



BY TR FOLEY / PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER





# SUNSHINE STATE

**Breakups, injuries, and a yearlong quarrel with Jon Jones have lead Rashad Evans to change training partners, managers, and zip codes. For the former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion, it may be the perfect solution for an imperfect attitude.**

By T.R. Foley / Photos by Paul Thatcher

**IT'S A WARM NIGHT IN BOCA RATON**, the daytime high was a single digit below 80 degrees, perfect weather for Rashad Evans to spend a few extra moments bullshitting with a small group of Brazilian teammates. Tonight was Muay Thai training at the Imperial Gym—Evans' new workout facility for the past year—and the former champ just spent two hours slapping shins with South America's most twisted bunch of tattooed and jovial expats. As Evans tries to pull away, they each wish him safe travel and give him thanks for the sessions of hard work.

None of tonight's workout partners were black, a suspicious and lopsided development for a team that Evans helped coin "Blackzillians"—an ode to the team's ethnic composition. The former champ's supporting cast of racially homogenous brethren are all out of town: Michael Johnson is in Missouri, Melvin Guillard is in Louisiana, and Anthony Johnson is possibly on the lam. According to Evans, that's fine, "The Brazilians are so passionate" he says, "they just get it—we have a good time training together."

Evans finally separates from the crowd, shaking hands and shoulder bumping until he reaches his silver Lexus SUV with New Mexico plates. He throws his coffin-sized workout bag in the truck, climbs in the front seat, and rolls down his window as he waits for the team's publicist to join the ride. Ready, he wiggles past several cars and exits the parking lot with a broad smile—a guy enjoying the type of February night that reminds you why people relocate to Florida, why life is extended and renewed on America's tropical peninsula.



## EVANS IS EIGHT WEEKS OUT

from his title fight, and he's tipping the scales at 220 pounds, which is leaner than he's been for any of his recent fights. His trim weight is due in large part to managed meals, so it's no surprise that when sitting down at Panera Bread—the type of place generally branded as healthy food—Evans sticks to water. The air-conditioning is set to “Arctic Circle,” but Evans seems content to continue his post-practice cooldown wearing a white V-neck T-shirt and cargo shorts.

Evans gets the cold. He's a native of upstate New York, wrestled Division I at Michigan State University and trained in Albuquerque and Denver for the past six years. In Florida, it's year-round sunshine, no need to worry about seasonal depression, lip balm, or skullcaps. It's a welcome change for Evans—the man is happy to wear a tee shirt in February.

Warming up has also been good for Evans' psyche, too. He began his thawing process in November 2010 when he flew to Miami from New Mexico to meet with his acting coach about potential gigs (Evans' ad for Microsoft “I'm a PC” is still one of the biggest commercials among MMA fighters). He had recently been injured and was experiencing his first personal and professional rut. Evans, a self-described tinkerer, was put in touch with local businessman Glenn Robinson, who had started managing former UFC fighter Jorge Santiago (Robinson is the same man who would later go on to sign Alistair Overeem and many of the Brazilians from American Top Team—the legality of the latter is currently being battled in the court system.)

“It was weird, I met him and immediately our personalities clicked,” says Evans. “I had a manager at the time, but for some reason, I just trusted him with everything. I didn't know him, but I just trusted him.”

After only two face-to-face meetings, Evans called up his manager to end things and put Robinson in charge of his career. It was a decision that would land him a head-to-toe JACO deal (a company purchased from bankruptcy by Robinson) and surrounded him with some of MMA's most talented and amiable fighters.

“I never make plans in life. I've never made a five-year plan, I just go with

the feeling in my stomach,” says Evans. “Now, Glenn's like my brother, dude's my best friend—that feeling, it's never been wrong.”

Robinson runs IronBridge, a company that creates the Husky brand tools for sale primarily at Home Depot. Over the past year, Robinson has transformed the company headquarters at an office park outside Boca Raton into a shelter for wayward MMA talent. In the midst of screwdrivers, wire cutters, design computers, and fabrication machines are lumpy-eared fighters roaming the hallways and loitering in the office kitchen.

It's the type of atmosphere where Evans, and now Alistair Overeem, can feel free from the control of overseers they didn't trust. “The guys can come to me

“When you're a champion, guys cling to you, and sometimes their interest isn't in your best interest,”

with a problem, and I'll help 'em out, that's what I do,” says Robinson. “I have 20-something guys who need some help running parts of their life. That's kind of my business.”

The freedom to train in the sun while making more money? For Evans, the combination was irresistible, but there was a catch.

**IF ROBINSON WANTED EVANS** to train in Florida, he'd need to provide one guarantee. The Greg Jackson refugee wanted to pack something more than his board shorts and sandals—he wanted a staff position for his coach Mike Van Arsdale.

Evans met Van Arsdale while training at Jackson's gym in Albuquerque. When Van Arsdale retired and began prepping younger fighters on conditioning and wrestling, Evans sought out the All-American wrestler to help him get more out of his training. Like he did with Robinson years later, Evans felt they “just clicked.”

Van Arsdale, a respected international wrestler and NCAA All-American at Iowa State in the '80s, connected with Evans through their shared past in the sport of

wrestling. Van Arsdale remembered Evans from his two-year stint wrestling at Michigan State, specifically his 2002 NCAA tournament where Evans bounced another Jones—eventual three-time NCAA Champion Greg Jones of West Virginia University—from the NCAA tournament. Even though Evans never placed (he lost in the next round), he's more remembered for that single victory than most wrestlers are for entire careers.

Van Arsdale is consistently reminded of Evans' special something in practice. “I don't think people realize how talented Evans can be,” says Van Arsdale. “He's bigger and stronger and healthier now than he's ever been. Dude's a winner.”

There are coaches that motivate fighters to workout more, who believe in fighters so much that it becomes more than inspiration. With Van Arsdale, Evans wears an invincibility cloak buoyed by respect and shared experiences, “I can't lose with him in my corner,” says Evans. “I won't fight without him.”

The two fights where Van Arsdale was absent ended poorly for Evans—his title fight with Forrest Griffin and his loss to Lyoto Machida.

The Griffin fight was a victory—he won the UFC Light Heavyweight Title—but that performance was marred by a middle round outburst in which Evans gestured that Griffin should “kiss his dick.” That display of penile dominance turned off fight fans, many of whom still thought of Griffin as the archetype courageous fighter. Evans was immediately recast from lovable and witty reality star to promotional antagonist. It's a stereotype that's persisted.

Looking back on the Machida fight, where he lost via knee-buckling knockout, Evans points to multiple failures, some of his own making. Not having Van Arsdale available was a mistake, and not dealing well with months of negativity and hype surrounding his unblemished record left him hesitant, protecting a record that ultimately “meant shit.” But mostly, Evans faults the loss as a result of his frayed communication with Jackson.

“When you're a champion, guys cling to you, and sometimes their interest isn't in your best interest,” Evans says broadly, before zeroing in on Jackson like someone acknowledging Stockholm Syndrome.



Rashad Evans tried, but ultimately failed, to find an answer to the unorthodox striking of Lyoto Machida at UFC 98.

"They try to get you to march to their beat. Even though I knew what I needed to do, I didn't do it, because I was trying to appease him."

Evans believes Jackson's plan for his training camp was the major cause for his lack of performance on fight night. "I was working on karate for three weeks. Tell me: Why the fuck am I working on karate? I kept telling Greg, I was like, 'Dude, I don't want to do karate, I should just be working on what I'm good at. But sometimes, when [Jackson] has something in his mind, he's like, 'no, no, no.'" Evans' imitation of Jackson sounds a lot like Daffy Duck.

Jackson is out, and though Robinson oversees the business and personal aspects

of the Blackzillan operation, it's Van Arsdale who has control over Evans' training (all of his workout sheets include photos of lionesses killing zebras, elephants, and gazelles. "Why? Because lions don't think about attacking, they just do it!"). Van Arsdale's mandates are looser, but his commitment is complete. There's no Jon Jones competing for attention, it's Van Arsdale and Evans.

"I don't need to be coddled," says Evans. "I know what I have to do, and I'm here doing the work."

#### EVANS WAS JUST COMING OFF

a unanimous decision victory against Rampage Jackson at UFC 114 when he

says his life began to unravel.

First it was Diego Sanchez, "being fucking wild and crazy" who ran into his knee, eliminating him from a chance to compete for the title. In his stead, the UFC chose Jon Jones—who had just submitted Ryan Bader—to take on Mauricio "Shogun" Rua with only four-weeks notice. Jones won via third-round TKO, and conflict ensued, as Evans, once considered the top contender, was relegated to Dana White's Island of the Misfit Toys.

"When I came to Florida, I was in pieces, man. I was like a shell of a man," Evans says in a self-aware half-chuckle. "I was going through problems with my lady, my knee was blown out, I know I'm not getting a title fight...I was all depressed. I



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”







was sitting in a hotel room in Ft. Lauderdale flipping through the TV, like ‘Dude, what happened to my life?’ It was like a real coming-to-God moment, like, ‘What am I gonna do with the rest of my life?’ I was just so depressed. I just didn’t know what was going to happen, it was just so uncertain. I’d never been injured before. Never been injured, never been hurt.”

Eventually, the Florida sun, the rehab, and the energy of an ever-expanding team began to soak in. His mood improved. He knocked out Tito Ortiz and won Fight of the Night. Next up was uber-wrestler extraordinaire Phil Davis. Evans out-wrestled and out-battered the former NCAA Wrestling Champion to secure a unanimous five-round decision. Not bad for a guy who endured three cracked ribs two weeks before the fight, compliments of Muay Thai trainer Tyron Sprong’s glancing right to the body in sparring.

Evans scans the table assessing the reality of that time. He sees those dark weeks as a building block, a threading of downcast moments to be laughed at, but taken seriously, like a best-selling memoirist reading their cringe-worthy high school diary.

The memory of being laid up in a south Florida hotel room can be erased with success, but other disappointments like the recent separation from his wife, are pains that are without immediate resolution. “Fucking victim of the game,” Evans says. The relationship failed because of distance he says, in no way helped by the issues that arise from celebrity and travel. A combination of stressors that eventually negated their commitment.

The failure of the relationship stings, but what’s most upsetting to the father of three is the time he feels he’s missing with his children, two of whom live with their mother in Chicago.

“I don’t get to see ‘em as much as I’d like, but after this fight, I’m going to bring ‘em down for a bit.” Evans’ smile is back with a twinkle that doesn’t pop up in news conferences and post-fight interviews. He postures up in the booth, before leaning forward, a proud father about to tell a story.

“The last time I brought them down we went to the beach. They’d never been to the ocean, they’d just seen it in books and movies, so they couldn’t even understand why the waves were so strong and what the water was doing to them,” Evans says, his face bright. “I just want to see them again as soon as possible, ya know?”

**TONIGHT, AS EVANS IS** tucked away in a south Florida Panera Bread dredging up his past, Jon Jones frolics three hours north—the honorary race official for the Daytona 500. It’s impossible that Evans didn’t know that he was there, both are tethered to the same organization and the young champion has been Tweeting photos of himself alongside celebrities all weekend—that funny gym teacher from *Glee*, the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit cover girl.

Three weeks earlier, they were sitting feet from each other at a press conference in Atlanta, trading barbs about their former life together in New Mexico. Evans, always the sharpest tongue in the room (best-dressed too, a trend he is rarely credited with starting), did well to frustrate the younger Jones, mocking his lack of wit and encouraging him to rethink his pre-fight strategies.

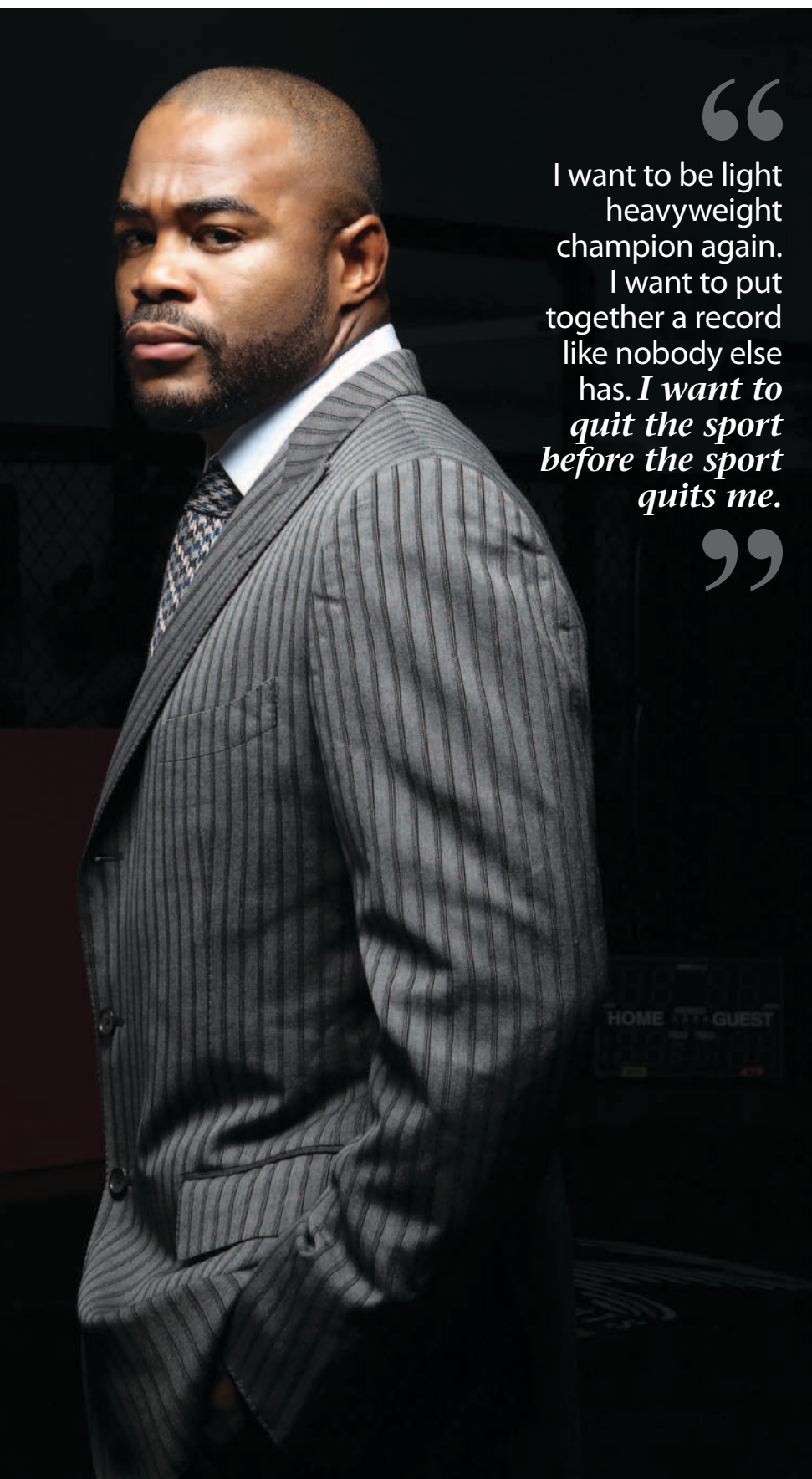
According to Evans, Atlanta was the first time they’d had a chance to sit down and talk since Jones won the belt from Rua in March. “Every other time I’ve seen him, it’s kinda been in passing,” Evans says. “It’s always like [smiling], ‘Fuck you.’...‘Yeah, yeah, fuck you, too.’”

Press conferences might be an expected place to find your opponent, but even outside UFC-sanctioned pressers the duo have been crossing paths like a pair of afterschool brawlers made to sit across from each other in the lunchroom.

“Last time I was in Vegas for the fights and I go to this small, small little club to get off the Vegas nightlife scene. I was relaxing, I wasn’t rolling deep or anything,” says Evans. “I got a nice little table, get all settled in, and I look over and I’m like... ‘Mother fucker, there’s Jon Jones.’”

The fighters share so much in common, that it’s been easy for everyone to create a blood feud on the fighter’s behalf. Both are black wrestlers from western New York who trained at Jackson’s and who’ve enjoyed the fame of being the UFC Light Heavyweight Champion. That’s significant overlap. Their yearlong battle in the media has been exhausting to endure as a fan, and equally deflating to promote, but Evans feels that he’s always delivered a genuine message while Jones has been erratic and insincere with his Homerish good-guy routine and has been dishonest about the handshake agreement that remains at the center of their contentious separation.

“I just don’t think he’s good at handling relationships,” says Evans. “It’s not like he



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doesn't have life experiences that ages a person, he's a father of three. You're a father of three, you should put away some of your childish habits and become more of a man and deal with the reality of life."

The two-plus years of overlap of Jackson's is the most over-analyzed training period since the Apollo Creed/Rocky Balboa's beach sprint montage in Rocky III. Every week, it's a new fighter or trainer claiming that Jones (No, it was Evans!) had always gained the better in sparring. Nobody can recall with clarity who punched who with more precision, or kicked with more umph—it doesn't matter, and it'll all be figured out in the cage, with results based on training and game planning, not the proper recollection of a failed relationship.

"We see each other now and do that thing for the cameras," says Evans "And maybe it'll still be the same way after the fight, or maybe we just don't get along too much. But maybe one day we'd be able to be friends again."

**THE BETTING PUBLIC** and the fighting intelligentsia have quantified and qualified Evans' chances of a victory in April as preposterously slim, a meteorite rocketing toward earth seems to have a better chance of threading the St. Louis Arch. Despite their negativity and the fandom surrounding Jones, Evans still sees himself as the fighter to take the sport to the next level, the man who can be the UFC Light Heavyweight Champion for several more years, the guy whose choices and changes will become validated and make him a legend.

"I want to be light heavyweight champion again. I want to put together a record like nobody else has. I want to quit the sport before the sport quits me. I've never had a perfect fight. I want to have a perfect fight and look back and never have to say 'Damn, I coulda...'"

The waitress walks over and says the restaurant has closed for the night. Evans thanks her, then trots to the door and pushes himself into the still warm evening air. It's almost 10 p.m., and Evans slaps palms and shoulder bumps, thanking everyone for setting up the meeting.

He hops into his Lexus SUV, backs out of his parking spot and speeds away—his windows are down, his white T-shirt and bare arm hanging out of the window as his blue New Mexico plate disappears into the Florida night. 📍