

Russian Filmmaker Makes Waves With Bodybuilding Documentary

By [Timothy Misir](#)

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Kai Greene, who lost to Phil Heath in the 2012 Mr. Olympia contest, is among the athletes featured in the documentary, which explores the little-known world of professional bodybuilding.

Apart from the continuing presence of Arnold Schwarzenegger, professional bodybuilding has had little impact in the mass media. However, the new bodybuilding film "Generation Iron" was an unexpected success — one of the top grossing independent documentaries of 2013 in the U.S. with close to \$1 million in box office receipts, according to independent film tracker Indiewire.

"In the beginning, nobody expected this film to do that well, and people just didn't know what to expect really. But the film outperformed all expectations ... It's exciting. I think people underestimated the following that bodybuilding has," says the film's director, Vlad Yudin, speaking over the phone from his New York office.

Perhaps one of the reasons it has been so successful is that little is known about the world

of professional bodybuilding, because professional bodybuilding is a topic that has been explored so little by the mass media in general, especially about what happens behind the scenes.

The subject of *Generation Iron*, his fourth feature, is worlds apart from Yudin's earlier films. His first two features were music-related documentaries, followed by the comedy-drama "The Last Day of Summer," which made it to Russia on DVD.

Born in and raised in Russia, Yudin moved to New York in the mid-90s when he was 12 years old as his family wanted him to be educated in the U.S. After high school, he studied business but after receiving his degree, decided to pursue filmmaking at NYU.

Eschewing traditional Hollywood studio models, he brought his business and filmmaking acumen together in *The Vladar Company*, a film production company he founded in 2008 through which he makes and distributes his films.

He explains that what drew him to the secluded world of professional bodybuilding was precisely the fact that he knew so little about it. The only reference he had was "Pumping Iron," a docudrama released more than 35 years ago that popularized the sport and brought Arnold Schwarzenegger international fame, so he teamed up with Jerome Gary, its producer.

Yudin wanted to find out what has happened in the sport since then, and how it has advanced since the 1970s. When Schwarzenegger dominated the sport, Mr. Olympia was largely an amateur competition with a \$1,000 cash prize. Now, winners take home \$250,000 and competitors are dedicated professionals. However, the sport is still a very insular one, unknown to mainstream culture.

"For most people, they stereotype bodybuilders as being guys with no brains at all. Unfortunately in the media, we can see that a lot, people make fun of bodybuilders as opposed to embracing them, even though all the fitness, all the supplements you see in stores, all the gyms, basically across the world, they come from from bodybuilding. That's the core of it all, that's where it all starts, but it's not being appreciated in the open," Yudin laments.

Pumping Iron focused on the gym and the stage, but Yudin received unprecedented direct access to the athletes. "Usually bodybuilders are very private people, they're kind of intimidating. I think for many years, people tried to make a film that tried to expose something. It's a very misunderstood sport," Yudin tells me. But he gained their support after they saw what he was trying to do. He spent a few months with them, traveling from city to city, spending time with their families, spending time in their homes.

While the film is about bodybuilding, it focuses more on the athletes, particularly on the rivalry and relationship between the sport's two biggest names, Phil Heath, the current champion, and his rival Kai Greene. The result is an intimate portrait of the personal battles and existential crises of athletes, of determination and competition that extends beyond bodybuilding.

"There's a lot of elements that go into the sport, and really wanted to focus on its mental aspect, on how these guys get ready and what their life stories are. And I discovered a lot of interesting stories."

Yudin said he was most surprised by the sensitivity of the bodybuilders, saying that "a professional bodybuilder is very similar to a painter or a sculptor, as opposed to an athlete, even though they're large guys with muscles. For them to get on the stage and to create what is essentially an art piece, it takes a lot of thought and preparation."

Russian audiences will get to catch Generation Iron on the big screen soon. The film is being released in several markets in Europe, after which he hopes to bring it to Russia, which he is aiming to do for spring.

Contact the author at t.misir@imedia.ru

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