

Pavlik And Taylor Hit New York

Written by Robert Mladinich
Monday, 30 July 2007 19:00

The New York press conference for the highly anticipated middleweight showdown between undefeated champion Jermain Taylor, 27-0-1 (17 KOS), of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Kelly "The Ghost" Pavlik, 31-0 (28 KOS), of Youngstown, Ohio, was held today at Central Park's Tavern on the Green.

The fight will take place at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on September 29.

Both Lou DiBella, who promotes the champion, and Bob Arum, who handles Pavlik, praised the fighters for accepting this intriguing matchup. The 28-year-old Taylor is coming off a series of aesthetically displeasing victories over Cory Spinks, Kassim Ouma and Bernard Hopkins (twice), as well as a draw with Winky Wright.

The red-hot 25-year-old Pavlik most recently scored a sensational seventh round stoppage over power punching Edison Miranda on the May 19 undercard of Taylor-Spinks in Memphis.

"We've already sold 1,500 tickets on the floor, and we haven't even printed up a poster yet," said DiBella. "This fight is creating a big buzz in the boxing world. This is a terrific matchup between the two best middleweights out there. More fights like this need to be made."

HBO, which will televise the fight for "free" on its broadcast network, is so excited about the matchup it will be producing a 24/7 countdown to the show that will run during the entire week leading up to the fight. Considering that the fight is not on pay-per-view, one must wonder what the long-term motive is.

The 6'1" Taylor is extremely talented but not exactly exciting, while the 6'2 1/2" Pavlik is not only extremely talented, he is all action all the time. Should Pavlik win, HBO would have a bonafide superstar on their roster.

Arum, the Hall of Fame promoter whose company, Top Rank Inc., has handled Pavlik since he turned pro after losing to Taylor at the 2000 Olympic Trials, says that this fight is akin to the great middleweight matchups of the eighties. Those, of course, featured the likes of Thomas Hearns, Marvin Hagler, and Roberto Duran.

"Boxing needs a great night right now, and that is what they are going to get on September 29," said Arum.

He described first hearing about Pavlik's vaunted power. Manager Cameron Dunkin told him about a tall, skinny, Midwestern kid with a punch that belied his slim build.

"I was told he hit so hard, no one would spar with him," said Arum. "Then I saw him knock a kid out. I think the kid is still knocked out. I knew in my gut that he was something special."

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One person who did not have such positive initial gut feelings about Pavlik's abilities was his own father Mike, a Youngstown insurance agent. He says that all three of his sons were athletic, but even though former champions Ray Mancini and Harry Arroyo hailed from Youngstown, boxing never seemed to be on any of their radar.

Kelly, the youngest, played baseball and football, but early on displayed no inclination to box. "I figured three months and he'd give it up," said Mike.

But once Kelly started punching as a teenager, football and baseball were quickly forgotten as he roared through the amateur ranks. Before the now 55-year-old Mike knew it, his son was competing in the Junior Olympics. It was readily apparent how real Kelly's desire was.

Mike was awfully proud when 17-year-old Kelly came in third at the 2000 Olympic Trials. The man who beat him was Taylor, then 21 and the eventual Olympic representative who was way more experienced in international amateur competition.

But, muses Mike, that was then and this is now. "No parent wants to see their kid become a boxer, but when Kelly got to about 15-0, I realized he had a real legitimate chance to be a world champion," he said. "I (initially) envisioned him going to college, certainly not becoming a pro boxer. But I'm now at the point where I have the ultimate confidence in him, so I am able to just go with the flow."

Mike, whose other sons are a butcher and dialysis technician, says that Kelly's success is a family affair, even though his wife Debbie can't bear to watch the fights until they are over and she knows Kelly is okay.

Mike has come to tremendously admire Kelly's dedication to such a difficult craft. He also has the utmost respect for Taylor, as both a fighter and a human being. To hear him tell it, two nicer guys couldn't be fighting for a world title.

"We've kind of flown under the radar," said Mike. "When the fight with Miranda was announced, I couldn't believe that we were not favored. Maybe that was a blessing for us. But people are paying attention to us now. I know Jermain certainly is. He knows he's got a fight on his hands."

He says that Taylor won't have any problem finding his son in the ring, the way he did against the always elusive defensive maestros like Spinks, Wright and Hopkins. "Kelly will do what he always does, which is put on constant pressure and punch to win," he said. "We don't have any secrets on how we are going to win the fight."

Taylor said that he remembered not long ago being in the same position that Pavlik finds himself in now. The first time he fought Hopkins, virtually no one gave him a chance of winning.

"I listened to all the attention being paid to Hopkins, but when fight time came I brought it," proclaimed Taylor. "Kelly's gonna bring it. Kelly's here to win. He earned this fight. He's the second best middleweight in the world. I take my hat off to him. But I'm going to beat him."

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Whether or not Pavlik is still the second best middleweight on September 30 is yet to be seen. But as confident as Taylor seems, Pavlik seems to have the eye of the tiger. He's got the serene look of a man who knows exactly what daunting challenges lie ahead, but has the skill, confidence, determination and wherewithal to face those challenges head on and come out the winner.

"I don't put myself in the category of Hagler or Hearn's," said the soft-spoken and extremely polite Pavlik. "I just like to get in there and do my best. I'm still pinching my skin at this great opportunity. Stay tuned to September 29. It's going to be a great one."

One person who has a vested interest in the outcome is cut man Big George Mitchell, who works with, among others, hot middleweight prospect John Duddy. Mitchell would love to see Duddy against either Taylor or Pavlik, but says that a Pavlik-Duddy title fight would be monumental in scope.

"It would be a war," said Mitchell, "that would eclipse Hagler-Hearn's."