The issue of race is such a loaded topic.

Like, enriched uranium loaded.

I'm typically not enthused to go there, because it sometimes feels like we in the States are confused and edgy when it comes to discussing race, so trafficking in that arena can get real dicey, real quick.

But often, race is the two-ton elephant, sitting in plain site in front of our eyes.

In boxing, we often skirt the elephantine-sized minefield that is race, and unless we are dragged into it, fight writers are hesitant to go there. Largely, that could be een as a good thing; as a society, it can be argued, we are more cognizant than we've been in the past that pointing out racial divides can serve to elongate the process of achieving racial equality in a nation that took a looooooong time to make significant headway in that sphere. The frequency you see a fighter referred to as a "Great White Hope" has radically decreased in recent years, and whether that's because writers have made inroads in the racial sensitivity department, or because people are gun-shy about delving into the topic, is up for debate.

But those that don't see the harm in putting racial divisions on the table would argue that human beings segregating themselves based on common characteristics like color, or language spoken, or musical preferences, is a most natural act. So they wouldn't be appalled if a Caucasian fighter, like Ohio middleweight Kelly Pavlik, who fights Jose Luis Zertuche on HBO's Boxing After Dark on Saturday, was seen by others sharing similar characteristics, such as skin color, as somebody who should be paid particular attention to.

Pavlik is promoted by Top Rank, and on occasion Top Rank top dog Bob Arum has wondered aloud if Pavlik is the victim of reverse discrimination.

He's theorized that because Pavlik is white, he's held to a higher standard. Arum has wondered if Pavlik is held to an unfair standard, because we are conditioned to be fearful that many white fighters aren't the real deal. The promoter was referring to the "McNeeleys" who've been elevated to a higher, undeserved status more because they represent a personage that is appealing to advertising outlets, to a coveted demographic for programmers and advertisers, than for their level of skill.

Pavlik himself was kind enough to field a "uranium enriched" question from TSS. What about the race issue, Kelly?

"Arum has mentioned that [my career advancement has been hurt by reverse discrimination]," he said. "I don't get into that as much. I don't know the inner workings of the networks and sanctioning organizations. I hope reverse discrimination isn't the reason I haven't gotten a shot."

Certainly if Pavlik were to compare his climb up the ladder to that of Colombian Juan Urango, who got a title shot against Tunisian-born Naoufel Ben Rabah in his 18th professional outing, he could have grounds for engaging in a healthy debate about the 'hows' and 'whys.' Pavlik is 29-0 and can crack a little bit, as evidenced by his string of six straight TKO victories and total of 26 knockouts. Sure, you can pick apart his conquests and debate their merits, or lack thereof. But it does say something that Pavlik, age 24, was the first guy to stop Bronco McKart early. Definitely, boxers with far less skill and experience have been awarded title shots far earlier than he…

Back to the "R" word deal…

"The race thing, I'm actually tired of it," Pavlik said. "Each race has a complaint. But everyone is given equal opportunity, so it's sad to hear this race saying 'they're doing this,' and that race saying 'they're doing this.' That's not the case any more, or it shouldn't be."

Now, I don't have Arum hooked up to a polygraph on the matter, but we must always remember that he is a promoter, and playing the race card will focus attention on whoever is playing it. People did pay attention when Arum played the card. HBO's Ross Greenburg did, to say the least—he went ballistic when he was apprised of Arum's contention about Pavlik. "It is a disgraceful and undignified remark by a disturbed man," Greenburg said. "That is pretty much all we have to say. It is sad. This has nothing to do with race."

Pavlik's manager, Cameron Dunkin, says that Arum was frustrated by his inability to book meaningful bouts for Pavlik.

"Arum said it was because he is white and people don't believe that he can fight. I don't know if that's true."

Dunkin concedes that in his time as a manager, he's seen more than a fair share of "white stiffs" who've been built up as contenders without merit, and presented to Caucasians for their approval and adoration.

Dunkin also told TSS that the "white guys can't fight" theory was in play in McKart's head before he scrapped with Pavlik last July in Connecticut.

"McKart came in saying that Kelly was a built-up white guy," Dunkin said. "Then he said on air that Kelly will be champion." (Aside to boxing newbies: for the record, McKart is a white guy himself…)

I have to point out the fact that Pavlik does have some pop, of course, which could factor in the equation when Arum tries to book his Youngstown, Ohio hitter.

In fact, Dunkin says that Roger Mayweather called him the "best white guy" on the planet after taking in a Pavlik sparring session against Kofi Jantuah. That goes to bolster the case for Pavlik's power, and, I suppose, also underline the fact that all of us tend to compartmentalize people according to various traits…

Also, it must be mentioned that Pavlik has had hand woes… and there was that 2005 arrest for taking part in fight with an off-duty sheriff outside a bar in Youngstown. So, no one could argue convincingly that race is the sole factor that has “kept Pavlik down,” so to speak.

Down the line, if Pavlik gets past the 19-3-2 Zertuche, and builds up his resume and visibility a bit more, so he can entice a Jermain Taylor that he’ll bring some dough to the table, then we may still see him presented as a “Great White Hope.” That we haven’t yet, I offer, indicates that we have made strides in this area. I believe people are more color blind in the States than they ever have been, and not only because they’re afraid to play the race card—a poker, they take their chances at getting dealt a “you’re a racist” card. More and more, it seems, fight fans get on a boxer’s bandwagon not simply for their nation of origin, but for their talent.

That’s progress, not perfection, and that’s right up Pavlik’s alley. He simply wants to progress, and get his title shot.