NEW YORK – The middleweight champion of the world laughed Thursday afternoon when people tried to suggest his first title defense on June 7 against a barely known Welshman named Gary Lockett was, well, a lock.

“Not that long ago I wasn’t heard of just like him,’’ Kelly Pavlik recalled while chatting before a press conference at B.B. King’s Blues Café in mid-town Manhattan. “They say he hasn’t fought anybody. That’s what they used to say about me. Kelly Pavlik hasn’t fought nobody.

“Then they said if Kelly Pavlik fights Jermain Taylor or Edison Miranda he’ll be wiped out in two rounds and look what happened. I haven’t forgotten that.’’

What happened was when the punching product of Youngstown, Ohio’s shuttered steel mills got his chance after seven long years of apprenticeship he knocked out Miranda and then he knocked out Taylor and then, to quiet any remaining doubters, he came back in his next fight and won a clear decision from Taylor at a catch weight above 160 pounds. Just like that he went from beatable to the guy who cannot lose.

Pavlik knows such talk is rubbish. It is the kind of nonsense people who have never been hit for a living say and write because they think fight outcomes are most often pre-ordained. Pavlik knows better.

Certainly Lockett has not faced the caliber of competition he has and on paper it seems unlikely a one-dimensional puncher of limited skills will last long against the undefeated (33-0, 29 KO) knockout artist who ended not only Taylor’s reign as middleweight champion but also his time in the 160-pound division after beating him in back-to-back fights. Yet it was only a year ago that Pavlik was the guy who had no chance. At that time he was a sacrificial white lamb from the Midwest whose comeuppance was coming.

Now the roles are reversed because the boxing world is unimpressed that Lockett is a mere holder of the less reputable WBU version of the 160-pound title and the WBO’s No. 1 contender. Such small achievements mean little to pundits because neither was accomplished by a victory over any of the division’s top challengers and so even the challenger’s sparkling record of 30-1 with 20 knockouts is dismissed and remains suspect until he proves otherwise.

Lockett understands this just as he seemed to realize the decision to bring him in as a replacement for John Duddy after the popular Irish contender fought poorly and sustained a serious cut over his eye in his last outing a month ago was mere serendipity. It was the fortunate happenstance of being available and being trained by Enzo Calzaghe, who just happens to be preparing his son Joe for a huge HBO pay-per-view fight with Bernard Hopkins next month and thus held some sway with the suits who write the checks.

In that sense, Duddy’s hard luck has become Lockett’s good fortune, at least until the first bell

tolls at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City and he is faced with someone who approaches prize fighting the same way he does.

“I know none of you guys have ever heard of me,’’ Lockett said quite rightly. “None of you. I’m a dark horse but this is a massive opportunity for me.

“My first fight when I was 10 years old lasted 12 seconds. I’ve always been able to knock people out. You’re going to see a fight between two punchers. There will be fireworks.

“Normally I’m the aggressor against guys trying to out jab me. I don’t think I’ve fought anybody like Kelly. The guy is going to be right in front of me. It’ll be a good, old fashioned punch up, as they say back in Britain. Boxing won’t come into it. There are 50 knockouts between us. ’’

Lockett must have already been figuring in the one on June 7 because to date there’s 49 between them, although Pavlik and his trainer, Jack Loew, agreed with the larger figure Lockett came up with because, like him, they don’t expect to be working a full shift that night.

“If he stands in front of us, he’s leaving,’’ Loew promised. “We’ve watched him on tape. All the guys he’s fought have backed up. He’s not backing Kelly up.

“I think this guy is far better than Duddy. He can obviously punch. But those belts are not going back across the pond. He’s definitely going to get knocked out.’’

Born in Pontypool, Wales, Lockett began boxing at eight and by the time he was a teenager had already won nine British amateur titles and a gold medal in the European junior championships in 1992. After a 6-5 start in headgear, Lockett went 84-3 before turning pro at 19 with only two senior division victories. It was an unusual choice and one he now admits he regrets but he felt it was simply time to get paid for being punched.

He won his first two professional fights but a string of hand injuries and other problems kept him out of the ring for two years before he made a concussive two-round return at the expense of someone named Lee Bird in Liverpool in 1998. He would go on from there to lose only one time, a bloody 12-round split decision to Yuri Tsarenko for the WBO International title six years ago one fight after he stopped tough Australian former world title contender Kevin Kelly in four rounds.

Lockett avenged that lone defeat a year later and has won 14 straight since his only loss yet even he concedes it’s a big step from Kai Kauramaki, his last victim, to Kelly Pavlik, his next opponent.

“I don’t see it going the distance regardless of who wins,’’ Lockett said and therein lies one difference between the champion and the challenger. The latter is predicting a knockout on June 7. The former is predicting Gary Lockett gets knocked out on June 7. It is not a subtle difference.

“Gary Lockett is a rugged fighter,’’ Pavlik said. “He comes to fight and he throws a lot of

punches but every guy he's fought went backwards. Nobody held their ground.

"We'll see what happens when he gets caught with a lot of punches. We'll see what happens when he starts to back up because I won't be going backwards. I've proven that. He won't have to look too hard to find me.''

The hard part, unless someone has drastically miscalculated, will come when Gary Lockett finally does.