The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Big Fight Night Sees 'Rocky IV' Remake

By Alec Luhn

November 02, 2011



Denis Lebedev, center left, and James "Lights Out" Toney, center right, facing off ahead of Friday's match. **Viktor Sokolov**

The plot for Friday's headlining fight at MegaSport Sports Palace could be straight out of "Rocky IV": An aging American champion comes to Moscow to face a younger Russian fighter who has just brutally defeated another American great.

In this enactment, 43-year-old James "Lights Out" Toney takes the part of Rocky, 32-year-old Denis Lebedev plays his opponent Ivan Drago, and 42-year-old Roy Jones, Jr., whom Lebedev knocked unconscious in the final seconds of their bout in May, stands in for Apollo Creed.

But since this isn't the movies, there's no guarantee Rocky will win. Also, this Rocky isn't uttering doofy Stallone lines, but rather is spouting more PG-13 fare.

"I ain't got no quarrels with Russian people period, it's just, who's in my way? Guys who don't deserve to be there, like Povetkin, the Bitchko sisters, Lebedev," Toney said at a party

put on by event organizers, referring to WBA regular heavyweight title holder Alexander Povetkin and heavyweight champions Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko. "As a matter of fact, it's James Toney versus the Eastern Bloc countries. What I want to do is show everybody what real fighting's all about."

The "Rocky IV" equation is one that local promoters may be able repeat again in the future now that, according to the fight's promoter, Vladimir Khryunov, purses for marquee fights in Russia are on the same level as those in America.

Thanks to Toney's pre-fight antics, the Russian side is well on its way to increasing boxing's visibility in Russia, one of the reasons put forth by Khryunov for choosing an American opponent. Another reason — to affirm the strength of Russia and the end of American dominance in boxing — will have to wait until Friday.

"This is an exam for all of us, for me," said Khryunov, who is also Lebedev's manager. "We will overtake and surpass" American boxing.

Toney himself rejected the notion that American boxing is in decline, saying the recent success of fighters from the Soviet Union came only because they weren't fighting strong opponents. His coach, legendary trainer James "Buddy" McGirt, said Russian boxing could eventually reach the same level of the American sport.

"Right now the European fighters are more hungry than the American fighters, that's the honest-to-god truth," he said. McGirt also trains a Russian fighter, junior welterweight Ruslan Provodnikov.

American boxing has gone downhill due to the large paychecks and the popularity of other sports, including mixed martial arts, said former WBO heavyweight champion Lamon Brewster, who is accompanying Toney and who has said he'd also like to train boxers in Russia.

"The Russians have always been in great shape, but they've never had the skill America had, but now what they've done is they've changed with the times and they're starting to adapt more of the American style," Brewster said.

Khryunov declined to name exactly how much the boxers are making on the upcoming fight, but said it was on the order of millions of dollars. Although the event has a slew of partners, Khryunov said no companies or oligarchs are paying for the match. All proceeds will come from ticket sales and television fees, he said. MegaSport will hold almost 15,500 spectators for the fight, Gazeta.ru reported.

Toney said he's fighting because he was "called out" by the Russian side and wants to show spectators that he's the "greatest fighter of all time." An interim WBA cruiserweight title now hangs on the fight, as Yoan Pablo Hernandez vacated the title after the Toney-Lebedev bout was already set.

"Yeah, [Toney's] going to make some money to take care of his family, but his frustration is that a lot of people won't fight him in America or anywhere in the world, because he intimidates a lot of people by the way he talks, and by way he fights," Brewster said, "He

makes you look bad even if you beat him."

Friday's bout will pit Toney's experience, which spans 84 professional fights in five weight classes, against Lebedev's youthful vigor and what Khryunov called his "will to win." Lebedev's trainer, hall-of-fame boxer Kostya Tszyu, told Sovietsky Sport that Lebedev had never faced a fighter of Toney's level. Toney, however, has dropped more than 60 pounds since his last match to fight at Lebedev's own weight, and his advancing age has many calling this his last fight.

"In boxing, 10 years is a lifetime," said Yevgeny Gorstkov, a longtime judge and referee who judged the Jones-Lebedev fight.

On the other hand, Toney is a cagey defender who has never been knocked out, and nobody argues that Lebedev is the next Mohammed Ali.

"He's a reliable boxer at a good level, but he fights monotonously," Gorstkov said of the Russian fighter. "He needs some sort of spark."

As of Thursday morning, Lebedev was a six-to-one favorite on BetOnline.com.

No matter who wins, the fight will be the subject of conversation and will inspire kids to take up boxing, Gorstkov said.

"Everywhere they were talking about it," he said about the Jones-Lebedev fight. "It will be the same with this fight."

The Toney-Lebedev fight is Friday at 6 p.m. at the MegaSport Sports Palace, 3 Khodynsky Bulvar. Metro Aeroport. Tel. 643-1817. www.hockey-palace.ru. It's also showing live on Rossia-2.

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