

Hopkins' Strength Is That He Knows His Weakness

Written by Frank Lotierzo
Monday, 21 April 2014 09:20



This past weekend Bernard Hopkins 55-6-2 (32) unified the IBF and WBA light heavyweight titles with a 12-round split decision over Beibut Shumenov 14-2 (9).

If you didn't see the fight, it should've been a unanimous decision because Hopkins controlled the bout from start to finish and the outcome was never in question. I guess with the fight being held in Washington D.C. a scandal in regards to the scoring in favor of Shumenov isn't all that shocking.

Hopkins, 49, did what he always does, and that's put the clamps on a young, strong fighter who had the illusion of throwing 100 plus punches per round at him. For some reason Shumenov only averaged 50 punches per round, which was only about 18 more than what Hopkins averaged for the fight. The fight barely qualifies as a boxing match. But it was still a great exhibition because of Hopkins.

What is it about Hopkins that his opponents never fight their intended fight against him? And it's not like he's anything close to being un-hittable. When there *are* exchanges, he generally only gets the better of them maybe 60-percent of the time. I've noticed, though, that he makes it a point to *always* be the one who lands last. This aids him in a big way in the eyes of the judges. Most boxing observers know that Hopkins is most vulnerable to volume punching and work rate. Volume punching would accomplish two things against him if it could be sustained. It would speed up the pace of the fight, which is the last thing he wants. And it would also give him less time to plot his next move and set up his opponent for his sneaky counters. But for some reason nobody ever really lets their hands go once they are in front of Hopkins and feel his presence. It's as if they become

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hypnotized by him.

Fighters don't let their hands go for a reason, believe me it doesn't just happen by accident. One of the reasons fighters don't go in with both guns blazing is because they are concerned about getting blasted back with something big in return. However, Hopkins isn't really a life-taker when it comes to punching power, so that can't be the reason why his opponents are so judicious and measured with their punch output when facing him.

The other reason fighters tend to clam up and not get off is because they are fearful that they will be embarrassed due to missing badly and then being countered. This probably applies mostly to the fighters who have recently tried to overwhelm Hopkins with their power and activity.

The genius of Hopkins is that he is fully aware of his limitations and what he must do in order to slow the pace of the fight down to a walk instead of a sprint or hard run. This shows that he not only understands his strengths better than anyone else, he also understands and accepts his weaknesses. And, by doing that, those things are barely weaknesses at all. Every time Hopkins signs for a fight, regardless of who the opponent is, he knows that he has no intention of trying to win by knockout. He understands that pressing for a stoppage only opens himself up to getting hit more solidly and can give his opponent confidence and momentum.

Bernard doesn't care if you run with him during the fight as long as he can trip you up once or twice during the round in order to win it. Understand that Hopkins wants a lot of wasted time during the round and only needs to land a few clean signature shots to win them. He also has a great chin to protect himself in case of an emergency and has retained just enough punch to prevent any opponent from charging at him as if he were handcuffed.

Strategically, Hopkins is one of the few fighters that actually looks his opponents over and sizes up what they are vulnerable to based on their stance and movement. And it sure was easy for him to catch Shumenov with so many lead and counter-right hands with him moving towards Hopkins in a straight line with his left hand so low. Bernard seldom looks directly at his opponent and seems to be looking off to the side or down at the canvas. What he's really doing is watching his opponents' body movement and footwork. Knowing that the opponent cannot move without picking up their front foot first, he gets the jump on them. In addition to that, they can only move forward or to the left or right. Once he reads their foot movement he knows the direction to go to place himself out of range and set up his counter assault. In reality it's boxing

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101, but Hopkins is an academic and has the aptitude to take something basic and use it to exploit everybody he fights. Since he's looking not to get hit before he's looking to hit, Hopkins tries not to initiate many exchanges and forces his opponents to commit first. He doesn't want to deal with a lot of activity and when he is under attack, he doesn't try to fight his way out. He'll get away by using his feet and upper-body movement to set up his sneak attack/counter, usually a right lead or left-hook while the opponent is open after throwing at him. Notice that after landing those sneaky right leads or left hooks, he'll immediately tie up. It's like he doesn't care about building up momentum, even when he has the advantage.

Actually, when you think about that, *that* might be part of his genius: he's smart enough to know that even when he's the one doing the landing, it's in his best interest, in the long run, to keep shutting things down. Even when he can get off a few more punches, he shuts it down because he wants to prevent a firefight from breaking out. And this works because Hopkins goes into every fight with the intention of going the distance and has no mind to beat up his opponent or knock them out.

In the 11th round Hopkins dropped Shumenov, and it wasn't a flash knockdown. Yet he didn't even attempt to press for the knockout or stoppage. And that's because he knew the only way for Shumenov to get back in the fight was if he got into a big exchange with him while he was desperate. Instead, Hopkins slowed the pace back down and dragged him through the mud for the remainder of the round. Going the full 12-rounds against Shumenov not only suited Hopkins fine this past weekend, it was his plan the moment the fight was announced.

There was a time when Hopkins really was the executioner in the ring. He was nasty and had no mercy and wanted to win by knockout. But that was a long time ago. As of 2014 and at age 49, Hopkins knows he can't really beat up or knock out any of the top-tier contenders he'll have to fight. He's like a pitcher with no fastball. So he forces batters to chase bad pitches, and then after they've fouled off seven or eight pitches and are looking to get walked, he fires a fast one and strikes them out.

Hopkins knows that in order to beat his opponent up, he has to put himself at risk. So he doesn't even attempt to go there. At this stage of his career he can't take that risk and won't put himself in harms way. In essence Hopkins wants to avoid a fight at all cost. So his first order of business when he fights is, I'm not going to let you work me over and beat on me. And in turn I'm not going to attempt to beat you up. Instead I'm gonna have you follow me into little minefields that will go off here and there and that will shade just enough aggression off of your game that we'll be fighting in the mud. Only I can navigate in the mud better than you because I've been doing it for 10 years and have it down pat now. And as long as I don't try to cover you

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completely in it, all I have to do is make sure you are a little muddier than me when the 12th round is over, I win.

The consensus is Hopkins will next fight WBC light heavyweight title holder Adonis Stevenson 23-1 (20). In Hopkins, Stevenson will be facing an opponent who won't even be trying to hurt him or knock him out, yet he will be in for the most difficult fight of his career.

Frank Lotierzo can be contacted at GlovedFist@Gmail.com

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mortcola says:

B-Hop masters something no one has found the answer to: when he doesn't feel like punching, he goes where the opponent can't hit him without opening wide or overcommitting, or he occupies the guys arms and arms and shoulders till he gets a break. Then, when the time is right- he lands. Dude landed almost 50 percent of those low-output shots, meaning he picked exactly the ones he knew would land. That's boxing, in its purest form - just without the adrenaline that makes it fun for most. He's a genius at it.

brownsugar says:

Nicely written article and good comments from Mort.
Bring it on Adonis!

oubobcat says:

Hopkins know his weaknesses at 49 and he also knows his opponent's weaknesses. First, at 49 Hopkins knows he must fight in spots and make the most of those moments. For example, against Shumenov, he consistently found a home for the right hand. And when he landed it, it was a punch that stood out. Why did he keep landing the right hand? Well, Hopkins either saw from tape or during the fight (probably a combination of both) that Shumenov held his left against his hip. Shumenov was wide open for a right hand and Hopkins exposed this weakness with consistency throughout the twelve rounds even dropping Shumenov with a picture perfect right in the eleventh.

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The Commish says:

Mortcola is so right. Hopkins is indeed a genius at what he does. In order to kick someone's butt, you gotta' be ready to BRING butt. Hopkins just isn't going to bring it. He is content with slowing the pace down and giving his oppoent a boxing lesson. He is the fastball pitcher who has lost his high hard one, but stays on top with a variety of "junk." While there are many more fighters I'd rather watch for sheer entertainment and animalistic rage in the ring, there is nobody this 'ol veteran enjoys watching more how to take a man apart, piece by piece and round by round, than Bernard Hopkins. He doesn't do it with rage. He does it with skill, with saavy and with tons of experience.

I am really curious what his game plan will be to diffuse the bomb known as Adonis Stevenson.

-Randy G.

ArneK. says:

I love the analogy of the baseball pitcher who loses his high hard one but stays at the top of his game with his guile. BHop's boxing IQ is off the charts. Like so many great fighters of yesteryear (Archie Moore comes quickly to mind), he reminds us that the sweet science is a cerebral game; it's not just about two guys trying to knock each others block off.

Having said that, I hesitate to buy a PPV fight if I believe it will take the form of a chess match.

jzzy says:

BHOP's remarkable run shows how important the mental side of boxing is. Some of the younger boxers need to study BHOP and learn the sweet science. He's a master craftsmen now, his youth long ago left town and he now soldiers on with smarts and guile. When he does decide to stop fighting, he'll make a great trainer

Domenic says:

[QUOTE=ArneK.;50097]I love the analogy of the baseball pitcher who loses his high hard one but stays at the top of his game with his guile. BHop's boxing IQ is off the charts. Like so many great fighters of yesteryear (Archie Moore comes quickly to mind), he reminds us that the sweet science is a cerebral game; it's not just about two guys trying to knock each others block off.

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Totally agree. I haven't purchased a Hopkins PPV since the Tarver fight (I think), and had no plans to ever again for the reasons cited. I will watch him on standard Showtime though, that I'm ok with. But if I'm buying a PPV, I generally want at least the potential of a KO. This doesn't diminish his expertise, which is off the charts, just not worthy of \$70 or whatever to watch a very

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low punch output chess match.

That said, if he fights Stevenson, that'd be PPV worthy, as AS carries serious thunder, and will presumably pressure BHop, ala the Calzaghe blueprint, for the entire fight. It almost will have a Holyfield-Tyson 1 type danger to it (people feared for Holyfield's life prior to their first meeting, as he was coming off the Bowe KO and a dreadful showing against blown-up Czyz). This is an intriguing matchup, his most compelling in years.

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=jzzy;50098]BHOP's remarkable run shows how important the mental side of boxing is. Some of the younger boxers need to study BHOP and learn the sweet science. He's a master craftsmen now, his youth long ago left town and he now soldiers on with smarts and guile. When he does decide to stop fighting, he'll make a great trainer[/QUOTE]

I agree with Jizzy and everything everybody else had said on the topic... I even agree with Frank... which is not that often depending on the topic.

But young fighters...please don't study this man. Study Sugar Ray Leonard instead or Pacman... for the action lovers of the sport...lol

Radam G says:

[QUOTE=ArneK.;50097]I love the analogy of the baseball pitcher who loses his high hard one but stays at the top of his game with his guile. BHop's boxing IQ is off the charts. Like so many great fighters of yesteryear (Archie Moore comes quickly to mind), he reminds us that the sweet science is a cerebral game; it's not just about two guys trying to knock each others block off.

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Wow, ArneK, you and the Commish stole some of my thunder. Hehehe!

From his own words -- the late, great Archie Moore and an old, long-gone friend of his [known as (baseball pitcher) Roughhouse] of the Negro Baseball League -- told kid me about the art of slow punching and slow pitching.

They clearly said that is how an "Old goldie" gets to a young speed demon and/or a young monster hitter by breaking up what he is use to in regardless to seeing, timing and doing.

The "Old Mongoose" kayoed more fighters with his "syrup" hook and "molasses" right cross/over-hand right than any prime and/or young pugs did with expected, use-to-seeing speed and power punches.

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The Roughhouse, according to legends of the Old Negro League of Baseball, was known to throw a "wobby pitch so slow" that it caused batters to swing twice trying to time it, and would still bytch miss and cussed him out. An old Stachel Paige threw a similar pitch when his got the call to the major at an age of 42-years old PLUS.

Back in da day, black, dark Latin and Pinoy boxers and baseball players and music entertainers would travel together on trains or a caravan of vehicles and perform in the same cities. From what the oldtimers tell me, it was not a lot of lighted baseball fields for night-time games, so the baseball players played before sundown, then hollered at the night fights, usually in small arenas and club.

B-Hop is no doubt a genius in general. And a boksing one for sure. And he has studied the art and wisdom of the Old Mongoose to the max. And for a while yet, young arses, B-Hop will continue to tax.

I only took a bet against him once. And that was when he went against the great "Slappy" aka "The Italian Dragon" Joe Calzaghe.

If Superman Stevenson is dumb enough to fight an "Alien" with a powerful and wise Genie Naazim in the Alien's corner, I don't pity da foolish Superman being kyptonited. Hehe! Holla!

amayseng says:

All great posts on this thread there is nothing I can really add.

I agree changing speeds and rythems will mix a young gun up.

BHOP is the Master and should be appreciated as one.

Round one was boring but other than that I was entertained all the way through.

Hopkins is more entertaining than Mayweather.

DaveB says:

Not only does Hopkins slow his man down and beat them in a mud fight he starts by getting into their minds. Dude is master at mind games. I know he will never fight Mayweather but he would make Mayweather have a nervous breakdown. Shumenov was still crying after the fight when he said "And you said (the camera didn't stay long enough to hear what Shumenov said) and Hopkins said I had to say that to get into your head. He does make these guys fight like they hadn't planned. They are bewildered.