

Four Heavyweights of the Soviet Apocalypse

Written by Ed Schuyler
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If you put the four heavyweight champions from the former Soviet Union in four fights on the same card, you still might have to paper the house.

If they walked down the street in the United States, only Nikolay Valuev, a 7-foot, 330-pound-plus Russian, would elicit stares and draw comments such as, "The circus must be in town."

Of course, WBC champion Oleg Maskaev might meet someone he knows on the Staten Island Ferry because the American citizen from Kazakhstan lives on Staten Island. Perhaps WBO champion Sergei Lyakhovich of Belarus might be recognized in a fast-food joint at Scottsdale, Ariz. IBF champion Wladimir Klitschko of Ukraine lives in Hamburg, Germany, and WBA champion Valuev of Russia fights out of Germany.

Generally speaking, however, none of the four has difficulty in avoiding the glare of celebrity. The same can be said of the Americans the former Soviets beat for the title – Hasim Rahman, Lamon Brewster, Chris Byrd and John Ruiz. Rahman did get 15 minutes of fame when he upset Lennox Lewis.

Do not expect to see the four former Soviets on pay-per-view, and if they fight outside the United States, the bouts almost certainly would be seen on tape delay. A possible live pay-per-view fight, however, would be one featuring Valuev on Red Square in Moscow, with the HBO broadcast crew seated in front of Lenin's Tomb.

No division in boxing has been hurt as badly by the chopping up of the title by the various sanctioning bodies as the heavyweight. The selfishness of these groups and promoters with long-term contracts on fighters will continue to make championship unification difficult. Adding to the problems is the fact that there is no heavyweight to stir the public into demanding a single champion, and none appears to be on the horizon.

The time when the heavyweight champion was most celebrated athlete in the world is gone, never to return.

John L. Sullivan was the Great John L. So what if he drank a lot, he was the heavyweight champion of the world. Jack Johnson was hated by many and feared by some as the first black heavyweight champion, but from 1908 until 1915 he was at the center of the sports universe. Jack Dempsey, slugger Babe Ruth, golfer Bobby Jones and tennis player Bill Tilden were shining stars during the sports-crazed Roaring Twenties, but Dempsey probably was on the top rung of this ladder of celebrity. He was the heavyweight champion of the word. Joe Louis dominated boxing like few athletes have dominated any sport, holding the heavyweight for 12 years and defending it successfully 25 times.

Even fighters who did not hold the heavyweight title long were respected. When Primo Carnero

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won the championship he was not mocked as he is now.

Although champions Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali became major sports personalities, the heavyweight title began to lose its luster with the growth of television after the World War II.

Before the war, boxing and baseball were the most popular sports in the nation. Now baseball and professional football and basketball are the major players in the battle for public attention and consumer dollars – autographs, signature bats and gloves, jerseys with the numbers and names of superstars or perceived superstars. While TV does not ignore boxing, there are probably more than a few viewers who can name more poker champions than they can boxing champions.

While Larry Holmes has been the best heavyweight champion since Ali and one of the best ever, the most popular heavyweights since Holmes have been three who fit nicely into the television mold – George Foreman, Evander Holyfield and Mike Tyson. Foreman scripted himself as the king of the middle-age spread, with a folksy manner and self-deprecating jokes, while becoming the oldest champion at 45. Holyfield became the darling of overachievers with his can-do attitude and take-no-prisoners style. Tyson, especially in the late 1980s, was everything a TV script writer could ask for – an intimidating villain in black with a soap opera life outside the ring.

Today's champions are not big names, just big men, and that is a problem. The division is peopled by Neanderthals with little speed and not a hint of grace. Of course if they had any speed or athleticism most of them would be in the NFL or NBA.

Listen up, boxing fans. Concentrate on the lower weight divisions and be happy if you get competitive fights.