

Where Has Kelly Pavlik's Fighting Spirit Gone?

Written by John Nguyen

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How does someone go from being one of boxing's most celebrated fighters to a forgotten man in less than a year?

Ask Kelly Pavlik. He should have more than a few pointers for how to run a career into the ground.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, Pavlik seemed too good to be true to fight fans. The bomber from the Rust Belt was a throwback. Here was a fighter who was dynamic where it mattered: between the ropes. He would hit and get hit. And then hit back. Harder. Even the casual observer could appreciate Pavlik's craft. After all, it's pretty easy to admire a guy who hits like he has horseshoes in his gloves.

Kelly Pavlik was undefeated, and his perch atop the middleweight division didn't appear as though it would be disturbed for a good while. It looked like the beginning of a storybook career.

Enter: Bernard Hopkins. nbsp;

Exit: Pavlik's bevy of bandwagoneers.

After the twelve-round thrashing "The Ghost" took at the hands of B-Hop, Pavlik's detractors were suddenly as vocal as they were numerous. Truthfully, though, the Hopkins loss didn't really expose anything new about Kelly Pavlik. We knew he was mechanical. We were aware he was rather one-dimensional. He was exactly the type of fighter that Hopkins could feast upon, even in the twilight of his career. If ever there was a forgivable loss, this would be it.

The purpose of this article is not to rake Pavlik over the coals for losing to Hopkins. There are things far more shameful than losing to an all-time great.

The purpose of this article is to criticize what Pavlik has done since.

Given Pavlik's previously demonstrated fighting spirit, the hope was that, after an appropriate time to heal physically and psychologically from such a devastating loss, fans would see a return to the ring, and a return to form, for "The Ghost." Four months after the first loss of his career, Pavlik took the first step of his comeback before his adoring hometown fans in Youngstown to face the tough, but very limited Marco Antonio Rubio.

I guess we could spot Pavlik a gimme in his first fight back, which is the only way that his easy nine-round destruction of Rubio could be characterized. With a confidence builder out of the way, Pavlik would ideally move on to serious middleweight business, right?

Arthur Abraham? Paul Williams? Winky Wright?

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Heck, we'd even have taken Felix Sturm.

Nope. We got Sergio Mora.

Even worse, we weren't even able to see Mora-Pavlik. A staph infection in Pavlik's hand led to the cancellation of the room-temperature matchup. What followed was a standstill in Pavlik's career trajectory, a standstill with which Pavlik seemed satisfied. Rumors emerged that the pride of Youngstown was perhaps enjoying the spoils of being middleweight champion a bit too much. Murmors of rancor between Team Pavlik and his promoter, Top Rank, began to surface.

Where had the old school fighting spirit gone? Where was Pavlik's effort to salvage his reputation as a prizefighter?

These questions appeared answered at long last when it was announced that Pavlik would lock horns with boxing's most avoided fighter, Paul Williams. The fight posed a dangerous proposition for Pavlik, but involved the type of risk fans want to see from an elite fighter. Here was Pavlik's chance to prove his worth and silence his critics.

Not so fast. Cue staph infection. Cue postponement. Cue disappointment.

The announcement on Monday that the Williams fight had been postponed (and potentially cancelled altogether, due to rescheduling conflicts with Williams' promoter Dan Goossen) due to Pavlik's lingering infection led to serious criticism when it was leaked that Pavlik had missed at least three appointments to have his hand examined by his doctor.

Pavlik's irresponsible behavior leading up to Monday's announcement has drawn the ire of his promoter, Bob Arum, which cannot help matters in an already teetering relationship. One can't help but think that Pavlik simply doesn't care about landing the Williams fight or, for that matter, salvaging his status as a marquee name.

And now Kelly Pavlik finds himself in an even more precarious situation than before. Outside the ring, things seem to be unraveling. The world is no longer at his feet. Even his immediate supporters are at a loss for how to mend the situation.

Inside the ring, he is a man with few options. The arch-nemesis fans really want to see him against, the undefeated Arthur Abraham, grew tired of waiting and went north to 168 pounds to seek other challenges. And with Abraham's commitment to Showtime's Super Six World Boxing Classic, it doesn't look like he will tangle with Pavlik in the near future.

If Pavlik has any hope of doing damage control for his career, re-scheduling with Paul Williams is the only option. It is the only fight of significance available to Pavlik. Boxing fans have a relatively short attention span, and Pavlik faces the possibility of fading from relevance in the eyes of the public.

There comes a point in the life of every fighter when their identity comes to the surface.

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Courage and character are tested, and from murky ambiguity comes a verdict. This is how the greats are separated from mere mortals. One way or another, the truth always comes out.

It seems very possible that Kelly Pavlik is reluctant to embrace his true moment of reckoning. Maybe the issue isn't even reluctance; perhaps it's just general apathy. In either case, he needs to understand that his inaction can also decide his legacy. The truth seems to be coming out, alright. And it doesn't look pretty.