

Russia's Tallest Man Dead At Age 52

By [Galina Stolyarova](#)

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Alexander Sizonenko, Russia's tallest man, who once appeared in the Guinness Book of World Records as the tallest basketball player in history, died on Jan. 5. He was 52.

The life story of the athlete, who in the 1980s was ranked as one of the U.S.S.R.'s top four central cornermen players, along with Arvidas Sabonis, Alexander Belostenny and Vladimir Tkachenko, is one of the most dramatic in the history of Russian sports.

Upon retiring in 1986, owing to a string of health issues from acromegaly to circulatory diseases, the star player immediately fell into oblivion.

He lived on his own in a tiny room of a communal apartment in central St. Petersburg, teetering on the brink of poverty — in 2011 his monthly pension totaled about 7,000 rubles (\$220) — as his health deteriorated and he developed diabetes and osteoporosis. His room was so small that the former basketball player could not even straighten his back when he stood up.

Sizonenko's plight received sudden media attention in the summer of 2011, when local reporters discovered that after suffering a fall at home, the former athlete had spent almost a week without medical attendance. Because of his height — two meters 45 centimeters — and weight (200 kilograms), he was denied a place in local clinics, and was not receiving adequate treatment.

For weeks, while the sick man laid in bed in his room developing bedsores, officials refused requests for a caregiver or nurse to look after the man who was once the pride of the country's sport.

Sizonenko's plight touched the hearts of hundreds of locals, who brought money, medicine and food to him. They also signed a petition asking City Hall to stop turning a blind eye to the situation and offer help. Because of his syndrome, his body continued to grow, destroying his internal organs, which could not cope with the enormous size of his body. Eventually, one of the bureaucrats took pity on the ill man — and help did arrive.

The former player was provided a nurse, an individually designed orthopedic mattress, and medicine — all free of charge.

Sizonenko is survived by his 17-year-old son, Alexander, who supported his father during the last days of his life, when Sizonenko's condition was so bad that he could not even eat.

The basketball player's friends had to collect money for his burial and even for the specially designed coffin. His friends managed to collect about 50,000 rubles (\$1,569) by campaigning among locals.

Several dozen St. Petersburgers attended a burial service at the Vladimirsky Cathedral on Jan. 9 to bid farewell to the former sports star. During the last months of his life, Sizonenko made new friends, who admired his courage, stamina, sense of humor and ability to enjoy life, despite the hardships he faced.

Sizonenko was buried at the Severnoye Cemetery on Monday. He was laid to rest close to his former basketball coach, Vladimir Kondrashin.

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