



COVINGTON AT HIS HOME IN THURSTON

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

These are the fans who try to act like a booker or pretend that they know what it takes to win a fight, Covington adds. In other words, they're armchair fighters — just like an armchair quarterback.

He started calling out UFC fighters, posting spoilers on Twitter for *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and *Avengers: Infinity War* and continuing a heated relationship with Brazil (during a UFC event in Brazil, people threw trash and booed him and he shot back calling them “filthy animals”).

He's attacked the mainstream sports world when he called the Golden State Warriors and Cleveland Cavaliers, who were then battling it out in the NBA Finals, a “bunch of losers” for not wanting to bring the championship to the White House.

The strategy is effective.

I missed his June championship fight, but I watched as UFC fans reacted on Twitter. Just like any great professional wrestling heel, the fans still expressed hatred for him, but they knew he was a fighter who could hold his own.

It sounds rough, but Covington says the UFC business is all about selling out pay-per-view events, and he's just trying to sell himself to a larger audience — whether it's liberals who want to see him get knocked out or conservatives who want to see their guy win.

His methods seem to offend some people. But he's not trying to be a bully. It's just business.

“I'm getting locked up in a steel cage and the goal is to take the other guy's brain cells,” Covington says. “[UFC fans] want blood from me. They want to see me get knocked unconscious.”

MR. COVINGTON GOES TO WASHINGTON

Covington wasn't planning on parading his belt around when he was in Oregon. Sure, he had a few visits to make, but the visit he looked forward to the most was waiting on the UFC. He couldn't wait to bring it to Trump.

“You go to the White House and be a proud American,” he tells *Eugene Weekly*. “Doesn't matter what side of the political race I'm on. I'm proud to be American — red, white and blue.”

He adds: “I fight for 541, Oregon and, more importantly, number one is the troops.”

Bringing the belt to the Washington, D.C. is a pretty big achievement, considering it wasn't long since Sen. John McCain called UFC “human cockfighting” and wanted to outlaw the combat sport.

But, Covington adds, he would've done the same if Hillary Clinton were in the White House.

He brought the championship belt on July 30, to a live taping of RAW, WWE's weekly Monday night television show. He was originally going to be front row for the show, but his old teammate and current WWE superstar Bobby Lashley invited him backstage.

While there, Covington took a photo with former UFC champion Ronda Rousey — who's now been taking the professional wrestling world by storm — and former WWE champion Jinder Mahal.

A few days afterwards, on Aug. 2, with the help of UFC President Dana White, Covington finally brought the belt to Trump — and the White House bumped him in front of the Washington Capitals, who won the Stanley Cup this year.

Thanks to the UFC, the world now has a photo of Trump with a large gold-faced championship belt slung over his left shoulder while giving thumbs up in the Oval Office. All of this is happening as Thomas Jefferson looks down from the wall and the bust of Abraham Lincoln stares at the floor.

Covington shared the photo on Twitter and echoed Trump's campaign slogan: “Promises Made. Promises Kept” and threw in a #MAGA.

“Best day of my life, hanging with the president cracking jokes in the Oval Office,” he told me in a direct message on Twitter.

Covington also shared some of the conversation he and Trump had on Twitter: Trump kept calling him “champ.” After Trump posed with Covington, he gave him back the belt.

“No, Mr. President. This belt's for you. You're the champion of the people,” the Tweet said.

Covington told *EW* that it was lot of fun kicking it with Trump, adding that he's just “a regular guy.”

“It was like hanging out with a friend,” he says. “Trump gets a lot of criticism. He loves this country. He's trying to make this country great again.”

But the story gets more complicated, as UFC decided whether or not to strip Covington of the belt — the title he took to WWE and gave a replica of to Trump — since he would need time off to rest from surgery.

“Fake news,” he told me in a direct message on Twitter.

He went on to say it wasn't in his best interest to fight in two title matches in three months.

“They trying to scare me but it ain't gonna work, 'cause take my belt I'm still here and not going anyway anytime soon,” he adds.

Before Covington attended a WWE event and met Trump in August, MMA news outlets began to report that Covington needed nasal surgery in late July.

Then, the weekend before his WWE appearance and meeting with Trump, UFC President Dana White made the decision to strip Covington of the interim belt because he was unable to fight Woodley — the UFC recognized champion.

White added that the interim belt just means Covington is actually the number-one contender and that he would get the chance to fight for the belt.

Meltzer tells *EW* he couldn't believe they would strip someone of the belt, and then have them go on to meet with WWE superstars and pose with Trump in the White House.

Covington still denied it the last time I talked to him.

“I didn't get stripped of shit — that's fake news,” he says.

Stevie Richards, who helped Covington work an audience like a professional wrestler, says the belt-stripping debacle is a great opportunity to grow beyond the organization. In fact, it could be possible to see Covington become someone like Conor McGregor — a brash-talking Scottish MMA fighter who's grown into a media icon and international personality.

If his star power expands to McGregor's level, Eugene could see itself benefit. Covington says he hopes to have UFC hold an event in Eugene, and that the UFC is listening to him.

The only thing that would hold that back would be the University of Oregon — who controls the largest stadium: Matthew Knight Arena.

Because that's why Covington fights. That's why he brought Trump the championship belt. That's why he does #NerdBash2018. He does it for business, so he can then give back. ■