizes, and admits that the word choice was poor.

Because I want to believe that Hopkins, who is a genuine role model for wrong-doers who crave the ability and strength to spurn old habits and stay on a straight and narrow path, is better than that, and that boxing, in the year 2007, is better than that.