

# CENTER RING

by

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Sandwiched between majestic tree topped mountain ranges, a sprawling man-made oval ring bordered entirely by spiral razor wire capped chainlink fencing solemnly rests in a lush California coastal valley. The mere sight sparks lost mental images of childhood memories where I spent sultry summer days with my siblings sitting on spectator grandstands fanning away facial perspiration beneath a pennant waving canvas tent.

Many years later, far from those exciting and joyful experiences under the canopy of The Greatest Show on Earth, spectacular death-defying feats boasting heart-stopping and

eye-popping performances have been replaced with suspended punching bags, steel workout bars, horseshoe pits, concrete court surfaces and sand-colored dirt softball fields. Inmates within the ring have become my new form of entertainment.

Looking-out over the bleak distraction, I find myself trapped in a circus sketch of my own doing. At my feet, lies a lone meandering five inch wide milky white pavement stripe racing unbroken confining activities within its circumference and directing one-way inmate traffic around a suffocating, overcrowded prison yard.

Every new day starts-off the same way. Under wide-open, pale blue morning skies, a less than lively inmate conga line haphazardly exits tortilla-colored, shoebox-shaped triple decker housing blocks. Beyond the ground level sally port, a single pivoting steel entrance door opens unleashing wicked bursts of swirling crisp winter air into my

unsuspecting face. Countering the chill, the insidious shock immediately shifts the wandering masses behind me into single file formation. Dressed alike in state issued blues, we exit the sally port door. Sporting slabs of blank faces, hungry men track westbound along the white stripe like captured slave ants re-supplying a buried enemy's colony. Prisoners dare not stray. Posted wall signs explain why: **NO WARNING SHOTS WILL BE FIRED**. Because of those threatening words, I walk the white ring heel to toe mimicing a gymnast mastering a slender wooden balance beam as my arms automatically snap sharply back and forth at my side.

Ignoring all posted warnings, those ahead of me falter by choice, tempting their fate. During our monotonous stroll towards the chow hall for breakfast, their choice is met with stern words blurted over the public address speakers, "Walk on the line! No grouping!" squawks the lethally armed tower officer as pairs of straggling inmates swerve across the thin white pavement marking like tacking sailboats.

To my amazement, one deafening authoritative voice is sufficient to launch overnight

pent-up tempers and heated obscenities at one another as though their amplified outbursts would settle any differences.

The white ring's hidden message conjures-up multiple connotations. To some, it rekindles madcap drug flashbacks. For others, it is an opportunity to defiantly talk smack to a weary neighbor. And still for many more inmates, the infinite white loop represents a bouquet of audible complaints; lousy state food, unscheduled lock-downs due to officer accompanied medical transports and petty administrative rule violations are a few examples of everyday frustrations fueling soaring frictions.

"Keep your head up, A'hole!" barks one rowdy inmate to a trailing inmate accidentally colliding into him.

"¡Tranquilo! Homeboy," yelps the wide-eyed culprit while clenching his right ~~hand~~ into a fist.

As startled inmates skate past the annoying pair, a gap quickly widens between the two allowing ample space for a sudden scuffle to breakout.

For me, frivolous exchanges emit much deeper lessons. When I contemplate the consequences of my own actions, the final results will determine whether life in the big house becomes better or worse.

Excessive confinement tactics easily fracture inmate spirits, often leaving them feeling empty as though nothing is left in their emotional tank. Because of the circumstances, I've found myself not far behind.

As the Sun sinks behind the distant mountain range, I sit perched on my cells upper bunk staring at the white ring through my iron crossbared window. The inanimated control symbol erases everything I once cherished; my identity, my opinions, and most importantly my freedom. However, no obstacle is unsurmountable. The humiliating deceptive tide retreated the very moment I refused to view prison as a barrier, but

instead as a portal for change and growth.

Therefore, after many hours of peaceful meditation, I've decided to separate myself from the orbiting white pavement streak that blatantly prevents me from dreaming, composing, or exploring possibilities.

With each bleeding breath, I cast away another charred piece of convict branding associated with prison and inhale lifes promising rich aroma filling me with renewed rooted purpose to succeed. The white ring of despair confining me, no longer chokes my resolve.

Nonetheless, until the gate of free will swings back in my favor, I reluctantly walk the white center ring, head-up and eyes forward firmly locked-on an optimistic future beyond the ring's implicit grip.