Death – actual death – finally brought a measure of peace to former heavyweight champion Ingemar Johansson, whose once-athletic body had continued to function for these past 10 years even as his mind slipped ever deeper into the dark cave of Alzheimer's and dementia.

When even Ingo's body gave up the fight, at 10 minutes to midnight on Friday night in a nursing home in Kungsbacka, on the west coat of his native Sweden, the national mood in the Scandinavian country understandably wavered between grief at his physical passing and relief that he was finally free of the bar-less prison of a mind that had long since ceased to function beyond occasional moments of semi-clarity.

Ingemar Johansson, who was too ill to attend his induction ceremony at the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y., in 2002, was 76 when death, that most invincible of opponents, claimed what remained of him. His daughter, Maria Gregner, told the Swedish news agency TT that he recently had returned to the nursing home after being hospitalized with pneumonia.

Olof Johansson (no relation), whom American matchmaker and friend Don Elbaum describes as "the Larry Merchant of Swedish television," recalled a recent visit with Ingo in which it was painfully evident that the end was nearing.

"Olof said he was with Ingemar three or four months ago when he got up from his chair, took one step, and froze," Elbaum said. "Ingemar's doctor said it was like his brain did not remember how to tell his body to move the other foot. It was tragic."

More than likely, Johansson didn't realize where he was trying to walk to in any case. Years earlier he increasingly failed to recognize friends and family members, until that familiar twinkle in his eyes went blank and he likely even forgot who he was and what he had accomplished in and out of the ring.

Assessing the career of Ingemar Johansson, prizefighter, is no easy thing. How he is regarded is largely contingent on which side of the Atlantic Ocean one resides. Here in America, where he achieved his single greatest success, the third-round stoppage of heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson on June 26, 1959, Ingo is generally regarded as one of boxing's lesser titlists, someone whose induction into the IBHOF is the result more of a charmed summer night in Yankee Stadium than of the sustained excellence required for history's acceptance. But in Sweden, where he rehabilitated his reputation from its low point nine years earlier in Helsinki, Finland, Ingo was the most popular prizefighter ever, a national hero and symbol of Swedish pride.

In 2000, the Swedish Sports Academy named Ingo that country's third-greatest athlete of the 20th century, behind only tennis legend Bjorn Borg and renowned skier Ingemar Stenmark. That high placement is particularly amazing, given that Sweden banned professional boxing from 1970 to 2006 on the grounds it was too dangerous an activity.

Johansson seemed an unlikely candidate for such adulation during the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. Boxing in the heavyweight gold medal bout against a huge American opponent, Ed Sanders, Johansson refused to engage until, in the second round of the scheduled three-rounder, he was disqualified by French referee Roger Vaisberg for not giving his best effort.

Initially awarded the silver medal, Johansson – who later claimed his strategy was to play keepaway and to tire out Sanders in preparation for a furious, third-round assault – had it stripped from him before he left Helsinki, a turn of events that made him an object of scorn back home. For purposes of comparison, consider the seemingly irreparable damage done to Roberto Duran's reputation in his native Panama after he turned his back and quit in his "No Mas" second fight with Sugar Ray Leonard. But Duran won back most if not all of his fans with incandescent performances against Davey Moore and Iran Barkley, among others, and Ingo similarly found his own path to redemption.

For a while, though, a comeback from disgrace seemed a longshot, at best. In Stockholm, the chairman of the Swedish Boxing Association contemptuously chided Johansson for "bringing shame to the Swedish name."

It was under that initial cloud of suspicion and resentment that Johansson, impossibly handsome and just as charming, began his pro career on Dec. 5, 1952, with a fourth-round knockout of France's Robert Masson in Ingo's hometown of Gothenburg.

Johansson's manager, Eddie Ahlquist, figured his guy had the looks, personality and punch, particularly his big overhand right, to rehabilitate his image, at least with his countrymen. All of Ingo's first 20 pro bouts were in Europe, 17 of which were in Sweden, as Ahlquist employed a strategy later adopted by such European fighters as Dariusz Michalczewski, Joe Calzaghe and Ricky Hatton: fight and win at home until it became financially expedient to take your act across the pond to the United States.

Although he annexed the European heavyweight title in 1956 on a 13th-round knockout of Franco Cavicchi in Bologna, Italy, Johansson emerged as a legitimate threat to world champion Floyd Patterson when he whacked out a formidable U.S. contender, Eddie Machen, in one round on Sept. 14, 1958, in Gothenburg. So popular was Ingo by that time that his bout with Machen drew a crowd of 53,614 in Ullevi Stadium, which is still a record turnout for the venue. In second place is a concert by the Rolling Stones.

The fast takeout of Machen, who had long been ducked by Patterson, so impressed Nat Fleischer, editor of *The Ring*, that he elevated the Swede to the magazine's No. 1 heavyweight ranking.

It at last was time for Ingemar Johansson, alleged Olympic coward, to come to the United States and challenge Patterson, who had won the middleweight gold at those same 1952 Helsinki Games in which Ingo came up small.

Although a 4-1 underdog, in no small part because of the lingering taint of his Olympic failure, Johansson hardly acted the part of an I'm-just-glad-to-be-here outsider. He set up camp at

Grossinger's resort, in the Catskill Mountains, and quickly revealed himself to be the very essence of a *bon vivant*. Sure, the 26-year-old Ingo told reporters, he liked to partake of strong beverages now and then, even in training. And women? The holy gospel of pugilism back then stated in no uncertain terms that sex weakens legs, and almost all fighters obediently left their wives or significant others at home when they trekked off to camp to prepare themselves for an upcoming fight. Johansson, though, arrived at Grossinger's with his stunning, brunette girlfriend, Birgit, in tow, and it wasn't long before rumors were rampant that at night he was going to the body in a far different way than he did with his sparring partners earlier in the day.

Although one publication dubbed Johansson as "boxing's Cary Grant," he was more of a predecessor to such swingin' 1960s athletes as Joe Namath and Walt Frazier. His behavior left traditionalists like Hall of Fame trainer Ray Arcel aghast, but delighted others who figured that even heavyweight champion wannabes deserved to have some fun on their way into battle.

But none of that would have counted for anything had not Johansson done what he did on fight night in Yankee Stadium. After two rounds in which he landed nothing of consequence, Johansson clipped Patterson with a left hook and a right hand so allegedly devastating it had two nicknames, the "Hammer of Thor" and "Ingo's Bingo." Patterson went down, rose on wobbly legs at the count of nine, and turned to return to his corner, fuzzily thinking it was he who had had floored Johansson and that the round was over.

In one of the more unusual sights ever seen in boxing, Johansson ran up alongside the dazed Patterson and delivered an uncontested shot to the side of the head that sent the champion to the canvas for the second of an amazing seven times. There still were 57 seconds remaining in the third round when referee Ruby Goldstein finally stepped in and wrapped his arms around the game but defenseless Patterson.

When the fight ended, at approximately 3:15 a.m. Swedish time, people poured into the streets throughout Ingo's homeland to celebrate the coronation of boxing's new king of the heavyweights, and the first European to wear the crown since Italy's Primo Carnera a quarter-century earlier.

It was a different time for sure, 1959 was. Seven knockdowns in one round? Wouldn't happen today, but Goldstein, who is perhaps best known for his failure to jump in earlier in the March 24, 1962, bout in which Emile Griffith bludgeoned Benny "Kid" Paret into a coma and eventual death, had a reputation for letting fighters continue if they demonstrated even the slightest capability of returning fire. Johansson was named "Male Athlete of the Year" by *The Associated Press*, and when was the last time that happened for a boxer?

Ingo, not surprisingly, soaked up the adulation and sudden fame as if he were a sponge. He appeared in a 1960 movie, "All the Young Men," as a Marine, cast alongside stars Alan Ladd and Sidney Poitier. He chatted up Dinah Shore on her daytime variety show, and wherever he went, in the U.S. or in Sweden, he had a beautiful woman on his arm and paparazzi snapping pictures.

That sort of lifestyle probably did not serve Johansson well in his rematch with Patterson, on June 20, 1960, at the Polo Grounds in New York. His championship reign ended in the fifth round when Floyd landed two left hooks, the first of which left Ingo woozy, the second of which – a leaping shot delivered with all the power Patterson could muster – left the Swede stretched out on the canvas, blood trickling from his mouth and his right leg quivering. Concerned that he had seriously injured Johansson, Patterson knelt beside him, gently cradling his head until medical help arrived. Five minutes passed before Ingo sat up, and another 10 ticked off before he left the ring, still a bit discombobulated.

The rubber match in the trilogy, on March 13, 1961, in Miami Beach's Convention Hall, was perhaps the most competitive in the series. Johansson – who had sparred with an 18-year-old Cassius Clay as part of his training regimen – dropped Patterson twice in the first round, but Patterson survived the storm and went on to knock out Ingo in the sixth round.

For all intents and purposes, that was the end of Johansson as a big-time fighter. He did return to Sweden, fighting and winning four more times, but in his final bout, against Brian London on April 21, 1963, he was in serious trouble and in danger of being stopped when the final bell rang. Even though Johansson got the decision, he understood that it was time to step away, even though he was only 31. His final record: 26-2, with 17 wins inside the distance.

Retirement, though, was good to Ingo. He had a keen business sense and he invested wisely. For years, he summered in Pompano Beach, Fla., where he operated a motel and a fleet of fishing boats. He and Patterson, once rivals, became good friends and even ran together in a couple of marathons.

But then Johansson's memory began to fade, and with it his recollections of the good life he had crafted for himself. Anyone who has had a friend or relative endure the slow descent into hell that Alzheimer's can be surely understands how difficult it was for Ingo's many supporters to realize their hero was leaving them in bits and pieces.

But gone does not necessarily mean forgotten. A contemporary of Johansson's, Swedish boxing promoter Benny Rosem, plans to put on a pro fight card on June 26 in Gothenburg, the 50th anniversary of Ingo's rout of Patterson. There is talk of erecting a bronze statue of Sweden's greatest fighter, a fitting tribute to a man who, in 1982, finally received the Olympic silver medal he probably hadn't deserved to have taken from him in the first place.

Elbaum, who has traveled to Sweden several times with heavyweight Joey "Minnesota Ice" Abell, said the passage of time has not diminished the legend of Ingemar Johansson, but rather enhanced it.

"He is and always will be an icon," Elbaum said.