Written by Rick Folstad
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Walk the dog, stroll through the park, have a picnic at the lake.

There are safer things for IBF cruiserweight champ Vassily Jirov to do this month than defend his title against James “Lights Out” Toney.

Barbecue, play softball, fish, visit the zoo. Thank his lucky stars.

Jirov, who lives in California, won’t be fighting Toney on HBO on Jan. 25.

Something to do with his insides.

Ask Toney why Jirov pulled out of their fight and he’ll tell you it was Jirov’s heart that let him down, his backbone that went soft, not his banged-up ribs. Ask Toney and he’ll tell you about heartbreak and lies and revenge and fighting anybody in the universe if it means another title. Jirov claims he suffered the damage while sparring. Maybe. But it’s the fourth time Jirov has found a reason not to fight Toney. How many times you got to be told to go home before you realize the guy doesn’t want to come outside and play? How many times you got to be bit by the same dog before you realize it wants to be left alone? Jirov has more excuses than a politician caught with a hooker on his lap.

In his own eloquent way, Toney recently described how disappointed he was in the cancellation of their title fight on the undercard of the Vernon Forrest - Ricardo Mayorga welterweight title fight.

“The @#%$%*&#@,’’ Toney said after learning of the postponement on Christmas Eve. “Jirov can @&%$#% and then he can @%$#@#$. He’s nothing but a #$%#@#.’’ That said, it doesn’t brighten up the New Year in the Toney household.

“I’m done with it,’’ said Toney, sounding like a guy who finally gets tried of being stood up by the same girl.

As of Dec. 30, there was still no word of an opponent for Toney, though he’s still making regular trips to the gym.

Merry Christmas, James. Have a Happy New Year.

“Bah, humbug,’’ said Toney’s promoter Dan Goossen. “We didn’t have much of a Christmas. I got the news on Christmas Eve. But you just have to bounce back.’’ Funny thing about fighters. Some make excuses, some fight through them. You get the feeling Toney could have cracked five ribs and his right tibia and still climbed into the ring against Jirov.

It raises a lot of questions. What’s Jirov got against fighting? After a busy 2001, he hasn’t fought since last February. How do you hold a title after you’ve gone into retirement? Just who is this guy and why does he like to hide? Is there really a Vassily Jirov out there, or is he a creation of the IBF, a shadowy figure who won the title and decided it was too big a risk to keep defending it? The bottom line is, Toney may be left with a lot of unexpected free time on his hands if they don’t find him another fight, though he knew better than to mark the date on his calendar in ink. There are no promises in boxing. When dealing with a guy like Jirov, all bets are off. But Toney can still hope. The name O’Neil Bell - the WBC’s No. 1 challenger - has been knocked around, and Toney said he doesn’t care what contender or champion he knocks out on Jan. 25. “#@#$%$#,’’ Toney said.

You can say that again.