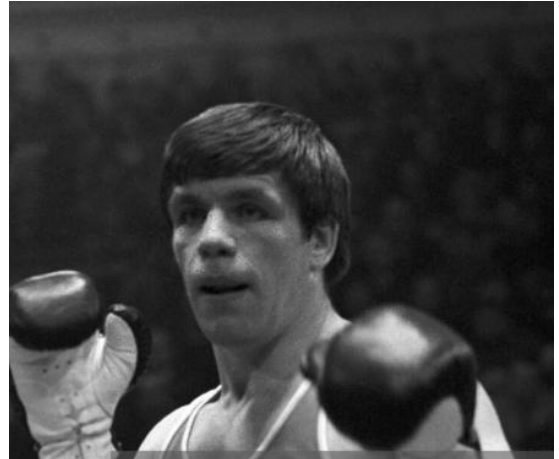


# R.I.P. Igor Vysotsky, a Heavyweight Boxer of Great Renown

By Arne K. Lang (*Published in The Sweet Science April 17, 2023*)

Igor Vysotsky competed in an era when Russian boxers, like their Cuban counterparts, were barricaded from turning pro. But as an amateur, Vysotsky's accomplishments made him a national hero. His death on April 4 at age 69 in his native Yagodnoye in far-eastern Russia (closer to Alaska than to Moscow) warranted more than a footnote in the English-language press.



Vysotsky was the only boxer to defeat Teofilo Stevenson twice and the only man to knock out the Cuban icon, a three-time Olympic gold medalist widely considered the best amateur heavyweight of all time.

Vysotsky won a split decision over Teofilo in Cuba in 1973 and stopped him in 1976 in Minsk. In the latter, he had Stevenson on the deck twice before the match was halted in the third and final round.

During this era, many of Russia's top amateurs appeared in U.S. rings in one-day tournaments against a squad of U.S. Olympic hopefuls. Vysotsky was 8-2 against U.S. opponents in bouts contested on American soil, twice avenging a loss to Jimmy Clark and TKOing Tony Tubbs, a future U.S. national amateur champion. His other defeat came at the hands of Greg Page. (Having graduated from the same high school in Louisville that produced Muhammad Ali, Page was then the most heavily-touted of America's amateur heavyweights. After turning pro, he would go on to win a piece of the world title which he lost to the aforementioned Tubbs.)

Several of these meets were all-heavyweight affairs that were nationally televised, albeit usually edited for viewing on a delayed-tape basis.

In November of 1975, a team of Soviet heavyweights opposed a U.S. contingent in meets staged in New York, Cincinnati, and Las Vegas.

The 1975 lid-lifter at Madison Square Garden attracted a crowd of more than 10,000 who got into the swing of things during the playing of the Russian national anthem. They booed it lustily.

The Americans won six of the 10 matches, their best showing in these one-day heavyweight tournaments. The stars were Gerry Cooney and Jimmy Clark.

Cooney, a 19-year-old iron worker from Huntington, Long Island, demolished his opponent, stopping him in the opening round. Clark, a 20-year-old political science major at Pennsylvania's West Chester State College, got off the deck to TKO Vysotsky whose face was a bloody mask when the match was stopped in the third round. "I sent him back to the salt mines," gushed the euphoric Clark.

*New York Daily News* sportswriter Phil Pepe noted that the 10-man Russian squad had 1,285 bouts between them heading into the meet, compared with only 364 for the Americans. While career records in amateur boxing are approximations and invariably inflated, this made it an historic day for amateur boxing in the land of the free.

In the ring, Vysotsky was a stalker. Las Vegas Review-Journal sportswriter Frank Dell'Apa described his style as that of a "Frankenstein-like robot fighting machine," betraying an ingestion of the stereotype that would shape the Ivan Drago character in the fourth installment of the *Rocky* franchise.

How far would Igor Vysotsky have gone if he had turned pro? Likely not all that far. His record entering his first match with Jimmy Clark was 82-5 with 72 knockouts per a story in *Newsday*, but that record was manufactured from thin air. He was a small heavyweight by modern standards, standing five-foot-11 and customarily weighing about 212 pounds, and he was a notorious bleeder, a penchant that kept him off the 1976 Russian Olympic team. However, he conquered the great Teofilo Stevenson and was the face of the touring Russian boxing team during an interesting period in boxing history and for those reasons alone he ought not be forgotten.

***Arne K. Lang's third boxing book, titled "George Dixon, Terry McGovern and the Culture of Boxing in America, 1890-1910," rolled off the press in September. Published by McFarland, the book can be ordered directly from the publisher or via Amazon.***