

# DAILY NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER

# OUR KIND OF PEOPLE

## Hopkins makes young fan's wish come true



By Bernard Fernandez  
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**LAS VEGAS** · Shaun Negler and his family could have gone anywhere, all expenses paid. This past weekend, Shaun, his parents, his older brother and younger sister could have been at Disney World, or rafting down the Colorado River with the majesty of the Grand Canyon rising above them like the walls of God's very own cathedral.

The Make-a-Wish Foundation, whose mission is to fulfill the dreams of very ill or dying children, would have picked up the tab.

But for 18-year-old Shaun, an amateur boxer whose left leg was amputated below the knee on Sept. 28, 2006, at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, there was only one place to be that would make him happier than anywhere he could think of.

That would be at ringside last Saturday for Bernard Hopkins' bout against undefeated Welshman Joe Calzaghe at the Thomas & Mack Center.

"I never thought I'd get to see him fight in person," said Shaun, who describes himself as Hopkins' No. 1 fan. "I thought he would retire after beating Winky [Wright]. Then, when I found out he would fight again, I lit up. I had goose bumps all over me. I wanted to see 'The Executioner' at his work."

Their paths had converged once before. Shaun, who had been training for a bout when he was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma on May 30, 2006, was in CHOP, waiting to have surgery to save his life, when he was paid a visit by Hopkins, who many years earlier had been employed across the street as a kitchen worker at the Inn at Penn.

Shaun, whose family hails from the Parkwood section of Northeast Philly, explained how personal tragedy brought him together with the fighter who since has become even more his hero and role model.

"I was sparring, getting ready for a fight," he said. "I twisted my ankle. The swelling went down, but then I twisted it again. I underwent an MRI. That's when I found out I had a big tumor in my leg.

"We know a lady who worked at the same place as Bernard's lawyer [Arnold Joseph]. We asked her if she could set something up. She got [Joseph's] e-mail address and sent my story to him."

Joseph contacted Hopkins, who was touched by how much devotion a young fan whom he had never met had for him.

"I never blow anything like that off," Hopkins said 2 days before he squared off against Calzaghe, who would go on to wrest B-Hop's *The Ring* light-heavyweight title on a split decision. "I'm sure there were other things I could have done that

day. But there was a kid who wanted to see me who was losing his leg to cancer. So I told Arnold to set it up. I know what it's like to fight battles that nobody thinks you can win."

Hopkins met and talked with Shaun for more than an hour before presenting him with an expensive, special-edition "Executioner" watch that Shaun now says is his proudest possession.

"I had known about Bernard, but I didn't *know* Bernard until that day," Shaun said. "There we were, just talking, like regular people, when he said, 'I got something for you.' Then he gave me the watch. I couldn't believe it."

During a private audience with Hopkins last Thursday evening in the fighter's sumptuous suite at the Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Shaun held up his left wrist.

"It's my good-luck watch," he told Hopkins. "When you were fighting Winky, I was watching at home. I had it in my hand and you won. It's always brought me good luck. No one touches that watch but me. That's why I only wear it for special occasions."

And what could be more special than to be invited up to Hopkins' quarters, along with dad Michael, mom Renee, brother Mike Jr. and sister Brittany, to talk about boxing, and life, and how they sometimes come together in ways that one might least expect.

Shaun, who has been fitted with a prosthetic, told Hopkins that he hoped to box again.

"There was a guy years ago with one leg [cruiserweight Craig Bodzianowski] who boxed as a pro," Hopkins recalled. "I think he fought on ABC or NBC, one of them. It was a real big deal at the time. So if he can do it, you can do it."

"When they told me you wanted to see me, my eyes got real watery," Shaun said.

"He started crying," Michael interjected.

For a moment, it looked as if Hopkins also might get a bit misty.

"People who have everything they were born with can take that for granted," Hopkins said, nodding toward Shaun. "Here you are, a young guy without a leg. It would be easy to understand if you were bitter and angry. But you're not. You see this as a challenge that you accept and can overcome."

"Some people squander their talents in so many ways. For them, it's always coulda, shoulda, woulda. They have that mind-set. But you're an inspiration to me, man."

"Here I am, about to fight Joe Calzaghe. But other people are fighting bigger fights, more important fights. You're facing a much bigger fight."

Hopkins then tried to lighten the mood.

"Your girlfriend come with you?" he asked.



"He loves 'em and leaves 'em," Renee said, with a laugh.

"I'm young. I like to give different girls a try," Shaun said.

"With that mentality, you're going to be buying a lot of presents," Hopkins said. "But enjoy yourself. You got time. Ain't no rush."

The Neglers pray that is the case. The cancer had reached Shaun's brain. He continues to undergo chemotherapy, which has caused his hair to fall out, and although his doctors said most of the cancer is in remission, there still is a spot on his rib that has yet to clear up. Part of his treatment involves drinking a ghastly tasting concoction that makes him nauseous.

"Doing chemo is very hard," Shaun acknowledged.

"I can't even imagine," Hopkins said.

Shaun has been home-schooled the past 2 years, the better to protect him from infections he might contract through prolonged contact with others. He said his doctors have told him it is not inconceivable he might box again, and he hopes to attend college in the fall.

"I'm a very strong person," Shaun said. "Bernard has helped make me strong. I think of him when I do my chemo."

"That's right," Renee noted. "I have to tell Shaun, 'Do it like Bernard would do it. You're in training, like Bernard. He wouldn't quit, and neither can you.'"

"As a family, we have been through a lot. But Bernard has helped bring Shaun through all of this. He has been Shaun's inspiration. We will always be thankful to him for that." \*