

## Briggs Confesses To Steroid Use!

Written by Ronan Keenan  
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Shannon Briggs takes steroids. And he has been for some time.

“You want to talk about steroids? I’m taking steroids,” admitted the WBO heavyweight titlist last April.

Fortunately, the substances he consumes aren’t the banned performance-enhancing kind, but are a medication necessary to stave off his chronic asthma-related illnesses. For all of his 35 years Briggs has been plagued by respiratory problems that have had a detrimental impact on his life in and out of the ring.

Most recently, he contracted a bout of walking pneumonia that forced him to withdraw from his March 10 title defense against Sultan Ibragimov of Russia.

And if he wasn’t feeling sick already, the native New Yorker was made to feel worse when he lost the opportunity to defend his belt in front of a hometown crowd at the Theatre in Madison Square Garden, as the rescheduled bout will now take place in Atlantic City on 2 June.

“It’s very disappointing,” Briggs told writer Thomas Gerbasi. “I’m from New York City, born and raised. We had a whole assortment of entertainment – from the ringwalk to bringing the title back home to New York City – but this is something I’ve been dealing with my whole life. And it’s not gonna destroy me because I’m gonna come back better.”

Still, battling against the odds in boxing is nothing new for Briggs.

Having suffered an asthma attack in the early stages of his title challenge against Sergei Liakhovich last November, he found himself hopelessly behind on the scorecards going into the final round. Yet somehow, ‘The Cannon’ miraculously summoned the strength in the final seconds to unleash a ferocious barrage of punches to knock Liakhovich out of the ring and claim the WBO crown.

“It’s hard fighting [with asthma],” Briggs said. “I’ll be honest with you, I was born with it, I’ve been fighting it all my life, I’m heavyweight champion of the world, and I’m still fighting it. I’m not only fighting people in the ring, I’m fighting asthma. No one knows what it’s like to be in a fight and you’re thinking about breathing and not the opponent. It’s tough to deal with.

“But if you want to become heavyweight champion of the world and you got asthma, you’ll do whatever it takes. I take so many pills; I can’t sleep, too hyped up. And depression, and you get hungry, eat too much.”

Asthma makes his life difficult, but then again, Briggs never had it easy.

Born in a tough neighborhood in Brownsville, the same part of Brooklyn that produced

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heavyweight champions Mike Tyson and Riddick Bowe, Briggs endured the type of childhood that has ruined many a man.

When he was still a kid his stepfather died in prison, while his mother became addicted to heroin and spent most of her time in institutions. The turbulent upbringing ultimately forced Briggs to the margins of society.

“I use to sleep on the “D” train,” he recalled. “I was on welfare. I was born and raised on it my life. I remember getting free cheese and shoes. Sometimes I use to go to the doctor’s office with Medicaid and the other kids use to laugh at my sneakers and say ‘look he’s on welfare.’”

But that didn’t stop Briggs from dreaming. When he was fifteen he picked up a boxing magazine in a Brooklyn subway station, and almost immediately the confused teenager found comfort in the sweet science.

It wasn’t long before he entered Jimmy O’Pharrows’ Starrett City Gym and began to display talents rarely seen in a fighter of his size.

At 6’4” and 225 pounds Briggs possessed surprisingly rapid hand speed and knockout power to match. And with his muscular frame, golden dreadlocks and gregarious personality, he had all the hallmarks of a promoter’s dream.

After picking up a New York Golden Gloves title and a silver medal at the Pan Am games, Briggs entered the professional ranks in 1992 under the tutelage of a distinguished team. With Marc Roberts and Michael Marley acting as his management and Teddy Atlas as his trainer, Briggs blitzed through his first 25 opponents and the big time began to beckon.

In March ’96 cable giant HBO offered him the opportunity to impress the world against the unfavored Darroll Wilson in what was supposed to be little more than a showcase bout. But the path to the top isn’t always easy as Briggs found out when Wilson shockingly stopped him in the third round.

Briggs blamed the loss on asthma, but many insiders believed it was his lack of dedication to the sport that brought defeat. A disgruntled Atlas soon departed from Team Briggs, leaving the fighter open to scathing criticism from the media.

“After me and Teddy split, everyone came raining down on Shannon Briggs,” said the Brooklynite. “After that it was target practice and I couldn’t do anything right. It took me years on top of years to grow thick skin and it took me many hurtful days.”

Even so, Briggs was still a marketable commodity and one year later he found himself in the ring with the man who many observers regarded as the linear heavyweight champion, George Foreman.

Hoping for an undemanding, yet profitable contest, the 48-year-old Foreman thought he handpicked the perfect opponent, and despite appearing to control most of the twelve rounds, the decision went to the New Yorker, much to the dismay and outright revulsion of many

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observers.

Regardless, Briggs was soon brought back down to earth when the WBC titlist Lennox Lewis ruthlessly dismantled him in 1998. Even though he was ultimately outclassed, Briggs produced a courageous performance and gamely attacked the champion on enough occasions to garner grudging respect from the boxing press.

Wrote Glyn Leach in his post-fight report for *Boxing Monthly*: “[Briggs] is all fighter. I had suggested otherwise in my report of the Foreman fight and for that I apologize without reservation. He fought for respect and he has earned mine.”

But Briggs’ questionable dedication to the sport was highlighted in the ensuing years as he failed to beat relatively ordinary opponents such as Frans Botha, Sedreck Fields and Jameel McCline – a fight in which Briggs weighed a staggering 268 pounds.

Despite such mediocre performances, ‘The Cannon’ never questioned his own ability.

“I haven’t been the fighter I could have been,” he told writer Carlo Rotella. “I didn’t have enough confidence, enough amateur experience. I never had the right coaching until now. The asthma was always on my mind. If I didn’t have asthma, I’d probably be one of the greatest fighters of all time.”

After the 2002 loss to McCline, Briggs re-evaluated his career and decided to form a business partnership with Scott Hirsch. One world title and twelve consecutive knockout victories later, Briggs seems to have finally found happiness in the sport.

“[Scott Hirsch] is a breath of fresh air for the sport,” said Briggs, 48-4-1 (42). “He has taken care of me. He has set up a pension plan for me; so I can always take care of my family. He just wants boxers to fight. I love waking up in the morning and knowing I’m fighting for him.”

Still, as is the norm with an enigma like Briggs, his plans for the future are more than a little hazy.

“I want to fight one hundred career fights,” he said in an interview last January. “I feel like I have another ten years left in me. I could even fight until I’m 50. I like to set goals, and one hundred career fights I know I can reach if healthy.”

But his plans had drastically changed only two months later.

“I don’t want to fight forever,” he told *BlackAthlete.com* last March. “I want to be able to leave this game and play with my two kids. I’m fighting one more year. I’m not the great fighter that [Larry] Holmes was. I’ll fight a couple more times.”

Whether he’s thinking about retirement or not, Briggs is advancing in years and his ability to make a major impression on the heavyweight scene is uncertain. This weekend he’ll be facing a southpaw for the first time in his career and is expected to have a tough time against the unbeaten Sultan Ibragimov, 20-0-1 (17).

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“[Briggs] has a lot on the line against Ibragimov,” says Eric Raskin of The Ring magazine. “If he loses, it immediately undoes any of the good his win over Liakhovich did him. If he wins, that’s two wins in a row over quality heavyweights, and it sets him up for big fights, such as a possible match with Wladimir Klitschko.

“He can potentially make an impact in that he can take part in an important fight against the top heavyweight in the world. And when you combine Briggs’ talent and power with the uncertainty surrounding Klitschko’s chin, anything is possible. Briggs having an impact is not the most likely scenario, but it isn’t beyond the realm of possibility.”

Whatever his future, Briggs has already proven to be one of boxing’s more popular fighters during a time when the sport’s marketability has gradually waned. Appearances in magazines such as Vogue, GQ and The Source and movies such as Bad Boys II have thrust him into the public eye, but his pugilistic ambitions have remained stout.

“I can’t even go to Blockbuster Video without someone saying ‘aren’t you Shannon Briggs?’” claimed the WBO beltholder.

“The world is looking for someone like me to take the bull by the horns in boxing. I’m going to clean up this mess.”

He’ll need a big mop on Saturday.