Blue-collar hero Kelly Pavlik is the kind of man who prefers the hard way. He takes the stairs. Over the past few years he has trudged up the most perilous staircase in sports like a laborer burdened with blunt tools. He doesn't complain; he sees what there is to do and he does it with an uncomplicated resolve common in places like Youngstown, Ohio.

Youngstown. Back in 1922, "Pavlik was one of 276 Slovak surnames on mailboxes in the Lansingville section of the city. This descendant remains close to home despite the fame and fortune his fists brought over the past few years. He stays while others leave. In 1930 the steel industry was strong and the population peaked at 170,000. It has declined 67% since then. Thirty-three years ago its economy collapsed when too many businesses moved away seeking cheaper labor; and now the empty shells of furnaces and foundries dot the landscape. The problem was always the same: stubborn Youngstown stuck with what it knew despite the signs of the times. It failed to develop new growth industries to sustain employment and as a result almost 1 in 4 of its inhabitants is scrounging below the poverty line.

Youngstown didn't diversify.

During training, Pavlik leaves his parents' house to do early morning roadwork …a skeletal figure in a hoodie running past haunted old mills.

Pavlik didn't diversify either. Nor did he need to. This laborer climbed out of the basement where so many nameless fighters toil in dim lights and defeated first a contender and then a champion. Hometown support helped. Those blunt instruments dangling at the end of his arms helped more.

The contender was Edison Miranda, a pure puncher. Miranda's style contains a total of two elements, absorb and deliver. It is no more sophisticated than his hand-to-mouth childhood in a third-world country, but it was enough to see him bring a 28-1 record into a title eliminator against Pavlik. Pavlik absorbed and delivered better and stopped the Colombian in seven rounds. Miranda didn't have an alternate script. He still doesn't, despite a reported nine months of training under Joe Goosen. He took shots on Saturday night with the kind of bravado that falls as he fell after an unseen uppercut landed on a nerve center. As Lucian Bute skipped away, they needed a broom to sweep up the broken pieces of pride and promise. Miranda couldn't diversify.

The champion was Jermain Taylor. Thousands of Pavlik's neighbors left Youngstown for Atlantic City when he faced the then-undefeated middleweight king. It was a battle for the ages. Five rounds after teetering on the brink of a knockout loss, Pavlik hit Taylor with an assembly line of punches that dropped the champion like a crane would scrap metal.

That was 2007. The first white linear middleweight champion since 1980 threw that belt over his shoulder and thanked the city he loves. "I still get goose bumps, he said during the post-fight

press conference, “thinking about the fans who came out.

The excitement a white working class American champion stirs up in the boxing world is something to behold. More complex in its origins than racism and less noble than patriotism, it was notarized when Pavlik handled Taylor again in the rematch. But purists of every pigment remained suspicious about the new king’s aptitude. Taylor’s style was never sophisticated. He never learned his craft well enough to become a technician or a stylist, and instead relied on natural ability. His legs moved as if he was playing tennis. He was not malicious and the *nom de guerre*
of “Bad Intentions didn’t make him so. Taylor was spirited but never mean, competitive but never do-or-die. Pavlik’s search and destroy robotics were out of his bounds.

Nothing was out of bounds for the master craftsman who stood atop the next flight in the perilous stairwell. With tools as sharp as Pavlik’s are blunt and far more efficient, Bernard Hopkins used a multi-faceted approach to deal with a straight-thinking, straight-punching method, and spun him as easily as a hustler spins a hick. Pavlik stumbled, an antique wheezing and creaking while Hopkins was born again.

Afterwards the master craftsman pushed his glove into the chest of the laborer, “You are a great middleweight champion, he told Pavlik, “keep your head up and keep fighting.

Pavlik did as he was told. He made two low-risk defenses and stopped both. But disillusionment had set in among the masses. The word was out, even in Youngstown. ‘Heavy-handed Pavlik is one-dimensional,’ it said, ‘he has trouble with skilled boxers.’

Argentinean Sergio Martinez is a skilled boxer. He is also a southpaw and an athlete superior to Taylor. Taylor ran track in high school. Martinez was a professional soccer player and cyclist, who started boxing at the ripe old age of twenty. He has evolved into a stylist who fights with a rhythm all his own, with legs that move on wheels and a soccer player’s sense of placement. Those wheels and that placement were more than enough to make the feared and avoided Paul Williams look like, well, Kelly Pavlik.

With that performance, Martinez identified himself as a bad choice for any fighter living in a single dimension.

…So what did our blue-collar hero do? His callused hand signed to fight Martinez. That wrench that Hopkins so casually tossed into his machine had to be removed and Pavlik would try to do it the hard way, by prevailing over someone who promised to be even more wrenching.

He failed.

By the end of the ninth round, the middleweight champion looked as if the Ohio state bird had crashed headlong into his face. “I couldn’t see, he said minutes after the blood was wiped off his face, after the title was surrendered.

Youngstown had Black Monday; Pavlik, Bloody Saturday. A local historian might suggest to us

that he made the same mistake that his city made decades ago. City and champion stuck with what they knew in an expanding market and ended up losing what they had.

Now twenty-eight years old, Pavlik has gone as far as he can go without making fundamental adjustments to his machinery. *Le fantôme dans la machine* insists that he realign his equipment to meet styles more sophisticated than simple punchers and over-eager athletes. The word is out. Geometry and mobility can break him down. If nothing changes, he himself will end up a scuffed stair for the newly ascending.

He must diversify.
…
Youngstown, like its favorite son, has been struggling in a ruthlessly progressive world that left it brooding by broken windows. This year newspapers are reporting that hope is rising for the city; new initiatives are developing technology-based companies with some success. Kelly "The Ghost Pavlik wants to become a part of the renewal plan.

There is hope for him.

Boxing's landscape, littered though it is with dented husks, has a history animated by willing spirits …and resurrections. □□□□

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The photograph, "Abandoned facility of defunct Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, appears with the courtesy of stu_spivack. "Ghost in the Machine is a phrase introduced by Gilbert Ryle in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Census information was derived from "Census of the Slovak People Living In Mahoning County, Ohio, published by the District Assembly of the Slovak League of America, 1922.

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