

An over-the-hill Toney? Don't bet on it

Written by Rick Folstad
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Vassily Jirov is taller than James Toney, younger than James Toney and hits harder than James Toney.

The reigning IBF cruiserweight champ, Jirov has always been a cruiserweight and will probably always be a cruiserweight. He's the kind of guy who would still weigh 190 or 195 pounds if he was a carpenter or a banker or a ballplayer. He's what you might call a natural-born cruiserweight, a guy who was headed toward 190 pounds from the day he was born.

Undefeated with 31 wins, he's got more knockouts than the Miss Universe Pageant and most of the time he finishes his work early. Of his 27 knockouts, 22 have come before the start of the sixth round.

A native of Kazakhstan and now fighting out of Scottsdale, AZ, he's a southpaw who goes by the nickname, "The Tiger." He won the IBF title in June, 1999 when he stopped Arthur Williams in the seventh round of their fight in Biloxi, Miss.

He's held the title since and shows no signs of wanting to give it up.

He's quietly predicted that he'll stop Toney when the two meet for Jirov's title on April 26 in Mashantucket, Conn.

The fight, which will be televised on HBO, will be part of a package that includes a fight for the vacant IBF light-heavyweight title between Montell Griffin of Las Vegas and Antonio Tarver of Chicago.

James "Lights Out" Toney (64-4-2, 42 KOs) is five years older than Jirov and almost three inches shorter. A former middleweight and super-middleweight champ of the world, he hasn't seen 170 pounds in over a decade.

His weight on a given day could be anywhere from 198 to 225 pounds, depending on what he had for dinner, and between fights, he's been known to balloon up to the size of the Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man.

In his younger days, Toney liked to skip working out and drive past the gym on his way to an all-night party. He had the attitude of a guy who thought he was so good, he didn't have to work as hard as everyone else.

But he grew out of it.

Now 34, he says he's got about five more fights left in him, though that number could fall off if he loses to Jirov.

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But he won't.

The thing you've got to remember about James Toney is that once you get through all the fast talk and bold predictions that are part of his entertainment package, Toney is a pure fighter. Ignore his age, forget his weight and don't pay any attention to his constant babble. He's still one of the toughest guys out there, still one of the supremely gifted fighters who somehow always manages to back up all his bravado.

When Toney puts away the chit-chat and turns to serious things, he can still be a world champion, and that's why he's still hanging around the gym, still looking for another chance to prove he's one of the best fighters in the world.

He'll tell you at 34, he's a better fighter than he was at 24. He's learned a thing or two about mental toughness, about doing things right. And that's what separates him from the fighter he was.

Toney also predicts a knockout, but in his case, that's just standard procedure.

"James' mental knowledge of the game is right up there with his physical abilities," said Dan Goossen, who promotes Toney and sees him virtually every day. "He's so mentally strong now, it puts him at a whole different level. He's focused now both inside the ring and outside it."

Which means Toney no longer drives past the gym on his way to a party.

Goossen said he knew his fighter had the mental toughness he needed when he learned last Christmas eve that the fight with Jirov that was originally scheduled for Jan. 25 had been cancelled because Jirov injured his ribs while training.

"My biggest concern was how James was going to handle the disappointment," Goossen said. "But I was ecstatic with the way he took it. That's when I knew he had that mental toughness."

How are your ribs feeling Vassily?