

If Pavlik Gets Past Rubio, Duddy Likely Next

Written by Ron Borges

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The owner of half of the middleweight championship of the world knows the situation he'll be in Feb. 21, when he defends those titles from the challenge of Marco Antonio Rubio.

"I've got a lot of proving to do," Kelly Pavlik said Thursday from Youngstown, Ohio, which will be the site of an unusual split-city, pay-per-view telecast in which his fight will follow the WBO welterweight title fight at Madison Square Garden between former champion Miguel Cotto and England's Michael Jennings.

This is Pavlik's first appearance in a ring since Bernard Hopkins gutted him like a skillful butcher last October at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City. That night the previously unbeaten Pavlik not only had no answers for what Hopkins was up to but seemed so lost he didn't even know what questions to ask. It was a stunning evening, one that left people wondering if he was the same guy who had twice beaten Jermain Taylor and flattened Edison Miranda.

"After the first round I came back and told myself in a couple of rounds I'll loosen up," Pavlik recalled. "After the next round I thought maybe he'd fade and I'd get warm."

He never did and by the 11th round even finally landing a flush shot on Hopkins' chin didn't help. "It was the only time all night and I knew then and there I didn't cause him any problems," he admitted.

Why that was Pavlik refused to speculate upon, insisting the only thing he could take from such a long night at the office was the message Hopkins gave him after the one-sided decision had been announced and he went to counsel the 26-year-old Youngstown hero as he sat forlornly in his corner.

"Bernard said to me in the corner, 'Mental strength,'" said Pavlik, whose last loss came almost 10 years earlier at the 1999 Olympic Trials in his final amateur fight. "He told me to put it behind me and move on...which I did a week after the fight.

"He told me I could still be middleweight champion for a long time. He told me my career was not over. Look at Hopkins. He's got four or five losses and he's going to go down as one of the best all-time. It was one of those nights.

"It happens to a lot of fighters. There's nothing really you can take away from it but how to move on. What can you do? It is all how you bounce back. The great fighters bounce back and win. It's not the losses, it's how you come back."

That is what the boxing world will be watching for on Feb. 21 because until Pavlik shows he has righted himself the memory of how one-sided that defeat was will not be erased. To begin that process he seems to have the perfect foil in Rubio (43-4-1, 38), a hard-punching, one-dimensional opponent whose compass seems to seldom point East or West.

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“Rubio is not going to turn into a Bernard Hopkins,” Pavlik’s trainer, Jack Loew, said. “Rubio is a come-ahead fighter. He’ll be right in front of us. We won’t have to look for him. That definitely plays into our hands. I think it’s a perfect opponent they put in front of us but he’s tough.”

Tough and someone who can hurt you if he lands, not an inconsiderable issue when you recall Pavlik crumbling to the canvas early in his first fight with Taylor only to rise on wobbly legs, hold on and then comeback to knock Taylor cold a few rounds later. Those are not the kind of theatrics either Loew or Pavlik’s promoter, Bob Arum, particularly want to see repeated, however.

Given their druthers what they want is what Pavlik’s loyal fans who will be packing the Chevrolet Centre in dying downtown Youngstown want – domination.

Whether they get it remains to be seen but Pavlik assured them they won’t be looking at the middleweight version of Willie Pep all of a sudden. They’ll be seeing the same Kelly Pavlik who knocked out 30 of his 34 victims on his way to the middleweight title.

“We’ll use our overall talent, ability and boxing skills,” Pavlik (34-1, 30 KO) said. “As far as dancing skills – no. But we’ll use angles and hand speed.”

Pavlik admitted he was happy to be fighting in his hometown for the first time since he hit the big time and glad his fans did not have to travel to Atlantic City or New York to see him but at the end of the day he understood convenience and comfort are not what this fight is about. It is about only one thing - who he is.

“It’s important to bounce back and look good,” Pavlik said. “To prove the critics wrong.”

Pavlik said he didn’t expect to feel unusually nervous being back in front of a hometown crowd that will include Ohio State head football coach Jim Tressel, Oklahoma coach Bob Stoopes and a number of the members of the Cleveland Browns, his boyhood team. Nerves, he pointed out, stopped being a problem a long time ago after having appeared on the biggest of stages against Hopkins, Taylor and Miranda on HBO. Perhaps as a reminder of how quickly one can slide from that high place however, this fight is on pay-per-view because neither HBO or SHOWTIME was willing to buy it for their regular boxing shows, the first time in several years Pavlik was not appearing under HBO’s bright lights.

Another change has been a closed door training camp at Loew’s Southside Boxing Club. Before recent fights Loew and Pavlik had been open and welcoming to the media but this time they have opened the gym doors only once, a reaction to some extent Loew admitted to the Hopkins loss.

“Maybe we all got a little bit too content,” Loew said.

Pavlik is clearly content to be back at middleweight instead of fighting at 168 pounds and then beyond that as he did in the rematch with Taylor and the Hopkins fight. In neither match did Pavlik seem as heavy-handed as he was in the middleweight division and although both he and

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Loew said they expect he will return to super middleweight and even light heavyweight down the road for the moment they are content he is back at a weight that while a bit more difficult to make is the one where he has proven most dominant.

“Right now there’s much more to accomplish at middleweight,” Pavlik said.

Waiting in the wings, Pavlik knows, are potential unification title fights against undefeated IBF champion Arthur Abraham (28-0) or WBA titleholder Felix Sturm (31-2-1) but Arum pointed out that while those might be better fights to boxing insiders they may not be bigger fights than the one they are hoping to make with popular Irishman John Duddy.

“There’s a difference between the best fight and the biggest fight,” Arum said. “The biggest fight is financial. The best fight is Arthur Abraham but nobody knows who the hell Abraham is in this country. It’s the same with Sturm. I’ve talked to both German promoters and I’m confident at some time we’ll be able to do those fights but Duddy is a monster fight in Cleveland or at Madison Square Garden. It may not appeal to you as much as Abraham but it’s a bigger fight.”

That may be true but only if Pavlik first rids the ring of Rubio and rids himself of any lingering doubt that might be hidden in the corners of his mind courtesy of the Hopkins beating. To clear away those cobwebs Kelly Pavlik knows what he has to do on Fe. 21. He has to clear the ring of Marco Antonio Rubio as spectacularly as he can.

“He’s ready to go,” Loew insisted. “You’re going to see the old Kelly Pavlik back. You’re going to see a complete Kelly Pavlik that night.”

So he and all of Youngstown hope.