

STEWARD: Someone's Gotta Be The Scapegoat

Written by Michael Woods

Wednesday, 13 February 2008 19:00

You all heard Jermain Taylor in the last few weeks, saying that he wasn't in tip-top condition when he fought Kelly Pavlik the first time in December.

That was news to some of us, who recall his then trainer Manny Steward proclaiming his man to be a king of cardio coming in to the September 2007 middleweight title showdown.

"I've never, in all my years training fighters, had a fighter in better condition," Steward said then. "Never a fighter in better shape, mentally and physically."

Taylor himself said that it was boxing 24-7 at the camp Steward set up in the Pennsylvania Poconos. "(Coming to the Poconos camp) been the greatest decision I ever made," Taylor said. "There's nothing to do but box. It's all-day boxing. I love it."

Flash forward to today.

Taylor, grasping, quite understandably, at different straws to explain why he was splayed out on the mat on September 29, as Pavlik stripped him of his consciousness and title belt, has tossed out a few explanations why Pavlik got the better of him in Atlantic City last year.

"Kelly was in great shape for the fight and I should have been in better condition for the fight," Taylor said. "My mind-set wasn't right. With this training camp, it's all work. I'm talking about every day. I'm talking about getting up doing what I'm supposed to do every day. And it wasn't like that last camp, I'll be honest with you."

Hmmm.

And whose fault was that, pray tell? Isn't that the trainer's job, to run a tight ship, yank the fighter into line if he's straying, and force him, as best he can, to be in shape to go 12 hard rounds?

Indeed it is, which is why I got on the horn, and asked Steward about Jermain's comments.

"Manny, do you feel like JT is throwing you under the bus a little bit? Is he sort of blaming you, subtly, for what happened on September 29th?" I asked.

Steward defended himself, and explained his take on Taylor's viewpoint. "My fighters are always in shape," he said.

Klitschko, when he was down three times against Sam Peter had enough gas to motor on, he said. Lennox Lewis was gassed against Holyfield, but had enough gas and guts to keep on keepin' on. Even Taylor's in previous outings, against Wright, he was in the sort of shape he needed to be in, Steward said.

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"Someone's gotta be the scapegoat," Steward concluded, good naturedly.

"Does it piss you off?" I asked.

"Nah," said the trainer, who is getting Wladimir Klitschko ready for his Feb. 23 title defense against Sultan Ibragimov, and will work the Pavlik/Taylor PPV for HBO. "Someone has to be the scapegoat," he reiterated. "But I've removed myself from that."

So, I asked Steward, you've removed yourself. Who then do you think will win?

"Logic has to favor Kelly," he said. "But I give JT a very good shot. JT's more desperate, and very dangerous. The desperate man is dangerous. Don't ever underestimate that."

Steward does not think that Taylor will come into the ring on Saturday with psychic scar tissue ready to rip and tear, leaving him open to a repeat meltdown.

"I don't think he's psychologically damaged from the Kelly fight," he said. "He's convinced himself that he had Pavlik out in the second round. Now he's brainwashed himself that he wasn't training right."

C'mon, I said. You think he really does believe that it was his conditioning that let him down, not his skills, or his desire, or his chin?

"He'll believe it if he has enough people in his camp telling him that too," Steward said.

The Taylor tenure, Steward said, "was a good learning experience for me. I don't need to be in a situation where I don't have total control."

Steward gives a yeah or no on Wladimir's opponents, and sparring, and conditioning, on down the line. There were too many cooks stirring the stew of Team Taylor, and that wrecked the gig for him.

That aside, Steward expects a helluva tussle on Saturday.

"JT can punch still and he has fast hands," Steward said. "He could've played it safe and taken an easier fight. But he took the rematch and I would've done just what he's done. Taylor has a good chance early. And neither guy is beyond a kayo. Taylor has more emotion, and there won't be any clinching or going on the ropes. He will be very explosive."

Steward hammered home a point for me. It doesn't matter if Taylor was or wasn't in great condition for the last fight. It only matters if he truly believes that he wasn't in great condition for the last fight, and feels he's in exemplary condition this time. If doubts are lingering in the nooks and crannies of his brain, ready to spring into debilitating action when the going gets rough on Saturday, then he's in trouble. But if he's washed out his brain, and removed those troublesome traces of doubt, we may well need to book Taylor/Pavlik III.