

PAVLIK: I Can Win This Fight Convincingly

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 14 October 2008 19:00

Perspective is often in short supply three days before a major boxing match but even by that limited standard undefeated middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik went around the bend a little bit recently in discussing the importance of achieving his true aim Saturday night at Boardwalk Hall.

“A knockout would be a huge statement,” Pavlik said quite rightly while discussing his upcoming showdown with aging former champion Bernard Hopkins. “That would probably be one of the biggest statements since probably the last 40 years in boxing.”

Now wait a minute. If memory serves the last 40 years of boxing would cover the period from 1968 to 2008. That would include Buster Douglas knocking out Mike Tyson as a 42-1 underdog, Muhammad Ali beating George Foreman when many of his friends feared for his life, Evander Holyfield knocking out Tyson as a 25-1 long shot, Oliver McCall knocking out Lennox Lewis at a time when no one thought he could have done that with a shotgun in his hand, Lloyd Honeyghan cold cocking Donald Curry when the world insisted Curry was the next Ray Leonard, Marlon Starling doing the same to unbeaten Mark Breland...need we go on?

Certainly stopping Hopkins (48-5, 32 KO) would be an admirable feat, however, as he has only been off knocked his feet once and has never really been in serious trouble despite having boxed seemingly since the Kennedy Administration. But the guy is 43 years old and looked every bit his age in his last outing, running out of gas in the final rounds against Joe Calzaghe to the point where he was reduced to crying about a low blow that wasn't and seemingly kept looking to the referee to help him defend himself from Calzaghe's ever quickening pace late in what he had made a close fight by slowing down the overly cautious Calzaghe's attack in the early rounds.

Juxtapose Hopkins' age and the small signs that the years have finally begun to change him with Pavlik's youth (26) and punching power (30 knockouts in 34 straight victories) and a stoppage is not the most remarkable thing one could conjure up. It would be admirable to be sure but as statements go it wouldn't exactly be the Gettysburg Address.

“I mean, he's never been stopped,” Pavlik said but then added his own caveat to what that meant when he continued. “How good a chin does he have? Well, we don't know. The question is what happens when he does get hit flush.”

When that has happened to most of Pavlik's opponents their eyes have seen a flash of white and then everything has gone dim. He has been blessed by what is known in the manly trade as heavy hands. When he touches you, the house lights begin to flicker and soon you find yourself sitting when you thought you were standing.

That is certainly countered by not only Hopkins' proven chin but also his defense and his slickness, especially on the inside. Hopkins has long been a master of getting you to do what he

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wants by making it difficult for you to do what you want. The more you try, the more open you are to being countered, which is his game.

But Hopkins' counter shots aren't what they used to be because his reflexes aren't what they used to be. At 43, there is no shame in that. It is simply a reality. What looms as a starker reality is that what Pavlik does best – throw lot of punches – is what Hopkins now likes least – which is the creation of a fast pace.

Hopkins has lost three of his last five fights to the same kind of problem. He lost to younger men whose pace was more than he could keep up with. In the case of Jermain Taylor it wasn't by much and the margin was slim enough that you could argue he won at least one of those fights if not both. But by the time he fought Calzaghe in April, after winning decisions from guys nearly as old as he is in Winky Wright and Antonio Tarver, his slowing pace in the latter half of the fight seemed a warning signal of larger problems to come for a man who would not listen to people like his former trainer, Freddie Roach, who has urged him to retire.

Pavlik has seen and heard this and while he is not taking Hopkins lightly he is coming into this fight believing he is the bigger, faster, stronger and busier of the two and there is nothing this vintage Hopkins can to counter that. Not at this stage of his life, any way.

"He's got great defense but he's got to keep up at a price," Pavlik warned. "His defense will lapse a couple of times so we got to take advantage of that.

"He's never been convincingly beat but after watching the Calzaghe fight I think I can definitely go in there and win this fight convincingly. A stoppage or just a unanimous decision, that's going to be a huge, huge victory for me. I have a ton of confidence going into this fight."

Perhaps Hopkins does as well but he has strangely downplayed his usually abrasive approach, constantly praising Pavlik for his power, skills and rise through the middleweight division rather than making menacing suggestions about the fate he is about to endure.

That departure seems to have convinced Pavlik's often bombastic trainer, Jack Loew, into believing there is something Hopkins understands about this fight that perhaps the general public will only learn on Saturday night.

"Don't be surprised if we put Bernard's nuts in his throat before he touches us low," Loew said of the possibility Hopkins might try to employ the borderline roughhouse tactics that have long been an important part of his arsenal.

"We're just as rough as he is on the inside so it's tit for tat. We want to make him fight at a really high rate and throw a lot of punches. Kelly lands 55 per cent of his power punches and you've got a guy who throws 37 punches a round against a guy who throws close to 100, 103 a round."

In other words, you've got both an accurate and busy power puncher facing a guy who throws a third as many punches as his opponent and who is neither as big or as strong as him. The latter will most likely come into play on the inside, the place where Hopkins has for so many years

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gotten the better of other men.

It is where he beat Oscar De La Hoya and William Joppy and Felix Trinidad and many less recognizable names. It is where he took apart Robert Allen and Keith Holmes and beat down Tarver and Wright.

But it is not, Kelly Pavlik insists, a safe place for him to be this Saturday night. Not if he wants to end the night upright at least.

“He fought a lot of great fighters and he beat them but a lot of those guys were smaller fighters,” said the 6-foot-2 1/2, 170 pound Pavlik, who will be free to fight at 10 pounds over the middleweight limit at Hopkins’ insistence, a decision Pavlik and Loew believe only works to their advantage.

“So it’s going to be a little harder for him to try and rough house on the inside and get away with dirty tactics as first of all he’s going to have to use a lot of energy and second of all, you know, it goes both ways on that.

“If you watched the Calzaghe fight, the second half of the fight Calzaghe played the same game as Hopkins and Hopkins was the one turning to the referee, pointing and telling him that Joe was being dirty on the inside. It kind of took him away from his game plan and his strategy.

“And he’s never really fought a guy of my size and strength on the inside. I’ll have more snap on my punches at this weight. The weight, to me, is not a big deal at all.”

The implication clearly was that it may be for Hopkins. Despite his having fought most recently as a light heavyweight, Hopkins has always been seen as a middleweight, which he’s been since the second fight of a career that celebrated its 20th anniversary seven days before his date with Pavlik.

Hopkins has cited that anniversary as proof positive of his vast edge in experience over the young champion, reminding the world that he began his career in the same town where he will face Pavlik at a time when Pavlik was a six-year-old boy playing with Tonka toys in Youngstown, Ohio.

What Hopkins conveniently leaves out is that if one believes in symmetry the fact is he lost that fight 20 years ago this month in Atlantic City to a guy named Clinton Mitchell. Hopkins wasn’t fighting as a middleweight that night either. He was a light heavyweight in with a bigger man and things did not work out.

Obviously much has changed since then. Hopkins went on to a stellar career, defending the middleweight title more times than anyone in history before moving up to light heavyweight and winning a belt there too. But that is all history, which is what Kelly Pavlik wants to make Bernard Hopkins on Saturday night – history.

“I’m not changing anything,” Pavlik insisted. “If he tries to keep up with me that defense of his is

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eventually going to open up.”

When it does, he believes, he will make a bold statement. A statement about himself, more than about Bernard Hopkins.