

Shannon “The Cannon” Ritch

The Iron Man of MMA

If you're an MMA fan and haven't heard of Shannon “The Cannon” Ritch, you might want to get out of the house more. Recently featured in ESPN Magazine, and having fought for just about every show in the sport, he is a true modern-day gladiator.

In a sport where most fighters are part-timers who work during the day and train at night, Shannon Ritch has managed to earn a living for nearly two decades as a full-time gladiator. But in true gladiator fashion, he has done it with a sheer force of will, fighting sometimes two or three times in a night, much less a month, and virtually never turning down an opponent regardless of size. That is one of the reasons he is nearing an “official” fight count of 110 matches. But his true number of matches, according to Ritch himself, is well over double that. Day in and day out for nearly 20 years “The Cannon” has pulled on the MMA gloves, climbed into cages, rings, and barroom floors in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia and fought a string of opponents that included many with names he couldn't even pronounce, much less speak to. The question of “how” he does it, however, it is not nearly as important as “why” he does it.

Lets Get It On

Ritch's fight record paints a picture of a man who literally ducks no one. He'll take just about any match he's offered, whether it's in a village in Brazil, a bullring in Mexico, or a clearing in a Thailand jungle. From the pristine white ring at Pride 11 in Osaka, Japan, where he fought Sakuraba in the main event before thousands of live Japanese fans and millions more on television, to the heart of Moscow, where he won a Russian cagefighting belt, “The Cannon” just keeps on firing. He has taken pit fights for cash where the ring was formed by the headlights of parked cars driven by men with gold teeth in



their mouth, guns in their waistbands, and cash in their hands.

“There was one event,” Ritch recalls, “in a broken down bullring just south of the border. I had to wait until the chickens fought, then the dogs, and then I got to fight. The safest part of the night was the actual fight, even though you didn't know if the guy you fought would outweigh you by 40 or 50 pounds. But that was the least of my worries. In a case like that you're more concerned about whether they'll shoot you if you win just to avoid paying your salary.” Then amazingly enough, Ritch laughs. “But I

had a good time and I got most of my money. So I went back the next weekend and did it again.”

In a sport now filled with prima donnas who'll refuse to fight if their opponents outweigh them by two or three pounds, Ritch is a promoter's dream: easy to deal with, not particular about who he fights, unconcerned about his opponent's record, and willing to take a match on a moment's notice.

“A fighter fights,” Ritch shrugs. “I've had promoters call me up two days before an event from a different continent telling me that they just lost their main event and needed someone to fill in otherwise they'd lose their lose everything. Most of the time I'll just say yes without even knowing who the opponent would be. I might even negotiate for more money if the guy is a lot bigger than me or has a great record, but unless I'm injured I'm ready to go.”

In one case, as Ritch recalls, he was called on a Wednesday from Holland, got onto a plane on Thursday, and got into the country just hours before he fought, only to find out his opponent was Cacareco, a top Brazilian fighter who outweighed him by 40 pounds. “Cacareco was a knotted mass of muscle and I knew I was in trouble. So I came out hard and tried to knock him out early. I think I just made him mad,” Ritch laughs. “I got in one good punch before he took me down and pounded me from the mount and then keylocked me. But hey, the show happened, the promoter was happy and the fans were happy. No hard feeling towards Cacareco, either. I even offered to buy him a drink later.”



THE CANNON

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Shannon “The Cannon” Ritch

Fists of Fury, Heart of Gold

When he's in the ring he's all business, but outside it Ritch is always making sure that everyone around him is taken care of. Despite being a central figure in an admittedly violent sport, there is a warmth about Ritch that you'll never know until you actually meet him. He might not be the best fighter in MMA but he could be the most decent. He's the first guy to offer his hand to help another fighter. He frequently inquires about the other fighters, even his opponents. "Is he alright?" he'll ask. "Did he get to the hotel alright? Are the promoters looking after him?" And it's not just a smoke screen, Shannon genuinely cares. He loves every part of this sport and he does everything in his power to promote it and the fighters that participate.

"There's a lot more fighters now than there used to be," says Ritch, "and a lot more jealousy now with people hating on each other in person and on the Internet. But back when I started fighting MMA 20 years ago, you'd see the same guys fighting in different events over and over again. You had to take care of each other because nobody else would. We'd share rides to the airport, pile into hotel rooms, and take each other to the doc to get stitched up. We were opponents inside the cage but brothers outside it. I guess that is one reason I still like fighting in the regional shows. People look out for each other and you still get a feeling for what the sport truly means."

A True Warrior

Ritch, fight record aside and all his ups and downs ignored, is a true "fighter" in every sense of the word. A lot of competitors string

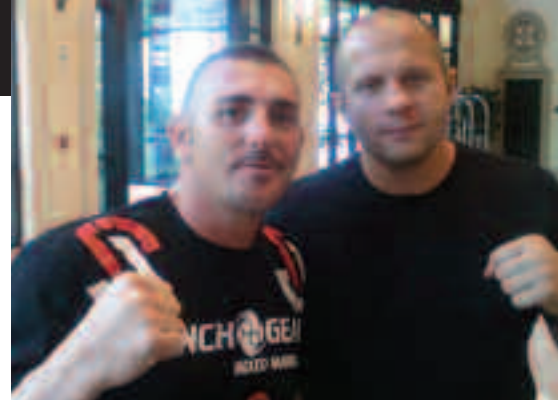
together some wins, then drop a few fights and leave the sport never to be heard of again. But Ritch is not that guy. He might win three or four fights in a row and then drop three or four after that. But he continues to fight. There is simply no quit in him.

"It's just a fight," says Ritch. "You have to put your ego aside, not suffer future pain, and live in the moment. You can't change the past and the future will take care of itself. You do the best you're capable of, learn from the experience, and then move on. Regardless of the outcome, it's way better than having a real job."

Coming from the mouth of a man who's fought names like Dan Severn, Frank Shamrock, Sakuraba, Yuki Kondo, Jose Landis-Johns, Cacareco, Chris Brennan, Fabiano Iha, Evan Tanner, Diego Sanchez, Benji Radach and countless others, his words seem understated, almost inappropriate, as if he should give himself more credit for the countless years spend in the cage. But when you have a warrior's mentality, fighting just seems to be something that you do, not something that you have to think about.

Ritch doesn't just fight in cages and rings, however, he has worked as a bodyguard and security consultant in some of the most dangerous places on the planet. Just a few years ago, he explains how he worked for Blackwater in Iraq, tasked to keep the U.S. ambassador out of harm's way.

"It's different being there in person rather than just watching it on the news," he says with a distant look in his eyes. "You can't see the snipers but you can hear them when the rounds come in. So you're always looking around for threats. You can never relax or take a breather.



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People will run up to you, most of the time just trying to sell you CDs or DVDs, but you don’t know for sure. You only have two or three seconds to decide whether or not to fire on them. It can mess with your head.”

On one occasion in Baghdad, he was the object of a kidnapping attempt. Realizing that he was in danger of ending up on grainy television station footage while masked men stood behind him spouting anti-West rhetoric, he acted quickly as the pickup full of armed men approached at high speed. “You don’t think at a time like that, you just act. There were Iraqi civilians all around, so I didn’t want to fire high. So I started shooting in front of them before they had a chance to open up with their AK-47s.” When asked how many of the kidnappers were hit Ritch responds, “I have no idea. But I did enough to change their plans for the evening and they drove off.” In everything he does Ritch seems to find a way to survive.

MMA’s Most Active Fighter

Having started his fighting career in Arizona nearly 20 years ago, he remains the most active fighter in MMA. But for all his wins and losses, Ritch manages to keep an even mental keel and not be affected greatly by either outcome.

“Do I have regrets?” he asks, repeating my question. “Not really. I don’t dwell on the past but I do look back. I know I would have a lot better record if I had chosen my opponents carefully and trained for months for each of them like they do today. If I had done that I probably would have won twice as much as I have lost. But then I’d only have 30 or 40 fights in my career instead of over 200 and I wouldn’t have been able to fight full-time and I wouldn’t have seen the world and met so many people and made so many friends.”

“MMA is a lifestyle choice for me,” Ritch continues, “and a way of living that goes far beyond a simple win-loss record. By fighting less I would have won a lot more but I would have experienced a lot less. Life would have passed me by. In many of my fights I didn’t even know who my opponent was until the night of the event. And I was fighting five or ten times a month, not per year. So you do what you can do. Now since people know me I get a lot more money to fight than I used to. I’ve had articles done on me in major magazines like ESPN and I’ve done TV shows and movies parts and there has been some genuine interest in Hollywood about doing a “Rudy” type movie on my life. Its gratifying to get credit for all my years of supporting the sport but it doesn’t change who I am.”

If you ask what his greatest experience was he answers without hesitation: “Without a doubt it was fighting Sakuraba in the Pride

main event in Osaka Castle Hall in Japan. I was the headliner on a card that included Heath Herring, Tom Erikson, Wanderlie Silva, Gilbert Yvel, Gary Goodridge, Akira Shoji, and Igor Vovchanchyn. The production was amazing, the fans were incredible, and the entire experience was unforgettable. Who has a chance to do something like that?”

Life in the Cage

Ritch has trained in virtually all of the different styles that make up the MMA spectrum. “Back when everyone was just training in one style,” says Jeff Paulson, his coach and close friend, “Shannon was already cross-training. Shannon can box, kickbox, grapple, and do submissions. He’s an expert in muay Thai kickboxing and holds a black belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. The truth is that he’s dangerous from any position and any range. Now if I could just get him to fight less you’d see his record improve, but that’s just not Shannon.”

In typical fashion, Ritch himself seems less worried about his own reputation and more concerned that those around him get their proper due. “I’ve been blessed over the years to have great friends and sponsors,” he says. “These include POF USA, Gary Beer at Swisher Air Conditioning, Affliction Clothing, Eruption Clothing, Planet Beach Tanning, Kikskin Clothing, Tapout Clothing and Seige MMA. Those guys enable me to do what I do.”

When asked if there is one goal that he would still like to accomplish, Ritch shrugs. “I’ve fought in some of the greatest MMA shows in the world including KOTC, Pride, EC, StrikeFC, GC, ROTR, WEC, SF 2H2H, and many more, but I’ve never been in the UFC. But I still have time. I’ve only been fighting for 20 years. I have another good 10 years or so left.”

If it was anyone else saying that most people would just be tempted to laugh. But with Shannon “The Cannon” Ritch you just never know. With two hundred fights behind him and maybe another 100 in front of him, there is no telling where he’ll end up. But you can be sure wherever and whatever it is, whether in MMA or out, he’ll be giving it his all and doing his best with no regrets. **G**

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