

Out of Jim Riva's satiric, comic novel *The Champion of Reason* comes a section in which the Champ crashes a basketball banquet and rips into the statement "Anything is possible" while focusing on the limitations imposed by the laws of science.



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A few days after he appeared at the production of *Hamlet*, the Champion of Reason made another appearance, this time at the Addleton Central High gymnasium, where Evan Osbourne was the guest speaker at the annual basketball banquet.

Evan Osbourne's basketball records would probably never be broken at Addleton Central High, even though he hadn't really gone to Addleton Central High. Or *had* he? Addleton Central High was rebuilt from many of the same bricks and beams that once comprised Central Addleton High. BVCC's distinguished professor of philosophy, Gilbert Karras, was asked to settle the matter about whether Addleton Central High was the same school as Central Addleton High – a matter that Evan Osbourne had special interest in because he didn't want the inscriptions of his achievements to be sent to the trophy cases of Limbo. Professor Karras tried to settle the matter by familiarizing himself with Locke's and Hume's thoughts on identity, and he finally rendered his verdict that Addleton Central High was a continuation of Central Addleton High,

mainly because Evan Osbourne threatened to beat the shit out of him if he didn't.

Evan Osbourne stood six-foot eight inches tall and weighed 230 pounds. Although I was bigger than him in physical stature, I was a midget compared to him in eminence and esteem. People never looked up to me in any other way than they do when they say things like, "How's the weather up there?" Nobody ever asked me for *my* autograph, and why should they? I became a freelance photographer; Evan Osbourne became a power forward in the NBA.

In a survey among Addleton high-schoolers, Evan Osbourne overwhelmingly topped the list of the people they admired most. But they never saw him as he really was – a man who beat his wife, cheated at cards, and sometimes (with friends) lit his farts. They only saw the All-American image he projected and carefully cultivated.

Evan Osbourne was treated like a god and consequently came to think of himself as one. When he swaggered around Addleton, and swagger he did, people took notice of his existence in a deified sort of way, even though he made a point of saying to autograph-seekers, "I'm made of flesh and blood just like you are."

Evan's records at Addleton Central High included single-game and regular-season records for scoring, rebounds, blocked shots, and field goal percentage. Most of the records he broke, incidentally, were mine. I wasn't very good at basketball, but I didn't have to be. As a senior at Central Addleton High, I had already reached my present height of six-foot-eleven and three-quarter inches. All I had to do was hang around under the basket and catch high lobbs from my teammates. Although I earned the nickname 'Butterfingers', a nickname that has stuck with me to this day, I caught enough of the high lobbs to usually score in double figures.

I can't remember ever taking a shot from more than two feet away from the basket. Opposing players tried to take advantage of my terrible outside-shooting ability by fouling me in the act of shooting in order to send me to the free throw line. Perhaps my greatest value to the team was getting opposing players fouled out. One game, in which I went 9 for 47 from the free throw line, I succeeded in fouling out eight of the opposing

twelve players, and we won by forfeit. (My record of 47 free throw attempts in a single game, by the way, is one record that Evan Osbourne *didn't* break.)

After his illustrious high-school career, Evan went to Oklahoma State University, where he majored in Physical Education. After his junior year, he was drafted by the Chicago Bulls. He was only a reserve player for the Bulls, but that didn't matter. No one from Addleton had ever gotten that far. His picture seemed to always be in the *Addleton Times* for doing this or that, and he had a massive scrapbook of articles about himself that were his favorite reading. He used his local popularity to launch several business ventures, including his own line of sportswear. Evan Osbourne Jock Straps were big sellers.

On this particular evening, Evan was back in the same gymnasium (or was it?) that he had broken my records in. Chairs were set up on the playing floor to accommodate the freshmen, sophomore, junior varsity, and varsity cagers, and anybody and everybody associated with the basketball program. He was standing at the podium, delivering an inspirational speech that was identical to every inspirational speech he delivered, including the jokes and the parts that began with "I am reminded of". He had just finished telling the youngsters that he was living proof that they could do anything they wanted if they put their minds to it when a strange voice came from behind the audience: "That is a false statement!"

Heads turned. Near the door of the visiting team's locker room stood the Champion of Reason.

"There are limits to your capabilities, just as there are limits to your abilities. Your abilities are what you can do now. Your capabilities are what you *could* do in the future. Consider jumping."

Evan looked at the athletic director in bewilderment. The athletic director shrugged his shoulders.

"How high you are able to jump depends on the physical makeup of your leg muscles. Some of you are able to jump higher than others. That's because the physical makeup of your leg muscles is different. But none of you have reached your potential for jumping. If you trained very hard

under the direction of kinesiologists and biomechanicians, you could significantly improve the relevant leg muscles and thereby significantly improve your jumping ability. If you cheated by taking steroids, you could jump higher still. But there's a limit. It's difficult to know exactly what the limit is, but there *is* a limit. It's safe to say that none of you are capable of breaking the world record for the high jump, no matter how hard you trained, no matter how many performance-enhancing drugs you took, no matter how much you put your mind to it."

"Who asked *you*?" said Evan.

"The adage 'mind over matter' is nonsense. Your mind is nothing more than a manifestation of your brain, which, like the rest of you, is composed entirely of matter. Mind power is brain power. It's true that people sometimes perform seemingly superhuman feats in moments of crises, but that is because extreme excitation in the hypothalamus intensely stimulates the cortex and the medulla to superabundantly release adrenaline to the muscles. The chemicals are simply part of the physics of the situation. That's what it all boils down to: physics."

"What's your problem, fella?" said Evan.

"You are nothing but a collection of atoms, all of which ultimately came from dying stars."

"I'm *talkin'* to you, wise guy," said Evan.

"You are not apart *from* the world, you are a part *of* the world."

The audience was turning back and forth from the Champion of Reason to Evan like they were watching a tennis match, and from their vantage point, it seemed to be advantage, Champion of Reason.

"Hey, I said I'm *talkin'* to you, wise guy."

"And, as such, you are subject to the laws of nature."

Never before had Evan been disregarded as if he were a nobody. His blood was boiling.

"I'm gonna count to three, and if you're still there, your ass is gonna be grass and I'm gonna be a lawn mower."

"You fall according ..."

"One."

"... to Galileo's Law of Falling Bodies."

“Two.”

“You crash in accordance with ...”

“Three.”

“... Newton’s Third Law of Motion.”

Evan walked around the dais with his fists clenched tight. Everyone expected to witness a case of matter over matter with as much one-sidedness as when a roof collapsed on Wes Hoffman, a fellow with alleged telekinetic powers – he had an assortment of bent silverware to prove it – and pinned him for several agonizing hours until he died of a brain hemorrhage.

The Champion of Reason stayed right where he was. When Evan came within twenty feet of him, he drew his sword. Evan stopped in his tracks. “If you dare come within the reach of my sword,” the Champion of Reason warned him, “I’ll cut you down to the size of a jockey, and then we’ll see how well you can do on a basketball court with your claim that you can do anything you want.”

There was no doubt in Evan’s mind that the Champion of Reason meant business. The sword put him at a disadvantage in the physics of the situation, and he knew it. The Champion of Reason slashed at the air with all his might to impress upon Evan the danger of the sword, and Evan saw quite clearly that his basketball career, if not his life, could very well come to an end with a single slash. Confident that Evan wasn’t going to risk being bisected, the Champion of Reason addressed the audience.

“Your values are screwed up if you idolize someone like Evan Osbourne. He is a very good basketball player, but he’s a bozo. It’s better to emulate someone who has mastered self-control and guides their life according to reason and moral principles based upon consideration of others. Such a person is existing at a much higher level than someone who hasn’t mastered anything more profound than the art of slam-dunking a basketball. If you place more emphasis on developing your jump shot than you do on developing your character, you are existing at a superficial level. Think about it.”

Evan looked awkward. He looked disconcerted. He looked human. He felt the celestial pedestal wobbling beneath him. “You’re damn lucky

you've got that sword," he said to the Champion of Reason.

"And you're damn *unlucky* you *haven't* got this sword," the Champion of Reason replied before addressing the general audience.

"All people are *not* created equal. The zygote with which you originated contained forty-six chromosomes in its nucleus, half from your mother, half from your father. Along the chromosomes, there were approximately 100,000 genes. Unless you are an identical twin, that genome was different from the genome of any other person who has ever lived."

Evan snuck a step forward as a child does when playing the game *Green Light, Red Light*, but the Champion of Reason saw him sneak the step and cocked his sword back threateningly, and Evan embarrassingly took the same step backward.

"And that unique genome, which is now in all of your cells except the nucleusless red blood cells, determined what you were and are capable and *incapable* of. Evan Osbourne was capable of becoming a professional basketball player. He was not, however, capable of becoming a world-rekknowned astrophysicist. He could no more have become a world-rekknowned astrophysicist than he could have become able to fly like a bird to the moon and back, for impossibility does not have degrees. I'm talking about intelligence, which is genetically based. Just as some of you are naturally better at sports than others, some of you are naturally more intelligent than others. But you're all intelligent enough to take your thinking to a higher level, and it's high time that you did because then you'd be getting somewhere.

"You're not playing the game of life hard. You're loafing. For you, the first quarter is almost over. Actually, it may be much later than that because the analogy breaks down with regard to time. In life, you can't stop the clock. Unlike in a game, you usually don't know when the end will come. Maybe if you *did* know, you'd stop being so superficial. You're so shallow it's sickening. You need to call a timeout and formulate a better game plan. You need to bench yourselves for a while and philosophize. You don't need to have scored high on your SAT to philosophize. Even Evan Osbourne can do it. And if he *did* do it, and if he followed up with a little research in biology, chemistry, and physics, then he wouldn't stand

before you and say something so trite and so untrue as that you can do anything you want. Instead, he might say something like this: You cannot become able to do what you are incapable of doing, and your capabilities are limited – and the limitations are different from person to person. Don't chase dreams that can't come true. On the other hand, don't sell yourselves short. People are often capable of doing much more than they think they can. Take stock of yourselves. Learn your limitations as well as your potential. Don't be fools. Be reasonable."

The Champion of Reason backed up to the locker-room door. "In case you're wondering," he said before throwing down a smoke bomb and vanishing behind blue smoke, "I'm the Champion of Reason."

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