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BULGARIAN BOXING AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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Abstract. This article presents a limited retrospective analysis of the performance of Bulgarian boxing within the Olympic Games. Its aim is to provide a systematized overview of the position of the Bulgarian boxing in the Olympic history. The main stages of Olympic participation are examined—from the first medal in 1952, through the period of most consistent success between 1960 and 1988, to the governing regime changes after 1989 and the achievements of more recent years. The analysis is based on publicly available historical data and sources and outlines general trends rather than providing detailed evaluations. The content shows both - periods of more sustainable results and stages of lesser presence on the Olympic podium, without seeking definitive explanations for these processes.

Keywords: Bulgarian boxing; Olympic Games; sports history; Olympic results; retrospective analysis; sports policy

1. Introduction

A number of archeological findings show that boxing emerged in ancient times, thousands of years before Christ. Men boxing in front of spectators are pictured on stone plates, discovered in Egypt and Iraq. These ancient contests are the base of the boxing sport, as we know it these days.

Boxing has been part of the ancient Olympic Games since 7th century BC when boxers used to wrap their hands with leather strips. At that time the sport was an Olympic discipline under the name of „pigmachia." Through the culture of ancient Greece, boxing was popularized in ancient Rome, but historic data about its practicing after the decline of the Roman Empire are missing. The sport had its renaissance during the 18th century in England, when the term "boxing" actually started to be used.

The foundations of the Bulgarian box were laid soon after the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule. In 1894, 12 teachers of physical education arrived to Bulgaria from Switzerland, introducing gymnastics and French boxing to the school curricula. In 1924 the first boxing department at the Bulgarian AS 23 sports club was established, before in 1939 the Bulgarian Union for Boxing, Wrestling and Weightlifting was established.

Boxing has been part of the modern Olympic Games since their revival in 1904. The games in 1912 in Stockholm were an exception, as the Swedish laws at that time banned boxing. Until the Games in 1952 in Helsinki Bulgaria did not have an Olympic medal. 63 Bulgarian participants competed in 8 disciplines at the forum. Boxer Boris Georgiev won the bronze medal. He lost at the semi finals to legendary US boxer Floyd Patterson, who a few years later became a two-time world heavyweight champion.

Bulgarian boxing holds an independent and prestigious status in the country's Olympic history, marked by a series of individual achievements and distinguishable stages of development.

The first Olympic medal, won in 1952, marks the beginning of what would develop – over the following decades – into varying levels of performance (Girginov, 2009)

The strongest results were achieved between 1960 and 1988, when Bulgarian boxers regularly reached the final phases of Olympic tournaments.

After 1989, the Olympic performance of Bulgarian boxing became more inconsistent, interrupting the previous stability.

Alongside periods without medals, there are also successes indicating the continued, though limited, presence of Bulgarian athletes in the Olympic boxing ring. These results represent isolated achievements rather than a consistent long-term trend.

2. Aim and Methodology of the Study

The aim of this theoretical study is to systematize the most significant moments and outline the periods of Bulgarian boxing's presence in Olympic history.

The methodology of retrospective researches is based on historical and descriptive approache. Official public data, archival publications, and sports literature were used, with Olympic participations and results arranged chronologically. The main stages – from the first medal in 1952, through the period of sustained success (1960 – 1988), to the post-1989 era and more recent achievements – are presented. The analysis has an overview characteristic, focusing on summarizing factual information for the development of the Bulgarian boxing withing the Olympic games and outlining general conclusions based on how results are distributed over time.

3. Results and Discussion

Boxing has been part of the Olympic games since 1904. In its early stage, the rules and competition format were strongly influenced by the professional model, as "*all rules of the Olympic tournament were literally borrowed from professional boxing*[1]." (Delev, 2010).

Bulgaria made its Olympic boxing debut at the 1952 Helsinki Games. It was exactly there that the first Olympic medal in Bulgaria's history is won. Boris Georgiev – Mokata won a bronze in the middleweight category (75 kg), becoming Bulgaria's first Olympic medalist. Despite early injuries to both hands at the beginning of the tournament in Helsinki B. Georgiev achieved three victories. Given the injuries and physical difficulties, he succeeds in defeating representatives of significant boxing backgrounds, including the Germain Dieter Wemhöner, and Georgiev advanced to the semifinals, securing the bronze medal. These circumstances are well representing both the essential of the tournament and the conditions in which this first Olympic medal has been won.

This period from 1952 is therefore defined as the **Olympic beginning**, in regard to the winning of the first Bulgarian Olympic medal. This debut was built upon processes that had begun even before World War II; as Mihail Delev notes, "the last years of the World War II marked the rise of amateur boxing in Bulgaria. More and more boxing sections were established within the sports clubs, introduction of elements in the ring bouts distinguishing amateur form professional boxing. The year 1943 according to many specialists marked the start of the amateur boxing in Bulgaria." (Delev, 2010).

After 1944, the development of sport occurred within a new model of state governance, where sport in Bulgaria began to play role in mass influence and public legitimacy (Veleva, 2020). According to Vasil Girginov, boxing was among the disciplines supported by the state in certain periods (Girginov, 2009). Following the first won medal in 1952, Bulgaria's Olympic participation expanded and stabilized. This is systematized and to be seen from the date in Table 1.

Table 1. Olympic Medals Won by Bulgarian Boxers

Name	Olympic Games	Medal	Category
Boris Georgiev – Mokata	Helsinki 1952	Bronze	75 kg
Alexander Nikolov	Tokyo 1964	Bronze	81 kg
Ivan Mihaylov	Mexico City 1968	Bronze	57 kg
Georgi Stankov	Mexico City 1968	Bronze	81 kg
Georgi Kostadinov	Munich 1972	Gold	51 kg
Angel Angelov	Munich 1972	Silver	63.5 kg
Vladimir Kolev	Montreal 1976	Bronze	63.5 kg
Ivaylo Marinov	Moscow 1980	Bronze	48 kg
Petar Lesov	Moscow 1980	Gold	51 kg
Ivaylo Marinov	Seoul 1988	Gold	48 kg
Alexander Hristov	Seoul 1988	Silver	54 kg
Daniel Petrov	Barcelona 1992	Silver	48 kg
Svilen Rusinov	Barcelona 1992	Bronze	91 kg
Daniel Petrov	Atlanta 1996	Gold	48 kg
Serafim Todorov	Atlanta 1996	Silver	57 kg
Toncho Tonchev	Atlanta 1996	Silver	60 kg
Boris Georgiev	Athens 2004	Bronze	64 kg
Tervel Pulev	London 2012	Bronze	91 kg
Stoyka Krasteva	Tokyo 2020	Gold	51 kg
Javier Ibanez	Paris 2024	Bronze	57 kg

Date source: Bulgarian Olympic Committee[1]

The data analysis shows this era between 1960 and 1980 as the one with highest concentration Olympic medals and high rankings. The date however shows that the medals won by the Bulgarian boxers are unequally spread throughout the period. After the first won medal in 1952 follows a period of without medals, until 1964 and 1968 when new were won. The highest concentration of medals is observed in 1972 to 1988, when the first gold Olympic medals in boxing were won.

Major highlights include the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, where Georgi Kostadinov won Bulgaria's first Olympic boxing gold in the category up to 51

kg. In his biography book, he describes in detail the experience during the tournament and the physical challenges he faced, Kostadinov recalls: *"The doctor advised I should not participate in the finals, due to the bad condition and injuries of both my hands."* (Latifyan, 2025).

Kostadinov's story is a valuable primary source that supplements the official results with information about the competition conditions and the physical exposure during the Olympic tournament.

At the same Olympic Games, Angel Angelov also reached the final, where he lost 2:3 to the American Ray Seals. He recalls and describes the tension and dynamics of the fights and the judges' decision: "*In the final against the American Ray Seals, it was very clear to me that they would hardly give me the victory.*" (Latifyan et al., 2024).

In the following years, Bulgarian boxers continued to be present among the Olympic medalists. At the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Petar Lesov won a gold medal in the 48 kg category, solidifying Bulgaria's position among the leading nations in this sport.

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were an exception within the period 1960 – 1988, as Bulgaria did not participate in them due to the political boycott of the games by most Eastern European countries. This absence interrupts the consistent Olympic presence of Bulgarian boxers in an otherwise consistently successful stage. At the time of this Olympic cycle, boxing in Bulgaria has significant organizational and human resources - according to data for 1983, 21 sport centers operate in the country, 84 coaches work and 2,480 competitors are being trained (Meranzov, 2012).

The boycott occurs in a moment when the Bulgarian sport is in good condition, which is also confirmed by the results of the pre-Olympics years. At the time of the 1984 Olympics, Bulgaria held a world champion – Ivaylo Marinov (1982), who was also the first Bulgarian world title holder in this sport. This shows the high level of the Bulgarian boxing on the international stage just before the start of the Olympics.

After missing out on participation in 1984, Bulgarian boxing returned to the Olympic ring at the 1988 Seoul Games. Ivaylo Marinov became Olympic champion in the 48 kg category, and Alexander Hristov won a silver medal in the 54 kg category. These results close the period 1960–1988 as the most concentrated in terms of Olympic medals in the history of Bulgarian boxing. This period is to be considered the most successful in the Olympic history of Bulgarian boxing and can be called **the Olympic rise of Bulgarian boxing**. At the end of this period, boxing was already a widespread sport, which is confirmed by the data on the number of boxers in the country – according to the Statistical Yearbook of the People's Republic of Bulgaria for 1988, there are 4,108 boxers (Petrunov, 2012).

One year after the aforementioned period - in 1989, cardinal changes occur in Bulgaria in the form and governing regime, political transition, which directly reflected on the development of Bulgarian sports, including Olympic boxing in Bulgaria. Hristo Meranzov characterizes the early 1990s as a period of deepening crisis in the national sports system, noting that "since 1990, Bulgarian sports have been in a constantly deepening crisis, which encompasses all components of the national system of physical education and sports." (Meranzov, 2013).

Bulgarian boxing maintains its presence at the Olympic Games, however with less consistent results compared to the previous period. The frequency of medals has declined,

with the 1996 Atlanta Olympics being the notable exception. In the following years, medals have been won at greater intervals, indicating a lack of sustained consistency in Olympic results.

At this stage, Bulgarian boxers continue to qualify for the Olympic tournaments and represent the country in various editions of the games. Among them are Serafim Todorov, Daniel Petrov, Dimitar Shtilyanov, Detelin Dalakliev, Boris Georgiev and the brothers Kubrat Pulev and Tervel Pulev. During this period, the preparation of some of the Bulgarian boxers included participation in international tournaments and training camps outside the country.

The 1996 Atlanta Olympics were Bulgaria's most successful boxing participation in terms of the number of medals won at a single Olympic Games tournament. Daniel Petrov won a gold medal in the 48 kg category, Serafim Todorov won a silver medal in the 57 kg category, and Toncho Tonchev won a bronze medal in the 60 kg category. This remains the only case in which Bulgaria has won three Olympic medals in boxing within a single Olympic Games and represents a peak in the country's Olympic performance in the discipline since 1989.

Post 2000 Bulgarian box continues being present at the Olympics, however the results became sporadic. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Boris Georgiev won a bronze medal in the 64 kg category, and after an eight-year pause, Tervel Pulev won a bronze medal in the 91 kg category at the 2012 London Games. These results show that Bulgarian boxing retains a presence among Olympic medalists in the more recent period, but without the stability characteristic of the 1960 – 1988 period. The presented results and analyses for the period 1992-2012 give grounds to define it as a period of top, but inconsistent Olympic awards. During this period, the Olympic framework of this sport also changed – women's boxing was included in the program of the Games only since London 2012, initially with a limited number of weight categories, which placed new requirements on national selection and training systems[2].

After the 2012 London Olympics, Bulgarian boxing entered a period without Olympic medals, which lasted until 2020. This disruption is not limited to sport results lack but coincides with further challenges in the organization and management of the sport. In this context, just ahead of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, the selection processes in women's boxing became the subject of widely covered media disputes (see media publications from the period in segabg.com[3] , novinite.bg[4]). Such cases highlight tensions between athletes, coaches, and management and contribute to the lack of continuity in the training and preparation of elite athletes.

The most significant result in the modern period was achieved at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020, when Stoika Krasteva won another gold medal for Bulgaria in the 51 kg category. With this success, she becomes the first Bulgarian boxer to win a women's Olympic title, and the fifth Bulgarian Olympic boxing champion after Georgi Kostadinov, Petar Lesov, Ivaylo Marinov and Daniel Petrov. The Olympic title in Tokyo restores Bulgaria's presence among Olympic medalists in the discipline after an eight-year pause. After winning the Olympic title in Tokyo 2020, Krasteva ceased her active competitive activities.

According to a study based on data from Olympic boxing up to the Tokyo 2020 Games and aimed at analyzing the geographical distribution of medals, Bulgaria ranks

13th in terms of total medals won and 12th in terms of points won, calculated using a weighted point system.

The next Olympic medal was won at the 2024 Paris Games, where Javier Ibáñez won a bronze medal in the 57 kg category. Born in Cuba, Ibáñez competes for Bulgaria after being naturalized, a practice typical of modern Olympic sports. His medal shows that Bulgarian boxing continues to seek competitiveness in a changed and unstable sporting environment, although with limited frequency of medals. This contemporary period 2012 – 2024 can be defined as a **revival of Bulgarian Olympic boxing.**

4. Conclusion

The retrospective approach allows to represent the Olympic results of Bulgarian boxing in a long-term time frame, listing them in a consistent chronological context. This makes it possible to track the change in the frequency and concentration of achievements over time, without reducing the analysis to individual achievements.

It is seen that the Olympic history of Bulgarian boxing does not follow a linear, but rather a phased trajectory of development, in which four major phases can be distinguished in time: (1) Olympic Beginning; (2) Rise; (3) High Peaks but Inconsistent Results; and (4) Revival.

The presented data and its systematization also show the specifics of the boxing sport, in which top achievements are realized within limited time periods, rather than as a constant and monotone process. In this regard, the Olympic successes of Bulgarian boxers can be seen as an indicator of the variable sustainability of the sports environment in which they are achieved. The lack of a clear and consistent link in the development of sports performance provides a field for future research to focus on the discovery and analysis of the factors that determine the durability of high sports performance.

NOTES

1. https://bgolympic.org/letni-sportove/boks/
2. https://www.olympics.com/en/sports/boxing/
3. https://old-news.bnr.bg/en/post/100131311/bulgarian-olympic-glory-boxing
4. https://www.segabg.com/category-weekend/zlatnata-stoyka-krusteva-preodolya-intrigite-i-dve-otkazvaniya-boksa
5. https://www.novinite.bg/articles/121257/Stojka-Petrova-obvini-v-manipulacii-Balgarskata-federaciya-po-boks

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