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Shannon Briggs Says Nyet

By Carlo Rotella

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“The Russian domination of the heavyweight title is finis, over and done,” Shannon Briggs declared in an open letter last fall. Briggs, who referred to himself as “the Black Hope, the American Hope,” had recently won the World Boxing Organization’s championship belt by knocking Sergei Liakhovich entirely out of the ring in the closing seconds of the bout. Now Briggs was calling out the champions recognized by the other three major sanctioning bodies: Wladimir Klitschko, a Ukrainian, and Oleg Maskaev and Nikolay Valuev, both Russians. “I am made in Brooklyn, U.S.A.,” he announced, “and I am definitely in the heavyweight-title house.”

In his next fight, Briggs will defend his belt in Atlantic City on June 2 against Sultan Ibragimov, a southpaw from Dagestan, in the northern Caucasus. As Briggs says, “It does seem like Shannon versus the Russians, doesn’t it?”

Tradition holds that the heavyweight boxing champion is the baddest man on the planet. For most of the 20th century, that man was an American. From 1937 on, he was usually an African-American. The honor roll includes Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Larry Holmes and Mike Tyson. Even though rival organizations have turned one title into several, and even though boxers in the lower weight classes are almost always more skillful than the big guys, ruling the heavyweights has been a special point of pride for Americans in general and African-Americans in particular.

But in 2006, for the first time, the world's baddest man was in effect an Eastern European, a composite of the four principal titleholders. Briggs reclaimed one share last November by beating Liakhovich, a Belarussian based in Arizona, but American heavyweight primacy had clearly slipped away. It went first to Lennox Lewis, born in London to Jamaican parents, and when Lewis retired in 2004, it passed to the rising cohort from the former Soviet Union known as the Russians (even though they're not all Russian and Maskaev is, in fact, a naturalized American citizen).

The eclipse of the American heavyweight echoes the recent string of American failures in international basketball and baseball competitions and the continuing influx of athletes from around the world into these and other sports here at home. Formerly American-ruled games seem to be becoming like hockey and soccer, in which the U.S. is just one competitor among many, no more fearsome than Sweden or Spain. Jingoistic fans should worry that soon the only sport that homegrown Americans can count on dominating will be football, which almost nobody else plays. And those who believe that certain aspects of sport qualify as Black Things — like basketball or the heavyweight title — might even suspect a conspiracy.

Briggs played on these anxieties when he called himself the Black Hope, the American Hope. Joe Louis became such a contradictory hero, simultaneously representing African-Americans and a nation that did not treat them as equal citizens, when he fought his rematch with the German champion Max Schmeling. That was in 1938, during the buildup to World War II. How did we get to the point where we need a Black Hope now?

"I think we're a little spoiled," Hasim Rahman said last August. "We make too much money too quick. We lose sight of the grand prize." Rahman, who preceded Briggs as America's heavyweight Black Hope, had just surrendered his belt to Maskaev, who completed the Eastern European sweep of the four titles. The new champion, for his part, said: "This is a message to everyone:

European fighters are tough." Or, as Vyacheslav Trunov, Maskaev's former manager, once put it: "We fight like it's Stalingrad in 1942. We never surrender, and take no prisoners."

You hear this kind of talk these days in the fight world and beyond. It's not really just about boxing; it's about what used to be called national character. Eastern Europeans, the story goes, are tougher than Americans, who, spoiled by money and comfort, have gone soft in their gated community of a nation. The former Soviet bloc, by contrast, is like a vast gray housing project, stretching from the Balkans to the Bering Strait, from which issue streams of do-or-die strivers: fighters, basketball players, musicians, dancers, writers, hustlers, beauties, entrepreneurs and gangsters, all flowing toward the big money in the decadent West. Both halves of this story, the American decline and the rise of the Russians, are more mythic parable than serious analysis, but they're widely repeated and accepted, even by American boxers.

Larry Holmes, for instance, calls the post-Soviet heavies "ordinary fighters" but rates them well ahead of their American counterparts. Our guys, he says, exhibit "no dedication, no sacrifice. They want to party, be a star, play all that in limousines. That's not only in boxing, but in other sports, in society, and that's what's happening to young athletes — to fighters, too."

Like most Jeremiahs, Holmes makes a moral crisis out of a structural problem. Football, basketball and baseball (which has also become a big man's game) snap up the quick, strong, determined 200-plus-pounders in this country. The decline of boxing into a niche sport during the latter part of the 20th century coincided with the growing hegemony of the major team sports, with their high-profile professional leagues and school-based amateur networks. A big kid who likes to bang is likely to be shunted into peewee football, and from there he can work his way up through the sport's well-regulated layers without ever coming near a boxing gym.

Meanwhile, the American boxing network has continued to shrink since its heyday in the first half of the last century, when no prize in sports rivaled the heavyweight title. Industrial society honored men who were good with their hands, and almost every working-class neighborhood had at least one gym. But in postindustrial America, a would-be boxer has to go well out of his way to find one of the few remaining gyms. The underfinanced national amateur system regularly comes up short in international competitions and produces few prospects who live up to their signing bonuses.

Boxing offers a path of greater resistance for American big men. (It's different in the lower weight classes, where participants have fewer opportunities in team sports and where there are still some dominant American champions.) Only a handful of boxers make the kind of money that thousands of professional ballplayers do. Why get beat up for nothing?

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, there's no football to claim the hard-nosed big guys, no baseball, less basketball, a lot less money and a superior institutional apparatus for turning big men into competent boxers.

The Soviets and their client states strove to excel in boxing, as they did in gymnastics or swimming, exploiting enthusiasm for physical culture to propagandize the virtues of Homo Sovieticus. They set up extensive state-sponsored networks of gyms, combing the schools for promising kids and patiently teaching them balance, footwork and other fundamentals. "The athletes do what they're told," says Eric Bottjer, a veteran matchmaker. "They go to the gym like other people go to work. Americans don't always do that."

The fall of the U.S.S.R. allowed Eastern European amateurs to take the professional opportunities that opened for them in the West. German promoters and managers set up a pipeline to connect the farm system in the East to the money in the West. "The Russians" are not particularly good or

tough when compared with heavyweights of other eras, but they're big, dutiful, schooled in the rudiments and around in large numbers, and that's enough to rule the division in the wake of the American collapse.

How did Shannon Briggs, at the age of 35, come to be the lone American standing in their way? Brooklyn, he says, and asthma.

He came up hard in Brownsville. His mother worked and sacrificed to put him through parochial schools, but she became a heroin addict, then got into crack. She was "in and out of institutions" until her death in 1996; his stepfather, Briggs says, "died in prison, but he made me who I am, in some ways. He was a tough guy. My first fight, he made me fight the kid." Briggs was often on his own, staying with relatives or friends, drifting, out on the street and in charge of himself. "I had a lot of fights. I was an only child, a hard-case kid, in a rough neighborhood. But I always fought my battles."

Philip-Lorca diCorcia

When he was 15, he found a copy of a boxing magazine in a Brooklyn subway station. He read it to tatters and went looking for a gym, where his chaotic life began to take on structure. Hopes were high for him when he turned pro in 1992.

Briggs's professional career, long and mostly victorious though it has been (48-4, with one draw), has not quite borne out his youthful promise. He's a big hitter with very fast hands, and a deceptively clever tactician, but he has a

reputation for wavering in his commitment to training and winning. He acknowledged his critics in his open letter challenging the other champions: “Underachiever. Asthmatic. Excuse-maker and fistic faker. My opponents and some other haters have called me all of those things.”

Asthma has dogged him all his life. “I missed a lot of school,” he says. “I was always sick. I was in the hospital a lot. Asthma kicked my butt.” But if it wasn’t for asthma, he might not be a boxer at all. How did a strapping specimen like him escape being recruited for football? “I couldn’t play, nothing aerobic. Nobody picked me.”

So he was “saved,” as he puts it, to become “the first asthmatic heavyweight champion.” He has learned to control his condition with diet, training and medication. When I went to see him in January at his house in a gated community outside Fort Lauderdale, he said, “They say I’m taking steroids,” acknowledging another common accusation. “Let me show you something.” He got up from his living-room couch and went to a cabinet in the kitchen, returning with an armful of meds, which he dumped on the wooden chest that serves as a coffee table. “Singulair. Advair. Servent. Albuterol.” He had pills, inhalers, nebulizers, even Zaditor drops for itchy eyes. “Somebody told me these eyedrops can help, so I got some. You want to talk about steroids? I’m taking steroids” — by which he meant the kind not banned by boxing commissions. “If you want to become heavyweight champion of the world and you got asthma, you’ll do whatever it takes. You’ll go to Africa and” — he described an unnatural act with an improbable cow — “if it would help. All these pills, I can’t sleep, too hyped up. And depression, and you get hungry, eat too much.”

On fight night, the tension, adrenaline and anxiety about having an asthma attack often bring on a crisis. The resulting chronic shortness of wind, made worse by spotty training, has shaped his fighting style. He comes out bombing, looking to overwhelm his opponent early. “My mother said, ‘You

gotta knock him out first, 'cause you gonna get tired,' and that's been my motto since Day 1." By the third or fourth round, he slows down and picks his spots, sometimes visibly laboring to fill his lungs. An opponent can win rounds by simply outworking him but still has to guard against the ever-present threat of a sudden knockout — as Liakhovich, who was ahead on points in the final round when Briggs launched him through the ropes and left him swooning on the ringside scorer's table, can attest.

Briggs, who stands 6-foot-4 and weighs up to 270 pounds for a fight, has become addicted to his own power. He admits that he breathes more easily and moves better when he weighs 255 pounds, but he says, "I'm breaking bones in the ring at 270." Carrying the extra bulk makes him look and feel more potent, but combined with his asthma, it also makes him more beatable, which helps explain why Liakhovich's handlers let their man risk his title against him. Briggs can thank asthma for that too.

"I haven't been the fighter I could have been," Briggs admits. "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."

It was late. The lights were dim in Briggs's living room. He sat on the couch, an open laptop in front of him on the wooden chest. His asthma meds were still in a heap next to the laptop, where he dumped them earlier.

At this reflective hour, he talked of retiring. "It'll soon be time for me to find happiness in my life, but I need to be financially stable enough to walk away from the game." He's "allergic to broke," he said, and he has a family (two kids), a mortgage. Defending his title will bring paydays, and he's under pressure too to carry the standard of the Black Hope.

“Oh, I definitely feel it,” he said. “I’m the only guy with the punch and skill level.” During our conversations he sometimes dismissed his Black Hope talk as “marketing,” but at other times, like this one, he took seriously the notion of reclaiming an honor that belonged by rights to the line of Louis and Ali.

He wasn’t the only one thinking about tribal honor. On his laptop, he took me on a tour of intemperate online boxing talk. I could practically hear Avar folk tunes swelling in the background when I read one post predicting that Sultan Ibragimov will be “way, way too tough for Briggs. . . . The kids from the Caucasus mountains grow up playing with guns, seeing their friends and family members murdered over minor insults. These kids are tough, mean, natural fighters. . . . So called ‘tough guys’ from underprivileged American backgrounds — the so-called ‘inner city ghettos’ — are like helpless babies compared to the people of the Caucasus. . . . You can see it in the glint of the eye in these Caucasians. It’s scary, and it’s the reason why boxing dominance is leaving the U.S.A. for the East.”

Briggs said, “I don’t get caught up in the race thing,” but he told me more than once that promoters and cable networks favor the Russian heavies because they’re white. He also enjoyed retelling the story of how he’d spread the false rumor that Liakhovich, known as the White Wolf, had used a racial slur. Briggs had been playing a prefight head game, trying to put his opponent on the defensive. At their postfight press conference, Liakhovich, plainly upset and still dazed, earnestly assured Briggs that he had never called him any such thing. “I smiled,” Briggs said, “and I said: ‘I know. I made it up.’ He was, like, ‘Whuuuh?’ ”

Briggs doubted a similar move would work on Ibragimov. “This guy I’m fighting now, he’s more of a hard guy, or a wannabe. But I don’t care. I don’t care about that Russian mafia. Talk about, he’s had street fights, in Russia. Me, too. Bring it.” But a certain caution moved within Briggs’s bluster. He

sensed that he couldn't work Ibragimov, a fair-haired Muslim from a far-distant mountain land, like a regular white guy. The cultural reflexes, the leverage, felt different.

The next afternoon, I visited Ibragimov during a training session at his gym, Seminole Warriors, in Hollywood, Fla., only a few miles away from Briggs's house. At 6-foot-2 and 225 pounds, he's a small heavyweight by today's standards. His unpumped, uncut body has an old-school smoothness. Ibragimov is undefeated at the age of 32, but he has had only 21 pro fights, none of them against anybody particularly good.

His manager, Boris Grinberg, who in his tropical shirt and shorts resembled Ernest Borgnine on vacation, said: "All his tribe, his people, from the mountains near Chechnya. He real Caucasian." Dagestan is known for its freestyle wrestlers, but Ibragimov found his way to a government-run boxing gym at 17 when he moved to Rostov. "Sultan has good pedigree," Grinberg said. "He's from basic Soviet school, but he's more like American fighter, or black fighter with white skin. So fast, so powerful, always attack." Ibragimov closes with an opponent rather than standing back at arm's length in the traditional Eastern European defensive style. "Russian fighters take distance, stand up," said Ibragimov, who's taking lessons to improve his English. "American fighters go to fight" — he mimed bobbing and crowding. "I like."

Ibragimov, who won a silver medal in the 2000 Olympics, moved to Florida in 2002. He showed up at the gym on his first day in America, having flown in late the previous night. "They want him to spar," Grinberg said. "First day. There was big black" — he used an expletive common in the fight world, reaching up toward the ceiling to indicate the man's impressive size — "and Sultan smaller, with white skin, not so muscles. But Sultan knock him out, in first round."

They had something similar in mind for Shannon Briggs. Ibragimov said: “All the heavyweights so tall now. I like fight tall guys. I aim for body, head, everything.”

The bout, originally scheduled for March but postponed to June 2 when Briggs came down with pneumonia complicated by his asthma, is shaping up as a good test for both fighters, whose strengths and weaknesses seem likely to mesh in volatile ways. The winner gets the belt and at least one more good payday; the loser falls back into the pack of contenders, where also-rans, used-to-bes and could-have-beens mix with up-and-comers.

The two men’s different paths to the ring, their converging histories, make for a good story, too. Narrative is crucial to boxing because the significance of any given bout, even a heavyweight title bout, is never built in. As opposed to the Super Bowl, which means just about the same no matter who plays in it, each fight has to be individually packaged for sale. What’s the story of Briggs-Ibragimov? Take your pick. The Black Hope versus the hard man from Dagestan; Brooklyn’s own versus rising immigrant; old head versus young lion; Shannon versus the Russians, asthma and the decline of the American heavyweight.

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