

Nikita's Biography

Nikita was born on March 9, 1959, in Minneapolis, Minn. His father was a veteran of World War II and upon returning home after the war, like many veterans of foreign wars, had a difficult time adjusting. When Nikita was two years old, his father decided to leave the family. For the next 20 years Nikita's father was in and out of his life. With no real support Nikita's mother set about the task of raising four children as a teacher's aid in the Minneapolis school system. Although she worked this job well into her 70's, it didn't pay enough to fully support a family so she was forced to turn to welfare. Nikita found himself and the rest of his family living in the projects of Minneapolis for the next eight years. Finally, escaping the projects at the age of 10, the family moved to Robbinsdale, Minnesota.

When he entered sixth grade he stumbled across a copy of "Iron Man," a muscle magazine. Flicking through the magazine he found himself mesmerized at how men could build their muscles. He bought his first weight lifting set - a 110 pound starter set with money he earned as a newspaper boy, shortly thereafter, and began weightlifting. By junior high school he pumped himself up to where he could squat 500 pounds. He played offense and defensive line for the Robbinsdale Robins.

After high school, Nikita attended Golden Valley Jr. College and later, Moorhead State University, setting his sites on a professional football career. During his college career, Nikita's was twice slowed by broken legs. He was one of only three players on his team to be scouted by the NFL; however, the scouts lost interest due to the leg injuries. Not losing his childhood vision and hopes, he graduated in 1982 and moved back to the Twin Cities, still planning on making an NFL team. Friends found that Nikita had become an true "gym rat." He spent every free hour of his day pumping iron at a local training club, called "The Gym" (owned and operated by longtime friend Jim Yungner). A light day at the gym for him was six hours. Eight-hour days were more typical and it got to the point where he packed a lunch so he could eat it at the gym. He earned a living by bouncing at a bar at night.

Bouncing one night at the bar Nikita saw two men fighting and tried to stop them. In the melee his legs got entangled and he felt searing pain flow through his left leg. X-rays showed he had a hair-line fracture. Surgeons were called in to insert a steel rod in his leg to give it needed support and strength. He still carries that rod in his leg.

For all of 1983, still determined to play in the NFL, he would spend as many waking hours as possible pumping weights to build his body. His strategy was that by the summer of 1984 he would be ready for an NFL tryout. Looking for a little adventure while he was recovering, Nikita packed up his bags and moved in with his close friend in Atlanta, Georgia; his friend was a wrestler with Georgia Championship Wrestling known as Road Warrior "Animal". Soon, he was attending wrestling matches in the evening and worked out during the day. Workers compensation from his bar injury sustained him.

Three months later he returned to the Twin Cities and got a job as bar disc jockey. By then Nikita's body was a massive 6-foot-2, 285-pounds - 8% body fat. In April of that year he got a call from his friend Joe "Animal" Laurinaitis with news about a wrestling opportunity. At the time, Gordon Solie, who did play-by-play for WTBS Wrestling in Atlanta, had lined up a tryout for Nikita with the Tampa Bay Bandits in the newly-created USFL. But Laurinaitis told Nikita that Jim Crockett, who headed the National Wrestling Alliance in Charlotte, N.C., was searching for new wrestlers. A common practice in wrestling is to search for new talent when ratings are down. The NWA was in a ratings dip. World tag team champions Don Kernodle and Ivan Koloff came up with an idea. Figuring the Russians would boycott the Olympics, they put the word out to find a "nephew" for Ivan. Laurinaitis thought that Nikita would fit the bill.

Even though he didn't have an ounce of wrestling experience, Nikita decided to give the profession a stab, thinking that if it didn't work out he still had a tryout with the Bandits. So Nikita called Crockett and told him he was interested in slamming bodies as a wrestler. True to form, Nikita also told Crockett he had never been in a ring. Sight unseen, Crockett's only instructions were for Nikita to be in his office with his head shaved bald. When the time came Nikita traveled to Charlotte and opened the door to Crockett's office.

Looking at Nikita's skimpy waist (34 inches) and colossal muscles Crockett was shocked at his size. His eyeballs bugged out even more when he instructed Nikita to take off his size 54 sport jacket and removed his shirt. Each muscle was ripped to near perfection. Crockett immediately fetched Ivan Koloff, and Don Kernodle. Both men were among Crockett's top-of-the-line wrestlers. Ivan played the role of a mean wrestler from the Soviet Union while Kernodle's character was that of an American defector who sided with the Russians. The two men formed the championship team in the wrestling enterprise. As soon as Ivan and Kernodle saw Nikita they knew they found the "nephew".

Kissing a chance at playing football good-bye, Nikita signed up as a wrestler with the NWA. He was told that he would play the character of a Soviet wrestler, looking mean and wearing a chain. He was immediately put on the set for interviews, instructed to stand silent with folded arms and a scowling face, behind Kernodle and Ivan. He played his part well. Afterwards, he was told he would be wrestling the next night in Raleigh, N.C., before a huge audience, and taping a special four hour television event with the who's who of wrestling. Arriving late, Crockett made the decision not to let Nikita wrestle. Ivan convinced Crockett to give Nikita a chance. In his first match Nikita defeated his opponent in 10 seconds - a record time. Because of his association with Ivan and Don, Nikita gained an immediate disliking from the fans.

From that night on, Nikita's career was launched. For the next two months experienced on the job training - sometimes battling two or three opponents at one time throughout the Mid-Atlantic. His rise to stardom came quickly. Playing the part of a Russian during the cold war was about as evil as it got. It was a role that Nikita took serious, extremely serious. Fans booed him like no other wrestler and death threats against him were common because fans believed he was a threat to America.

Nikita developed the character as a Soviet wrestler who was suppose to compete in the 1984 summer Olympics Games in Los Angeles which was boycotted by the Soviets. The character was suppose to be a superstar athlete who was gunning to win medals in track, field and wrestling. A unique feature to Nikita's character was that he spoke no English - he even studied the Russian language and learned to speak and write Russian.

Nikita also came close to landing a movie role in Rocky IV with Sylvester Stallone. In the movie Stallone's boxing character was training to fight the no good Russian boxer, Ivan Drago. A casting call went out for someone to play the bad Russian and Nikita was on that short list - one of three finalists. He was flown out to Los Angeles and performed in a screen test with Stallone. Another character, a smooth looking blond, won the part.

During 1986 Nikita reached the top for those playing the bad guy. He was voted by fans as the No.1 most-hated wrestler. While on tour in Japan, Nikita's nemesis, Magnum T.A. was paralyzed in a car wreck in Charlotte, NC. Being groomed to one day replace Ric Fair, the promotion was devastated by the accident, and now wondered who could replace such a void. Upon Nikita's return from Japan, he was informed of Magnum's accident. Crockett had an idea: typical to the wrestling business, when a wrestler gets to be that good, or bad depending on your point of view, it's time for a switch to the other side - and they promoters suggested to Nikita that it was time for him to wear the white hat.

Before his accident, Magnum's tag team partner was wrestling legend "The American Dream" Dusty Rhodes. Magnum's accident now left Dusty without a partner in his feud against the "Four Horsemen". After thinking over Crockett's suggestion, Nikita decided to accept the new challenge.

So Nikita changed from the ugly Russian who hated Americans to one who fell in love with the country and became as loveable as hot dogs and apple pie. A top wrestling magazine ran a cover photo of Nikita's face with a tear trailing down his cheeks. The caption said he was crying for his friend Magnum TA. That sealed his new image.

The switch took place in Nikita's "new" home town of Nashville, Tn. where Dusty was scheduled to wrestle in a cage match. To heighten suspense, for several the match was advertised that Dusty would have a mystery partner. The identity of Dusty's partner was one of the best kept secrets in wrestling. Other than Nikita, only Dusty and Crockett knew who the mystery partner was. When the night came for the big match, Dusty strolled out of the dressing room. The overflowing crowd gasped when they saw Nikita slowly trailing behind him. As Dusty entered the ring the other two opponents, who were playing the bad heels, jumped him. Nikita paused outside the ring and looked to the audience. He climbed the stairs to the door of the cage where he paused again, as the two opponents pummeled poor Dusty. As he stepped through the ring ropes and the cage door was closed. He paused for a third and final time as Ole Anderson and J.J. Dillon continued their assault on Dusty. As the crowd waited in anticipation, surely expecting Nikita would make it a three-on-one, Nikita shocked the arena by viciously attacking Ole Anderson. Quickly defeating their opponents, the crowd erupted with the chant of Nikita! Nikita! Nikita! for the next 15 minutes.

He played his part to the hilt. His switch to the gentle Russian was complete. Dusty and Nikita's alliance would be nicknamed "The Superpowers". For the next 18 months, everywhere they wrestled the house sold out. Their accomplishments included many victories over the "Four Horsemen" and winners of the Crockett Cup Tournament. In 1987, Nikita was voted "Most Inspirational Wrestler" of the year.

Previously, Nikita had always said he didn't want to play the good guy. He thought having to sign autographs and chatting with fans would be a drag. But once he became loved by fans he relished being the good guy. Rather than spitting in his face fans would now come up to him and pat him on the back.

In 1987, his girl friend, Mandy, was diagnosed with cancer. After going through the agony of chemotherapy doctors declared the cancer was in remission. But the next year the cancer returned. At the same time Ted Turner bought out Crockett and renamed the company World Championship Wrestling. In a heartbeat the small family-operated company became part of corporate America.

By 1988 Mandy's conditioned was deteriorating and Nikita told WCW he was taking a sabbatical to care for her. The promotion was stunned - never before had someone left at the height of their career, and this didn't sit well with WCW executives; but realizing his priorities, Nikita was firm in his decision.

Nikita left the ring in 1988. Mandy's conditioned steadily worsened and Nikita looked on as her life began to wither. By early 1989 her fight was over. After six weeks in intensive care, with Nikita by her side, she died. This was his first experience in how short life can be and how valuable it really is. Within a week of Mandy's death, WCW began calling for Nikita's return. Taking time to recover, it would be several months before Nikita would return to the ring.

In early 1990, Nikita met his future wife, Victoria. Victoria later moved back to Charlotte and in the process of time their fondness for each other grew. In late of spring 1990, Nikita proposed to Victoria and the two married on Aug. 17, 1990. Victoria, Nikita, Teryn and Tawni (Victoria's daughters) became an instant family. Their marriage was further blessed with their daughters Kendra, who was born in June 1992, and Kolby, who was born in May of 1996.

Now 33 years-old, Nikita took a hard look at the world around him. He didn't like how wrestling was taking him from his family. He also didn't like how the WCW was treating wrestlers. Then, on Nov. 7, 1992 Nikita stepped into the ring for what would become his final match.

The match was against Big Van Vander (Leon "Bull Power" White), an enormous 500-pound wrestler. During the match Nikita was hit with a clothes line blow to the back of the head. Immediately, he knew something was wrong. He felt a throbbing pain in his neck and his left arm went numb. By 5 a.m. the next morning his lower abdomen was hurting as well. At that point he knew he needed medical attention. A team of seven doctors checked him out. Tests revealed he had a hernia. An MRI showed his neck had been injured so often in wrestling it looked like that of a 55-year-old. The doctors didn't tell him not to wrestle, but said the longer he continued to wrestle, the more likely he faced the risk of permanent injury.

Taking three months to recover from his hernia surgery, and rehabilitating his neck, Nikita decided it was time to "bronze the boots". He had set a goal to retire on top of whatever profession he was in, by the age of 35. His pet peeve was athletes who stay past their prime. Determined not to fall into the same trap, Nikita obtained his goal two years ahead of schedule.

Now free from the heavy burden of travel, Nikita took the most powerful turn of his life. Having achieved academically in the classroom, athletically on the football field and in the wrestling ring, and achieving world wide fame as a world champion wrestler, Nikita realized something was still missing in his life. He and his wife had always said they wanted to raise their children in church and began looking for one they could attend. This was a fairly new quest for Nikita. Growing up, his family was never known for their church attendance. And even though he attended mandatory Bible classes in junior college the word of God really didn't mean much to him then.

Upon invitation from a business associate, Nikita walked into a local church service. When the pastor asked the congregation if anyone wanted to give their heart to Jesus Christ, it was then that Nikita realized the key missing ingredient - Nikita was the first to walk that aisle, to the altar, and bend his knee to Jesus. As much as the rejoicing of fans raised the roof the night that Nikita came to Dusty's aid against the Horsemen, the response pales in comparison to the rejoicing of the angels in Heaven the day that Nikita bowed a knee at the altar of Salvation (the same is true of anyone else who bows a knee and accepts Jesus Christ). Thereafter Nikita's zeal for Jesus continues to grow day by day.