The last time we saw Kelly “The Ghost” Pavlik in the prize ring, he had just been schooled by a middle-aged professor who was 43, quickly closing in hard on 44.

It was the kind of sobering lesson young fighters don’t want to be taught, but sometimes need to learn. It comes with hard knocks, heartbreak, setbacks and a pill of humility the size of a basketball.

Doesn’t go down easy.

For awhile, Pavlik (34-1, 30 KOs) was hotter than a jalapeno salad, the best middleweight to come around since, well, since the middle-aged professor himself was fighting at middleweight: Bernard Hopkins.

That‘s who took Pavlik to school. That‘s the guy who beat “The Ghost” last October at a silly catch-weight of 170 pounds. That’s why they call him “The Executioner.” He kills a lot of hopes and dreams.

A one-sided fight, it was a difficult loss for the undefeated Pavlik, especially since Hopkins beat him so easily, so convincingly. It was like watching a wolf devour a kitten after tossing it in the air a few times for kicks.

What Pavlik learned was, at 170 pounds, he’s not so much a ghost as he is a sitting duck. If he can’t fight at 160 pounds and has to move up, he might want to consider a career change. There’s a lot of potential in the food and beverage industry.

But if he can stay at 160 pounds and doesn’t go near Hopkins or sign anything with the word “catch-weight” on it, he might be on his way back to becoming a hot property, the best middleweight out there under the age of 44.

That long, bumpy road back to fame, fortune and credibility starts Feb. 21 when Pavlik faces Mexico’s Marco Antonio Rubio (43-4-1, 37 KOs) at the Chevrolet Centre in Youngstown, Ohio, Pavlik’s hometown.

They will be fighting for the WBO and WBC middleweight belts, which Pavlik still owns despite the loss to Hopkins. It all goes back to the 170-pound catch-weight.

“It took about a week to get over the loss (to Hopkins),” Pavlik said on a recent conference call. “I talked to my wife and dad, then we moved on.”

Sure they did.

Don’t believe it. He’ll remember that loss long after he forgets most of his wins. It just works

that way.

“The fans have been very supportive,” Pavlik said. “You can see that by the ticket sales of this fight.”

Apparently, tickets are selling pretty fast in Youngstown. And it ain’t Rubio who is selling them.

“I still feel like a champion, but I feel as if I need to go in and shine on Feb. 21,” Pavlik said. “I need to dominate.”

That would help. But the truth is, he just needs to win.

A nice guy who won the middleweight title with back-to-back wins over Jermain Taylor before the Hopkins fiasco, they worship Pavlik in Youngstown, a small city that keeps coughing up world-class fighters.

“Everyone asks me ‘what could be better then being the middleweight champion of the world,’ ” Pavlik said. “I’ll tell you what’s better. Defending the title in my hometown. This is a dream come true and I want to make it a spectacular night for Youngstown. This city deserves it.”

We know Pavlik does.

Don’t expect Rubio to play the role of sacrificial lamb. He isn’t too concerned about civic pride or the erecting of statues in Youngstown.

“Everything I have achieved in boxing, I’ve earned,” he said. “There have been no gifts given to me. That’s how I became mandatory challenger, traveling throughout the U.S. and Mexico, fighting and winning.“

Yeah, but have you ever fought a hometown boy in Youngstown? A guy who can put you to sleep faster than a glass of warm milk?

“Challenging Pavlik in his hometown makes no difference to me,“ Rubio said. ”I’m not afraid of ghosts.“

How about wolves?