

## The Rise And Possible Fall Of James Kirkland

Written by John Nguyen  
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With what will undoubtedly be one of the biggest boxing events fast approaching Saturday with Pacquiao-Hatton, fight fans are buzzing with anticipation. Such occasions stir excitement for up-and-coming fighters as well. For prospects who long to see their names in the bright lights of Vegas, the next best thing is to find their name on the undercard. A young fighter couldn't ask for a better platform to use as a showcase for mainstream fans.

One fighter who won't get such an opportunity, at least not this weekend, is junior middleweight contender, James Kirkland. It was revealed late last week that Kirkland will be scratched from the Pacquiao-Hatton undercard due to an arrest made on April 19. Kirkland, who has a spotted legal history, has since been charged with unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon, a charge which stems from a 2003 armed robbery conviction for which he was still on probation. He was formally arraigned Tuesday.

The 25-year old Kirkland, (25-0, 22 KOs), has emerged within the past year as one of the game's most celebrated prospects. Kirkland's exceedingly violent style has made him one of boxing's most TV-friendly fighters. He wins not by wiliness or craft, but instead with raw, honest brutality that gains the attention of even the passing fan. Kirkland, who headlined an HBO Boxing After Dark card in February, was supposed to use Saturday night's undercard appearance as a springboard to bigger and better things. Instead, it will be a painful missed opportunity for a young man whose career suddenly is in jeopardy.

Last week, Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer issued a statement supporting the man who was supposed to be one of the company's fastest rising stars.

"We support James and we want him to take care of his issues. We're not going to abandon him because he has a serious problem that he is facing," Schaefer said.

That's probably one of the only bits of reassuring news that Kirkland has received in recent days. After more than a week in federal custody, Kirkland has certainly had ample time to reflect on the direction his life and career are headed. Given current circumstances, things don't look good.

The feeling among fight fans and insiders alike is the cynical, knee-jerk reaction one might expect: Kirkland will prove to be another example of talent squandered. His past will dictate his present, forecasting a grim outlook for his future.

One does not need to look very far into the past to see careers derailed by personal demons and the swift, strong hand of the law. Boxing history is littered with tragic stories of promising careers cut short, and a lifetime to lament what could have been.

Take, for instance, the case of Jo-Ei Scott, the undefeated heavyweight prospect who, in the mid-nineties, appeared destined for an eventual shot at the heavyweight title. At 6'3" and 240

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pounds, Scott had the size to compete in the changing landscape of the heavyweight division. Scott also had the amateur pedigree to compete at the elite level of the sport, winning the U.S. Amateurs in 1993, and claiming the bronze at the World Amateur Championships that same year. He began his career with eighteen consecutive knockouts, and even garnered a feature article in the October 1995 issue of Ring Magazine.

Things were coming up daisies for Scott, until poor decisions and a lack of self-control eclipsed his physical gifts. In 1996, Scott was convicted of rape and sentenced to four years in prison. Upon his release, he attempted a comeback that eventually saw him suffer two KO losses. Then, in 2004, Scott was convicted of a brutal rape and murder of an elderly woman in Albany, New York, for which he is currently serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Also consider the well-known case of Tony Ayala, Jr., a fighter with whom Kirkland shares startling similarities in terms of style and circumstance. An undefeated junior middleweight prospect in the early 1980s, Ayala looked like a sure bet for stardom. Ayala destroyed his opponents with a brand of savagery rarely seen. After compiling a record of 22-0 with 19 knockouts, Ayala was on the verge of getting a title shot against WBA champion Davey Moore.

All of Ayala's promise and meteoric success came to a screeching halt early in 1983, when a nineteen-year old Ayala burglarized the home of a neighbor, and then sexually assaulted her. For these crimes, he served sixteen years in prison, effectively ending his professional career. Upon his release from prison in 1999, Ayala attempted a disappointing comeback, which saw him lose twice by knockout.

Things continued to go south for Ayala, as several run-ins with the law followed, the last in 2004 resulting in a ten-year prison sentence for probation violation, driving without a license, and possession of drug paraphernalia.

The stories of Scott and Ayala are illustrative of potential unrealized and lives ruined. Worst of all, their own mistakes left a trail of collateral damage, leaving the lives of numerous others unspeakably damaged. That such brave warriors in the ring could be so cowardly when facing their own fears, failures, and demons speaks to the duality of human nature.

That being said, it is evident James Kirkland's current situation does differ from the downward spirals of Jo-el Scott and Tony Ayala. The gun charges faced by Kirkland, all would agree, are not nearly as ghastly as the worst acts perpetrated by Scott or Ayala.

And unlike Scott and Ayala, the James Kirkland story still has crucial chapters left to be written which will decide whether the story ends in triumph or bitter disappointment. After all, his current circumstances have yet to be resolved, and Kirkland is entitled to due process. Until all the facts are gathered and Kirkland has had his day in court, conclusions should not be drawn. Time will tell how the James Kirkland saga will play out.

However, it is impossible to look at Kirkland's current situation without a pessimistic lens. From a boxing perspective, a prison term for James Kirkland would claim one of the sport's brightest young stars. The old showbiz adage "Always leave them wanting more" rarely translates to

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boxing, a sport in which fans wish to see every ounce a fighter has to give. The feeling is we've only seen a fraction of what Kirkland has to offer in the ring.

But the greatest tragedy that could result from all this is not a fighter whose prime could be spent in a prison cell. Boxing is only a tiny fraction of the bigger picture. Should the worst-case scenario prevail for James Kirkland, the greatest sadness would be the image of a young man who lost himself while on the verge of discovering what he could be. For Kirkland, the best scenario would not be winning a world title, but instead putting his past life behind him and becoming a new man. Boxing was only the vehicle to get him there. All that could be rendered naught by one very costly, very foolish, decision.