

## American Heavyweights and the former Soviet Bloc

Written by David A. Avila  
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Not long ago Americans dominated the world of heavyweights, but a lot has changed in boxing and many other sports since the Iron Curtain was shredded more than a decade ago.

American hopeful Calvin Brock, a former Olympian, will try his skills against Timor Ibragimov of Uzbekistan at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas on Saturday June 24. The fight will be shown on HBO.

One thing can be said about fighters from the former Soviet Union, they all have a lot of class and treat opponents with respect and admiration.

Ibragimov, 31, who now lives in Florida, meets North Carolina's Brock for the IBA Continental heavyweight title and hopes to be included among those from the former Soviet bloc with a hold on the world heavyweight titles.

"I think it's very good for us," said Ibragimov about former Soviet Union countries now sending heavyweights into title contention or currently in possession of a world title.

Those with belts are WBO champion Sergei Liakhovich, IBF champion Vladimir Klitschko, WBA champion Nikolay Valuev and fighting for the WBC title against the lone American is Oleg Maskaev. He'll be meeting Hasim Rahman on August 12 in Las Vegas.

"I don't know what happened but we're showing everybody we can fight too," said Ibragimov during a telephone press conference. "Now there are a lot of champions coming from the former Soviet Union."

When the Berlin wall came crashing down back in 1989 and the first rush of East Europeans came racing into the United States, few realized the impact it would have on all sports.

Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbekistanis, Croatians, Poles and the many other countries that formed after the Soviet Union collapsed have sent athletes pouring into the professional ranks of basketball, hockey and boxing like a tsunami.

It's amazing when one remembers the days of the Cold War and the bitter rivalries between the major nations. Who can forget the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City when Big George Foreman battled against the Soviet Union's Ionas Chepulis. After the second round knockout Foreman trotted around the ring with a tiny American flag.

At the time it was just another American heavyweight capturing the gold medal in boxing like Joe Frazier before him in 1964. Few realized Americans would get shut out of the super heavyweight gold medal until 1984 when Tyrell Biggs captured it as the Soviet Union and Communist countries like Cuba boycotted the games. Cuba's Teofilo Stevenson did not take part in the Olympics in Los Angeles though he monopolized the amateur scene with skills that

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rivalled the best professional boxers.

“Everybody knows the best heavyweights come from America,” Ibragimov said, “like Mike Tyson, Muhammad Ali. But now it’s changed before our eyes.”

Brock knows all about the East European fighters. As an American representative during the 2000 Olympics in Australia, the fighter known as the Boxing Banker was eliminated. That year Audley Harrison of Great Britain captured the gold. But no American came home with a shiny gold medal.

“I feel like I got a lot to prove,” Brock said during a press conference. “Basically I’m going to go in there and make a statement each time out.”

### Where are the American heavyweights?

Brock thinks other sports have taken from the pool of American heavyweight prizefighters.

“It looks like most of the top athletes are playing football, basketball or baseball,” says Brock without hesitation. “I played football and baseball, but I never had a desire to be in a sport outside of boxing. I’ve been in boxing since I was eight-years-old.”

Ibragimov agrees with Brock and has one added suggestion for the lack of American heavyweights: the lack of a strong amateur program in the United States.

“I think the former Soviet fighters have a lot of experience from amateur school, maybe this is a point for us. Of course a lot of American heavyweights don’t have a lot of amateur experience. When I was an amateur I was a cruiserweight. I fought in Olympic games in Atlanta,” Ibragimov says. “I had 200 amateur fights maybe more. I don’t know but close to 170 or 180 wins.”

Tony Rivera, a noted trainer who’s worked with Roberto Duran and Marco Antonio Barrera in the past, and now works with Joan Guzman, said the crop of heavyweights from former Soviet Union countries come here hungry with a capital H.

“These guys come from poor countries,” Rivera said. “People think because they’re white that they have money. But these guys are as poor as Mexicans or Blacks. That’s why there are so many of them. It’s their only shot to get out of poverty.”

Ibragimov says American fighters still have advantages despite the lack of amateur backgrounds.

“European fighters will stop if they are not winning,” said Ibragimov. “But American fighters keep coming. They don’t stop.”

Brock is like that too, says Ibragimov.

“He’s a good fighter and he’s got a lot of heart,” Ibragimov said.

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Brock wants to fight all of the former Soviet bloc fighters. He wants them all one by one.

“I don’t have anybody in particular that I want, just the pecking order,” Brock says.

Rated fighters from former Soviet Union:

Wladimir Klitschko (46-3), 30, the younger brother of Vitali has finally returned all the way from his crushing loss to Lamon Brewster. With Emanuel Steward in his corner he seems to have a lot more striking power and offensive stability. It’s his defense that bothers me. If he wants America’s support he has to beat the big Russian Nikolay Valuev or Belarussian Sergie Liakhovich. Even James Toney would do. Otherwise he should just retire.

Sergei Liakhovich (23-1), 30, from Belarus, beat Lamon Brewster, enough said. The 6-foot-4 heavyweight has fought several times in the U.S. and has impressive boxing skills. He’s one of the better East European fighters and the current WBO heavyweight titleholder. I wonder if Wladimir would take him on?

Alexander Dimitrenko (21-0), 23, the Ukrainian beat two clever American veterans in Vaughn Bean and Ross Puritty, but does that make him the next great champion? He’s fighting out of Germany and boxers tend to get protected over there. We’ll find out soon if he has the goods.

Nikolay Valuev (44-0), 32, the big galoot took the WBA world title from John “The Quietman” Ruiz. But he won’t play fair and give Ruiz a rematch. Never trust a Russian giant who doesn’t play basketball.

Ruslan Chagaev (20-0-1), 27, of Uzbekistan, has a close win over Vladimir Virchis, which has been the only decent test for the 6-foot-1 southpaw who fights out of Germany.

Sultan Ibragimov (19-1), 31, from Russian, has knocked out Lance Whittaker, Friday Ahunanya and Zuri Lawrence. He’s a southpaw heavyweight and they’re always tough to fight.

Oleg Maskaev (32-5), 37, of Russia, is getting a chance to show his first win over Hasim Rahman by knockout in 1999 was no fluke. Both hit the deck several times. He meets Rahman this August for the WBC title. Hasn’t had a tough fight in four years and that was against Corey Sanders who stopped him in eight rounds.

Vladimir Virchis (20-1), 32, of the Ukraine, lost to Ruslan Chagaev by a close majority decision this past March, but beat Bidenko and Cliff Couser. He also has a win over former Mike Tyson victim Julius Francis.

Taras Bidenko (18-2), 26, of the Ukraine, fought and lost to Valuev by decision after 12 rounds six years ago in Seoul, Korea of all places. It was only Bidenko’s fourth pro fight and Valuev had 28 under his belt. Not a fair match. Bidenko also lost to Virchis by decision. He did beat Julius Francis of Great Britain two years ago.

Alexander Povetkin (8-0) of Russia, 26, has beaten Willie Chapman, Friday Ahunanya and

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Muhammad Ali. No, not that Ali.