

## Taylor's Old Ways Will Lead To Same Result

Written by Ron Borges

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The day of reckoning is here for Jermain Taylor and Kelly Pavlik. One will be right about himself and his opponent, at least to some extent. The other will not. That's the simplicity of prize fighting.

But nothing is really that simple in boxing, as the two of them probably understand. For Taylor to avenge the crushing defeat he suffered at the hands of Pavlik five months ago he must do more than simply arrive at the arena in Las Vegas in better physical condition than he was in Atlantic City. For Pavlik to repeat his knockout victory he must do more than avoid turning his head to the side to be sure he doesn't get hit with the kind of shot that nearly knocked him out in the second round of the first fight.

So who has to do what to whom? That is the question that has to be answered, although wrapped inside it are a host of more complex issues.

For Pavlik, he must be as relentless as he was in their first fight. He must be the stalker he has always been, constantly pressuring Taylor into the kind of mistakes he's prone to make. That would seem to be a given since that has long been his greatest asset but once a man becomes champion that is not always as easy as it seems.

Pavlik first must deal with the danger of overconfidence. Having not only devastated Taylor five months ago but also won the majority of the rounds before the knockout even though the judges felt otherwise, he could easily underestimate Taylor's skills and thus find himself ill-prepared mentally for a street fight if one breaks out.

Secondly, it is one thing to say you got hit behind the ear repeatedly because you leaned in and turned your head, thus opening yourself up to such a blow. It's quite another to break yourself of the habit once the leather starts flying. If Pavlik isn't successful in doing that he runs the large risk of again finding himself on the floor. If he does Taylor might not again flail away like an amateur, missing more punches than he lands, but rather conduct himself like a professional assassin.

As for Taylor, his problems run deeper and must be confronted early. First, anyone suffering the kind of devastating knockout he absorbed has to overcome a steep psychological climb when he first gets hit again by the same man. Some guys can do it. Others hesitate and retreat, setting themselves up for continued problems.

This is clearly what happened to Roy Jones, Jr. in his third fight with Antonio Tarver. After having won a questionable decision from him the first time and then being knocked cold by him the second time they squared off, when he found himself in with Tarver the third time Jones fought not to win but to survive. His goal that night was not to again visit the floor, as had happened to him in back-to-back fights, and so he did not. He also lost by a wide margin.

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That psychological issue is Taylor's first problem. Yet even if he finds a way to deal with it there are also physical and stylistic problems he has to overcome. Unlike most of his prior opponents, Taylor is in with a bigger man than he is. This wipes out the edge he had in most of his early knockout victories, when he was stopping blown up junior middleweights and welterweights.

Taylor hasn't stopped a full-sized middleweight in three years and that seems no accident. Although he hurt Pavlik in the second round, he was unable to finish him despite having nearly half a round to do it at a time when Pavlik's legs were less firm than overdone spaghetti. What that tells me is that his punching power is nothing special, which cannot be said of Pavlik's.

Pavlik has stopped 29 of his 32 victims, including the last nine straight. He may be the hardest puncher in the division and unlike most fighters of that persuasion he's also among the busiest, often throwing 100 punches in a round.

That pace is far in excess of Taylor's and if Pavlik puts it on him the former champion will have to find a way to keep up without becoming engaged in a street fight. The latter is not something Taylor is likely to survive because he has too many technical flaws and tires too easily late in fights for that.

Pavlik is the one who tends to get stronger, or at least to maintain his punching power and pace longer, so the longer it goes the more at risk Taylor is. This was true in the Hopkins fights and against Winky Wright and the same was true in Pavlik I. Was he out of shape for all of those fights? Not likely.

What's more likely is that, as his anxiety builds his energy dissipates. Relaxation while under assault is a key weapon in boxing but a high art form. Not everyone can do it and the fighters who do it best are the ones who can sustain themselves longest. Pavlik wins that battle.

He also wins the power battle and, worst of all for Taylor, he appears to have a better and more punishing jab too. The latter seems more a result of the way Taylor often stops using his jab as he tires than in any technical deficit in that area for Taylor.

At its best, Jermain Taylor's jab is a dangerous and effective weapon. If he can keep it in Pavlik's face throughout the fight he will be able to dictate the terms of engagement, controlling the space between them and the means of attack.

But Taylor has never been able to sustain that for an entire fight so why should that change this time? Frankly, I doubt it will, which will be the beginning of the end for the former champion.

Taylor faces an odd circumstance. To win he needs to box brilliantly, using his jab, quickness and athleticism to keep Pavlik at bay and force him to keep re-setting himself, thus negating his power edge. Yet he has never shown the ability to sustain that through 12 rounds, usually allowing the fight to turn into a slugfest as he retreats straight back to the ropes, a place where his defensive deficiencies are most evident.

That being the case, what he really must do to win then is to finish Pavlik quickly. Only problem

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there is that means he has to come forward, moving into the champion's punching range, exposing his chin and giving Pavlik openings to land right hands over his often low-slung left.

This is a dilemma of considerable proportions and why forcing this rematch seemed ill-advised. Kelly Pavlik is not a perfect fighter. He is fairly easy to hit and is always in your face and hence available for an assault. But because of Taylor's style, defensive inadequacies and relative lack of punching power the new middleweight champion seems perfectly suited to again do to his predecessor what he did last September – which is to say separate him from his senses.

Pavlik wants Taylor in front of him, retreating straight back or lying on the ropes. In those places he's vulnerable to the straight right the champion loves to unload as well as, when at close quarters, the uppercut Pavlik used to render him unconscious. Coincidentally, that tends to be where Taylor stands, in part because he's game and likes to hit you back immediately and in part because it's too much work to be on your toes and moving for 12 rounds.

Taylor has the athletic ability to box Pavlik into submission. What he doesn't have is the willingness to throw his jab all night and move without quickly giving in to his worst instincts and simply walking straight back away from his opponent or just standing in front of him with his chin out and his left hand down by his kneecap.

What seems most likely then is that Taylor will box well for a while, scoring with his jab and frustrating Pavlik some while also eating some right hands from the champion that will begin to slow him. As the rounds progress and fatigue becomes a factor, Taylor will return to his old ways because they are comfortable and because he still seems to think they were never a part of the problems he had with Hopkins, Wright, Kassim Ouma and Pavlik.

Once that begins to happen, the clock will be ticking for Jermain Taylor. It will run out on him before Kelly Pavlik runs out of rounds to hit him in the chin and one of those times will be one time too many. Somewhere between the sixth and ninth rounds he will revert back to what he's been throughout his career – a brave guy who wants to fight a little too much for his own good and who knows how to box not quite well enough to hold off a bigger and stronger opponent.

Does this mean there is no way Jermain Taylor can have his hand raised against Kelly Pavlik? No. It just means the odds against it are a lot longer than he and his supporters may think.