

As 2008 began, Kelly Pavlik was seeking inclusion on the short list of boxing superstars.

Pavlik-Taylor II: Courage under Fire

The crowning achievement for one fighter is often the low point for another.

In July 2005, when Jermain Taylor dethroned Bernard Hopkins, it was his greatest triumph. But for the Executioner, it was the most bitter defeat in an illustrious ring career. Two years later, boxing's wheel of fortune turned again. Kelly Pavlik seized the middleweight title by knocking out Taylor in seven rounds. This time, it was Jermain whose world was turned upside down while Pavlik enjoyed the celebration.

Pavlik is from Youngstown, Ohio; a city in the heart of the nation's rust-belt that has fallen upon hard economic times. After the fight, Youngstown and the surrounding region embraced its new hero with a fervor that America reserves for reigning sports champions.

Kelly is a hometown boy who made good. Like Youngstown, he'd been on the canvas. But he got up and won in dramatic fashion. "My style is to come out swinging and keep swinging," he says. "The thing I like most about boxing is, when the bell rings, it's straight up; me and you."

When Pavlik returned from Atlantic City after his victory over Taylor, his SUV was met at the Ohio border by a caravan of police cars and fire trucks that escorted him home. Thereafter, the perks kept coming.

Pavlik threw out the ceremonial first pitch before Game 4 of the American League Championship series between the Cleveland Indians and Boston Red Sox ("It was a good pitch; 45 miles an hour, I think"); sat beside the legendary Jim Brown after presiding over the coin toss before a Browns-Dolphins match-up ("a real thrill"); and addressed the Ohio State Buckeyes before the Ohio State-Michigan football game; ("the greatest sports event in America").

"These are teams I've rooted for my whole life," Kelly says. "So it was awesome." He was also the subject of a Congressional resolution

that praised him for his commitment and continuing loyalty to the community.

But after a while, it got a bit tiring. "I'm a simple guy," Pavlik acknowledges. "I don't like flash and the limelight too much. I like to do things around the house and spend time with my daughter, and there's been a lot of times lately when I haven't had any 'me' time. People just show up at my house with ten gloves for me to sign. That's the part I don't like."

And there were other pressures. "In Youngstown," Pavlik notes, "when you're on top, you're on top. But when you let them down, you're the worst person in town. It's funny how that works. You don't want to become the bad guy in the city for failing at something. But at the same time, it's pretty neat to be that guy, to be in that situation. You have to take in what you like and enjoy all the great things from it. And the things you don't like, you've got to just block out. The main thing is, I won the world title. That's something nobody can ever take from me."

There was a blip on the radar screen in early November, when Pavlik was reported to have put his hands through a glass window in the kitchen while doing repair work. The early word was that more than a hundred stitches had been needed to close the wounds, but that number was later downgraded to fourteen. Why had Kelly been fixing the window instead of having a repairman do it?

"That's what I do," he explained. "It's my house."

Trainer Jack Loew also enjoyed the fruits of victory. The Cleveland Cavaliers asked him to give an inspirational talk to their office staff. More fighters (amateur and pro) sought him out. "I'm a lot more popular in Youngstown now than I was before," Loew observed. "And I'm getting to play at some of the finer golf courses around town."

Jermain Taylor was familiar with the drill. Two years earlier, he'd enjoyed similar adoration after lifting the crown from Bernard Hopkins. "Anywhere I go," Jermain said at the time, "restaurants, clubs, wherever; they don't charge me. Of course, when I was broke and needed it, no one gave me anything for free."

Now Taylor had an agenda that was far more pressing than free meals. "I believe in, you fight the guy that beat you," he said. "It's like, you beat me fair and square. Let's see if you can do it again."

The contracts for Taylor-Pavlik I had included a rematch clause. But because Jermain had encountered difficulty making weight for earlier fights, he'd insisted that the rematch (if there was one) be contested at 166 pounds. That meant Pavlik-Taylor II wouldn't be for the middleweight championship. But Taylor didn't care about getting the belts back. "It's all about revenge now," he said. "Kelly took something that I think is mine. When I win, I'll be walking out of there with everything he took from me. I'll be walking out with my pride."

"Win or lose, I'll still have my title when this is over," Pavlik countered. "But that's not what this is about. This is about personal pride, me and Jermain, and keeping the '0' on my record."

The fight was scheduled for February 16, 2008, at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. That was where Taylor had beaten Bernard Hopkins to annex the middleweight crown. Throughout fight week, Kelly wore the black-red-and-white colors of Youngstown State University and mingled freely with fans. Two days before the bout, he was eating in the Studio Café (an MGM Grand coffee shop), posing for photos and signing autographs for well-wishers who came by.

Bob Arum (Pavlik's promoter) played the Youngstown angle to the hilt. Ray Mancini and Harry Arroyo (two former champions from Youngstown) were brought in to bolster the promotion. At the final pre-fight press conference, Arum proclaimed, "We're all from Youngstown." One half-expected the promoter (who'd served in the Justice Department during the Kennedy Administration) to follow with the proclamation, "Ich bin ein Youngstownner."

Taylor partisans pointed to Pavlik's flaws as the first building block in their theory that Jermain would win the rematch. "Kelly is tough," they acknowledged. "Kelly has lots of heart and throws lots of punches. If you stand in front of him, he'll beat you down. But he's less effective if you move on him and keep him turning so he can't plant his feet and punch. And Kelly is a good long-range fighter but, on the inside, his punches lack leverage. Inside, an opponent can use Kelly's long arms against him and smother his punches."

Taylor's backers also noted that Jermain had come very close to winning the first fight. Midway through round two of that encounter, he'd timed a right hand over a sloppy Pavlik jab and landed solidly. "I was

hurt,” Kelly acknowledged afterward. “I don’t care how good your chin is. If you get hit hard behind the ear where he hit me, your equilibrium will go.”

Once he was hit, Pavlik staggered backward and Taylor followed with a fifteen-punch barrage that put him down. Kelly rose at the count of two, but was on shaky legs with eighty-eight seconds left in the round. Another right hand sent him reeling backward. A lot of referees would have stopped the fight at that juncture.

Ultimately, Pavlik rallied to win. But five rounds later, when he scored his knockout, Jermain was ahead 59–54, 58–55, 58–55 on the judges’ scorecards.

That led to point three in the case for Taylor. Boxing is the most demanding of all sports. A fighter who wants to be great but doesn’t work hard is daydreaming, that’s all. But prior to Taylor-Pavlik I, Jermain had sloughed off. Instead of doing roadwork, he’d run on a treadmill in his room. He hadn’t sparred enough or otherwise paid his dues in the gym.

“I got too comfortable,” Taylor admitted after the loss. “I didn’t do what I was supposed to do in training camp. I lost what it took to become world champion. I took it for granted. Somewhere around the sixth or seventh round, I started getting real tired. Then I started going into survival mode, backing up to the ropes, and Kelly capitalized on it.

“I think about it all the time,” Jermain continued. “Boxing is hard but it’s fair. What comes into my head now is how I could have trained harder. But all the ‘should haves’ and ‘could haves’ in the world aren’t going to change anything. It took me getting my butt kicked to get me back on track. This time in training camp, I got back to the way it used to be; getting up in the morning, running, working hard. I’m in tip-top shape now. Kelly knows what happened in the second round last time and that the fight should have been over. His ass was beaten and he knows it. I give him credit. He got up and did what he had to do to win. But this time, when I get him in trouble, I’ll finish him off.”

But the case for a Pavlik victory was just as compelling, if not stronger. Kelly is big, strong, and relentless. He keeps coming and his punches take a toll. He wears opponents down with hard thudding blows. “It’s a small ring to begin with,” Ray Mancini observes. “And when you’ve got a 6-foot-2 guy like Kelly coming at you, it gets smaller real quick.”

Taylor was thought to have permanent soft-tissue damage beneath his left eye that could cause him difficulty during the fight. And Pavlik was free of a problem that had hindered him during their previous encounter. "Last time, Kelly's nose was all banged up from sparring and he had a sinus infection," Mike Pavlik (Kelly's father) confided. "There was no sense in talking about it afterward, but he could hardly breathe out of his nose. That's not a problem now."

Nor could Taylor count on getting Pavlik in trouble again in the early rounds.

"I won't sell Jermain short," Kelly promised. "He had it in him to beat Bernard Hopkins twice. But there were a lot of things I did wrong last time that I've worked to fix. Last fight, I got lazy and dropped my left hand, and Jermain took advantage of it. That won't happen again. If I keep my left hand high and don't lean in with my head, I should be able to avoid getting hit behind the ear. Jermain is expecting the second round to happen again, but he's wrong."

As for Taylor's conditioning, Pavlik observed, "Before the last fight, all we heard was, 'Jermain is eating, drinking, and sleeping boxing. He's more focused than he's ever been.' Emanuel Steward told us that he'd never had a fighter who was in better shape than Jermain. And now they're telling us something completely different. I know what kind of shape I'll be in on Saturday night. I never want to go back to the dressing room after a fight and say, 'If I had trained a little more when I was tired or pushed a little harder when it got tough during the fight, I would have won instead of lost.' If I do my job right, Jermain's shape won't matter."

The contract weight of 166 pounds also seemed to favor Pavlik. Prior to recent fights, Kelly had depleted himself in order to make weight. Most likely, it had been harder for him to make 160 pounds last September than it had been for Jermain.

"I think the Taylor people are crazy, but that's fine with us," Jack Loew said of the contract weight. "Kelly can get down to 163 with no problem, but the last three pounds are murder. We're all but chopping off body parts. This is the first time in four years that Kelly won't have to go into the sauna and run on a treadmill right before the weigh-in. 166 pounds is great for us."

In the days leading up to the fight, Pavlik looked visibly stronger than he had before Taylor-Pavlik I. His cheeks were less sunken and there was

more color in his face. "It's hard for me to make 160," he acknowledged. "With the added weight, I was able to train harder and refuel my body. My energy level is sky high. I won't be drained. There will be more snap on my punches because I'll have fresh legs. I love it."

And there was one more factor at work. When Taylor turned pro, his management team hired Pat Burns to train him. Over the next five years, Burns did his job, which was getting Jermain ready to do his. Taylor won all twenty-five of his fights and defeated Bernard Hopkins twice to become the undisputed middleweight champion of the world. But Pat was at odds with Ozell Nelson (the "surrogate father" in Jermain's life, who had taught him to box as an amateur). In January 2006, Burns was forced out and replaced by Emanuel Steward.

Steward and Taylor were not a good fit. Emanuel lamented "a series of bad opponents, style-wise, that made it very difficult to teach Jermain and develop him as a fighter." Whatever the cause, Jermain's ring skills appeared to deteriorate in successive fights against Winky Wright, Kassim Ouma, and Cory Spinks. Then Pavlik knocked him out.

On October 30, 2007 (a month after his loss to Pavlik), Taylor telephoned Burns and the two men talked for the first time since Pat had been unceremoniously dismissed eighteen months earlier.

"Coach, I owe you an apology," Jermain said. "I made a mistake; I was wrong. I listened to people I shouldn't have listened to. I want to go back to the way things were between us."

"I'll work your ass off," Burns told him.

"That's not a problem. I understand now why you made me train so hard. That's what got me through against Hopkins. After the second round against Pavlik, I had nothing left. And the strategy they gave me wasn't as good as yours."

Burns told Taylor to think about it for a week to make certain that Jermain would be fully committed to their reunion. There was also the matter of Ozell Nelson, who'd been a key figure in forcing Pat out.

"I'll talk to him," Jermain said. "Either Ozell gets with the plan or he goes."

On November 10th, Jermain called Burns a second time. "Coach; I told Ozell that I want you back. He fought it for a while, but it's final. I'm going away for a few days, and then we can start."

Burns began planning to go to Little Rock to meet with Taylor and

Nelson. In his view, Jermain needed a mini-camp to work on core conditioning. Then regular training could begin.

It wasn't to be. Taylor and Burns never spoke again. Instead, on November 20th, Jermain told a handful of reporters in Little Rock that, henceforth, Nelson would train him.

"I'm going back to what made me a champion," Taylor said. "This fight [the Pavlik rematch] will bring everything out. I know Coach [Ozell Nelson] and he knows me. I feel good about it."

"Me and Jermain made the decision," Nelson added. "I just felt like it's time for me to take over. I'm the one who built Jermain. I'm the one who built the motor."

Team Pavlik was more amused than anything else by the switch. Even if Jermain were more focused in the upcoming training camp than before, there was an issue as to whether Nelson could properly direct that focus.

"Ozell is the guy who taught Jermain all the bad habits, and now he's back," Jack Loew said. "This would have been a much tougher fight for Kelly if Jermain had brought Pat Burns back."

There was an illogic to it all. Taylor was attributing the loss to Pavlik to his not having being in shape. But if he really believed that, he would have retained Steward and simply gotten in better condition the second time around. The rationale for releasing Burns that was fed to Jermain in early 2006 had been that Pat was an "amateur." But Nelson had considerably less experience than Burns in the professional ranks. And Jermain was now admitting that he'd lied to himself about his conditioning prior to the first Pavlik fight. But he'd had plenty of enablers, and some of them were still around.

In sum, the talk about Taylor going back to Nelson to recapture his past success was questionable at best. Instead of going back to the way things were when Jermain was an unpolished amateur, why not go back to the way things were when he beat Bernard Hopkins twice? There was a lot of tap-dancing around the essential truth that Pat Burns should have been there.

Champions trust in their own ring superiority as an article of faith. But success as a boxer isn't just about what a fighter does in the ring on fight night. It's about what he does and all the decisions he makes before he gets there. Under Burns's tutelage, even in the days leading up to the

first Hopkins fight, Jermain had exuded an aura of quiet confidence. By contrast, at the final pre-fight press conference for Pavlik-Taylor II, he seemed plagued by self-doubt. He looked anxious and fidgeted a lot. The feeling in the Pavlik camp was that Taylor was lying to himself and didn't believe the lies.

It's scary to get in a boxing ring and fight. A fighter has to be able to absorb punishment and fire back with damage-causing blows of his own. "Going into a fight, you know you're going to get hit," Pavlik said. "I don't know how Jermain will react to the knockout. I don't know if mentally he's going to be hesitant. I don't know neurologically how he'll respond. Some guys get knocked out, come back, and are fine. Some guys get knocked out and are never the same again. Either way, I'm winning on Saturday night. Once the bell rings, it will be just a matter of time before Jermain makes that one big mistake. Even if he changes things, one good crack and he'll go back to old habits."

"I want revenge," Taylor said in response. "Kelly can be hit and Kelly can be hurt. It's gonna be a fight. I know that, and Kelly knows that too."

But there was a difference. Taylor thought he could close the show. Pavlik knew he could.

Two days before the fight, Kelly was asked if he wanted to get the fight started or get it over with. "I just want to get it started," he said. "I'm tired of the talking; I'm tired of thinking about it. I want to get in the ring and do my job."

There was a school of thought that Jermain just wanted to get the fight over with.

Pavlik arrived at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on Saturday night at 5:50 P.M. He was wearing the same Youngstown State windbreaker that he'd worn for much of the week. Now it was matched with grey-red-and-white Ohio State warm-up pants.

Larry Merchant came into the dressing room for a brief interview that would air during HBO's pay-per-view telecast. Kelly's comments were short and to the point: "The fact that Jermain wants to fight me again shows that he's a champion at heart. But so am I."

When the interview was over, HBO production coordinator Tami Cotel thanked Pavlik for his time.

"No problem. That's what I'm here for."

When a fighter gets to the championship level, his dressing room reflects his preferences. Pavlik opts for low-key and quiet. Sitting on a chair, he took out his Blackberry and began playing a video game called *BrickBreaker*.

The first televised fight of the evening began. On a nearby television monitor, Ronald Hearn could be seen beating up on an overmatched opponent named Juan Astorga, who fights out of Topeka, Kansas. As the punches landed, Mike Pavlik winced and turned to Cameron Dunkin (Kelly's manager).

"I wish we were back in Kansas, Toto."

"There's certain guys who shouldn't fight," Dunkin responded. "Astorga is so slow. I feel sorry for him."

Kelly looked up from his Blackberry and joined the conversation. "I used to feel sorry for Wile E. Coyote," he said. "Just once, I wanted to see him get his hands around that Road Runner's neck."

That led to reminiscences between father and son about cartoons that Kelly had liked in childhood. "I watched *Bugs Bunny* and *Looney Toons* all the time," Kelly recalled. "*Tom and Jerry* is still my favorite." Then he went back to playing *BrickBreaker*.

Mike and Jack Loew began talking about the time that Jack accidentally let his cat crawl into the clothes-dryer before an eight-minute cycle. The cat survived but wasn't happy about it. John Loew (Jack's son) and Michael Cox (a Youngstown cop who's Kelly's friend and third man in the corner) were engaged in quiet conversation.

At 6:50, referee Tony Weeks came in. Kelly put his Blackberry down long enough to receive the ritual pre-fight instructions. After Weeks left, Mike Pavlik rubbed his hands together. "It doesn't change," he said. "We could be fighting Penelope tonight and I'd be nervous."

Jack Loew began taping Kelly's hands. When the job was done, Kelly sat down on the floor and began doing stretching exercises. "If I tried to stretch like that, they'd have to call 911 twice," Mike noted.

Kelly finished stretching, put on his black sequined trunks, and gloved up.

On the television monitor, Christian Mijares emerged with a twelve-round decision over Jose Navarro. Fernando Montiel versus Martin Castillo began. Castillo had nothing. Mike Pavlik stared at the monitor. "This is such a brutal sport," he said.

Kelly and Jack Loew began working the pads.

Montiel stopped Castillo in four.

The padwork increased in intensity. "You're gonna catch him," Loew told his fighter. "It doesn't matter what he does. Back him up. Double jabs. Sooner or later, you'll catch him."

Cutman Miguel Diaz (who had worked Castillo's corner and would do the same for Kelly) entered and did a quick change into a Pavlik corner jacket. "Poor Castillo," Diaz said. "He had nothing tonight."

Loew rubbed Vaseline on Kelly's chest and arms.

Mike Pavlek put a small green amulet around his son's neck. "Someone gave it to Kelly before the last fight and told him the Pope had blessed it," Mike explained. "He won last time, so why not?"

Then it was time for battle.

There were hugs all around.

Mike turned to Jack Loew. "Remember to take that green thing off before the fight," he said.

The crowd was heavily pro-Pavlik. The odds were 8-to-5 in Kelly's favor, but Jermain was a live underdog. He was also in better shape and fought a more measured fight than in their previous encounter.

In the early going, Taylor looked to establish his jab and kept his right hand in reserve for defensive purposes. He also kept Pavlik turning, which made it hard for Kelly to set his feet and punch. Clearly, Jermain was the faster of the two fighters. But Pavlik appeared stronger and kept coming forward.

That was the story of the fight. There were some good exchanges. Taylor began landing right hands and Pavlik never got his double-jab working ("Jermain was countering off it quicker than last time," Kelly said afterward). Taylor also managed to stay off the ropes for most of the night, which was essential to his strategy. But Pavlik was relentless in his assault, testing Taylor's resolve and throwing punches for three minutes of every round.

In round nine, Kelly began to pour it on, but Jermain didn't submit. Not then; and not in round eleven when a brutal body shot caused him to gasp and hold on to survive. Taylor fought bravely and he fought well, but it wasn't enough.

It was a difficult fight to score despite the fact that Pavlik outlanded Taylor by a 267-to-178 margin. All three judges (and most of the media)

gave rounds one, eleven, and twelve to Kelly. The other rounds were up for grabs. The judges had it 117–111, 116–112, 115–113 for Pavlik, reflecting the conventional belief that, in Nevada if you go forward, you win the fight. The consensus at ringside was that, of the three scores, 115–113 was closest to the mark.

“I’m pleased with my performance,” Kelly said afterward. “This is the first time that I’ve gone twelve rounds [his previous longest effort had been nine rounds against Fulgencio Zuniga]. And this wasn’t twelve rounds with just anybody. This was twelve rounds against Jermain Taylor.”

As for what comes next; Taylor still has a future in boxing. There’s ample precedent for a champion losing two fights in a row to the same opponent and coming back strong afterward. Think Bernard Hopkins (who lost twice to Jermain) and Shane Mosley (bested on consecutive occasions by both Vernon Forrest and Winky Wright).

But Jermain has to get his priorities in order; particularly when it comes to choosing a trainer. He has now lost two fights that he could have won. Did he lose with honor? Absolutely. Still, one is reminded of Johnny Ray (Billy Conn’s manager), who said of his fighter after the first Louis-Conn encounter, “He was swell in defeat, but we’d rather have won.”

Meanwhile, Pavlik is stronger at 168 pounds than he is at 160. But he believes he has unfinished business in the middleweight division. “It took a long time to get the belts,” he says. “I don’t want to give them up just yet.”

Kelly’s next fight is tentatively scheduled for June 7th. Lucrative potential match-ups against Arthur Abraham, Bernard Hopkins, and Joe Calzaghe lie ahead. It’s also possible that Bob Arum will broker Pavlik’s way onto broadcast television in an effort to increase his marketability. The on-site attendance (9,706) and pay-per-view numbers (roughly 225,000 buys) for Pavlik-Taylor II were disappointing. But Kelly is expected to become more marketable as time goes by.

“This will only last for so long, so I’ve got to make the most of it,” Pavlik says, putting matters in perspective. “I want to make enough money to support myself and my family so we’re covered whatever happens in the future. And I have other goals. I watch television sometimes and see great fighters that are legends from the past. That’s something else I want to reach. It’s a long road and I’ve got a lot more to accomplish. But so far, so good.”