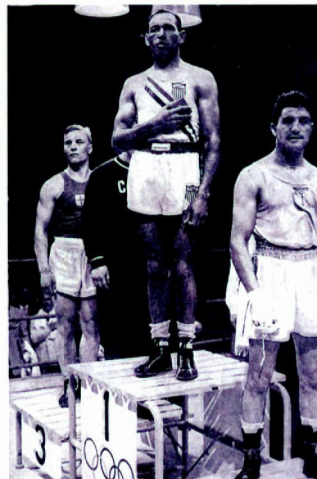
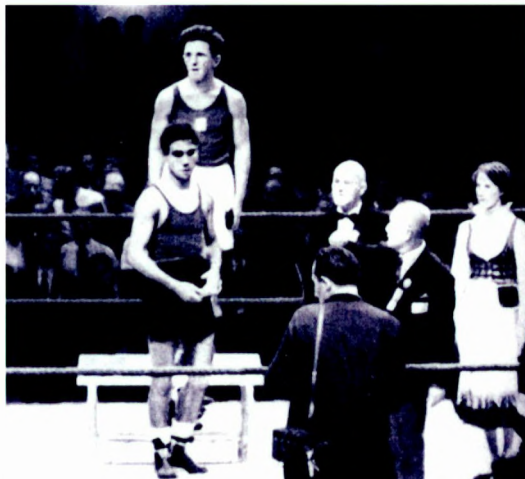


The 1952 Boxing Bronzes – “to solve this problem, which is a Finnish one”

By Bill Mallon



The 1952 Olympic boxing competition consisted of ten classes, which were dominated by United States' boxers, who won five gold medals. They won no bronze medals in 1952, which is not surprising, because at least originally, there were no bronze medals awarded in 1952 boxing.

At the Olympic boxing championships from 1920 to 1948, the losing semi-finalists always fought a deciding bout to see which of them would receive a bronze medal. Beginning in 1956, the bronze medals were simply awarded to both losing semi-finalists and it has remained that way since. But 1952 was different. The “1952 Official Report” noted as follows:

As recommended by the AIBA (Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur), Gold and Silver Medals only were awarded. The losers in the semi-finals were not, as previously, matched for Bronze Medals; instead, both were awarded diplomas. Their national flags also were hoisted at Victory Ceremonies. This decision in regard to medals afterwards gave rise to criticism. Seeing that there were three medals for all other sports, the exception made in the case of boxing was felt to be not in harmony with the whole. The AIBA

certainly meant well, the idea being to spare tired boxers the strain of an extra bout.

This decision was taken at the 2nd AIBA Congress in København in 1950. Volker Kluge notes that “The losers of the two semi-finals would be placed equally third. The IOC agreed to this in 1951 on the condition that no bronze medals would be given to them. The third-placed boxers were invited to the podium at the medal ceremony, but they were given only diplomas.”²

This decision by the IOC appears to have been taken at the 44th IOC Session in Wien, Austria, held from 7–10 May 1951. In his monographs on the IOC Sessions, Wolf Lyberg appears to mention this, although there is an apparent typographical error. On p. 52, he notes, “2) Proposal FIBA. Was accepted, but not to distribute bronze medals to the two teams that lost the semifinals. A match for third place had to be played.”³ There is no other mention of the boxing decision in any of the IOC Sessions from that era, and it appears that Lyberg mistook FIBA (basketball) for AIBA (boxing), as there was a deciding match for the bronze medals in 1952 Olympic basketball.

This is confirmed from the minutes of the 1951 IOC Session⁴ in which this topic is listed as Item 14 (c) on the agenda, in the original French, "F.I. Boxe: ... médailles de bronze pour les demi-finalistes perdants, les épreuves pour la troisième place n'étant pas prévues."⁵ The Session minutes then state, "Fédération Internationale de Boxe. Les propositions soumises sont acceptée à l'exclusion de la remise des médailles de bronze aux demi-finalistes perdants ..."⁶

The "1952 Official Report" has some photographs and captions that support this. On p. 404, two featherweight boxers are shown on and near a small podium, with the caption reading, "[Ján] Zachara [TCH-gold] and [Sergio] Caprari [ITA-silver] receive their medals."⁷ No other boxers are shown and only these two are noted to be receiving medals. However, on p. 417, the light-heavyweight ceremony is pictured, with two boxers standing on the 3rd place step of the podium.⁸

So should the losing semi-finalists in 1952 be considered bronze medalists, as they stood at the medal ceremony, and were awarded diplomas, but not actually bronze medals? Well, the story does not end in 1952. In 1970 the Finnish Boxing Association and the AIBA took steps to correct the missing 1952 bronze medals.

On 17 March 1970, Atle Salokangas, President of the Finnish Boxing Association, wrote to Lt. Col. Rudyard H. Russell, President of the AIBA concerning the 1952 bronze medal problem. He wrote, "A certain boxer who had lost in the semifinals of the Helsinki Olympics explained some time ago how annoying it is as he has a framed diploma at home on the wall which certifies that he was placed third in his cat[eg]ory of the Helsinki Olympic boxing. People then ask to be shown this bronze medal and he then has to inform that he has never received one."⁹ The remainder of this letter goes on:

Within our board we discussed the medal-question that had thus arisen and we realised that at all Olympic Games before and after the Helsinki Games bronze medals had been distributed in boxing, and thus the Helsinki Olympics were the only ones where nobody got one. This is according to our opinion a flagrant injustice towards those 20 boxers who during the ceremony of distributing medals stood on the victors' stand as you certainly well remember. They are just as entitled to get a medal as were those boxers who achieved corresponding results and got their bronze medals at the Melbourne, Rome, Tokyo and Mexico Olympics. At the Helsinki Games the present system was adopted for the first time according to which there is no match for the bronze medal, but each one having lost in the semifinals is placed third i.e. as bron[x]e medalist. The decision about this seems to have been made just before the Olympics and the question of distributing bronze medals seems to have been open at that stage, and for that reason no medals were distributed. Later



on the questions solved as to the Melbourne Olympics and probably this was forgotten as to the Helsinki Games.

Be it as it may, we anyway consider the fact that no bronze medals were distr[ib]uted at the Helsinki Games as being extremely illogical and unjust. Bringing this to a point one might say that at the Helsinki Games these 20 boxers were punished due to the fact that the question had not been solved clearly and justly enough.

On the basis of the aforementioned I went together with Valle Resko,¹⁰ the chairman of our association, to negotiate about the matter with baron Erik von Frenckell."¹¹ He immediately and completely agreed with our opinions and informed that the medals that had not been distributed could now be distributed and preliminarily the Exhibition Hall in connection with the Scandinavian Championships. We thus considered it as a matter of course, especially as the Finnish Olympic Committee had nothing against it, that the medals should be delivered as soon as possible to all those 20 boxers who for almost 18 years have been without these important tokens of recognition of their sports careers. As the Scandinavian Championships were near at hand we thought it suitable to try and distribute them in the same place where they had been gained. So we sent our invitation to all 20 boxers from all over the world. We know that scarcely anyone of them will have a possibility to travel here, but we wanted to give them the chance to get their medals here. Our intention is to send the medals to their associations when we have received their answers.

We are still of the opinion that now as the mistake of the Helsinki Games have been brought to daylight one should try to correct it as soon as possible. For that reason we also the steps explained above without losing any time. We cannot believe that AIBA or IOC wants to object to the correction of this mistake that happened 18 years ago.

We are very sorry if we have violated the formalities, but we believe that you will understand that we have acted only according to sportsmanship and justice.¹²

The Olympic bronze medal that was withheld from the third-placed boxers for two decades (left). Opposite: incomplete victory ceremonies: while in the light-heavyweight division, won by the American Norvel Lee, the podium was fully occupied. The two third-placed boxers were absent at featherweight. Far left: Ján Zachara (Czechoslovakia) with the gold medal, the Italian Sergio Caprari took silver.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archives

Not a mistake: the podium for the second placed boxer remained empty, because the Swede Ingemar Johansson was disqualified for passivity in the final versus American H. Edward Sanders. As Johansson later had an exemplary professional career, he became world champion on 26th June 1959 against Floyd Patterson (USA). The Swedish NOC petitioned the IOC on five occasions from 1969 onwards, asking that the silver medal be restored. The IOC finally agreed in 1981 and the medal was handed over at a ceremony in Gothenburg in 1983 (photo below).



Now strangely, Russell answered Salokangas four days before the above letter was written. It appears that Salokangas first forwarded the circular letter: he had sent to the losing semi-finalists,¹⁹ and Russell answered that letter:

Thank you for sending me a copy of the circular letter you have sent to the Federations to which the losing semi-finalists in the Helsinki Olympic Boxing competition belonged. I see from this that you are suggesting presenting bronze medals to those boxers, although they were not actually awarded in the 1952 Olympic Games. As you say, this was because we did not on that occasion hold 3rd-place contests as we had done in the London Olympics in 1948.

Of course, Olympic medals are a matter for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), through the

Organising Committee of each Olympics, and they are the people who are actually concerned with presenting the medals to the boxers entitled to them. It is not thus really a matter for the national boxing association, but for the IOC and the Organising Committee concerned.

I wonder, therefore, if you have been in touch with Baron Erik von Frenckell about this, as Chairman of the Organising Committee. As you know, he declined to allow [Ingemar] Johansson to receive the silver medals after being disqualified in the finals, so he may have something to say about giving them to the losing semi-finalists if the IOC had not at that time agreed to them receiving them.

If he, and the IOC, are however, agreeable, then I think the approach should be made through AIBA, as it concerns a number of affiliated associations, several of whom are of course outside Europe.

Many such boxers would of course not be able to undertake the journey to Helsinki which might involve them in considerable travelling and time, so perhaps it would be rather invidious to present to some and not to others, but it could of course be done through the National Olympic Committee of theirs, if that is the wish of the IOC and the Helsinki Organising Committee.

As time is short I am sending a copy of this letter to Baron von Frenckell.²⁰

But were the bronze medals even available to distribute in 1970? It appears that they were. Vesa Tikander, a researcher at the Sports Museum of Finland in Helsinki, was instrumental in information on this topic. He wrote in an e-mail, "The required number of bronze medals (20) was available in the Sports Museum of Finland, where spare medals had been deposited after the Games."²⁵

So with the imprimatur of Erik von Frenckell, Finnish IOC Member in 1970, and Chairman of the Organising Committee of the 1952 Olympic Games, and support from the AIBA and President Rudyard Russell, all that remained was to contact the IOC. This was done in a letter of 28 March 1970 from Kirsti Eklund, Assistant Secretary of the Finnish Olympic Committee.

Re: A proposal of the Finnish Amateur Boxing Association concerning the distribution of the bronze medals for the losing semi-finalists in the Helsinki Olympic Boxing competition in 1952.

The Finnish Olympic Committee hereby wish to ask your opinion in the abovementioned [sic] matter. We wish to make this question clear for us as one national olympic committee. For obtaining more light on this matter we enclosed the correspondence between the Amateur Boxing International Association (AIBA) and our national Finnish Amateur Boxing Association (FABA).

Our question is following:

Can the Finnish Olympic Committee release these bronze medals with the permission of the International Olympic Committee to the FABA for the forward distributing as FABA has proposed?

Because the time is short your answer as soon as possible by cable if possible is very much appreciated.¹⁶

At this time the Secretary-General of the IOC was Monique Berlioux, who basically ran the IOC on a day-to-day basis as IOC President Avery Brundage was not based in Lausanne. Berlioux answered the Finnish Olympic Committee on both 6 April and 8 April 1970. On 6 April she briefly wrote:

I duly received your letter concerning the distribution of medals, which I am sending on to Mr. [Artur] Takac, the Technical Director, who will answer you.¹⁷

The final answer from Mme. Berlioux and the IOC was not long in coming. On 8 April she replied to von Frenckell in French, obviously after a short phone call. It appears that this letter was merely written confirmation of their conversation.

C'est avec grand plaisir que je vous ai entendu au téléphone ce matin, et que nous avons pu nous entretenir de la lettre émanant du Comité Olympique Finlandais.

Je vous confirme donc qu'il était inutile d'intervenir auprès du Comité International Olympique pour résoudre ce problème, qui est un problème finlandais. Veuillez croire, Che: Monsieur, en mes bien fidèles pensées.

[It is with great pleasure to speak with you on the phone this morning, and to discuss the letter from the Finnish Olympic Committee.

I can confirm that it was therefore unnecessary to intervene with the International Olympic Committee to solve this problem, which is a Finnish one.¹⁸

Please believe, Sir, in my very faithful thoughts.]¹⁹

So it appears that the IOC, via Mme. Berlioux, gave tacit approval to distribute the bronze medals from the 1952 Olympic boxing tournament, although it appears she had no such authority to do so. There is no mention of any IOC decision concerning the medal distribution in Lyberg's book on the IOC Sessions, for those sessions in 1970 and 1971.²⁰ There is also no mention of the topic in the minutes of the IOC Sessions.²¹

It's good that the IOC supported this decision, because by the time of the letters from Mme. Berlioux, the medals had already been awarded to six of the losing semi-finalists at the 1952 Olympics. A medal ceremony was held at the Scandinavian Boxing Championships that were held at the Messuhalli in Helsinki on 2 April 1970, which had also been the venue for the 1952 tournament.



Because of the short notice, however, only five of the 20 semi-finalists appeared at the ceremony. As would be expected, the four Finnish bronze medallists – Erkki Pakkanen, Erkki Mallenius, Harry Siljander, and Ilkka Koski – were there and they were joined by Günther Heidemann of West Germany. Boris Nikolov of Bulgaria also came to Finland but was late for the ceremony and received his medal the next day, 3 April, in a similar ceremony. The other medals were sent by post to the losing semi-finalists from 1952.

The difficulties over 1952 medals did not end in 1970. In the final match of the heavyweight division in 1952, American Ed Sanders defeated Sweden's Ingemar Johansson, when Johansson was disqualified for passivity. Because of this disqualification, Johansson was not awarded the silver medal.

Johansson turned professional in December 1952 and won the European professional heavyweight title in 1956. In June 1959 he fought Floyd Patterson for the world

For almost three decades, Lt.-Col. Rudyard H. Russell had a formative influence on AIBA: first as its Honorary Secretary, then as President since 1958. During the presidency of the Briton the third placers from Helsinki in 1971 received their deserved bronze medals.

heavyweight title, and won in a major upset when he knocked down Patterson seven times in the third round before the referee stopped the bout. Patterson had also featured at the 1952 Olympics, winning a gold medal in the middleweight division. In 1960 Patterson regained the world professional heavyweight crown when he defeated Johansson in a re-match. Patterson would win another fight with Johansson in 1961, and those two losses were the only defeats in the Swede's professional career, which ended after 1963, with a record of 26 wins and those 2 losses. Sanders would also turn professional, but it would not end well. In December 1954, he fought for the New England heavyweight title, but was knocked out by Willie James. He never regained consciousness and died from his head injuries a few days later.

In 1982 the IOC decided to award the silver medal from the 1952 heavyweight division to Johansson, who received it at a special ceremony. That same year, he and Patterson also ran the New York Marathon together.

So sometimes it takes a few years before the "final" results of the Olympic Games can actually be declared. At least for the losing semi-finalists in the 1952 tournament, they did eventually receive bronze medals. Should they be considered bronze medallists in 1952 Olympic boxing? It appears that the Finnish Boxing Association and the AIBA did attempt to correct this situation and obtain official support from the IOC. While the absolutely correct channels may have been circumvented in this situation, and there has never been any official word from the IOC concerning the 1952 bronze medal ceremony in 1970, there has also never been an official IOC statement stating that the losing semi-finalists should not be considered bronze medallists. As the following 20 boxers did eventually receive medals, in a decision at least supported by the AIBA, and with what appears to be tacit approval from the IOC, it seems reasonable to include them in any list of Olympic bronze medallists. ■

The 1952 Olympic Bronze Medallists

Flyweight	Anatoly Bulakov (URS)	Willie Toweel (RSA)
Bantamweight	Kang Joon Ho (KOR)	Gennady Garbuzov (URS)
Featherweight	Joseph Ventaja (FRA)	Leonard Leisching (FRA)
Lightweight	Gheorghe Fiat (ROU)	Erkki Pakkanen (FIN)
Light-Welterw.	Erkki Mallenius (FIN)	Bruno Visintin (ITA)
Welterweight	Viktor Jørgensen (DEN)	Günther Heidemann (FRG)
Light-Middlew.	Boris Tishin (URS)	Eladio Herrera (ARG)
Middleweight	Stig Sjölin (SWE)	Boris Nikolov (BUL)
Light-Heavyw.	Harry Siljander (FIN)	Anatoly Perov (URS)
Heavyweight	Andries Nieman (RSA)	Iikka Koski (FIN)

- 1 *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the Games of the XV Olympiad Helsinki 1952*. Sulo Kolkka, ed. Porvoo, Finland: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1955. English edition, p. 396.
- 2 Kluge, Volker. *Olympische Sommerspiele. Die Chronik II. London 1948 – Tokio 1964*. Sportverlag, Berlin 1998, p. 303, footnote 200.
- 3 Lyberg, Wolf. *The History of the IOC Sessions. II. 1946–1972*. Lausanne: self, 1994, p. 52.
- 4 Provided by Dick Pound, former IOC Vice-President.

- 5 "Bronze medals for the losing semi-finalists, with third-place matches not being contested."
- 6 "The submitted propositions are accepted except for the awarding of bronze medals to the losing semi-finalists ..."
- 7 *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the Games of the XV Olympiad Helsinki 1952*, p. 404.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 447.
- 9 Letter of 17 March 1970, Atle Salokangas to Rudyard Russell. Held at the IOC Archives in Lausanne and the Sports Museum of Finland in Helsinki.
- 10 Resko boxed at both the 1928 and 1948 Olympics, as Valfrid Resch in 1928 and Valie Resko in 1948.
- 11 Von Frenckell was Chairman of the Organising Committee of the 1952 Olympic Games, and was an IOC Member from 1948–76. Thus he served a position of high importance in two of the four organisations responsible for the 1952 Olympic medals – OCOG and IOC. The others were the AIBA, and the Finnish OC, with which he certainly had influence.
- 12 Letter of 17 March 1970, Atle Salokangas to Rudyard Russell, IOC Archives, Lausanne and Sports Museum of Finland in Helsinki.
- 13 This circular letter is not held at: the IOC Archives nor at the Sports Museum of Finland.
- 14 Letter of 13 March 1970, Rudyard Russell to Atle Salokangas, IOC Archives, Lausanne.
- 15 Personal communication from Vesa Tikander, 18 March 2013.
- 16 Letter of 28 March 1970, Kirsti Eklund to IOC Secretary-General (Monique Berlioux). Held at the IOC Archives in Lausanne.
- 17 Letter of 6 April 1970, Monique Berlioux to Finnish Olympic Committee, IOC Archives, Lausanne, Ref. lamj/No. 897-70.
- 18 Dick Pound noted, in a personal communication, "MB [Berlioux] was clearly incorrect in dismissing the matter as a Finnish issue".
- 19 Letter of 8 April 1970, Monique Berlioux to Monsieur Erik von Frenckell, IOC Archives, Lausanne. Ref. MB/mc/No. 922-70.
- 20 Lyberg, Wolf. *Op. cit.*
- 21 Personal communication from Dick Pound, e-mail of 26 March 2013.

With thanks to Ove Karlsson (SWE), who first asked me about this problem; Vesa Tikander (FIN) of the Sports Museum of Finland; to Dick Pound (CAN), IOC Member and former IOC Vice-President; and Jocelin Sebastiani (SUI) of the IOC Olympic Studies Centre.