

More Merchant: On Calzaghe/Jones, Pavlik

Written by Michael Woods
Monday, 27 October 2008 19:00

It wasn't his first rodeo, that night in Atlantic City on Sept. 18 when Bernard Hopkins spit in the face of the inevitable bodily degradation that stems from aging, and showed Kelly Pavlik just why it is that we see this sport as a science, and an art, more than a mere clash of strength and will.

No, Larry Merchant has seen his share of cowboy-tough hombres enter the ring snorting and stamping, ready to enjoy a session of infliction and instead, find themselves eating the bulls horns, repeatedly. In AC, Pavlik certainly found himself gored from the get go, floundering, unable to perform at a level to which he'd been accustomed, and bewildered why this 43 ½ year old dude was working him over like a novice sparring mate.

Merchant took a few minutes to chat with TSS about what that fight means, with the benefit of some more hindsight, and shares his take on whether Hopkins' stellar showing leads the HBO analyst to give Roy Jones that much more of a chance to mar Joe Calzaghe's professional record.

We asked Larry if he thought Pavlik was "exposed" by the loss.

"I don't think it's any great secret that the fighter that Pavlik would have most problems with would be a guy with movement and pure boxing ability. At 160 pounds, he was so much bigger and stronger than most opponents he could overcome that."

Merchant thinks that Pavlik may have given future foes the foolproof blueprint to beat him, if they follow the Hopkins lead, and move away from the Pavlik, and do so without fearing a left hook keeping them honest. Of course, a plan pulled off by Hopkins isn't easily replicable, so we shall see how the blueprint theory plays out...

The analyst, who will be working the Nov. 22 Ricky Hatton/Paul Malignaggi fight, as well as the Dec. 6 Oscar De La Hoya (David) /Manny Pacquiao (Goliath) scraps, points out that the Pavlik management and promotional team clearly had a certain glowing assessment of their guy, and in retrospect, that glow might've been a bit bright.

"I think the loss exposed the grandiose plans for him to move to 175, and beyond. I think he should be extremely content to stay at middleweight as long as he can. But it exposed a weakness in that the management team got carried away. And, that the trainer went into the fight without a Plan B, they didn't think he needed one. But, he could win the next, two or three or five fights, and this could be just another episode."

Merchant wondered when his fight was signed why exactly it was taking place, and told TSS he didn't think the risk/reward ratio for Pavlik was all that. Sending Pavlik into the ring on antibiotics, as he battled bronchitis, was not a wise move, in the rear view, Merchant said. "They were basically saying that their fighter could go up ten pounds and being at less than his

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absolute best, beat Hopkins. That was underestimating Hopkins, which was understandable, considering he was huffing down the wire against Calzaghe.”

With that streak free rearview mirror, Merchant thinks the Pavlik career builders might've instead taken on their middleweight mandatory, Marco Antonio Rubio, and not bothered to listen to detractors who might've whined that the Youngstowner was plowing through human bowling pins, set up by Bob Arum. Then, they could have made maybe double the dough to fight the Calzaghe/Jones winner.

Merchant thinks Pavlik will glue himself back together and chug forward. A fight with Rubio will be entertaining, and Merchant sees the Ohian winning that and then maybe targeting either Arthur Abraham or Winky Wright. Both men are beatable, Merchant said.

Hopkins' splashy fountain of youth type of effort in AC didn't change Merchant's opinion of Roy Jones' chance against Calzaghe on Nov. 8, however. "I think basically Jones is the same fighter who fought Tarver in the third fight (on Oct. 1, 2005)," he said. "The only difference has been his level of opposition. He's still reluctant to put it all out there and attack."

It is entirely possible, even probable, that Jones won't be able to pick and choose his spots, and impress the judges with showy flurries, as Calzaghe peck, peck, pecks away at him, the analyst feels. "Will Jones be willing to let 'em go, or will he just be there waiting for an opening, and then hoping he can hurt Calzaghe? I haven't seen him do that in a long time, him be willing to go in there and let his hands go if there's the prospect of some guy unloading back at him. He may find that he tried to unleash his combos, and Calzaghe isn't there." Then again, Merchant hears Calzaghe pondering retirement, and knows that a fighter with one foot out of the ring may as well, oftentimes, forgo that final curtain call, because his mind has already left the building. So, maybe Jones can be the hungrier fighter come Nov. 8 at Madison Square Garden.

Finally, Merchant shares a scenario that might well impact the fightworld, in one fell swoop, in stunning fashion. What if, Merchant said, Calzaghe wins, and retires. Who does that leave for Hopkins to fight? And Jones? Maybe they'd just as soon wave the game goodbye, and call it a day.

And then again, maybe John McCain will show up on Barack Obama's Thursday infomercial, dump The Alaska Disasta from his ticket, pronounce Obama the better man, and remove himself from the race. Not...that...likely.