

Hopkins dominates flat, listless Tarver

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) - Bernard Hopkins got his Hollywood ending. Capping his career with a stunning upset, the 41-year-old Hopkins won a unanimous decision over the younger, taller Antonio Tarver on Saturday night, using aggressive offense, smart defense and the ring savvy borne of 18 years of boxing.

It was a Capra-esque ending: Coming off a two-fight losing streak, Hopkins chose to fight at 175 pounds — jumping up two weight classes — in hopes of putting an exclamation point on his career.

His opponent was a bruising lefty with two victories over Roy Jones Jr. and a world of confidence.

It was a longshot. Oddsmakers had IBO champion Tarver as a 3-1 favorite. But Hopkins pulled it off, cheered on by a partisan crowd of 10,200 in Boardwalk Hall, 55 miles down the road from his hometown Philadelphia.

"Yes, I told you people you would be surprised at how easy of a fight it would be," Hopkins said. "I could have fought in three different weight classes a long time ago. I knew all I had to do was negate his jab and he wouldn't have anything else."

Hopkins, who reigned for 11 years as middleweight champion before a pair of losses last year, tied Tarver (24-4) in knots from the opening bell — literally and figuratively.

When he wasn't scoring with lunging right leads, he was keeping Tarver at bay whenever Tarver tried to get close, flailing away with rapid-fire combinations or forcing him into a clinch.

Tarver, who'd agreed to pay \$250,000 to a charity of Hopkins' choosing if he didn't knock him out in five

rounds or less, found himself fighting for his life in the fifth.

After missing Hopkins with a right, Hopkins (48-4-1) countered with a right lead that caught Tarver flush in the face, knocking him backward. Referee Benjy Estevez ruled it a knockdown because Tarver's left glove touched the canvas as he struggled to stay on his feet. The crowd rooted him on with shouts of "B-Hop! B-Hop! B-Hop."

Hopkins stayed in control in the later rounds, waiting for Tarver to swing and then unleashing five- and six-punch combinations as he chased him across the ring. By the end, Tarver's right eye was nearly swollen shut, and the other one didn't look much better.

The 37-year-old Tarver, who recently served as Sylvester Stallone's on-screen opponent for the upcoming final installment of the "Rocky" series, was confounded.

Stymied by Hopkins, he fought the later rounds the way he fought the early ones — tentatively, rarely landing punches and seemingly disinterested in doing so. Even when it became clear he needed a knockout to win, his strategy didn't change.

All three judges scored it 118-109.

"It wasn't my night," Tarver said. "You have days like this. No excuses. I give all praises to Bernard Hopkins."

It was a retirement party from the start.

Hopkins' sisters, wife and two of his schoolteachers were brought into the ring before the bout, and a video tribute to his career played on the scoreboard above it.

The gritty middleweight, who never achieved stardom until he beat Felix Trinidad and Oscar De La Hoya, ended his career where he

began it. In 1988, he debuted at 175 pounds, losing a decision to Clinton Mitchell in a fight held in Atlantic City.

Now, he can ride off into the sunset. Although it didn't take long for him to open the door to another day in the ring.

Asked by HBO boxing analyst Larry Merchant if he would consider coming back for a \$20 million payday, Hopkins replied: "I might come out of my grave for that kind of money."



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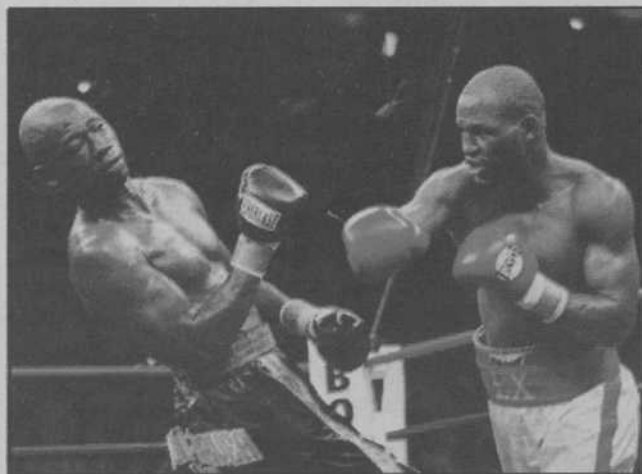
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Hosted by
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Bernard Hopkins, right, of Philadelphia, hits Antonio Tarver, of Orlando, Fla., during the twelfth round of the IBO Light Heavyweight Championship at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, N.J. on Saturday, June 10.

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