

Remembering Evan Tanner

"The Half-Guarded Truth"

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Evan Tanner was the craziest person I ever saw in mixed martial arts. The sport is the kind that tends to attract a different crowd anyways, but even amongst a group of weirdos, Tanner was different.

For me, the seminal image of Tanner was after he defeated David Terrell for the UFC Middleweight Championship. One of Caesar Gracie's prized pupils, Terrell had come into the UFC with worlds of hype; after knocking out Matt Lindland in seconds, the hype looked to be reality. Tanner was expected to lose to Terrell. And early in the first round, as Terrell locked in a tight guillotine, it looked like that might just happen. Tanner could've panicked. He could've tried to slam Terrell, or burn excessive amounts of energy trying any manner of improper technique, but he didn't. Tanner remained calm. Eventually, it was Terrell who found himself tiring from the hold, letting the Texan break free and immediately begin pounding on his downed foe. A few moments later, it was all over. Evan Tanner was the UFC Middleweight Champion. I've always suspected it was Tanner's different world-view that allowed him to escape that submission: an unconventional man doesn't tap to a conventional hold.

However, don't remember Evan Tanner based on his winning a fight. I mean, he was a damn interesting competitor, claiming to learn submissions from Gracie DVDs and basically teaching himself to be an elite fighter. But, that's not who he was and how he'll be remembered. No, remember Tanner for how he looked immediately after that fight. He had this hair, oh how he had hair. It was partially in a pony tail and partially just flying all over the place. He was screaming and cheering. He was the most bad-ass version of Medusa you ever saw.

He was a wildman that found himself fighting in a sport kind of by accident. Where most MMA artist need to devote themselves for years in order to reach the big time, Tanner just kind of happened upon it. Not that he didn't train, but you see fighters like Georges St. Pierre, dedicating themselves to the craft 24-7, 365, dutifully studying everything they can. Evan Tanner wasn't that kind of guy. He'd go on drinking binges, posting rambling blogs that made him into a cult hero. He rode a motorcycle and his car was decades old. He probably would've preferred to surf than train. In a sport where Rashad Evans can produce some of the most memorable highlight reel knock outs you'll ever see yet still remain boring, Tanner was a character just by waking up in the morning.

You hear fighters bitch and moan about sponsorships and such, but how many do something about it? Tanner did. He started "Team Tanner," a deal where fight fans could sponsor him directly in return for memorabilia and such. You could essentially buy Evan Tanner. That's not a surprise, as Tanner was known for being generous. He tried to set up a home for wayward fighters. He was known to help causes simply because he thought they sounded like a good idea. He wasn't publicizing his good deeds, looking for praise from media and fans, he just wanted to help.

Reports say that Tanner hopped on his motorcycle and rode into the desert only for the bike to run out of gas. He'd recently noted that he wanted to go on a spiritual journey into the desert. If anyone is surprised to hear that Tanner wanted to isolate himself from the world by spending time alone in the desert, they've never heard a thing about Evan. That's a shame. His manager said that after he ran out of gas, he was walking back towards civilization when he passed. That's Evan Tanner: walking towards us, but not amongst us.

â€œThere he goes. One of God's own prototypes. Some kind of high powered mutant never even considered for mass production. Too weird to live, and too rare to die.â€• Hunter S. Thompson, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
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