Jermain Taylor is saying all the right things but then he always said the right things. The question is did he do the right thing when he fired Emanuel Steward, was talked out of returning to Pat Burns and ended up with his amateur trainer, Ozell Nelson, preparing him for the biggest fight of his life?

Frankly, I think not.

Taylor has always seemed more a great athlete than a wondrous boxer. This is not meant as a criticism of his bravery, which he has in abundance. The issue is that while his athletic skills are obvious, so are his technical flaws and it is those that seem to be his greatest weakness as he enters the final days before his rematch with the man who knocked him cold and stripped him of his middleweight title, Kelly Pavlik, this weekend in Las Vegas.

Since many of those flaws – like carrying his left hand in his front pocket rather than in position to either jab or protect himself with it or a distressing tendency to back straight up and trap himself on the ropes when retreating – were learned at the foot of Nelson or ignored by his first trainer and father figure. That being the case, what is the likelihood he will alter them now?

Perhaps no one can because no one yet has but the fact is Taylor's best performance, either as an amateur when Nelson was his coach, or as a pro when he was Taylor's assistant trainer, came when Burns handled him in often rough fashion. His greatest moment – the second victory over Bernard Hopkins – came with Burns directing his every movement but Burns was unceremoniously dumped after that at the insistence of Nelson, according to people in position to know.

Steward was brought onboard then and the two had four rocky performances together – a draw many felt should have been a loss against Winky Wright, lackluster wins over smaller challengers Kassim Ouma and Cory Spinks and then the crushing defeat to Pavlik. Each fight Taylor seemed to go backwards from the boxer he was the night he faced Hopkins, a change he now attributes not to the presence of Steward but to his own growing reluctance to push himself as he once had in training.

Perhaps it will prove to be as simple as that Saturday night but it seldom is. Last week, Taylor spoke by phone about his poor conditioning for the first Pavlik fight, blaming it not only for the devastating knockout by Pavlik but also for the former champion's inability to finish Pavlik when he had him down and hurt in the second round.

One has to wonder if Taylor and Nelson are simply deluding themselves on this point however. While perhaps Taylor was not in top shape, mentally or physically, but what effect would that have had four minutes and one break into the fight?

His failure to finish Pavlik after dropping him midway through the second round had nothing to

do with conditioning and everything to do with his tendency to revert to a wild-eyed amateur swinging for the fences with little thought or purpose all too often. Alarmingly, Taylor was asked what mistakes he'd made in that round and during the knockout barrage Pavlik caught him with in the seventh round. His reply made you wonder if he had any idea how he really had been beaten down.

"Strategy wise, I couldn't tell you,'' Taylor said. "I don't think he does anything better than I do. He comes straight forward. He's a straight up fighter. He comes to fight and I come to fight. He was at his best. That was his best, what he gave. I wasn't.

"He knows his ass was whupped. That's all there is to it. If his coach don't know, he knows.''

Actually, what Kelly Pavlik knows is that he's the new middleweight champion because he wasn't whupped. What he knows is he did what Taylor could not. He got up and won the fight, finishing the champion off when his opportunity came and not with a lucky punch but with a well-placed avalanche of punches. It was a professional hit on a guy who never saw it coming.

Later Taylor would be asked again what he might have done differently in Round 2 and his response was the standard "I should have gone to the body to lower his hands'' type of stuff before he added what seemed to have become his mantra for this fight.

"I'm throwing nothing but punches (this training camp),'' Taylor said. "I'm throwing a lot of punches to the body in camp. All around working. It's all about work.''

That was a return to his near-constant insistence that he lost to Pavlik not because he was ill-prepared to meet the challenge Pavlik presented but simply because he was out of shape and had taken him lightly. The more he and Nelson talked the more it sounded like they felt if the former champion just hit a few truck tires with a sledge hammer this time the way Pavlik has long done ("He got a tire, so I got a tire,'' Taylor told some Arkansas reporters who asked about that change in his training methods) everything would be made all right. Boxing is seldom that simple.

Certainly Taylor may have taken Pavlik lightly even though he was undefeated (32-0, 29 KO) and coming off nine consecutive knockouts, including back-to-back stoppages of Jose Luis Zertuche and fearsome Edison Miranda in his last two outings. But if he and Nelson truly believe they lost only because of a conditioning deficit they are sadly deluding themselves.

When Taylor says, as he did last week, that there is nothing Pavlik does better than him he's wrong. He punches harder and cleaner and, apparently, he recovers faster since Taylor didn't recover at all when he was left lumped in his corner like a broken beach chair slammed against a seawall by a stiff wind.

Taylor (27-1-1, 17 KO) does not punch as hard as Pavlik nor as accurately and he has technical flaws defensively that put him at risk against an opponent who is bigger than he is, which is unusal for a guy the size of Taylor (6-1 to Pavlik's 6-2 ½). While he argued last week that Pavlik knows he was beaten in that disastrous second round he obviously was not beaten

quite enough because he came out and slugged Taylor in the face to open the third round after getting up and surviving nearly half of Round 2 after being dropped.

When Nelson was asked about Jack Loew, Pavlik's trainer, saying he was glad to see him in Taylor's corner because all the bad habits his fighter has he learned from him, Nelson had a snappy response.

"They're the same bad habits that kept Kelly from making the Olympic team,'' referring to Taylor's victory over Pavlik at the Olympic Trials eight years ago. "That sounds pretty good to me. We're ready for this fight.''

Eight years is a long time in boxing, however and what wins in the amateurs is far different from what wins in the pros. That's how Henry Tillman twice beat Mike Tyson in the Olympic Trials and then got knocked cold by him for pay.

Eight years is a lifetime in prize fighting. Things change and so do young fighters. In this case one of them, Pavlik, has. The other, Taylor, we can't be so sure about because Loew's assessment was at least partially correct.

Despite his successes, Taylor has often fought wildly out of control, flailing more than punching on offense, and tending to tire badly as fights progress in part, one assumes, because he grows tense and wears himself out. He is brave to be sure and he is aggressive, quick and strong. What Jermain Taylor is not at 29 is a well-schooled professional.

What would someone like Marvin Hagler, or even the aged Hopkins, have done for example with an opponent as small as Ouma? Taylor beat him primarily because of his size advantage but by the end he was tiring and in retreat, same as he was against Hopkins, Wright, Spinks and Pavlik. Was he in shape for none of those fights?

Worse, when first asked about why he thought he'd allowed Pavlik to escape the second round Taylor replied, "I think about it all the time. I should have tried harder but all the shoulda, coulda, woulda don't mean nothing.

"If I get him in that position again I'll finish him. I wasted a lot of energy, energy I really didn't have. I threw a lot of stupid punches. I should have put them together a lot more better.

"I think I underestimated Kelly just a little bit. My mindset wasn't right. This camp it's all work. I'll be honest with you. It wasn't like that the last camp.

"I was beating this guy half assed but in the later rounds I went into survival mode. I was tired. I didn't do what I was supposed to do in training camp. I lost what it took to be world champion. That's why I'm not world champion no more. I was beating him (when I was) half-assed so imagine what's going to happen this fight.''

If Jermain Taylor honestly thinks he didn't finish Pavlik in that ill-fated second round because he was "tired'' he has no idea what really went on. He didn't finish him because he fought like

an amateur when he saw Pavlik hurt, something that's happened in the past as well, which is part of the reason he has only 17 knockouts in 29 fights and none in the past three years (six fights).

He was not a calm assassin five months ago when he needed to be. He was a kid jerking the trigger and missing the target again and again until Pavlik's head cleared, which frankly didn't take long. Five rounds later he got hit with a series of punches because his left hand was down by his kneecap, where it has been throughout his career, instead of where it should have been. Too tired to lift it?

Not likely but if it's still there Saturday night, his old friend Ozell Nelson will at least be there to pick him up this time.