

Pavlik-Taylor Rekindling Middleweight Fire

Written by David A. Avila
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Middleweights have always represented prizefighting at its best.

From Jack "Nonpareil" Dempsey in the late 1800s to recent middleweights like Marvin Hagler and Vito Antuofermo, the guys who fight at the 160-pound or more level almost always deliver gutsy powerful action.

Get ready for more.

Middleweight champion Kelly "The Ghost" Pavlik steps back into the ring against former king Jermain "Bad Intentions" Taylor (27-1-1, 17 KOs) on Saturday Feb. 16, at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Though the world title is not at stake don't expect a let down from their previous fight. It will be shown on HBO pay-per-view.

"It's all about going in and getting back everything this man took from me," says Taylor, 29, who was suffered his first defeat and had never been knocked down let alone knocked out. "I'm going in there and taking care of business."

History has shown middleweight rematches have a special intensity. Pavlik and Taylor both have that old school kind of style of letting the punches go and to hell with everything else.

Fighting at 166 pounds instead of 160 doesn't faze Pavlik.

"I'll have my snap on my punches," said Pavlik (32-0, 29 KOs) with an ominous smile when he spoke at a recent press conference in Beverly Hills.

The Youngstown, Ohio fighter has a familiar look that has made more than a few boxing veterans pause. With his long sinewy build and trace of facial hair, Pavlik reminds old-timers of a fighter from another era.

"He reminds me of a guy who fought in the 50s named Bobby Dykes," said Art Carrillo, trainer in Riverside, California. "Dykes was tall and thin too and fought some pretty good fighters."

Legendary trainer Angelo Dundee concurs. He sees a resemblance, if not the ghost of Dykes in Pavlik too.

"Dykes was a tall, skinny kid who could bang, just like Pavlik," said Angelo Dundee the great boxing trainer of Willie Pastrano, Ray Leonard and Muhammad Ali. "Tall skinny kids without much muscle always seem to be able to bang."

Though Dykes never captured the world championship, he fought more than 140 professional boxing matches against several fighters now in the Boxing Hall of Fame. The Texas native beat Kid Gavilan, Al "Kid" McCoy, Gil Turner and Joey Giardello. He also lost a majority decision to

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the great Sugar Ray Robinson and fought to a draw with clever Holly Mims.

Dykes could also end a fight with a single punch, just like Pavlik.

“Dykes had slicker moves than Pavlik but resembles him,” Carrillo said.

Dykes died two years ago in Miami, Florida. Though he never won the world title he came within one judge of winning it when he lost a split-decision to Cuba’s Gavilan in 1952. He never got a shot at a world title again.

“He was a real nice guy,” said Dundee. “He used to have a bar in Miami Beach. He really could bang.”

It’s the bangers like Pavlik that attract boxing fans because of their penchant for a violent end like a Martin Scorsese movie.

Need proof?

Middleweight rematches of yesteryear

Since modern boxing began in the late 1800s the fighters emanating from the 160-pound weight division have produced some of the most electrifying fistic battles in history.

One of the first middleweight clashes that proved once was not enough came in 1908 when Stanley Ketchel and Billy Papke first met in the ring. After Papke won the first meeting by decision the following two of three rematches ended in knockouts for one or the other. One of the fights took place in Vernon, a small town a few miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles.

Both fighter’s lives ended tragically with Ketchel shot and killed on a street in 1910 and Papke committing murder-suicide in Newport Beach in 1936.

In another middleweight series Harry Greb had three fights with former heavyweight champion Gene Tunney in the early 1920s and then started a trilogy with Tiger Flowers in 1924. Greb took the first fight - a non-title bout - but when the world championship was at stake it was Flowers winning a pair of fights in 1926. The last fight against Flowers would be Greb’s last. He died on the operating table from injuries suffered in an auto accident in 1926. Flowers would also die on the operating table for an eye operation in 1927.

Tony “Man of Steel” Zale won the middleweight title in 1940 against Al Hostak at the age of 27. But when World War II broke out he was sent to the battlefield and the championship was put in limbo until he returned in 1946. At age 33, Zale began a momentous trilogy against Rocky Graciano in 1946 that would captivate the sports world with its savagery and spectacle. Zale knocked out Graciano in the sixth round of the first fight in New York, was knocked out in the sixth in Chicago by Graciano, and put Graciano to sleep in their third and final fight in Newark. Though they fought only a total of 15 rounds, but the damage caused to each other was tremendous. Zale’s next fight ended in a knockout loss to France’s Marcel Cerdan. Zale never

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fought again.

If you like rematches it was the great Sugar Ray Robinson who participated in so many that he's considered to be the greatest fighter of all time by more than a few boxing experts.

Randy Turpin, Jake LaMotta, Kid Gavilan, Gene Fullmer, Carlo "Bobo" Olson, Paul Pender and Carmen Basilio all had more than one crack at Robinson during the 1940s to the 1960s.

"I was in the corner when little Carmen Basilio beat the great Ray Robinson by out-boxing him," said Dundee of the New York City fight that took place in 1957. "It was a tremendous fight."

After Robinson's smorgasbord of middleweight rematches came Emile Griffith and Nino Benvenuti's middleweight clashes that proved just as intense in the late 1960s.

Others middleweights have engaged in rematches and all had that special intensity.

Sacred trust

Can Pavlik and Taylor rekindle spirits of the middleweight past to bring back the middleweight magic?

Top Rank's Bob Arum has bet a career on middleweight match ups.

"I've been in boxing for a long time and for me the middleweight championship is a sacred trust," said Arum, who has promoted more than 1,000 fight cards in his promotional career. "I've promoted so many great middleweights like Carlos Monzon, Marvin Hagler, Ray Leonard and Tommy Hearns."

Rival promoter Lou DiBella, who promotes Taylor, agrees that Saturday's rematch will be memorable.

"We have an historic night for boxing," said Lou Dibella, a boxing promoter. "It's one of the most exciting main events I can remember."

When Taylor enters the ring against his conqueror Pavlik, the Arkansas prizefighter promises to leave the ring with no regrets.

"I'm going to finish what I should have done last time," said Taylor.

Dundee, who's been involved in numerous historic prizefights including a few middleweight title fights, said this rematch "can't miss" when it comes to excitement.

All the experts agree that Pavlik and Taylor II will be just as cataclysmic as its predecessor.

"It has that special kind of feel," said Carrillo. "Like they say, don't blink."