

The official record won't reflect it, of course, but it could be argued that heavyweight enigma Shannon Briggs won a split decision in what should be the final bout of an intriguing, maddening career.

But as always is the case with Briggs, that decision is apt to remain controversial long after his retirement from the ring.

No, no, the judges got it right in Saturday's WBC title bout at the O2 World Arena in Hamburg, Germany, between Briggs, an overwhelming underdog making his last grab for the brass ring, and champion Vitali Klitschko. "Dr. Ironfist dealt a fearful beating to the outgunned challenger, winning 120-107 on two of the three judges' scorecards and 120-105 on the other.

Initial reports were that Briggs, who was rushed to a hospital immediately after the foregone conclusion of a decision was announced, had suffered a concussion and possible cerebral hemorrhage, and that he was in critical condition. Briggs' current promoter, Greg Cohen, later confirmed that such was not the case, although the injuries his fighter did sustain – fractures under both eyes, a broken nose and a torn left bicep and tendon – should be extensive enough for everyone, even the nearly-39-year-old Briggs, to concede that it's time for him to step away from a brutal business that has not always treated him kindly. Then again, Briggs has deserved at least a few of the verbal shots that stung him nearly as much as the punches he absorbed in 57 bouts over 18 years as a pro.

For 14½ years now, it has been Briggs' burden to have injury routinely added to insult.

To hear some tell it, Shannon Briggs, from the same blighted Brownsville section of Brooklyn, N.Y., that spawned Mike Tyson and Riddick Bowe, is a lot of things that aren't praiseworthy: unmotivated, frequently ill-conditioned, a head case and, the worst thing any fighter can be accused of, a quitter.

To others, Briggs' more deserved legacy is that of a talented fighter whose physical gifts were muted by a chronic condition, asthma, that flared up at inopportune moments and robbed him of the opportunity to fulfill his vast potential.

Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between. But in refusing to yield to Klitschko's obvious superiority, and to accept a frightening pounding that turned the bones in his face into a splintered jigsaw puzzle, the excuse-making coward perceived by so many at least served notice that the more positive sort of reviews he occasionally has received at least counterbalance the negative, and maybe more so.

The trashing of Briggs' reputation began in earnest the night of March 16, 1996, in Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall during an HBO-televvised tripleheader that was billed as "Night of the Young Heavyweights, featuring several highly regarded prospects – Briggs, David Tua, John Ruiz and

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Courage Tshabalala.

Briggs, with his loquacious manner and bleached-blond dreadlocks piled high on his head, was widely regarded as the best of the bunch, or at least the most marketable. He brought a 25-0 record, with 20 victories inside the distance, into what most figured would be a quick and easy night against journeyman Darroll Wilson.

But while Tua spectacularly starched Ruiz after an elapsed time of only 19 seconds, and Tshabalala also took out Paul Lockett inside of one round, Briggs – a 20-1 favorite – was a TKO victim of Wilson in three rounds, in what could only be described as a shocker.

“Everything was Shannon, Shannon, Shannon, Wilson said afterward. “It was like he was the only guy anyone was interested in. They were making him out to be the next Muhammad Ali or Rocky Marciano or whatever. The rest of us were, like, just there. I think the feeling more or less was that I was another warm body for Shannon to knock out.

Even great fighters occasionally lose fights they aren’t expected to lose, but Briggs’ defeat took an even more embarrassing turn when his trainer, Teddy Atlas, promptly resigned as his chief second. A furious Atlas claimed that Briggs conveniently cited his asthma as the sole reason he had been cuffed around by Wilson.

“I think it’s insulting to the guy that beat him for Briggs to claim he had asthma, Atlas said. “He was fine up to the time he went into the ring. I went to the hospital when he was getting stitched up and for four hours he never coughed or wheezed.

For years, Atlas, later afforded a high-visibility soapbox as the analyst for ESPN’s “Friday Night Fights” telecasts, would take potshots at Briggs’ heart, or lack thereof. Consider his prefight analysis of why George Foreman decided on Briggs as his opponent instead of Hasim Rahman for a Nov. 22, 1997, 12-rounder, also in Boardwalk Hall.

“Briggs always had ability, Atlas said. “I spent four years with him giving him a base, a technical base, to use that ability. He has hand speed, he has good size, he can move around a little. But the maturity, the in-ring character ... that’s something that comes from within. A trainer can’t give that.

“Maybe (Foreman) saw something in Briggs’ style, or maybe Briggs himself, that convinced him to go in that direction. I’m guessing that George believes Briggs can’t handle the pressure of the moment, that Briggs maybe is devoid of certain attributes, character-wise.

In what should have been the crowning point of his boxing life, Briggs won the linear heavyweight title from Foreman, who would turn 49 in less than two months, on a majority decision. Two inexperienced judges, Larry Layton and Calvin Claxton (and when was the last time you heard from either of them?) submitted cards favoring Briggs by margins of 117-113 and 116-112, respectively, with veteran Steve Weisfeld seeing the fight as a 114-114 standoff. But HBO’s ringside commentators were outraged and claimed that Foreman should have won easily, a talking point that seemingly was buttressed by punch statistics furnished by

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CompuBox: Foreman landed 284 of 488 (58 percent) to 223 of 494 (45 percent) for Briggs.

It proved to be the last ring appearance by Foreman, who bade his farewell with an admonishment that time stands still for no man, not even a legend.

"I stood there tonight in the last round and the guy started throwing shots at me, I started throwing shots at him, Big George said. "I was thinking, 'This could go on for the rest of my life,' me chasing young guys. It's time for young guys to chase young guys.

Briggs then was 25, with youth on his side and some grand destiny to chase, yet he was vilified for being the recipient of not only a perhaps undeserved decision, but one that served to forever chase the beloved Foreman from the sport.

For much of what has followed that watershed meeting with Foreman, Briggs remained an enigma, alternating moments of high drama with those of low humor. How could someone with so much ability lose to Sedreck Fields, which he did on April 27, 2000? Then again, how could someone who no chin and no gumption nearly stun the great Lennox Lewis? Lewis stopped Briggs, a 12-1 underdog, in five rounds on March 28, 1998, but only after he was twice wobbled himself in the opening stanza.

Briggs' more positive attributes were such that a dizzying succession of trainers, promoters and managers took chances on him in the hope he would finally put it all together. But some left muttering as had Atlas, questioning the mental toughness and resolve of a remarkable physical specimen who was as apt to show up overweight and underprepared as he was to kick ass.

After Briggs battled Francois Botha to a draw on Aug. 7, 1999, at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, a fight many believed the South African deserved to win, Briggs' then-trainer Emanuel Steward joined Atlas in throwing Briggs under the bus.

"Shannon got hit with right hand after right hand after right hand, Steward complained. "It showed he has a good chin, he has heart. But that doesn't do anyone any good.

"He has so much talent that he doesn't even use. He let Botha dictate the fight. He didn't counterpunch, didn't jump back, didn't box. And he hesitated. He would get there and stop. He would get in front of Botha and wait. He let Botha punch first. He was getting hit with the same thing over and over again.

Briggs' final moment of semi-glory probably came on Nov. 4, 2006, in Phoenix. Coming in at 268 pounds, 41 more than he had for Foreman, he was as immobile as a statue most of the night against WBO champion Sergei Liakhovich and was on his way to a one-sided points defeat when he unleashed a series of power punches in the 12th round which so discombobulated the native of Belarus that he couldn't survive to the final bell. Briggs had won an alphabet title and another bit of relevance.

It wasn't to last. So pleased with himself was Briggs to again be a champion that he ate his way up to a career-high 273 pounds for the first and only defense of his newly won WBO belt, which

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he surrendered on a unanimous decision to Sultan Ibragimov on June 2, 2007, in Madison Square Garden. It seemingly was the last gasp of a fighter whose long journey of peaks and valleys had bottomed out. Hadn't it?

But the heavyweight division in the 11th year of the 21st century is do bereft of legitimate contenders that a recycled Briggs, who at least brought some name recognition to the table, could be offered up as a viable option for Vitali Klitschko, whose previous opponent, after all, had been Albert Sosnowski. So the mismatch went off as scheduled, with a crowd of 14,500 Klitschko-loving fans on hand to witness the ritualistic execution.

Perhaps the elder of the Klitschko brothers, himself something of a relic at 39, can be faulted for not quickly and efficiently whacking out the fraying remnants of Briggs (51-6-1, 45 KOs), as Vitali (41-2, 38 KOs) had done in the past to so many other, and probably better, fighters. Maybe Klitschko's blows do not pack the sort of blunt-force trauma they once did. Hey, it happens.

Or maybe Briggs, the alibi-prone asthmatic, had determined that if this was to be his valedictory, as he had obliged Foreman to deliver so many years earlier, he would leave the doubters and the skeptics no reason to again question his valor. Even as his trainers du jour, Eddie Mustafa Muhammad and Herman Caicedo, knew Briggs' chances of reprising the last-moment miracle against Liakhovich were virtually nil, the fighter growled that he would "kill them if they surrendered on his behalf.

So take that, Teddy Atlas and anyone else who figured Shannon Briggs was a gutless wonder with big muscles, big hair and big talk that he too frequently didn't back up. In a crushing defeat, perhaps more than ever, Shannon Briggs revealed himself to be a real fighter.

Oscar De La Hoya, whose grit and determination also were questioned at times, but for different reasons – he was too handsome to be a fighter, the naysayers claimed, and thus declined to engage in the sort of wars that might have left him with Carmen Basilio's face – can empathize. He cringes whenever he hears someone suggest that a fighter, be it champ or chump, is lacking in courage.

"Very few people really understand what it means to be a fighter, De La Hoya said. "I hate it when I hear someone say, 'That fighter doesn't have guts.' It really ticks me off.

"I don't care if you're a world champion six times over or a four-round fighter who just got knocked out in 30 seconds of your first professional fight; to step inside that ring, you have to have guts.