

NIKOLAI “RUSSIAN GIANT” VALUEV

Undefeated World Boxing Association Heavyweight Champion

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia on Aug. 21, 1973

Height: 7’ Weight: Heavyweight (320)

Record: 44-0, 32 KOs

If being the tallest and heaviest heavyweight champion in history at 7 feet and 325 pounds, respectively, were not enough to bring attention to undefeated Nikolai Valuev, one need only imagine the looks of disbelief from boxing experts and novices alike when the Russian giant enters the ring not by the customary process of stepping through the ropes; he steps *over* them. These and many other anomalies are par for the course for this native of St. Petersburg, who has charted an unlikely course to become World Boxing Association champion.

He was born during the depths of the Cold War on Aug. 21, 1973, to parents who both stood only 5 feet 5 inches tall. The explanation for his immense size comes from his grandmother. She spoke of an Asiatic tribe called the Tartars (derived from Tarturus, the Greek god of the underworld), who had once conquered Russia and spread terror throughout most of Europe. She said her grandfather was “a giant of a man called Vasily,” and a direct descendant of this warrior race. Nikolai was the product of this gene pool.

Valuev grew up in a typical working-class Soviet family. His father, Sergei, worked in a factory repairing radios. His mother, Nadezhda, helped to make ends meet.

“Nothing came easily for us,” Valuev said. “Life was very basic. It was like growing up in the ghetto in a large American city though the old Soviet system was different. Everyone worked. Everyone was equal. I had the same childhood as every other child. We all shared the same life experiences, the same toys.”

At age 12, he stood at 6 feet 4 inches. At age 13, he went to a boarding school in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) that specialized in sports.

“I realized my childhood was finished,” Valuev said. “People had paid more attention to me than to other children. I knew this. It was obvious. But I had always lived with my size. Then I realized I could actually do something with it and set my focus on achieving something in sport. I considered no other profession.”

Valuev joined the basketball team and won a national championship at the junior level. At age 16, he was 6 feet 6 inches in height.

By age 18, Valuev towered at 6 feet 9 inches. His interest in sports had now expanded to track and field where he displayed a proficiency in hammer throw and discus. He won the national junior title in discus at age 19.

His achievements earned him an invitation to the Institute of Sport in St. Petersburg. He planned to hone his skills in an attempt to win a spot on the Russian Olympic Team.

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Valuev targeted sports schools as a means to get ahead in life, but he did not waste the expanded scholastic opportunities at these institutions. Always an avid reader, Valuev enjoyed Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Tom Clancy, Jack London, Tolstoy and other Russian giants of literature. Valuev was also known to compose poetry.

Fate intervened when he came to the attention of boxing trainer Oleg Shalaev, who wanted to turn the behemoth athlete into a boxer. At the age of 20, Valuev fell in love with the sport of boxing almost immediately.

“It was difficult for me to develop in this kind of sport at that late age,” Valuev admitted. “Almost every boxer in the world first learns boxing as a boy. For me, everything was new: running, skipping, punching the big bag, working the speed bag, sparring, even shadow boxing. I had never thrown a punch in my life. This was a new world for me and I became addicted to it immediately.”

The Communists banned professional boxing preferring pugilists to ply their trade in the Soviet amateur system. Valuev was a boxer-in-training during the day and held a job as a bouncer at a restaurant in St. Petersburg at night. After less than 15 amateur bouts, Valuev turned professional.

“Because of my size and strength, I had already won a Russian national championship silver medal but I wanted to make money.”

Shalaev taught Valuev to throw technically sound shorter punches rather than longer punches.

“I decided not to teach him to throw straight punches at a big distance, the kind of show that most people want to see a big guy like that fighting,” Shalaev said. “Instead I started teaching him how to throw short little punches from the bottom up.

“Teaching speed takes a lot of time. And Nikolai needed a tactic that would force everybody to come to him. They came to him and he clobbered them.”

Valuev fought professionally for the first time in Berlin at age 21 on Oct. 15, 1993, scoring a second-round technical knockout over American John Morton.

Over the next 10 years, Valuev would fight in his native St. Petersburg, England, Australia, Japan, South Korea and twice in Atlantic City, N.J. While honing his craft, he never suffered a defeat and often scored knockouts in the early rounds. Regardless, few took him seriously. Worse for him was the fact that he was promoted as a sideshow attraction rather than a legitimate boxer.

Having little to show financially for his efforts as evidenced by the fact he was still living in a small apartment in St. Petersburg, his life changed when he went to a friend’s birthday party at a restaurant where he was introduced to his future wife, Galina, in 1999. The gentle giant reluctantly admits to winning his bride over with poetry, but he prefers not to discuss it.

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“The poems were written for Galina. They are personal and I don’t like to discuss them. I’m a boxer, not a poet.”

He added with a smile, “All I will tell you is that Galina didn’t throw them back at me. She has all of the poems still.” Valuev married his sweetheart in 2000, and their son, Grisha, was born in 2003.

Noted German promoter Wilfried Sauerland signed Valuev to a promotional agreement in 2003, and all of Valuev’s matches have taken place in Germany since then.

“I told Niko that I thought he had been promoted as a circus act but he could be much more than this,” Sauerland said. “He had spent his entire career never improving or progressing in the rankings because the people he was with did not believe he was a real fighter with ability.

“I was not thinking world titles at first but the ease with which he destroyed Paolo Vidoz for the WBA European title made me think again.”

Vidoz was an Italian Olympian, Italian heavyweight champion, and a legitimate heavyweight contender with a record of 17-1 when he faced Valuev on Oct. 9, 2004. Although Vidoz succumbed to Valuev via ninth-round technical knockout, he went on to win the European Boxing Union heavyweight championship.

Valuev then met American contender Gerald Nobles—at the time undefeated at 24-0 with wins over Bruce Seldon and Sedreck Fields. Nobles was so perplexed with the giant that he resorted to throwing low blows, which earned him point deductions in the second and third rounds and lead to his disqualification in the fourth.

Valuev faced another legitimate heavyweight contender in Attila “The Hun” Levin on Feb 12, 2005. Levin was 29-2 when he faced the Valuev, with victories over Ray “The Rainman” Austin and Ross Puritty. The giant made quick work of Levin with a third-round technical knockout.

The logical progression up the heavyweight ladder continued on May 14, 2005, when Valuev faced Clifford “The Black Rhino” Etienne. He was highly touted at 29-3-2 after wins over future heavyweight champion “Relentless” Lamon Brewster and Lawrence Clay Bey, both of whom were undefeated prior to facing The Black Rhino. In addition, Etienne’s three losses prior to fighting Valuev came at the hands of “Iron” Mike Tyson, Fres Oquendo and Calvin Brock. He had also battled Francois “The White Buffalo” Botha to a draw. Again, Valuev made quick work of his opponent, knocking him out in round three.

This earned the Russian a world title elimination bout to determine the No. 1 position in the WBA on Oct. 21, 2005, against Larry “The Legend” Donald. A crafty veteran, Donald was fresh from the finest performance of his career, winning a lopsided unanimous decision over Evander “The Real Deal” Holyfield at Madison Square Garden and a draw after an inspired hometown appearance by Ray “The Rainman” Austin in Cleveland on April 30, 2005.

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More important, Donald was by far the slickest fighter Valuev had ever faced. Donald's footwork, hand speed and boxing skills are unquestioned. The big knock against him was an inexplicable proclivity to not let his hands go in fights he was on the brink of winning, most notably against Obed Sullivan in 2000 and Kirk Johnson in 2001.

Donald gave the performance of his life against the Russian before a sold out crowd of 5,000 in the new EWE Arena in the German village of Oldenburg. He darted inside with combinations and then stood toe to toe for 12 rounds with a man he gave away advantages to in every physical category, including 80 pounds and 8 inches in height.

To Valuev's and his trainer Manuel Gabrielian's credit, the giant Russian's abilities had progressed to the point where he held his own in a match of boxing skills; no small feat for a 325-pound man.

While the fight had been very close, Valuev was seen as the majority decision victor by scores of 117-112, 115-113 and 114-114.

It was one thing to have defeated Donald, but it would be quite another matter to defeat two-time and reigning WBA heavyweight king John "The Quietman" Ruiz in Valuev's first world title appearance. While the Don King-promoted Ruiz gave away the given height, weight and reach advantages to Valuev when they met before a sold-out crowd in Max Schmeling Halle in Berlin on Dec. 17, 2005, Ruiz was still the betting favorite due to his experience and burrowing, relentless style. This was, after all, a man who was entering his 10th world championship match and had prevailed over the likes of Evander Holyfield, Hasim "The Rock" Rahman, Fres Oquendo, Kirk Johnson and Andrew Golota.

But Valuev's skills were improving. The late-blooming bear of a man, who had literally been fighting to gain respect, had honed his skills and learned a few new tricks of the trade while competing against the likes of Vidoz, Nobles, Levin, Etienne and Donald.

Ruiz promised to bring the fight to Valuev, and that's just what he did in the beginning of the match. He made his way inside and was effective with combinations, but Valuev remained patient and established his jab, which gave him the scorecard lead. Knowing Muhammad Ali was in attendance at the fight (his daughter, Laila, was on the card), Valuev delighted the audience with a Herculean-sized "Ali shuffle" midway through the bout.

Ruiz sensed that he needed to rally, and he did with strong combinations in one of the better rounds of the fight, the seventh. All three judges gave that round to Ruiz, and all three judges were in agreement that Valuev was ahead by one point going into the eighth.

Gabrielian screamed at Valuev to increase his intensity, and Ruiz remained right where he wanted him to be—on the outside—where Valuev again worked his jab and also landed a solid right, which was enough to win the round on all three cards and extended the Russian's lead to two points across the board.

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Ruiz moved inside again in the ninth where he boxed effectively and won the round on two scorecards while the third judge, Derek Milham from Australia deviated by scoring it a 10-10 draw. (This wouldn't be his last 10-10 scoring as he did the same thing in the final round, which had produced some of the most spirited action in the contest.)

The 10th appeared to be an even round until Ruiz unloaded a right hand and promptly followed with another that may have been his best punches of the fight. Valuev answered with a right of his own with both fighters still throwing bombs at the bell.

The scorers differed in this round as well: two gave it to Ruiz, probably swayed by those strong back-to-back rights, but Hector Hernandez from Mexico preferred Valuev.

The fight was still up for grabs entering the championship rounds where one judge had the fight even and the remaining two still favored Valuev by 96-95 and 96-94, respectively.

Ruiz slowed his punch output in the first half of the 11th round while both fighters had marks showing under their eyes. The judges were obviously confused in this round as two judges split the round and the other, Hernandez, scored it a draw.

Both fighters seemed to give what they had left in the final round of a hard-fought battle with two judges giving the round to Valuev. The remaining judge, Milham, inexplicably scored the final round of a heavyweight championship match a draw.

In the end, Francisco Martinez of New Zealand scored the fight a draw, while Hernandez and Milham both favored Valuev by respective scores of 116-113 and 116-114. Valuev had become the first Russian in history to win a heavyweight world championship.

"I worked 12 years for this moment," Valuev said after the fight. "I excuse myself for not having the most beautiful performance but the most important thing is that I won the decision and the title. "

Now Valuev found himself co-promoted by the powerful duo of Sauerland and Don King.

In his last appearance and first title defense, Valuev met American contender Owen "What the Heck" Beck at the TUI Arena in Hannover on June 3. Beck attempted to make up for the 78 pounds and 10 inches he gave away in respective weight and height advantages by taking the fight directly to the champion on the inside during round one. Valuev responded by throwing brief, effective combinations that quickly paid dividends in the form of space to throw more combinations.

Beck briefly landed a few body shots at the beginning of round two before being caught with a one-two combination that consisted of a left jab followed by a picture-perfect right hand that landed flush on Beck's jaw and sent him crumpling to the canvas.

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It turned out to be the beginning of the end for Beck. With less than a minute to go in the round, it was all Beck could do to survive it, which he did—barely.

The impressive combinations from Valuev continued and expanded in round three. He added to his arsenal clubbing left hands and uppercuts. Then the Russian giant unleashed 12 punches in a row before Beck leaned into a staggering right uppercut that vanquished Beck and sent him back to the mat.

Beck beat the count on very unsteady legs, and referee Luis Pabon made a poor decision in letting the match continue. Fortunately, Pabon quickly recognized his mistake and waved off the action seconds later at 1:44 into the round.

“It was an important fight for me being my first title defense,” Valuev, who improved to 44-0 with 32 knockouts, said. “I change my training after each fight to prepare for my opponent’s skills. My trainer and I developed a good boxing plan tonight.

“Now I will go to conquer America.”

Valuev was congratulated after the fight by a man in an arena hallway who told him, “Your combinations looked good.” The 7-foot Russian smiled when he heard the English word and pointed to his Armenian trainer.

“Combinations, combinations, combinations,” he said in reference to Gabrielian’s repeated training guidance to use this boxing skill to his benefit. Gabrielian returned the smile and added a knowing nod of approval.

“Nikolai Valuev is one of the most underestimated boxers in the world,” Don King said at the post-fight press conference. “He is throwing more and better combinations as well as a devastating uppercut. I believe this man has the ability to become undisputed world champion.”

Ron Lewis of the Sunday Times of London wrote after the bout, “King has found his Kong.”

When the soft-spoken Valuev is not in the ring, he likes to spend time with his family and is also an outdoorsman who likes to hunt and fish in the forests around St. Petersburg.

“We meet outside the city, a group of us and it’s a big deal for all these people to be able to finish their jobs and meet friends who share a common interest, a passion,” Valuev said. “Some of us are sportsmen, some are in the military, but the hunt brings us together. I think it’s important to meet up with your friends, do things together and share some kind of adventure.”

His mother still likes to cook for him. He likes her to make him caviar-stuffed blini (pancakes) with borsch (a beetroot soup).

THE PROFESSIONAL RECORD OF
NICOLAY VALUEV

ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA
 Date of Birth: 08/21/1973

Won-Lost-Draw-KO'S
 44 0 0 32

1993

Oct 15 JOHN MORTON, BERLIN, GERMANY..... TKO 2 PRO DEB 313

1994

Feb 22 ALEXANDER VASILIEV, ST PETERSBURG, W 4
 Apr 15 ALEXEY TZIGANKOV, ST PETERSBURG, KO 3

1995

Feb 16 SERGEY ANIKEEV, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA KO 2

1996

Oct 08 NEIL KIRKWOOD, BATTERSEA, ENGLAND.... TKO 2 320
 Nov 26 DARREN FEARN, BETHNAL GREEN, ENGLAND. TKO 1 321

1997

Mar 21 PATRICK SLADE, PARRAMATTA, ASTRLIA... KO 1 319
 May 09 MANAO NAVUILAWA, BANKSTOWN, ASTRLIA.. KO 1 333
 May 31 TERRELL NELSON, AC, NJ..... TKO 2 316
 Jul 26 RODNEY HARRIS, YOKOHAMA, JAPAN..... W 4 319
 Aug 21 AUGUST TANUVASA, BANKSTOWN, ASTRLIA.. KO 1 330
 Sep 27 KEVIN ROSIER, MOSCOW, RUSSIA..... KO 1 318
 Nov 08 SERDAL UYSAL, FRANKFURT, GERMANY..... TKO 2
 Dec 06 SINCLAIR BABB, TOWNSVILLE, ASTRLIA... KO 1 325

1998

Mar 14 JIM HUFFMAN, MOSCOW, RUSSIA..... TKO 2 326
 Jun 09 JAMES GAINES, MOSCOW, RUSSIA..... W 6 324
 Dec 19 EVGENY ODOLSKY, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA TKO 1 317

1999

Jan 22 ALEXEI OSOKIN, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA. TKO 6 RUSSIAN 320
 Feb 13 KOLEA UTOIRAMANU, TOKYO, JAPAN..... KO 4 317
 May 07 ANDREAS SIDON, PRAGUE, CZECH..... TKO 4 315
 Jun 25 JAMES MC OUEEN, PRAGUE, CZECH..... KO 1
 Dec 15 ALEXEI VARAKIN, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA KO 1 RUSSIAN 324

2000

Mar 10 JURI NIKOLAEV, NOVOSIBIRSK, RUSSIA... TKO 2

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NICOLAY VALUEV

ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA
 Date of Birth: 08/21/1973

Won-Lost-Draw-KO'S
 44 0 0 32

Jun 06	YURI YELISTRATOV, ST PETERSBURG,	W	12 PABA	316
Oct 29	TONE FISO, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.....	TKO	1 PABA	320

2001

Mar 06	VITALY SHKRABA, MOSCOW, RUSSIA.....	TKO	4	319
Jun 30	GEORGE LINBERGER, AC, NJ.....	TKO	1 PABA	317
Sep 28	TOAKIPA TASEFA, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA	W	12 PABA	319

2002

Jun 15	YAROSLAV ZAVOROTNY, DONETSK, UKRAINE.	TKO	3	319
Jul 21	TARAS BIDENKO, SEOUL, KOREA.....	W	12 PABA	318
Oct 10	KONSTANTIN PRIZUK, ST PETERSBURG,	TKO	4	320

2003

Mar 15	PEDRO FRANCO, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA..	W	12 PABA	320
Aug 16	BOB MIROVIC, ADENAU, GERMANY.....	W	8	321
Oct 04	OTIS TISDALE, ZWICKAU, GERMANY.....	KO	1	323

2004

Feb 28	DICK RYAN, DRESDEN, GERMANY.....	TKO	1	325
Apr 17	MARCELO DOMINGUEZ, BERLIN, GERMANY...	W	8	324
Jul 24	RICHARD BANGO, FRANKFURT, GERMANY....	TKO	6 WBA/INT	324
Oct 09	PAOLO VIDOZ, ERFURT, GERMANY.....	TKO	9 WBA/INT	323
Nov 20	GERALD NOBLES, KEMPTEN, GERMANY.....	WDSQ	4 WBA/INT	323

2005

Feb 12	ATTILA LEVIN, BERLIN, GERMANY.....	TKO	3 WBA/INT	324
May 14	CLIFFORD ETIENNE, BAYREUTH, GERMANY..	KO	3 WBA/INT	333
Oct 01	LARRY DONALD, OLDENBURG, GERMANY....	W(M)	12 WBA/ELIM	324
Dec 17	JOHN RUIZ, BERLIN, GERMANY.....	W(M)	12 WBA	324

2006

Jun 03	OWEN BECK, HANNOVER, GERMANY.....	TKO	3 WBA	320
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