

Pavlik Knows He Has To Look Dominant To Shut Up Critics

Written by Rick Folstad

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He sounds like a guy you might meet at a church picnic, someone who helps old ladies cross the street and takes in lost dogs and cats.

He's not a fighter as much as he's an icon, a good guy getting along in a tough-guy profession. So when Kelly "The Ghost" Pavlik tells you his left hand is back to where it belongs - back to knocking guys on their backsides - you have to believe him. Choirboys don't lie.

Pavlik says the staph infection that sidelined him these past several months required two surgeries, lots of antibiotics, time and stitches to heal. And when he finally went back to the gym to start training for his Dec. 19 fight with Miguel Espino, he started out sparring with 18-ounce gloves, which is like sparring with pillows.

Tiny steps.

"The hand is at about 100 percent right now," Pavlik (35-1, 31 KOs) said on a conference call promoting his WBC middleweight championship title defense against Espino at Youngstown State University (pay-per-view) near Pavlik's home. "I've been sparring eight and ten rounds with the gloves we always use and my hand doesn't hurt."

But his feelings do.

Maybe now the worst thing about the bad hand is the questions it raised about Pavlik's willingness to face the best out there. He was supposed to fight Paul Williams twice this year, but had to pull out both times because of the hand. Instead, Williams won a close, tough fight against Sergio Martinez on Dec. 5, one of the days originally scheduled for a Pavlik-Williams fight.

Two weeks later, Pavlik is set to defend his title against Espino. And a lot of fight fans are left wondering why he could fight Espino but not Williams.

"I can understand (why people pointed fingers), but the reason it doesn't bother me is that those people know absolutely nothing about boxing," Pavlik said. "They don't know what goes on in the sport. The thing is, we had to take the fight (with Espino). We were told (by the WBC and the WBO) we had to defend the title. We had to. We had to make that fight happen."

Along with making it happen, he says he has to make sure he shows some of his old stuff against Espino.

"Especially after the layoff, I think we have to look dominant," Pavlik said. "I think it's very important to win big. If there are critics now, you know there is going to be a lot more (if he

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doesn't dominate).“

If there is anything positive about a layoff, maybe it's a whetting of the appetite. Pavlik said the long layoff has left him hungry to get back in the ring.

“I miss it,” he said.

The thing about Pavlik is that he became middleweight champion of the world the old-fashioned way: he earned it. He beat a lot of good fighters on the way up to where Jermain Taylor ruled the division. And when he got his chance, he stopped Taylor for the title in seven rounds in 2007. And then he beat Taylor again in a rematch. His only loss was a lesson as much as it was a beating, Bernard Hopkins doing the instructing.

They should hand out degrees to anyone who survives a fight with Hopkins. They learn more in 12 rounds with “The Executioner” than they'll learn in 12 years with most trainers.

While Pavlik is confident going in against Espino (20-2-1, 9 KOs) , the challenger isn't exactly rolling over and playing dead. The WBC's No. 3 contender and a former fighter on NBC's “The Contender,” he's won his last 11 fights and his last four by knockout.

“Do I have a shot to win?” said Espino, who lives in North Hollywood, CA. “Absolutely. Do I believe I can win? Absolutely. I'm going out there and give the best performance of my life.”

In enemy territory.

He knows it's a big home-field advantage for Pavlik.

“I know they're going to be cheering for Kelly Pavlik, but there will be a handful of Mexicans there cheering for me,” he said. “This is a great honor and I'm humbled by it.”

Pavlik's trainer, Jack Loew, said they're expecting nothing but “the best,” from Espino.

“A win like this could change his life,” Loew said. “It changed ours when Kelly beat Jermain.”

The fight will be one of four fights televised from both the United State and Mexico. The telecast will open from Sonora, Mexico, where super-featherweight champ Humberto Soto takes on Jesus Chavez in a lightweight fight.