**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**CHAMP PAGE**

Hello everyone!! (**Do you think your intro should be more formal, i.e. Family, friends, students, faculty, administrators, distinguished guests... and of course, to all of you graduating today,...**) It really is great to be back here at Eastern Kentucky U (**Or use whatever version of the name seems most comfortable**) .... actually, for those of you that know me, you know that I’m here as often as I can be... some of my greatest memories and most significant strides were achieved here....(**If you want to make a little joke you can say**)... so graduates, I **REALLY** should be thanking **YOU ...** for the opportunity to return once again....any excuse to be here !! **(Wait for the laugh).** (**If there is anyone in particular you’d like to acknowledge for inviting you to speak, do that here**). I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for inviting me to speak today. EKU has been an integral and active influence in my life. Although it’s been thirty years since I graduated, **THIS** is the place at which I built my foundation... I really learned about life. I truly learned how to connect... to hone my skills, and to find the value in mentorship, encouragement, and to experience the incomparable value in giving back.

I’ve learned and grown since my days at EKU and through the course of this time we have together, I’ll share the wisdom that was shared with me... and even some I’ve discovered on my own, thanks to the people I’ve met... people who have taught me and challenged me, tested me and befriended me, competed with me and encouraged me, and most of all, shown me the value of self respect.

There’s an old commercial I’ve seen on TV. To paraphrase the tagline, ”Maybe he’s born with it...” we’re all born with something... it’s what we ultimately **DO** with it that counts. I was born with the name “Champ...” Maybe if I were given the name “**Walker**.... (**Take a deadpan pause and wait for the laugh**). ... I think I would still possess the drive I’ve been blessed to own. I grew up in a single parent home... nothing was easy and less was handed to me... but the one thing I was blessed with in abundance was the confidence and resourcefulness my mother consistently instilled in me. She named me Champ as an omen... a talisman of what **COULD BE**...

By the time I got to my “pre-formative years...” you know... ages ten to thirteen... otherwise known as the “**PLEASE!! NO PICTURES**!!!” Era (**Wait for the laugh**), I realized I was becoming what you might call...an **outlier**. Somehow I found “the radar” and knew my plan was to go **under** it. I wasn’t the kid that got picked on... I didn’t feel comfortable in team sports... and Heaven knows, I **WAS. NOT. COOL**... but I did have one thing in my favor... I was the smartest kid in the room... now I’m not bragging when I say that.... in fact that was one of the reasons I played “limbo” with my visibility in school. Throughout those years until I got a little older, I was able to get by, although, like I said, I didn’t feel confident playing football or basketball.... but one day there was a race... and the first or second time I participated in track, I won...I bonded with the ground... and I leveled that playing field... and haven’t looked back since. I realized the first time I did well in track, I distinguished myself and my course was literally set. As Jack Welch has said.... **(If you want to make a little joke you can say**) ...maybe not to a thirteen year old, but still ... (**Wait for the laugh**), “If you don’t have a competitive edge, don’t compete.” One of the great lessons of life is in that short sentence.... It’s simple... find your distinction... identify **YOUR** edge... Hone the skills, talents and insights that make you **UNIQUE**. It’s **NOT** okay to just check out in the face of a challenge. You’ve come too far and you’ve made an investment in your personal success and fulfillment. **USE** what you’ve learned and **FIND YOUR LANE**.

I am so blessed to have found my lane. I’m even more thankful to have had the guts and support to do something positive and constructive with the gifts I’d been given. Remember, I had my cheerleading squad... especially my mother... and I had a name to live up to and a mission to explore. Somehow I recognized, at that early stage in my life, that track was my ticket (**Would you say “my jam? Just a choice**) and that if I were to make a name and a reputation for myself, running and field events would be the way I would separate myself... for **REAL**

I ran like my life depended on it... which it **DID**... and in the moments that I was one with the track, my focus served as a meditation... I **KNEW** I **HAD TO** go to college... no one in my family had ever achieved that goal... and I knew that track was my calling card to get into a quality school... You see, for me it was always about finding my place in the business world. Each step along the way taught me... trained me... conditioned me for where I am today. Several schools were interested in me. When I got to EKU for my tour and interview, I was aware of the excellent reputation it garnered in the collegiate world. With a phenomenal education system, students... like you... and me... receive a quality foundation. The proof of the pudding is in the eating... graduates of our school demonstrate impressive results in the professional sector.... and with students largely from the Maryland, DC, and metro New York regions, I instantly felt like I had found my new home. I will never forget the realization I had as a result of that first visit here.... for my entire life up to that point, I always knew... that, even against the odds, I would go to college. After that visit, I **KNEW** I would **graduate**. There’s a mighty lesson in that simple statement as well... envision the end game... place yourself at the finish line... whatever that may be. Set goals and work like heck until you achieve them... then set more goals... with greater distance... test your stamina... surprise yourself with the dedication and determination you’re able to muster... As Robert Browning states in his poem, “Andrea del Sarto, “... A man’s reach should exceed his grasp...” I left the “known universe” that made up my life to find something bigger... more challenging.... and it truly has been life changing. I came for the track and field... I **STAYED** for the the Accounting and Business Management!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). I’m happy to tell all of you that my time at EKU was life changing... I can imagine that many... or **ALL** of you can appreciate that, even now.... so much of my experience as a student has stayed with me... even thirty years later... the educational foundation I received has been invaluable and the friends I made are still my greatest, closest friends today.... so, yeah... as I said earlier, I’m thankful to each one of you for giving me a reason to come back and visit EKU!!!

During the time I spent at EKU, I learned the lessons of a lifetime... including the value of a dollar... intellectually and practically... and while I received a great and well rounded education in my classes, my studies were enhanced by “practical economics....” Oscar Wilde may have said, “A cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing...” but I **PROMISE YOU**, he need not have been concerned when it came to my respect for the value of things.. You see, when I was a student, my grandma would send me **forty dollars**... **A MONTH**... and it was up to me to make it last... and I **survived**... and I am more appreciative and resourceful for having figured it out.

So that gives you an idea of my scholastic background and early years. Since then I’ve made it my mission to work hard, find the value in teamwork and mentoring, and the importance of giving back. At each stage in life, we experience different vantage points. Every trajectory offers unique perspective. As I’ve found my way in the corporate world, I have a direct experience of what it means to be part of a team... to encourage, to lead, and to continue to be my own greatest competition, albeit in a different arena. Jack Welch has also said, “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.” I believe in the power of mentorship.... And while I know that we are capable of hearing things and heeding lessons when we are ready to absorb them, does anyone here think that kind of consideration would **STOP ME**??? **NAHHHH** (**Wait for the laugh**). ... so here goes...

o **Every step in life matters whether you make a mistake or not...they are both growth steps...** Mistakes indicate that a result that has been produced. Of course we don’t intend to deliberately make them, but some of the greatest, most indelible lessons we can learn come through owning and correcting mistakes.

o **Make "just" decisions....** Part of being successful in life and career is accepting ownership for your actions and participation. Proceed in all that you do as if it were really **YOURS**. Be the kind of employee that you would hire. Give more than you get... the value in that pays great returns. Operate with integrity and transparency. Be respectful of every colleague. Pay attention to every task. Don’t watch the clock. **FOCUS**.

o **Don't be afraid to be great...** and **DON’T** get sucked into wanting to win the office popularity contest.... Camaraderie will come as you present your authentic self. Like it or not...there will often be someone in the crowd that might be less than thrilled for any success or distinction that you may... and **WILL** achieve. Stay on course and focus on your tasks, your performance, and your long term goals.

o **Show compassion and empathy...** This goes without saying... we **ALL** need to be kinder and more humane to one another.... especially if you’re working on mutually advantageous objectives.

o **Make decisions on weightier matters...** In the future you will be called on to offer your opinion and expertise. Think globally... about the different facets of a situation.... consider options... weigh potential outcomes... offer your observations as they advance the issue.

o **Consistency matters...drive effective leadership....** Be reliable and accountable. Every action you take, from Day One, is on purpose to train you to lead. Be a sponge. Absorb as much as you can from the leaders you witness and admire. Be willing to do everything that’s asked of you... even the most menial tasks... its more important than you know. It demonstrates that **willingness** is an integral “tab” on your CV.

o **You are here now; what will you do next...** Focus on your current responsibilities, Hone your skills. Pay attention. Sharpen your perceptiveness... and plan for the future.

o **The value of resiliency and the value of "grit" ...** and through it all remember this. The professional world is not a popularity contest. You may or may not be rewarded for your actions and input, and you may not like everyone you meet or everything you hear and do.... welcome to the real world. Build your own personal arsenal of resourcefulness and elasticity. Learn how to repair yourselves and proceed in being the best employee... and leader you can be. Learn how to play “poker.” Your co-workers and employees don’t need to know your vulnerabilities. (**Do you want to say**) Remember the tag line, “Never let them see you sweat??? Yes?? **DON’T**!!! Find the balance between compassion and productivity.

Ultimately, I am here to encourage you graduates to “drink a full cup of life.” The world is now yours to make your mark. You have what it takes, which is, in the end, the willingness and drive to learn, grow, and have a positive impact in business, in your communities, and here at EKU. Trust me... we’ll be watching!!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

It was Michael Jordan who said, “One day, you might look up and see me playing the game at 50. Don’t laugh. Never say never, because limits, like fears, are often just an illusion.” I want to wish all of you congratulations... and here’s to limitless success for all!! Thank you!!