

Catch » Comeback » Crown | BY GREG BISHOP P. 26

MIRACLE

FEBRUARY 13, 2017
DOUBLE ISSUE
SI.COM | @SINOW

*"I don't
know how
the hell he
caught it."*
— TOM BRADY



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AHEAD

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ISAIAH THOMAS, THOR
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Tom Brady led a comeback for the ages, sealing his status as the greatest quarterback ever

By Greg Bishop

UPWARD AND ONWARD

James White celebrated his one-yard touchdown that brought the Pats within two in Super Bowl LI.

Photograph by
JOHN W. McDONOUGH

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Ezra Shaw/Getty Images

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SI.COM

FOR FEB. 13, 2017



NFL Mock Draft

WITH THE Super Bowl in the rearview mirror, it's time to look ahead to the biggest event of the NFL off-season: the draft. Two things are becoming clear as April 27 approaches: There is an abundance of defensive talent available (including Reuben Foster, *middle*, and Jamal Adams, *far right*); and at least two quarterbacks should be taken early in Round 1, with debates over those selections likely to rage throughout the



spring. Will defensive end **Myles Garrett** (*above*) go No. 1? Will the Browns finally find their QB of the future (perhaps Mitch Trubisky, *far left*), with one of their two first-round picks? How will teams like the Titans and Buccaneers, which barely missed out on the playoffs this season, bolster their rosters? Go

to **SI.com/nfl** on Thursday to check out Chris Burke's latest NFL mock draft for the first three rounds.



+ Nikola Jokic

LATELY IT SEEMS as if the NBA is being taken over by young, 7-foot, do-it-all unicorns like Joel Embiid, Karl-Anthony Towns and Kristaps Porzingis. Now you can add Nuggets forward Nikola Jokic to that growing list. The 21-year-old Serbian phenom has a game that is unlike any you've seen before. He's quietly becoming one of the league's best players—and he's putting Denver in the running for the Western Conference's eighth and final playoff spot.

Lee Jenkins has the story of the Nuggets star at
SI.com/nba

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of
3**Leading
Off**

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A High Note, Then Disaster

■ Julian Edelman's fourth-quarter catch will be the eternal preferred choice for Super Bowl mythmakers, but Julio Jones hauled in not one, but two immaculate receptions, the second of which barely eluded the reach of Eric Rowe. The catch set up the Falcons for a potential field goal that would have salted the game away if not for some questionable play-calling that kept the Patriots within one score and set up yet another Tom Brady Moment.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT BECK





+

2
of
3**Leading
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Line Dancing

■ Patriots wide receiver Malcolm Mitchell (19) gleefully mirrored line judge Jeff Seeman's touchdown call after James White—he's somewhere under those dejected Falcons—plunged in from the two to cap New England's Super Bowl-winning overtime drive. The score gave the Pats a 34-28 victory and the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMON BRUTY





+

3
of
3**Leading
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He'll Take the Fifth

■ Tom Brady had reason to roar as he held the Lombardi Trophy. He'd just led the Patriots back from a 25-point deficit, crowning a season in which he sat out the first four games on suspension for his role in Deflategate. Brady had been tied with that guy with the mike for most rings among quarterbacks, but he now stands alone as a five-time champion.

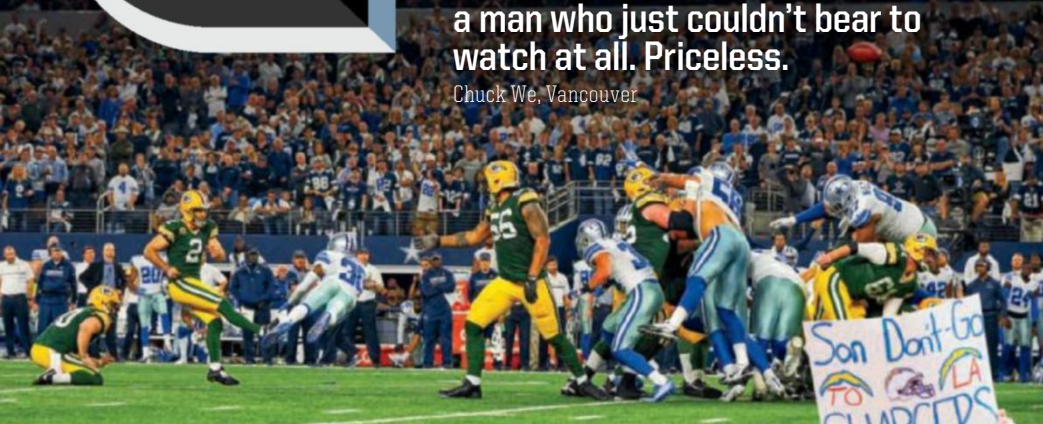
PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMON BRUTY

INBOX

FOR JAN. 23, 2017

It's all there in the details of Greg Nelson's photograph of the moment after Packers kicker **Mason Crosby** strikes the ball (LEADING OFF). Scanning the fans in the stands—cheering, jeering and prayerful—I stopped when I saw the back of one head, a man who just couldn't bear to watch at all. Priceless.

Chuck We, Vancouver



The Department of Defense is pursuing a fool's game if it thinks that minimizing active-duty commitments of **service-academy football players** has any marketing value (*Patriot Games*). I would bet even the most avid fans can't name more than three academy alums who have enjoyed lasting NFL careers over the past 10 years following abbreviated active-duty tours. But most important, the strategy would diminish the ethos of selfless service that underpins the academies.

Tom Slear, Annapolis, Md.



When St. Louis and **San Diego** refused to cave on stadium deals, Will Leitch wrote (SCORECARD) that "their teams decided to decamp." Forgive my persnickiness, but the *teams* did nothing of the sort. Those were the actions of a couple of gluttonous businessmen. The word *team* implies camaraderie and loyalty, neither of which is evident in the actions of these owners.

Matt Turnbull, Watertown, Mass.



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COVER

Tim Layden's story about **Tom Brady** and his receivers (*All About Connections*) reminded me of the first pass he threw in college, 20 years ago. As a redshirt freshman at Michigan, Brady entered a game against UCLA and dumped a short pass that linebacker Phillip Ward picked off and ran back 45 yards for a touchdown. Brady has certainly minimized that type of connection ever since.

Dave Beck
Hoboken, N.J.



POINT AFTER I would remind **Michael Rosenberg**, who discussed the difficulty of winning repeat championships, of Hendricks Motorsports' five straight NASCAR titles, from 2006 to '10. Jimmie Johnson is surely a Hall of Fame driver, but he also depended on a well-oiled team.

James S. Bus
Midland, Mich.

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SCORECARD

Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

Shock Jocks

Yet another unforgettable finish in a year full of them should teach us once and for all that nothing can match the magic of sports

BY JACK DICKEY

AFTER THAT Super Bowl, every self-respecting sports fan will remember where they were on Feb. 5, just as they will remember where they were last year on June 19, the night the Cavaliers completed their climb out of a 3-1 deficit to beat the Warriors in the NBA Finals, or on Nov. 2, when the Cubs did the same to beat the Indians and win the World Series. No less indelible are the nights of Jan. 9, when Clemson toppled Alabama on a go-ahead touchdown pass from Deshaun Watson to Hunter Renfrow with one second left, or last April 4, when Villanova's Kris Jenkins answered a double-clutch, game-tying three-pointer by North Carolina's Marcus Paige with a deep three of his own as time

expired to win the national championship. This is to say nothing of Denny Hamlin's photo-finish win at the Daytona 500 or Leicester City overcoming 5,000-to-1 odds to win the Premier League, or anything Katie Ledecky did last summer in a Rio pool. Indeed, if you need evidence that sports provide the greatest drama on the airwaves, by now you've got it. Outcomes this thrilling and unexpected would make even Herman Mankiewicz look like a hack.

At their respective 3-1 low points, the Cavs' title chances hovered around five percent while the Cubs' scraped bottom at 15%. Both were sitting pretty, though, compared with where the Patriots found themselves against Atlanta

midway through the third quarter, down 28-3, stuck going for it on a fourth-and-three on the wrong side of midfield. The likelihood of a New England victory at that point, according to FiveThirtyEight.com, was 0.4 percent. Not four percent, or one in 25, but .4 percent, or one in 250.

Games like these spawn books, movies, motivational-speaking careers, permanent social status. Will Danny Amendola, Julian Edelman or James White ever again be allowed to pay for anything at Cumberland Farms? In every town from Sturbridge to Saugus, Taunton to Tewksbury, they are legends now. They join Jenkins and Renfrow and a parade of others in possession of sudden and

once unimaginable legacies.

Probabilities, stark though they might be, fail to articulate the collective system shock of the last year. The fan's traditional vocabulary—*comeback*, *upset*, *stunner*—fails too. We appear naïve if we deploy the same awe-connoting words to describe what keeps happening. By now we no longer can be stunned. This is the age of Brexit.

I remember where I was on that night, too. On June 23, four nights after the city of Cleveland got its first title in 52 years, the people of the United Kingdom voted by a 52-48 margin to depart the European Union. Out to dinner with an uncle born in the former Yugoslavia who was anxiously



DAVID E. KLUTHO (RIZZOLI); EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (JAMES); BRADY: GREG NELSON (JENNINGS); AL THELMANS (WATSON)



Faces in
The Crowd

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ESPN Retool

25

of Nov. 8, per FiveThirtyEight, stood at 28.6%. Other outlets put his chances below 10%. Again my certainty kicked in; I wagered the (meager) entirety of an online gambling account on the, uh, inevitability of Trump's election loss. By midnight I was cursing myself, alternating four-letter words with "Mr. Brexit."

Liberals and conservatives alike fixed on the election night parallels in the Super Bowl. Trump is friendly with Tom Brady, Bill Belichick and owner Robert Kraft, so even before kickoff the Pats had a kinship with the President. On Sunday night, after New England cut its deficit to 28-9, Don Jr., the firstborn Trump, quoted a 20-minute-old tweet from *The Wall Street Journal* that put the Falcons' chances of

Americans outside of New England and Mar-a-Lago undoubtedly had the inverse reaction, crying so hard they couldn't help but laugh. On Twitter jokes about Wikileaks and James Comey abounded.

Not unlike the electoral college, football's design has always seemed a little bit zany—from the oblate-spheroid ball to the annual rules changes to the jumble of numbers the game produces (four downs; 10 yards; possible scores of one, two, three or six points). Whether feature or bug, the game's construction can grease the skids for trailing teams: Their playbook opens up, while the leader's shrinks. The Falcons had little difficulty building a lead but tripped all over themselves when it came time to defend one. Might that one-in-250 win probability have been something of a blessing for the Patriots? Who knows?

To calm our uncertain minds, philosophy offers the Socratic Paradox, to which, after the past year, surely anyone can relate: "I know one thing; that I know nothing." Is there any fact in the sports world about which we can be certain anymore? Well, maybe one: This Patriots dynasty is the greatest in NFL history. You can call their quarterback the best clutch performer of our era. Or you can call him Tom Brexit. □

checking the returns on his phone, I suggested without evidence beyond my own unjustified and retrospectively pompous certainty that no such thing could happen. Uncle Dusan was amused by my overconfidence.

"Games like these spawn books, movies, motivational speaking tours, **permanent social status.**"

Less than two months later, the man who would become president of the United States told his Twitter followers, "They will soon be calling me MR. BREXIT!" It sounded like superhero-movie dialogue, not prophecy. And yet. Donald Trump's shot at victory the morning

victory at 91.6%. "Where have I seen stats like this before?" he wrote, appending three emoji of the American flag and one face laughing so hard it was crying. He knew then what the rest of us would soon learn. An hour-plus later, after the Patriots' 34-28 overtime win, many

GO
FIGURE

1,000

Wins for Stanford women's basketball coach Tara VanDerveer, who joined late Tennessee coach Pat Summitt as the only women to reach that milestone after the eighth-ranked Cardinal's 58-42 victory over USC.

3,252



Regular-season wins in franchise history for both the Celtics and the Lakers before they played last Friday in Boston. The Celtics, winners of 17 NBA championships, beat Los Angeles, which has 16 titles, 113-107.

266

Consecutive minutes, spanning more than six games, that Gonzaga played without trailing before falling behind Santa Clara 5-4. The No. 1 Bulldogs trailed for 4:43 total before winning 90-55.



American Dreamer

One of the few Muslims to play pro baseball discusses what the ban and the U.S. mean to him

BY DR. KHALID BALLOULI

I'VE SEEN the scars on my father's body. It's not clear whether they're from a knife or from bullets. He doesn't talk about his time in the Lebanese army in the early 1970s. That was a dangerous time, and it got to be too much for my grandparents, so they told my dad, Walid, to get out of the country.

He moved to the U.S. in 1976 and met my mother, Candice, in Charlotte. She was from upstate New York, and her father was Dick Fowler, who pitched in the majors for 10 seasons and even threw a no-hitter before retiring in 1952. I was born in Charlotte in 1980 and grew up in Austin. My mom was Catholic, and we celebrated the customs of both my parents' religions. I didn't spend much time in mosques here in the U.S., but when I would visit family in the Middle East, an aunt or uncle would say, "Let's get him his own Koran" or "Let's take him to a mosque."

I started playing T-ball as a kid, and I don't know if it's because I was born here or because English is my first language, but I never felt any prejudice



while playing. But through my career, including four years at Texas A&M and five in the Brewers' farm system, I came across zero other Muslims.

Unless you're a minority, it's hard to relate to this, but I have to assume that every person who meets me has this immediate wonder that they wouldn't have if my name were more American. Even now when I give my name at the DMV, I get strange looks. Maybe it's because I don't look the part they're expecting.

Because I don't fit the stereotypical image of an Arab, people say things that they don't think will offend me, but they do: "Well, I'm not talking about you."

And when I hear them say "people from those countries," that doesn't sit well with me either. I have family in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. I have a cousin named Osama; he went to Texas and performed in school plays. President Trump's executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority nations hits close to home and feeds into people's fears. I've lived in Texas and the South my whole life, and there's a lot of people, especially here, who are making judgments

without ever having left this country.

I've traveled several times to Dubai and Syria and Lebanon. People in those places see that the U.S. has had its hands in a lot of wars in the Middle East and has military bases around the world. What I hope they also see from the reaction to this ban is that this is still a very diverse, very open and very welcoming place. It was for my father when he needed a safe haven, and the national pastime has been for me. I hope both always remain that way. □



Dr. Khalid Ballouli is an assistant professor of sport and entertainment management at South Carolina.

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And the Award Goes to . . .

SPORTS MOVIES are no strangers to the Academy Awards, from *Rocky* (Best Picture, 1976) to *Jerry Maguire* (Best Supporting Actor, 1996) to *The Blind Side* (Best Actress, 2009). But among this year's nine nominees for Best Picture, the closest any come to sports is *Fences*, in which the main character, Troy Maxson (Denzel Washington), is a former Negro leagues star. Here are our awards in a weak year for sports on screen.



BEST ACTOR:
ROBERT DENIRO

Hands of Stone

The award goes to DeNiro for his performance in *Raging Bull* in 1980. That's a great boxing movie; this film about middleweight champion Roberto Duran is not, despite DeNiro's portrayal of trainer Ray Arcel.



BEST LEADING ACTORS: **KEGS**

Everybody Wants Some

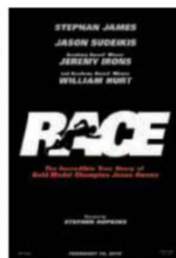
Director Richard Linklater's shaggy comedy about a college baseball team in 1980 affectionately captures the camaraderie, decadence and competitive spirit of young ballplayers.



BEST SUPPORTING ACTORS: **PAWNS**

Queen of Katwe

Madina Nalwanga stars in the true story of Phiona Mutesi, who emerged from poverty in Uganda to become a chess master at age 10. We give Nalwanga and the cast three rooks.



BEST DOCUMENTARY
Race

This award would go to a documentary about Jesse Owens and the 1936 Olympic Games. Alas, this film is not a documentary (how else to explain a smarmy Jason Sudeikis as Owens's coach?).



BEST COSTUME:
A CERVICAL COLLAR
Bleed for This

In a true story, middleweight boxer Vinny Pazienza (Miles Teller) spends much of the film in a neck brace after breaking two cervical vertebrae in a 1991 car crash. It's a cautionary tale: Pazienza wasn't wearing a seatbelt.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Last weekend, for the first time in its 140-year history, the Westminster Dog Show included cats.

Kobe Buffalomeat

The OL gained Internet name fame after signing with Illinois State. Guess it beats Magic Dissappearingact.



HOT
NOT



Tiger Woods

Citing back spasms, he withdrew after an opening-round 77 in Dubai. The news made fans sick to their stomachs.

THEY SAID IT

"THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT IT IN THE RULE BOOK, SO WE'RE ALL A BIT CONFUSED."

John Fallon Jr. // Manager of the Glasgow, Scotland-based Shettleston FC junior team, expressing his dismay after goalie Gary Whyte was sent off for urinating behind the net during the game.



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Running Man Challenge

A new standard for endurance excellence



FROM JAN. 23 TO 29, Mike Wardian raced—and won—seven marathons in seven days on seven continents. The next day he ran another 16.6 miles, just to make sure he got to an even 200.

Wardian, a 42-year-old who lives in Arlington, Va., averaged 2:45:56 for the seven races, which beat a field of 23 men and nine women and shattered the previous World Marathon Challenge record by 46:29 per race. His wins came in Antarctica, Chile, Miami, Madrid, Marrakech, Dubai and Sydney. He stopped running long enough to chat about his record-setting week.

—Chris Chavez

SI: Why would someone in his right mind do something like this?

MW: I've wanted to do this since I heard about it while running the North Pole Marathon in 2014. I didn't think it was possible. It took me three years to get the time and resources to make it happen. I love to race.

SI: Where does this rank among other races that you've done?

MW: It's in the top three. I did Marathon Des Sables, where I carried all my food and gear across the Sahara Desert. I also did Diagonale Des Fous in France with

tendinitis in my foot. I was in a world of hurt.

SI: How much sleep did you get between races?

MW: Not very much. I'd say in the first four days I slept a total of eight hours. When it was all finished, I was a zombie.

SI: Why wouldn't you take something to help you sleep?

MW: I'm a big believer in clean sport. I didn't take anything. Not Advil, not Sudafed or cough drops, because I don't want to risk any chance that I would trigger a drug test.

SI: What other running

goals are left on your bucket list?

MW: I have crazy aspirations. I'd love to run a marathon on the moon. I want to run across the Panama Canal or the Pilgrim's Trail in England. There are so many great races out there.

SI: How many miles do you want to run in 2017?

MW: Last year I think I finished with about 4,500 miles. I'm hoping to do even more this year. To keep improving and growing as a person is what it's all about. I hope that's what inspires people.

SI: Would you do this again?

MW: I would love to. There are definitely ways I can do better, and there are things I can fix, knowing what I know now.

SI: How many times does someone say, "Run, Forrest, run"?

MW: It's not unique! I just cheer along with them. □

EDGE

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For food, Wardian, a vegetarian, relies in part on almond and coconut balls made by his wife, Jennifer. Here are his keys to recovery:



Foam rolling

If you can't get a massage, this is the next best thing. It loosens your legs up and gives you the ability to get back out there. Quick and convenient.



Stretching

I'm not a huge stretcher, but I try to do it when I call people. When I'm on the phone, I'm pulling my legs up, touching my toes or spreading my legs.



Keep moving

So many people stop moving after a race, and their muscles cramp up. To keep moving is one of the best things you can do.

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ATHLETES & ANIMALS

+

Gimme Shelter

Sports stars advocate for pet adoption in a new television special

DAVID BACKES

lined up at the face-off spot and tried to focus. He was representing the United States at September's World Cup of Hockey in Toronto, and each play mattered. So he was startled when his opponent spoke.

"Hey, whatever happened to those dogs you brought home from Sochi?"

Backes laughs remembering it. "I'm like, Listen, I'd love to tell you the whole story, but we've got to drop the puck right now."

This kind of thing happens a lot. Backes, a Bruins rightwinger, estimates that hundreds of people have told him that his story inspired them to adopt. But he was an activist well before he became one of four U.S. athletes to fly home from the 2014 Olympics with at least one Russian stray in tow. Backes couldn't keep them; he and wife Kelly, who in '13 founded a nonprofit called Athletes for Animals, which works with shelters to raise awareness, were already taking care of two rescue cats and four rescue dogs at the time. (To answer that

opposing player's question, Sochi Jr. and Jake ended up with Blues defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk's parents and Rangers center Derek Stepan, respectively.)

So David and Kelly were delighted to participate in SI and PEOPLE's *Stars to the Rescue* documentary, which airs on Animal Planet at

"With all the ups and downs of sports," says Backes, "it's nice to see how happy they are to greet you no matter what."

9 p.m. EST on Feb. 17. The couple both grew up with adopted pets: Kelly with a menagerie of, as she recalls, "stray dogs, cats, gerbils, birds—I think there was a pheasant or two—ducks, turtles, bunnies. . . ." and David with a rehomed

poodle. So it was never a question that they would adopt once David's career seemed settled enough. They fostered cats while living with his parents when he played for the minor league Peoria (Ill.) Rivermen, and two months after buying their first house, in St. Charles, Mo.,

in 2007, they brought home their first rescue pup. The family has only grown from there.

"I went to practice today," David says, "so I haven't swept the basement to see if Kelly brought home any fosters. Usually

they show up when I'm on the road. She calls and says, 'We're gonna foster six kittens.' I say no, and I come home and there they are."

"He feels like he has to say no," Kelly says. "But he wants them."

Their career high is 17 animals at once, during the 2009–10 season—their own two cats and two dogs, plus a foster dog and her 12 puppies. "That was a lot of cleanup," says Kelly.

Now they have 20-month-old daughter Stella in on the action. They installed a squirrel feeder that they check, at her insistence, six times a day.

In addition to the Backeses, *Stars to the Rescue* features Olympic gold medalist gymnast Aly Raisman, professional



JOHN T. LUMACKY/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES

THE FAST AND THE FURRY

To the rescue: Backes (left, with an adoptable pit bull), Delle Donne (right, with fiancée Amanda Clifton to her left, and Wrigley and Rasta), the Wakefield family (with Toby), Stanley (bottom left, with Lola) and Raisman (bottom right, with Gibson).

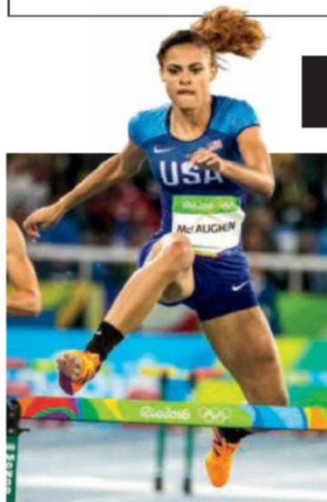
equestrian Georgina Bloomberg, 2015 WNBA MVP Elena Delle Donne, former Red Sox pitcher Tim Wakefield and Ravens offensive tackle Ronnie Stanley.

Stanley, who rescued his pit bull mix a few weeks after he was drafted last June, by asking his local shelter for “the dog who’s least likely to be adopted,” says Lola has helped him insinuate himself into his new team. He has ordered her a STANLEY 79 jersey and likes to take her to the team’s facility to run or to host playdates for his teammates’ pups, and he’s working on a bring-your-dog-to-practice day for next season. For Wakefield, playing with adopted Shih Tzu Toby—who joined the family this summer—offers another way to bond with his kids, whom he gets to see a lot more often now that he’s retired.

As for Backes, the reward is simple. “They’re so even-keeled,” says Backes. “With all the ups and downs of the sports world, it’s nice to come home and see how happy they are to greet you no matter what.”

—Stephanie Apstein





UPDATE

Running to The Top

■ **Two-and-a-half** years ago, Sydney McLaughlin made **FACES IN THE CROWD** (July 21, 2014) after setting a national freshman record in the 400-meter hurdles at the USA Track & Field junior nationals. McLaughlin (*above*) became the youngest U.S. track and field Olympian in 44 years last summer and reached the semifinals of the 400-meter hurdles in Rio. Now a senior at Union Catholic in Scotch Plains, N.J., she committed to Kentucky in November and last month ran the second-fastest 300-meter race in high school history, with a 37.11 at the Molloy Stanner Games in New York City. At this week's Millrose Games (Feb. 11), McLaughlin is eyeing the record of 36.96. Given her rise, it's likely she'll break that record—or come very close. —J.F.



Lena Johnson | *Peachtree City, Ga.* | *Fencing*

Johnson, a junior sabre at Columbia, went 7-1 over three matches against Wayne State, Notre Dame and St. John's at the NYU Invitational. A two-time honorable mention All-America, she finished ninth at the NCAA championships last year, and has won silver and bronze medals at the NCAA Northeast Regionals.



Kwity Paye | *Providence* | *Football*

Kwity, a 6' 4", 234-pound senior running back and defensive end at Bishop Hendricken High, ran for four touchdowns and made 14 tackles in a 48-28 win over La Salle Academy in the Division I state title game. A Michigan commit who was born in a refugee camp in Guinea, he rushed for 651 yards and 13 TDs while recording 61 tackles and 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ sacks.



Kelcey Crawford | *Purcellville, Va.* | *Hockey*

Crawford, a junior goaltender at Division III Elmira (N.Y.) College, made a career-high 32 saves in a 4-0 road victory over eighth-ranked Amherst for her fourth shutout in her first seven starts. Last season she went 13-3-0 with three shutouts and was twice named ECAC West goaltender of the week. As a freshman she went 8-0-0.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by JEREMY FUCHS



Maddie Musselman | *Newport Beach, Calif.* | *Water Polo*

Musselman, a freshman attacker at UCLA, scored a team-high 12 goals in four games as the Bruins swept the UCSB Winter Invitational, including a career-high-tying five against UC San Diego. During her gold-medal-winning Olympic debut, in Rio, she scored 12 goals, second most on Team USA, and was named to the all-tournament team.



Corry Long | *Cincinnati* | *Basketball*

Corry, a 6' 3" senior guard at Hughes High, hit three game-winning shots in five games: a three-pointer for a 63-62 victory over Aiken on Jan. 6; a layup to beat Withrow 49-47 on Jan. 17; and a three as time expired for a 55-54 win over Indian Hill on Jan. 21. Corry, who was averaging a team-high 19.9 points through 16 games, will play at Stony Brook.



Karen Chen | *Fremont, Calif.* | *Figure Skating*

Karen, a 17-year-old homeschooled senior, won gold at the 2017 U.S. figure skating championships in Kansas City, Mo. She followed a national record of 72.82 in the short program with a 141.40 in the free skate for a combined 214.22 to beat three-time U.S. champ Ashley Wagner by 2.44. Karen won bronze at the '15 championships.

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SCREEN

+
Shifting Center

ESPN rethinks its signature news show

THE SPORTSCENTER

you grew up on is no more. Over the past 18 months, ESPN has recalibrated the show for an era in which sports highlights and real-time news are proliferating across websites, blogs and social media. In response, *SportsCenter* is becoming more personality-focused and less of a homogenous brand, with different time slots representing the interests of the host or hosts.

The latest iteration of the show began Monday with Jemele Hill and Michael Smith (*above*) leaving *His and Hers* on ESPN2 to become cohosts of the 6 p.m. edition of *SportsCenter*. The new show (called SC6) has been designed specifically to fit Hill and Smith, whose

allegiances bend toward New Orleans and Detroit, comic books, food, pop culture and movies. The change follows the September 2015 recalibration of the midnight *SportsCenter*, which is hosted by Scott Van Pelt, who spices his shows with gambling coverage and long-form commentary. “The people who have watched us and know *His and Hers* are going to get *His and Hers*,” Smith said. “It’s just going to be called The Six.”

This new focus stops well short of the confrontational “embrace debate” ethos that’s been spreading across sports TV. But it is an acknowledgment that great plays and the latest happenings are not enough to draw and hold an audience. Of course,

there’s no guarantee that the new format will work, but it was time to try something.

In 2012, ESPN averaged a total-day audience of 1.02 million; four years later, it was 817,000. Hill and Smith, who have three-year guaranteed deals, have not been given ratings expectations, but the old 6 p.m. *SportsCenter* averaged 500,000 to 650,000 viewers, depending on the time of year. Van Pelt’s ratings are largely flat, although his show is doing well on social media, in part because it’s produced to create content that is easily shared. SC6 will take the same approach while maintaining its individuality. “The litmus test for us has always been, Are we excited to discuss this?” Hill says. “If it doesn’t pass that test, then it won’t be on the show.”

The follow-up question: Will the audience be as excited to watch? —Richard Deitsch



Thursday @ 8 p.m. ET
North Carolina at Duke (ESPN) or Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice (HBO)

One rivalry is legit and won’t disappoint. The other is contrived and definitely did.



Saturday @ 4 p.m. ET
Millrose Games (NBC) or Planet Earth: Frozen Planet (BBC America)

How many Millrose events can you name? How many planets? There’s your answer.



Sunday @ 3 p.m. ET
AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am (CBS) or Finding Bigfoot (Animal Planet)

At least CBS offers the chance to see something mythical, like a good celebrity golfer.



Sunday @ 7:30 p.m. ET
Canadiens at Bruins (NBCSN) or Grammy Awards (CBS)

There probably won’t be any bone-crushing hits by the musicians. Sorry, Bieber.



SUPER BOWL LI

S



A photograph of Tom Brady, number 7 of the New England Patriots, in a white jersey with blue and red accents, running with the football. He is wearing a silver helmet with the number 7. The background is a blurred stadium crowd.

USPENDED DISBELIEF

*With all due respect to a genius coach and his gang of misfit parts, it was **TOM BRADY** who led a come-from-way-too-far-behind victory that even some Patriots players didn't imagine possible, sealing his status as the greatest quarterback ever*

BY GREG BISHOP

Photograph by
Simon Bruty

INSIDE THE Patriots' locker room on Sunday night, Tom Brady sits down at his locker, at once surrounded and alone. He's oblivious to the teammates who are passing around a bottle of whiskey, emptying its contents in deep gulps, while others spray champagne until bubbly drips from their beards.

It's late at NRG Stadium in Houston as the quarterback unstraps the brace around his left knee, tugs off his sweat-drenched championship T-shirt and pauses for 30 seconds that seem to last forever. This brief meditation suggests that he's channeling some inner Zen to process what just happened: the first overtime and largest comeback in Super Bowl history, his fifth NFL championship, even the awkward congratulatory handshake with Roger Goodell, the commissioner who suspended him for the first four games of 2016 over a bunch of (possibly) underinflated game balls.

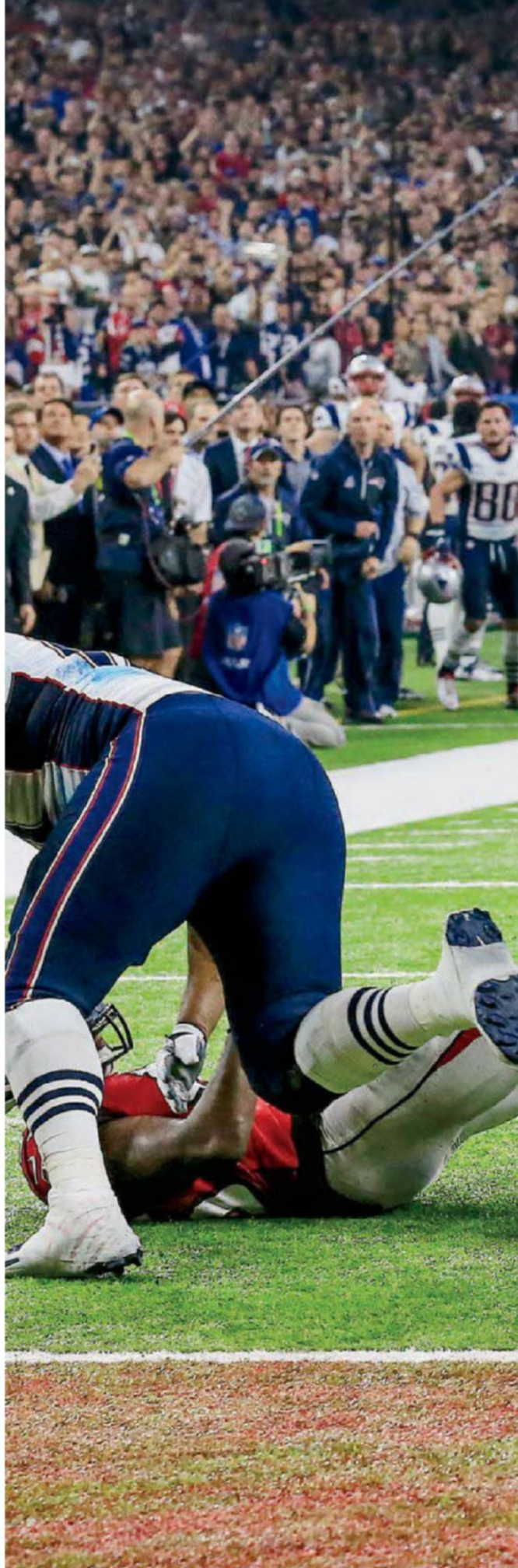
There's only one problem. Brady cannot find his jersey—the standard white number 12 that in the fourth quarter of Super Bowl LI, against the Falcons, could have been a wizard's cloak. Brady set championship game records for most passes (62), completions (43) and passing yards (466) in New England's 34–28 triumph. He accepted the MVP award. And then—*poof!*—the jersey vanished like Atlanta's second-half defense. “Someone f----- stole it,” he says, grabbing a patterned gray suit and wading through the crowd toward the showers.

En route, he is stopped by Robert Kraft, who's handing out Padrón cigars from an oak box. The Patriots' owner grabs the back of Brady's head with his right hand and pulls his franchise QB in close, planting a kiss on his cheek. Brady returns the gesture, whispers “I love you,” and then inches away from him, toward the next well-wisher and the one after that, a series of coaches and execs and support staff who invariably tell him the same thing, that he's the best passer ever to play this game, keepsake jersey be damned.

Brady's best friend and business partner, the man who is said to spend more time with him than even his supermodel wife, stands off to the side. One year ago, on the same day the rest of the world watched the Broncos trounce the Panthers in Super Bowl 50, Brady and Alex Guerrero, the man he calls his body coach, decamped to a football field in Boston. Because the two men plan out Brady's schedule three years in advance,

WHITE'S OUT

The Falcons' 25-point lead was a distant memory when the New England back broke the goal line in OT for his third touchdown.



TANNER MAUR/EPFL

• Kraft pulls his franchise QB in close, planting a kiss on his cheek.
Brady returns the gesture, whispers **"I LOVE YOU,"** and inches away.





FALCON CREST

Super Bowl MVP? Yes. Super tackler? No. Brady whiffed as Robert Alford's pick-six put Atlanta up 21-0.

and because that exhaustive training regimen extends each season through Super Bowl Sunday, there they were last Feb. 7 running through a three-hour workout, Brady throwing in full pads and Guerrero catching passes.

Back then, Brady's mother, Galynn, had already been diagnosed with cancer; that was before she underwent countless hours of chemotherapy and radiation, before a panel of three federal judges affirmed Goodell's suspension and before Brady declined to pursue his final appeal. In part he backed down, friends say, because of his mother's failing health.

All along it seemed obvious that this season meant more to Brady, who, to be clear, does not lack for motivation. He's not one of those star athletes who claims that his sport does not define him; it *does* define him, always will. But this year—the revenge tour, all the emotion he couldn't suppress on Super Bowl week—was about so much more than Deflategate. It was about a quarterback

who turned 39 in August and then spent September in exile, all the while traveling as often as possible to visit his mother. His father, Tom Sr., made it to one game this season, in San Francisco, near the home where he raised his son. Galynn wasn't even sure she could make it to the Super Bowl until doctors cleared her last week.

The night before the game, Brady and Guerrero paused for a rare, brief moment of reflection. They contemplated this surreal season and all that another ring would signify. Twenty-four hours later, Lombardi Trophy in hand, Brady insists that this title means no more than any of the previous four—but Guerrero allows what seems obvious. "Yeah, this one means more," he says in a corner of the locker room. "This one is as special as it gets."

THE GREATEST comeback in Super Bowl history began with the Patriots down 25 points, their offense discombobulated and their defense getting shredded like a stack of old credit card statements. More than a few New Englanders headed early for the exits, while reports from Washington indicated that President Donald Trump,

ROBERT BECK



noted Patriots supporter, had already turned the game off.

In his owner's suite Kraft looked at his son, Jonathan, and asked, knowing full well the answer, "You think Tommy has given up?"

"No f----- way," Jonathan replied.

Confidence is one thing. Delusion is another. Even Robert Kraft later acknowledged that his team's odds of finding victory had sunk to "infinitesimal" when the Falcons scored midway through the third quarter to take a 28-3 lead (win probability at this point: 0.3%). Defensive end Chris Long—new to the team, so forgive his ignorance—admitted that "naturally we had doubts." Others expressed hope, like safety Duron Harmon, who is said to have declared, "This is going to be the greatest comeback of all time."

Afterward, Patriots players insisted that their coaches simply told them to play better, choosing not to drastically change schemes. There, it helps to have Brady, who took the ball midway through the third quarter and led the offense on a 13-play, 75-yard drive, finding running back James White for the first of the running back's three touchdowns. (White tied yet another Super

Bowl record.) But even that score felt like a win for the Falcons, given the amount of clock it chewed up—not to mention Stephen Gostkowski's missed extra point.

Still, the vibe inside NRG Stadium started to shift from *No chance* to *It can't happen—can it?*

Atlanta punted at the start of the fourth quarter, and Brady mounted another long drive that bled further seconds from the precious clock, ending in a Gostkowski field goal. Yet again, that seemed like a Falcons win. They still led 28-12, and an offense that had scored the seventh-most points in NFL history had only 9:44 to kill.

Yet that sense of momentum shifting lingered. On Atlanta's next possession middle linebacker Dont'a Hightower barreled around left end and knocked quarterback Matt Ryan on his backside, jarring the ball loose—just as defensive coordinator Matt Patricia had drawn it up with the No. 2 Dixon Ticonderoga pencil stuck behind his right ear. Patricia wanted it to appear as if he were dropping his linebackers into coverage, then sent High-

Brady insists this title means no more than any of the previous four—but Guerrero allows what seems obvious:
"THIS ONE IS AS SPECIAL AS IT GETS."

tower at full speed from the edge. Defensive tackle Alan Branch recovered at the Falcons' 25.

Brady needed only five plays to throw another touchdown, this one six yards to wide receiver Danny Amendola, and with the two-point conversion—White, again, off a direct snap—New England cut the deficit to one score.

Dot after improbable dot connected. A victory started to feel, to borrow a phrase from the league's Deflategate investigation, "more probable than not." Ryan countered with a drive of his own, only to inexplicably drop back on second-and-11 from the Pats' 23. The Falcons needed just a field goal to win, but a sack by end Trey Flowers and a holding penalty instead pushed them out of range, forcing a punt. Atlanta's defense looked tired, as evidenced by pressure percentages: 64.3 in the first half, 17.9 in the second.

That set the stage for the drive that Patriots fans will tell their grandchildren about, a 10-play, 91-yard march that instantly ranks among the greatest in NFL history. Late in the second half the Falcons had switched from man coverage to zone, and wideout Julian Edelman,



manipulating that bubble, made a 23-yard grab so spectacular that teammate Martellus Bennett described it as happening “between seven guys’ legs.”

Mouths dropped. Tears ran down faces. The irony was lost on none. A decade ago the Patriots had lost two close Super Bowls after implausible catches from Giants receivers—David Tyree’s helmet snag in Super Bowl XLII and Mario Manningham’s sideline ballet tip-toe grab in Super Bowl XLVI. Now the Patriots had an implausible reception all their own—the Texas Tri-Tip or the Jules Robbery, whatever you wanted to call it. Four plays later Brady handed off to White for a TD, then zipped a pass to Amendola for the tying two-pointer.

After that, Ryan could only—in his own words—untie his cleats and watch Brady do what Brady does. New England won the overtime coin toss, flew 75 yards down

the field in eight plays and scored on a two-yard run by White. “Just an avalanche,” Brady explained.

That same word, *avalanche*, also describes Brady in the immediate aftermath, on the field. He knelt down, a gray T-shirt slung over his right shoulder, photographers so close that their feet formed a circle of shoes around him. Brady’s head remained pointed downward, so close to the turf that he could kiss it, so overwhelmed that he couldn’t move. Guerrero bent down and threw an arm over his friend’s back, then running back LeGarrette Blount embraced Brady, and then coach Bill Belichick. The scene ended with a group hug that was striking because, well, it was Brady and the Patriots. They weren’t robots in that moment. They were vulnerable, human.

Afterward, Kraft found his QB on the field and told him, “We won that for your mom.”



BEFORE BRADY could launch the ultimate Super Bowl comeback, he first had to serve his punishment: four weeks of league-imposed exile. While the season kicked off without him, Brady practiced football on the same days and at the same times as his teammates. He ran through the same quarterback drills and agility exercises as before, performed the same resistance-band training. He had Guerrero hammer his arms with weighted bags while throwing to former teammates—everyone from Wes Welker, one of his favorite old targets, to Ryan McManus, a former Dartmouth wideout turned marketing exec who worked out for the

each of the position groups, imploring them to honor their predecessors with their play. “He could not have been more gracious,” Harbaugh says.

That afternoon Michigan fell quickly behind Colorado, 21–7. Brady had planned to leave at halftime, but on the sideline he told Falk, “Big Johnny, I think I’m bad luck; you better get me out of here.” And so he left. On the 20-minute drive to the airport, Brady told Falk the Wolverines would be winning by the time Falk got back to Ann Arbor. They were.

Thus continued Tom Brady’s strange football vacation. He spent a weekend with his wife in Italy, where paparazzi

After Edelman’s implausible reception Ryan could only untie his cleats and watch **BRADY DO WHAT BRADY DOES.**



Patriots last spring. “We wanted Tom to come back *programmed*,” says Guerrero, who also performed the same massage work on Brady, before and after practices, that he normally would have.

Everything else about those first four weeks, however, felt unfamiliar—like on Sept. 10, one day before a Week 1 win over the Cardinals, when Brady’s wife, Gisele Bündchen, Instagrammed herself catching one of her husband’s passes in their backyard. A week later, longtime Michigan equipment manager Jon Falk picked up Brady at Willow Run Airport in Ypsilanti, Mich., and drove the old Wolverines QB immediately to Michigan Stadium, where he wanted to play catch with his nine-year-old son, Jack. The next morning Brady went over the Wolverines’ game plan with Jim Harbaugh, played catch with the coach during warmups and addressed

snapped pictures of him sunbathing in his birthday suit, and dined inconspicuously with Gisele at Ristorante Aurora (pizza *all’acqua*, served with mozzarella and red peppers) on Capri Island. He spent four days playing golf with his father in California and flew his throwing coach, Tom House, to Boston to evaluate his mechanics and fine-tune his motion. On Sept. 30 he filmed a Beats commercial at Milton Academy, outside Boston; on Oct. 2 video of his workout at a school near his home landed on TMZ.

The Patriots went 3–1 in Brady’s absence, and on Oct. 3 he returned to the team’s Foxborough headquarters. Kraft had been so hurt by the suspension that he says he became “very emotional” every time he passed his quarterback’s empty

RISE AND FALL

Two fourth-quarter miscues by Ryan (2)—a fumble (far left, forced by Hightower) and a sack (above, by Flowers)—caused coach Dan Quinn (center) concern.

RECORDS SET BY TOM
BRADY AT SUPER BOWL LI

62

Attempts in a
Super Bowl

309

Attempts in the
Super Bowl, career

43

Completions in a
Super Bowl

207

Completions in the
Super Bowl, career

466

Passing yards in a
Super Bowl

2,071

Passing yards in the
Super Bowl, career

15

Touchdown passes in
the Super Bowl, career



locker. But Brady never mentioned the ban, never so much as uttered *Deflategate*, and how he approached those four weeks says everything that he refuses even to admit thinking. His life, his career, the meticulous schedule—that’s *all* process, and process is what sustains him. “In a weird way,” Kraft says, “maybe [the break] was positive.”

Brady has refused to say that, but consider: His favorite bit of reading is *The Four Agreements*, a spiritual guidebook by shaman Don Miguel Ruiz, and

the second of those agreements—*don’t take anything personally*—seemed especially applicable in September. Ruiz writes that people tend to fall into narratives that others create for them, that they’re angry because they’re expected to be angry, aggrieved because most others would be too. Brady—at least publicly—never blamed Goodell, never let the noise appear to influence him.

“Brady,” Ruiz says, “has created his own truth.”

ON STAGE for the Lombardi Trophy presentation, Belichick falls completely out of character. For one, he’s not wearing a hoodie, his longtime fashion trademark that this season seemed to disappear from his wardrobe. For another, he’s letting out guffaws so hearty that his eyes close, his amusement appearing to stem from the deafening boos lobbed at Goodell, executor of Brady’s suspension, as he hands over the champions’ hardware.

Then Belichick disappears—Belichick *always* disappears—while his players tuck flecks of confetti into

their waistbands and pull on the requisite championship hats and T-shirts. Their coach may have concluded his ninth Super Bowl appearance and won his seventh ring—his record fifth as the football czar in New England—but his microprocessor of a mind has already turned forward. It’s a staple of Belichick, who gathers, processes and disseminates information like no coach in NFL history.

“He’s easily the best ever at melding the two most important qualities of a coach: foresight and insight,” says Belichick’s former assistant Charlie Weis. Foresight into whom to cut, whom to sign, when to retain four QBs in order to keep a sixth-round pick named Tom Brady on the roster, and insight that allows him to take away what opponents do best and exploit what they do worst.

This season marked just the latest example of that melding of A and B. Standout pass rusher Chandler Jones showed up shirtless at a police station and then got shipped to Arizona, but the Patriots still led the league in scoring defense. *Foresight*. Linebacker Rob Ninkovich missed four games after testing positive for a banned substance, so Belichick rotated in young players he’d groomed as backups. *Insight*. While Brady served his punishment, and after Jimmy Garoppolo went down injured, Belichick changed his game plan to run more with unproven Jacoby Brissett under center. *Insight*. Then he shipped linebacker Jamie Collins, whom many considered New England’s best defensive player, to Cleveland in the middle of the season. The unit actually improved. *Foresight*.

That intellect was evident after both of the Patriots’ losses in 2016. Their first came in Week 4, against the Bills. When Brady returned to face the Browns the next week, Belichick opened up the offense, spread his receivers wide and passed 40 times. New England cruised to

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four straight wins. In Week 10 the Seahawks knocked the Pats around at home, and Belichick responded by taking a more active role with the defense. Over the remaining seven regular-season games his team allowed an average of just 12.4 points. New England ran the table, not Green Bay. “We were more aggressive in our play-calling,” says Hightower. “That was Bill and Matt making adjustments.”

Against the Falcons on Sunday, down 28–3 with a quarter and a half remaining, Belichick went for it on fourth-and-three at his own 46. How many NFL coaches would actually do that? Brady found Amendola for 17 yards on a drive that would produce the Patriots’ first touchdown. That score went to White, another

chuckle here and there, like a *Go f--- yourself* chuckle.”

Goodell saw that on Sunday. As did one of Belichick’s most prescient signings, a pint-sized college quarterback whom he turned into a Super Bowl hero at wide receiver.

BEFORE JULIAN EDELMAN snagged one of the greatest receptions in Super Bowl history, he grew up in Redwood City, Calif., under the watchful eye of his father, Frank. The boy would hit 300 baseballs after practice, train on camping vacations and fight any teammate he deemed lazy. “He was like Bamm-Bamm,” his father says, “strong as an ox but looked like he was [far younger]—just this little baby. He’d get in fights, trouble, crying, every week.” Frank

Never mind Deflategate, the dipping likability index. . . . “Brady,” says the guy who wrote the QB’s favorite book, “has **CREATED HIS OWN TRUTH.”**

AIR B&B

Brady and Belichick stuck to the processes that put them in a seventh Super Bowl—even when their fans started heading for the exits.

New England find, a fourth-round pick out of Wisconsin who managed 551 yards on 60 receptions this season. Most games, he ceded touchdowns to Blount. Some games, the bulk of the receiving work went to Dion Lewis. On Sunday it

was White’s turn, and he extended drives with quick passes out of the backfield, serving as Brady’s first option at times and emergency outlet at others, catching 14 passes for 110 yards. This was, of course, the famous Patriot Way embodied. A player that few expected to dominate the Falcons at the outset made a run at Super Bowl MVP.

Belichick’s approach to the fourth quarter mirrored White’s ascension: Whatever works. He let Brady take control. The two have met almost weekly since Brady became the starter back in 2001, but they’re not exactly the best of friends—they don’t go out to lunch or dinner, or take vacations with their wives. Theirs is a pragmatic relationship built almost entirely on the technical aspects of a game that defines each of them. They’re both football nerds at heart.

“Greatest modern-day football coach, period,” says Lawrence Taylor, the Hall of Fame linebacker whom Belichick unleashed as the Giants’ defensive coordinator in the 1980s. “All these people think he’s dry, but he’ll



pauses, thinking back to all the training. “Now I’d probably get put in jail for [how I pushed him],” he says.

Edelman mixed a Brady-esque level of obsession with what at times seemed like misplaced confidence for an undersized juco product, which landed him at Kent State. That’s how he became the Golden Flashes’ starting quarterback after telling the incumbent, who was practicing quick kicks, “You better get used to that—it’s all you’re going to be doing.” That’s how he transformed from a seventh-round pick in 2009—one whom the Patriots weren’t exactly sure what to do with—into a slot receiver savant, by catching 300 balls after practices, pestering Welker for tips and moving to L.A. in the off-season, for those times when he was deemed worthy

of attending Brady’s throwing sessions.

Flash forward to Sunday. Fourth quarter. Patriots down 28–20 but driving. The game, and so many legacies, at stake. On first down from the Pats’ 36, Brady tosses a prayer into triple coverage, toward the 5’ 10”, 200-pound Edelman but not quite over the reach of cornerback Robert Alford, who bats the ball unwittingly toward his receiver. As Edelman falls to the ground in a pile of three Falcons, the ball hits a defender’s leg. The receiver, eyes wide as coffee-table coasters, grabs it, then bobbles it—and finally plucks it before leather meets turf. In the moment, he doesn’t even know for sure whether he’s caught the ball, later noting that “no one knows what the [catch] rule is.” The call holds

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up on replay, leading Hightower to call it “the single greatest catch I’ve ever seen” and the reason “why we call him Julian Incredibleman.”

The catch, while certainly miraculous and made possible by a chain of fortuitous events, is not entirely an accident. “Jules loves Tom,” says Frank Edelman. “He loves everything about Tom, he wants to be like Tom. Tom is his hero. He learned the whole system with Tom, from the bottom up.”

“It’s the same thing I had with Joe Montana and Steve Young,” says Hall of Fame receiver Jerry Rice. “When you go out there, it’s like doing a dance. You’re in tune.”

With his son’s catch and his place in Patriots lore secured, Frank Edelman has not forgotten all the slights. He’s still upset with retired wideout Keyshawn Johnson in particular, after the ESPN commentator described his son as a system receiver and said Julian wouldn’t have stuck in the NFL if he’d been drafted by another team. “Keyshawn Johnson is an idiot,” Frank says. “He could never play on my team. And I’m certain he squats when he urinates.

*“It’s the same thing I had with
Joe Montana and Steve Young,”
Rice says of Brady and Edelman.
“When you go out there,
IT’S LIKE DOING A DANCE.”*



“Jules would have made it on any team,” Frank continues. “But Jules doesn’t fit in every system.”

He fits best—like the running back known most for the punch he threw in college (Blount), like the lacrosse player turned NFL wideout (Chris Hogan), like the running back whom the lowly Browns cut loose (Lewis)—in one place.

With the Patriots.

INSIDE NEW ENGLAND’S victory party at the NRG Center, adjacent to the stadium, John Legend croons from the stage, *My head’s under water, but I’m breathing fine*. . . . Video boards display five Lombardi trophies, one for each title. Revelers snack on fish tacos, chicken-and-waffles, tater-tot casserole and sliders.

Two hours after the comeback Kraft takes the stage wearing a blue suit, pink tie and black sneakers. He starts by thanking the fans: “You got us through this difficult season. You know what I’m talking about. This one was definitely the sweetest.”



Kraft mentions his coach and his quarterback, then he stirs the partisan crowd into a chant: *Bra-dy! Bra-dy! Bra-dy!* “We are all Patriots,” he says as he walks off the podium and into his private party, the one with a football team’s worth of security guards; the one that requires a special pass reading KRAFT LOUNGE. The 64-year-old Belichick, clad now in a black suit, makes his way into the VIP room, through a gantlet of hugs and handshakes. He’s almost—*no, he can’t be*—emotional? He’s still laughing.

It’s easy to forget, especially for those outside New England, that Kraft has long clung to his own process, same as his coach and his quarterback. He hired Belichick after the forgettable Cleveland Years (five seasons, 36 wins), even when NFL insiders advised him not to. Then he gifted his new coach absolute power, and that led to finding Brady in the sixth round, Edelman in the seventh. . . . Those and a million other decisions led to this season, this Super Bowl.

Curtis Martin, a Hall of Fame running back who played three seasons in Foxborough, came to understand

Kraft when he visited the owner’s cardboard-box factory 20 years ago. There, Martin witnessed the dozens of steps it took to fashion something so simple, how product was discarded for even the slightest defect. Martin visited Israel with Kraft and became a regular at family dinners, and he says he saw how Kraft carries the same approach into football. “He should get more credit for the Patriots’ dynasty,” Martin says. “He’s one of the main reasons they’ve done so well. I believe it starts with him.”

Even this season, as Kraft fumed over Brady’s suspension and what he saw as Goodell’s overreach of power, the Patriots’ owner didn’t let his feelings turn into distractions. He let his coach plan and his quarterback throw. After he kissed Brady on the cheek, he said, “[Tom] was the greatest before this. He just proved it to people who didn’t want to believe it.”

LORDS OF THE RINGS

Amendola (left) and White (above) accounted for every nonkicking point for the unstoppable Patriots.



CONFIDANTS LIKE Jay Feely, a retired placekicker who played with Brady at Michigan, describe this season as “personal” for the quarterback. Brady may train inside a bubble of silly wealth and unfathomable celebrity, but he’s also an actual person, one who friends say is fully aware that he’s now as polarizing as he is popular. (According to Nielsen’s celebrity indexes, Brady’s “awareness” score ranked highest among NFL players this year, but his “likability” score fell into the bottom 3%.)

“He’ll never say it, but this game is as important as any Super Bowl he’s been in, except maybe the first one,” Feely says. “Just to vindicate himself. Guys get suspended for willingly taking steroids, and we’re still talking about ball deflation? After two years? That’s not the lasting image he wants people to have of him.”

Brady, for his part, continued Sunday with his standard deflections, saying little, answering anything even remotely controversial with “I’m a positive person” or “I’ve moved on” or “They’re all special.” But those close to him—Guerrero, Kraft, Feely, his father—knew what Sunday meant.

JUST A MATTER OF TOM

The overtime drive that ended in a TD by White (28) allowed Kraft (far right) and Brady to finally let their feelings go.

As the game drew closer, Brady told friends his “next ring” was his “best ring,” a line he stole from Falk. After the Patriots walloped the Steelers in the AFC title game, the Michigan equipment manager sent Brady a text: *You’re looking for your best ring right now.* Within 30 minutes Brady texted back in agreement.

Still, Brady never uses the word *legacy*. He never considers his place in NFL history, not when he reached his seventh championship game and not when he hoisted the Lombardi Trophy for a record fifth time. The numbers—career Super Bowl records for completions (207), passing yards (2,071) and TD passes (15)—make a compelling case for Brady as the greatest quarterback in league history, if not the single greatest player.

“I always felt Jim Brown was the best ever,” says Rice. “But Tom Brady, you have to put him up there.”

“No one’s done it better,” says Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath. “No one is comparable in dealing with the game, the way it’s changed.”

“He doesn’t even need to win,” Super Bowl champion Kurt Warner said before Sunday. “He’s already the best.”

“The greatest,” says Hall of Fame cornerback Deion Sanders.





“No one better,” says four-time All-Pro cornerback Darrelle Revis, a former teammate.

What’s remarkable, and largely without precedent, is that Brady turned in one of his best seasons at an age when most elite quarterbacks—*cough*, Peyton Manning, *cough*—are floating wobbly spirals into retirement. At 39, Brady threw 28 touchdowns against only two interceptions; he led the AFC in passer rating (112.2); and on passes that traveled more than 20 yards in the air—the throws aging QBs struggle with—he had the highest rating of his career (121.5). “Athletes slow down as they get older, but with quarterbacks it’s a little different,” says Matt Hasselbeck, who retired at 40 and now commentates for ESPN. “If you’re able to stay healthy, the chances of you playing your best football are better when you’re in your mid-to-late 30s. But what he’s doing is even more extreme. You’re seeing a paradigm shift in how the league looks at the position.”

Brady has his habits: meditation, a plant-based diet (no dairy, caffeine, white flour, iodized salt or white sugar), all the stretching that Feely says turned the quarterback into Gumby. That’s his process, just as Edelman, Belichick and Kraft have theirs.

As Brady leaves the stadium on Sunday he refuses to speculate about his future, but the idea that he might soon retire sounds downright laughable. He lost a starting tackle, Sebastian Vollmer, for the season and his top target, tight end Rob Gronkowski, for eight games and his most versatile running back, Lewis, for nine weeks. None of that mattered. None of that ever seems to matter.

“I don’t think people believed us when we said Tom could play to 45 or beyond,” says Guerrero. “I still don’t know if they believe. But Tommy and I, we believe it.

“I’m sure we’ll be back at it in a couple of weeks.” □

Additional reporting by Ben Baskin, Greg A. Bedard, Jonathan Jones and Michael Rosenberg

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

’17 STORIES

This year has already produced more than its share of “Holy s---!” moments. But, incredible as Clemson’s last-second college football championship win and New England’s description-defying Super Bowl comeback were, they weren’t really part of the 2017 narrative. The Super Bowl was essentially the final page of the ’16 sports calendar—and the ’17 edition starts now. So bring on the chase for Lombardi Trophy LII. Let’s talk about a little guy hijacking the NBA MVP conversation and a big man ready to dominate March Madness. It’s time to handicap the NASCAR season, Thor’s pursuit of ever-increasing fastball heat and O.J.’s chances of parole. And finally, on page 100, let’s look waaaay down the road and imagine where a ninth-grade hoops phenom might end up. Most college coaches are way ahead of us....





'17 STORIES // NFL Free Agents

MOVING RIGHT ALONG ...

... Or staying put? That's the question for the **TOP 25 FREE AGENTS** this off-season. *SI* runs down the open market and tries to imagine a best-fit home for the most coveted players

BY ANDY BENOIT

1. LE'VEON BELL STEELERS RB AGE: 24

His patient running style won't revolutionize the running back position because few, if any, players have his quickness and agility when changing pace. Factor in his receiving ability, and you have the best back in football. **Match Game:** PIT, WAS, NYG

2. BRANDON WILLIAMS RAVENS DT AGE: 27

He's built to be a nose, but he's shown the athleticism and tenacity to thrive at 3-technique. If he's not one of the five highest-paid DTs this year, it's because some team got a steal. **Match Game:** BAL, IND, DET

3. ERIC BERRY CHIEFS SS AGE: 28

A true multipurpose safety, he can play the run as a box linebacker or cover tight ends man-to-man, and he's adept in zone coverage both shallow or downfield. **Match Game:** KC, CLE, WAS

4. A.J. BOUYE TEXANS CB AGE: 25

This safety-corner hybrid became a lockdown perimeter mugger against receivers on the defense's right side in 2016. No corner improved more over the last 12 months. **Match Game:** TEN, GB, CHI

5. KAWANN SHORT PANTHERS DT AGE: 28

He offers burst off the snap, the strength to shed



blocks and the nimble feet to get through chaotic trench warfare. Whichever team signs him will generate consistent interior pass-rush pressure.

Match Game: CAR, DET, CLE

6. CHANDLER JONES CARDINALS DE AGE: 26

He's not an explosive edge bender, but he compensates for that with his high football IQ, lanky build and refined mechanics. **Match Game:** CLE, ARI, TB

7. MELVIN INGRAM CHARGERS OLB AGE: 27

Few players have his kind of explosive lateral movement, and that presents significant value on designer pass-rush concepts like stunts and twists. **Match Game:** CIN, CLE, LAC

8. CALAIS CAMPBELL CARDINALS DT AGE: 30

He has the wingspan of a pterodactyl and the strength of a stegosaurus. Rare is the D-lineman who is as steadily destructive. **Match Game:** ARI, CLE, IND

9. DESEAN JACKSON REDSKINS WR AGE: 30

He has the speed to change an entire passing attack: Safeties must roll their coverage over the top to him; 'backers and corners have to respect his run-after-the-catch speed. **Match Game:** LAR, PHI, BUF

10. JARED COOK PACKERS TE AGE: 29

Green Bay was 10-3 in games he played in '16 and 2-4 in games he didn't. His ability to align anywhere creates a valuable domino effect of versatility for an offense. **Match Game:** GB, NE, SF

FROM LEFT: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES; JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES; GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES; SIMON BRUTY/AL THELEMANIS



11. KIRK COUSINS REDSKINS QB AGE: 28

He's not exactly *elite*—he needs a well-constructed system with defined reads in order to thrive. But how often do you find a quality starting QB on the open market? Almost never. **Match Game:** WAS, SF, DEN

12. ALSHON JEFFERY BEARS WR AGE: 26

His availability is a concern—he's missed 17 games over the last five years, four to a PED ban in '16—but when he's on the field, he's as potent a downfield weapon as you'll find. **Match Game:** CLE, SF, TEN

13. T.J. LANG PACKERS G AGE: 29

A sturdy multidimensional run blocker, he's also rock-solid in pass protection. **Match Game:** LAR, GB, ARI

14. JASON PIERRE-PAUL GIANTS DE AGE: 28

JPP is a powerful pass rusher, capable of getting eight to 10 sacks, and he's even better against the run. His three mutilated fingers (from a '15 fireworks accident) are a concern, but he adjusted his game in '16 to compensate. **Match Game:** NYG, WAS, IND

15. TRUMAINE JOHNSON RAMS CB AGE: 27

He has an excellent feel for defending off-coverage, especially against big receivers, and he's capable of tightening up to play straight man-to-man. **Match Game:** LAR, TEN, GB

16. STEPHON GILMORE BILLS CB AGE: 26

Gilmore's long arms and physicality serve him very

well outside. He lacked consistency in '16, but the raw talent is there. **Match Game:** TEN, BUF, SF

17. DRE KIRKPATRICK BENGALS CB AGE: 27

He's prone to the occasional mistake, though those have been fewer and further between over time. Not many corners have his combination of length and hip fluidity. **Match Game:** CIN, TEN, TB

18. DONT'A HIGHTOWER PATRIOTS LB AGE: 26

He's as sturdy as they come against the run, both in space and up on the line of scrimmage. He's also one of the game's best blitzers. **Match Game:** NE, IND, WAS

19. TONY JEFFERSON CARDINALS SS AGE 25

A hidden gem, he's one of the best blitzing safeties in football, and he was terrific in man coverage against tight ends in '16, even when he was isolated on the perimeter. **Match Game:** ARI, CLE, IND

20. RICKY WAGNER RAVENS T AGE: 27

Right tackle is a problematic position for many teams. Some team will see Wagner as an expensive but worthy insurance policy on its quarterback. **Match Game:** BAL, TB, DET

21. TERRELLE PRYOR BROWNS WR AGE: 27

He improved in critical areas in year one as a wideout. He's no sure thing, but he has the size and athleticism to develop into a WR1. **Match Game:** CLE, SF, TEN

22. MARTELLUS BENNETT PATRIOTS TE AGE: 29

His goofy disposition can distract from the fact that he's been in the league for nine years. A proven veteran, he remains a versatile receiver and a very willing run blocker. **Match Game:** NE, GB, DET

23. SYLVESTER WILLIAMS BRONCOS DT AGE: 28

He's been kept out of the Denver spotlight by the likes of Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware, but this agile gap-plugger has been a big part of that D's success, particularly on early downs. **Match Game:** DEN, DET, NO

24. BENNIE LOGAN EAGLES DT AGE: 27

He moves laterally with tremendous aplomb for a man of his size (6'2", 309). In the right scheme, he can help make a run D elite. **Match Game:** PHI, NO, HOU

25. MICAH HYDE PACKERS DB AGE: 26

Great at nothing but sound at everything (including punt returns)—that kind of versatility can change a D's makeup, especially when you consider he can bring it from the slot, too. **Match Game:** GB, WAS, IND





MIAMI DOLPHINS

10-6

PRIMARY NEED: TIGHT END



COACH ADAM GASE, one of the league's best offensive architects, has a favorite formation: an unbalanced 3-by-1, with all wide receivers on the 3 side and a tight end on the 1 side. This not only forces the defense to reveal man or zone coverage but also sets up the three-receiver route combinations and quick strikes that define Gase's designs. Just one problem: The Dolphins don't have a dangerous pass-catching tight end. In 2016 they aligned in their 3-by-1 set 170 times and threw to the tight end just 10. That won't do. **Jordan Cameron** and **Dion Sims** are both free agents, so a new tight end is needed regardless. Gase has to find someone with the flexibility to split out wide, the way Julius Thomas did so effectively for him in Denver.



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

14-2

PRIMARY NEED: RUN DEFENDER



DEFENSIVE ENDS Jabaal Sheard and Chris Long, middle linebacker **Dont'a Hightower** and DT Alan Branch are free agents. The Patriots enter the off-season with more cap space than all but three teams, but their history says there's still little chance all four of these players will be retained. What Bill Belichick prioritizes above all else in run defense is someone to set the edge and force a ballcarrier to stay inside; that's where Sheard and Long are valuable. The 26-year-old Hightower, in particular, will be pricey, commanding top five stack 'backer money. Finding a thumping gap shooter like him, or a behemoth gap plugger like Branch, will be critical in maintaining a run D that tied for third in 2016.



NEW YORK JETS

5-11

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE TACKLE



UNLESS 2016 second-round pick Christian Hackenberg is the Guy (unlikely at this point), there's a spot to fill at quarterback. Whoever the Jets find will need protection. **Ryan Clady** (cap hit \$10.5 million in '17) and Breno Giacomini (cap hit \$5.1 million) are expensive for tackles in their 30s coming off injury-riddled seasons. Either could be replaced—and not internally, since so-so backup Ben Ijalana is now a free agent. What type of tackle New York finds depends on the system installed by first-time offensive coordinator John Morton (former Saints receivers coach). If it's run-heavy and built on deep drop-backs, the tackle will be pricier. If it's a quick-striking spread scheme, a middle-tier tackle will do.



BUFFALO BILLS 7-9 PRIMARY NEED: QUARTERBACK



UNTIL THIS team finds its quarterback, management will keep making shortsighted head-coaching hires every two or three years. **Tyrod Taylor** is not the solution. He's mobile—and that's it. He doesn't have the anticipatory instincts or accuracy to compensate for mediocre throwing velocity. Taylor's also not comfortable in the pocket, which leads to his breaking down before the pressure even arrives and renders him unable to see open receivers. If the Bills wind up riding Taylor one more year—unlikely, given they'd save \$13 million in cap space by cutting him—then he'll need weapons. Every receiver except Sammy Watkins is now a free agent.



BALTIMORE RAVENS 8-8 PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER



THE RAVENS will try to talk 37-year-old Steve Smith out of retiring. Maybe he comes back late in camp. Either way, GM Ozzie Newsome should find a playmaking receiver.

Mike Wallace improved his route running in Baltimore but is still confined mostly to Go patterns and shallow crosses. At best, he's a No. 2. Breshad Perriman, a 2015 first-rounder, might—*might*—be capable of headlining a group, but after a rookie season lost to a right-knee injury, he rose to only fourth on the depth chart. The Ravens' choices won't be limited. Joe Flacco is in his element as a deep thrower, but he can play with any style of wideout.



CINCINNATI BENGALS

6-9-1

PRIMARY NEED: EDGE RUSHER



DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR

Paul Guenther can be creative with some of his third-down pass-rushing packages. (For example: Whenever tackle Geno Atkins lines head-up on the center, be alert for a zone blitz.) More often, Guenther prefers to sit back in straight two-high zones and trust his men to execute, but that only works if the quarterback is forced to release the ball quickly. The Bengals, with their hit or miss four-man rush, don't generate enough pressure. The problem in 2016 was a lack of production on the edges. Left end **Carlos Dunlap** is talented but wildly inconsistent. Long and limber right end Michael Johnson looks the part but doesn't actually do anything. Watching film, you often forget he's even out there.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

1-15

PRIMARY NEED: PASS RUSHER



LIKE 99% of the teams that have ever

drafted No. 1, quarterback is a need. Also like 99% of the teams who've drafted No. 1, other needs exist. In the Browns' case, there's an especially dire one along the defensive line. They have no natural pass rushers. That, not unstable quarterbacking, was the biggest reason Cleveland, which was well-schemed and played hard throughout 2016, won just a single game. In the NFL, speed and burst off the edge are critical, but flexibility to bend around the corner is also a must. The Browns drafted **Emmanuel Ogbah** in Round 2 and Carl Nassib in Round 3 last year, but neither is a true edge-bender. It's imperative that Cleveland, with two first-round picks in April, invest heavily in a bona fide playmaker up front.



PITTSBURGH STEELERS

11-5

PRIMARY NEED: OUTSIDE LINEBACKER



AT 38, outside linebacker

James Harrison played 91% of the meaningful snaps after Week 12 and performed at a high level, largely because the Steelers had wisely limited his workload over the first dozen weeks. If Harrison re-signs as expected, they'll have to do that again. The question is, Who rotates in ahead of him? Outside 'backer is a crucial position in Pittsburgh's scheme. Jarvis Jones, a 2013 first-rounder, has yet to develop any moves and isn't worth bringing back. Arthur Moats and Anthony Chickillo both got chances to shine and didn't. Bud Dupree is a rising young player who thrives on second-effort moves. The Steelers need another Dupree to spell (and one day fully supplant) Harrison.

HOUSTON TEXANS 9-7 PRIMARY NEED: GUARD



IT'S A position that's unsexy but significant—especially for a team that must cover for its quarterback with a remedial passing game and a heavy emphasis on running the ball. Left guard **Xavier Su'a-Filo**, whom the Texans infamously selected at the top of the second round ahead of quarterback Derek Carr in 2014, hasn't worked out. The 6'4", 320-pound Su'a-Filo can get into his pull-blocks well (he stays tight to the other blockers as he moves behind them), but landing those blocks is a different story. He is neither nimble nor powerful, and he almost certainly won't be re-signed when his rookie deal expires after '17 because he's also erratic in pass protection. And so is right guard Jeff Allen.



INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

8-8

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE PLAYMAKER



FANS IN Indianapolis will scream from the mountaintops that their team should find new offensive linemen to better protect Andrew Luck. But the Colts have. Last year they took center Ryan Kelly in the first round, guard-tackle Le'Raven Clark in the third and Joe Haeg in the fifth. Now that trio, which started a combined 33 games in 2016, needs time to develop—just as any lineman that Indy picked this year would. The focus must instead go to a defense that has ranked 19th or worse in six of the last seven seasons and lacks pass rushers and ball hawks. **Erik Walden** led the team with 11 sacks, but his skill set is that of a No. 2 edge rusher. Finding a primary edge rusher, or a versatile safety, would be a great first step.



JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

3-13

PRIMARY NEED: GUARD



THIS YOUNG, talented offense grossly underachieved in 2016, starting with quarterback Blake Bortles and trickling down from there. Rather than remake the whole lineup, management should try to help its players become more consistent. Shoring up the interior O-line fosters that. Luke Joeckel, the No. 2 pick in 2013, is coming off a severe left knee injury that cost him the final 12 games. Before that he had not played well enough to justify his starting job at left tackle or guard. His spot must be refilled. At right guard, **A.J. Cann** leveled off after making steady improvements as a third-round rookie in '15, and his skill set suggests he's already hit his ceiling. He can remain a starter, but competition here wouldn't hurt.



TENNESSEE TITANS

9-7

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK



IT'S NEVER good in late November when you're releasing starters (Perrish Cox) and rotating new guys into the first string. That's precisely what went on at cornerback for Tennessee in 2016. Despite that, defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau, a long-time zone coverage advocate, continued to play man-to-man. Either LeBeau believes today's NFL demands more man coverage or he didn't trust his corners to meet the matchup responsibilities that come with his patented five-man zone blitzes. Either way, the Titans have immense needs at cornerback. If unaddressed, the situation will get worse before it gets better: **Jason McCourty**, the only reliable starter, is due for free agency in '18.





DENVER BRONCOS

9-7

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE LINE



WITH UNTESTED 2015 seventh-rounder Trevor Siemian under center, the Broncos knew they would need a run-based offense last season. There were two reasons their ground game (and playoff chances) dried up down the stretch. One: RB C.J. Anderson and underrated FB Andy Janovich suffered injuries. And two: The front five was inconsistent. Adept at times in zone blocking, at least inside, it ultimately couldn't move the line of scrimmage from snap to snap. Anderson and Janovich will both be healthy by '17, which means resources can go to the O-line. Every player except center **Matt Paradis** and maybe guard Max Garcia could stand to be replaced.



KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

12-4

PRIMARY NEED: INSIDE LINEBACKER



AT 34, middle linebacker **Derrick Johnson** is coming off his second torn Achilles in three years (one on each side). Ramik Wilson got better filling in for Johnson down the stretch, but even if he can assume more of Johnson's duties (which include taking the running back in man coverage), this position must be addressed. Despite a large, athletic defensive line, the Chiefs have ranked 22nd or worse against the run in five of the last six years. And with no depth at inside 'backer, they often have to play dime (six DBs) with a third safety in the box against three-receiver sets. As the Steelers made clear in their divisional-round win at K.C., this lighter personnel package only exacerbates the Chiefs' run-stopping woes.



OAKLAND RAIDERS

12-4

PRIMARY NEED: LINEBACKER



THOUGH THE issue abated as the 2016 season wore on, the Raiders struggled when offenses isolated their linebackers in coverage. Much of the time a simple lack of zone awareness was to blame. The fluid but inconsistent **Malcolm Smith**, Oakland's best coverage 'backer, was too often exposed. Even more so were youngsters Cory James and Ben Heeney (who is also coming off a right ankle injury that put him on IR in early October). Longtime Redskin Perry Riley helped after arriving midseason, but he's a plug-in guy. Considering the undisciplined play against the run, and given that the Raiders' D-line is already strong—if not stacked—a three-down clean-up linebacker would do wonders.

AFC + WEST

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS 5-11 PRIMARY NEED: BEST PLAYER AVAILABLE



IT'S STRANGE: If everyone is healthy, this is a playoff team. Philip Rivers and a bevy of athletic receivers lead a well-designed aerial attack. RB **Melvin Gordon** improved drastically in year two and now fits well behind what is the NFL's biggest O-line. On defense, Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa make a nimble, explosive pass-rushing tandem (if Ingram is re-signed). All the corners can play man coverage—Jason Verrett and Casey Hayward can do it against No. 1 receivers, in fact—the safeties hit hard and the inside linebackers, behind a stingy D-line, are capable. But for several years the Chargers have been ravaged by injuries. They must find more depth.

**DALLAS COWBOYS**

13-3

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE LINEMAN



GREG HARDY turned out to be a locker room cancer in 2015 (to say nothing of his off-field résumé), and the Cowboys chose not to bring the defensive end back in '16. The drug problems that led the gifted **Randy Gregory** to fall to the second round in the '15 draft persisted, and the D-end was suspended for 14 games in '16. (Now he's banned for all of '17.) DeMarcus Lawrence, a second-round pick in '14 at end, has suffered back problems. Clearly it's time for Dallas's front office to stop with the high-risk bargain hunting and just pay the premium for a quality defensive lineman. Coordinator Rod Marinelli's classic 4-3 scheme depends on production from the guys up front.

**PHILADELPHIA EAGLES**

7-9

PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER



DOWN FIVE late in a Week 14 game against the Redskins, the Eagles faced repeated must-throw scenarios—and yet they played with two wideouts and two tight ends. Almost any other team would have lined up three WRs and one TE—especially if their tight end options were Zach Ertz and career backup Trey Burton. But most other teams aren't limited by a receiving corps featuring slowpokes like **Jordan Matthews** and Nelson Agholor, or by an athletically gifted but unrefined route-runner like Dorial Green-Beckham. Philadelphia has to remedy this situation, and of these three receivers, Agholor is the one most needing to be replaced. Neither of the other two should sleep soundly though.

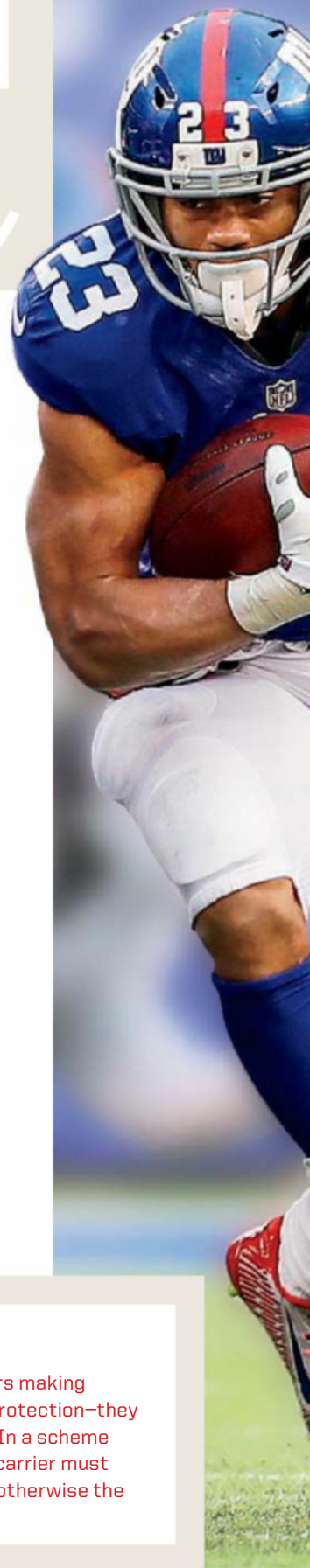
**WASHINGTON REDSKINS**

8-7-1

PRIMARY NEED: SAFETY



THE REDSKINS never got settled at safety last season, and now they have expiring contracts to deal with. Duke Ihenacho and Donte Whitner—both quality run supporters but vulnerable pass defenders—may not be re-signed. **DeAngelo Hall's** deal is up after the 2017 season; considering that he's 33 and coming off a right-ACL injury, Washington may take the \$4.25 million in cap savings (against \$813,000 in dead money) to dump him. Converted corner Will Blackmon is worth keeping, but he's also in the final year of his deal. If intriguing '16 second-round pick Su'a Cravens is earmarked to play more linebacker—he did so mostly in sub packages as a rookie—the Redskins could need two new starting safeties.

**NEW YORK GIANTS** 11-5 PRIMARY NEED: RUNNING BACK

THE GIANTS may have the NFL's simplest offensive scheme: They rely on their wide receivers making plays. And because they get the ball out quickly, they're not overly dependent on pass protection—they don't need to pony up for high-priced linemen. But consider how this impacts the run-blocking: In a scheme that requires only mid-tier linemen, that deploys no fullback and often just one tight end, a ballcarrier must create his own yards. That means New York must invest some capital in a quality back or two—otherwise the O winds up ranking 30th in yards per carry, as this one did with **Rashad Jennings** in 2016.



CHICAGO BEARS 3-13 PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER



CHICAGO HAS often endured **Alshon Jeffery's** missing time, due to either injuries or a PED suspension, so the front office may not be inclined to pay him the kind of money other teams offer in free agency. Given that uncertainty, plus the slow development of 2015 first-rounder Kevin White, there's likely a need at receiver—a *serious* need if the Bears are bothered by the deluge of dropped passes by Cameron Meredith and Josh Bellamy. When those two caught the ball, they showed the route-running acumen to be sturdy possession targets. That, however, is a description more fit for someone in a *supporting* role.



DETROIT LIONS

9-7

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE LINE



SCHEMATICALLY, the Lions' D was about as simple as it gets in 2016—their coverages were mostly undisguised zones, their fronts often static. It's fine to play this way, as long as you have destructive linemen. But the Lions have only one of those, D-end **Ziggy Ansah**, and his destructiveness led to just two sacks last season. Ansah's fellow ends, Devin Taylor and Armonty Bryant, are free agents; each is replaceable. On passing downs, Kerry Hyder is better suited for defensive tackle. Detroit doesn't have to look for an expensive edge player, however. They run a lot of stunts, with ends looping inside. Finding someone to pair with '16 second-round pick A'Shawn Robinson—and maybe supplant the declining Haloti Ngata—would be helpful.



GREEN BAY PACKERS

10-6

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK



THE MOST amazing thing about last month's NFC title game: that the Packers even got that far, given their problems at corner. They survived Odell Beckham Jr. and Dez Bryant in the first two playoff rounds; Julio Jones eventually proved too much. With **Sam Shields** out for all but one game in 2016 (concussion), and with Quinten Rollins and Damarious Randall often banged up, the undrafted LaDarius Gunter—plus considerable safety help—traveled with No. 1 receivers. Which speaks volumes. No disrespect to Gunter, but no player with such limited quickness has ever drawn consecutive matchups like Beckham, Bryant and Jones. Green Bay must ensure that such one-sided mismatches don't happen again.



MINNESOTA VIKINGS

8-8

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE TACKLE



MULTIPLE INJURIES at one position almost always bring big trouble—especially at a reactionary position like tackle. Much like how corners react to receivers, tackles react to edge rushers. And the tackles in Minnesota simply couldn't keep up in 2016. After Matt Kalil (right hip), Andre Smith (right elbow) and **Jake Long** (left Achilles) each went down before Thanksgiving, T.J. Clemmings (whose future is as a backup right tackle, at best) was forced to protect Sam Bradford's blind side. The Vikings had to overhaul their scheme just to hide him. With Kalil and Smith entering free agency (both may walk; Kalil was inconsistent and Smith is injury-prone), Minnesota must remake the position that killed this team.

ATLANTA FALCONS 11-5 PRIMARY NEED: EDGE RUSHER



NOT ONLY did the Falcons reach the Super Bowl with a powerhouse offense that's in its prime, and with a rising defense that is one of the league's youngest, but they also now enter the off-season with just *one* free agent they must re-sign: Patrick DiMarco. Luckily he plays one of the league's cheapest positions, fullback. And so this off-season will be about improving a defense that's already an improvement on recent years. The way to do that is to add a pass rusher opposite NFL sack leader **Vic Beasley**—who, by the way, still has room to grow. Atlanta employs plenty of stunts and twists out of a four-man rush. Whichever pass rusher they find must be flexible.



CAROLINA PANTHERS

6-10

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE LINE



THE PANTHERS' front four must be dynamic for their zone coverages to work. In 2016, Carolina was 3-1 in games in which the D had at least four sacks, and 3-9 in games it didn't. In '17 sacks will likely come from guys who aren't currently on the roster. D-tackles **Kawann Short** and Kyle Love (combined: 7½ sacks) are free agents. At D-end, the free-agent list includes Charles Johnson, Wes Horton and Mario Addison (16 total). Next year Kony Ealy (five) could walk. Of these players, only Short is a must re-sign—and that may be tough without franchise-tagging him. GM Dave Gettleman has lamented the D-tackle-market-setting contract signed by the Eagles' Fletcher Cox last year: six years, with \$63.3 million guaranteed.



NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

7-9

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSE (BEST AVAILABLE)



IN MARCH 2015, when the Saints traded tight end Jimmy Graham and a fourth-round pick to the Seahawks for center Max Unger and the 31st pick, GM Mickey Loomis said the end goal was to improve a defense that had been mired in mediocrity. But in the two seasons since then, the Saints have ranked 31st and 32nd in points allowed. Based on what he did as the coach in Oakland, it would seem that coordinator Dennis Allen would like to play a defense rich in variation and disguise. But with limitations at all three levels, he's had to go with schemes that simply minimize damage. With the exceptions of DT Sheldon Rankins, DE Cameron Jordan, CB Delvin Breaux and SS **Kenny Vaccaro**, Allen's unit can upgrade at any spot.



TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

9-7

PRIMARY NEED: SAFETY



DEFENSIVE coordinator Mike Smith likes to play a variety of zone coverages, often with a disguise. You don't necessarily need great safeties to operate like this, although the better you are at this position, the better your disguises. Both of the Bucs' starting safeties, Chris Conte and **Brad McDougald**, are free agents. Conte, a poor tackler who lacks range in coverage, lost his job to the much headier Keith Tandy in the final weeks of 2016 and should not be re-signed. McDougald is a quality downhill run-filler, but he can be a little hit-or-miss in coverage. Whether he's retained will largely depend on how Tampa Bay's front office feels about the NFL's '17 draft and free-agent class.





LOS ANGELES RAMS

4-12

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE LINE



PICK A spot, any spot. Left tackle Greg Robinson's feet aren't up to snuff for an NFL starter. Left guard Rodger Saffold is an average blocker, but he's injury-prone. Center Tim Barnes lacks athleticism; so does right guard Cody Wichmann. Right tackle **Rob Havenstein**. . . Well, O.K., maybe he's worth keeping—but only because he has shown improvement in his two years in the NFL and because he plays a position at which the league lacks capable athletes. If new coach Sean McVay is to run the cutting-edge system he previously employed with the Redskins, if second-year QB Jared Goff is to have a prayer, if running back Todd Gurley is to see any daylight, the Rams must make changes up front.



SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

10-5-1

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK



POPULAR opinion holds that the Seahawks need help along the O-line. That's not *untrue*. But understand: Seattle has addressed this position already. This team is just waiting on some young guys to mature. It's entirely possible—*likely*, in fact—that this group will remain unchanged. Pete Carroll and GM John Schneider have enough job stability (and wisdom) to wait out the O-line's development. The more pressing need is at corner. The depth here is iffy, and the right-side spot, opposite **Richard Sherman**, is very much in question after rising fifth-year pro DeShawn Sheard tore his left ACL in the playoff loss to the Falcons. Expect the Seahawks to look for a strong, lanky defender to play outside.



SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

2-14

PRIMARY NEED: QUARTERBACK



AN UNUSUAL front-office arrangement and unpredictable behavior by the owner—those aren't the only reasons quality coaching candidates initially rejected this job. (The 49ers were lucky to get one of the best young coordinators, former Falcons OC Kyle Shanahan.) There's also the matter of San Francisco not having a QB capable of elevating this team. **Colin Kaepernick** lacks the pocket acumen, field vision and throwing touch to lead an NFL offense. There's a tendency to think that Shanahan's system, with its emphasis on moving pockets and play-action, can save the 29-year-old. But no. Even on the move, his limitations are problematic. Plus, even in Shanahan's scheme, the QB plays on the move on fewer than half the snaps.

NFC + WEST

ARIZONA CARDINALS 7-8-1 PRIMARY NEED: GUARD



NO DEFENSE has more talent under expired contracts than the Cardinals': Calais Campbell, Froste Rucker, Chandler Jones, Kevin Minter, D.J. Swearinger and Tony Jefferson are all free agents. Some of them will have to be replaced externally. But things are even more dire along the interior O-line. Left guard Mike Iupati (who had a poor season) is the only usable returning piece. Center A.Q. Shipley's deal is up; guards Evan Mathis and Earl Watford also enter free agency (and they're both replaceable). Arizona runs a lot of empty formations, with no one in the backfield to help protect QB **Carson Palmer**. It's imperative that the core of this line be strong.



'17 STORIES // NBA

LITTLE MAN, BIG SHOTS

*No player this season is shorter than
ISAIAH THOMAS. No player in history
has been more explosive in the fourth
quarter than the 5' 9" dynamo, who has
lifted Boston to second in the East*

BY TIM LAYDEN

Photographs by
Greg Nelson

THE CLOSER

Against the Lakers last Friday, Thomas scored 17 of his 38 points in the final frame to help preserve a 113-107 victory, the Celtics' sixth in a row.

THREE HOURS before a late-January game in Washington, Isaiah Thomas, the Celtics' 5' 9" All-Star point guard, walks slowly through a Verizon Center tunnel, like a beleaguered civil servant going to work on a cold Tuesday morning, and onto the lacquered floor of the playing surface. The seats are empty, there is no music playing, and building personnel are bustling about. The hockey ice below the court keeps the air chilled. Thomas wears a green, long-sleeved shirt over practice shorts, three-quarter-length compression tights and low black Nikes with a green swoosh. No headband, not until the curtain goes up. "That's for fashion," he says. (And also an homage to Jason Terry, the 18-year NBA veteran and friend from their shared Seattle-Tacoma home area; Terry's headband is an homage to '70s-vintage Seattle Supersonics guard Slick Watts.) Assistant coach Jerome Allen begins feeding Thomas passes, and Thomas begins shooting, as he does three hours before every game, because Terry told Thomas early in his career to find a routine and stick with it. This is part of Thomas's routine.

Thomas shoots for 20 minutes, flicking soft, lefthanded jumpers, first from 15 feet out. He shoots with his body angled at 45 degrees to the backboard, left foot forward, the ball held low in front of his forehead and then snapped at the rim. It is a sudden movement, distinctly different from, say, Klay Thompson's silky motion. Thomas extends his arc until he is well past the top of the circle, receives a pass from Allen and then turns to find his vision suddenly blocked by a member of the Wizards' dance team, which has quietly taken the floor for rehearsal. Thomas at first squares up and then pauses, stymied. It is an instructive moment: The dancer is taller than the second-leading scorer in the NBA. Taller than a man who in late December scored 29 of his career-high 52 points in the fourth quarter of a win over the Heat (the second-highest-scoring fourth quarter in NBA history, behind Wilt Chamberlain's 31 the night he finished with





100 in 1962). Taller than the catalyst of the Celtics' rebirth, which at week's end had taken them within 2½ games of the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference. (To be fair, the dancer is wearing fancy white boots that might be giving her a lift. Still. . .) After a moment's awkwardness, she steps aside and Thomas drains a 25-footer while laughing. Then the shooting continues.

Thomas has always been short. He was not one of those kids who matured young and became dominant in sports, only to stall out and watch other boys catch up and pass him. In the third-grade class picture from Naches Trail Elementary School in Tacoma, Wash., he is smack in the middle of the second row, wearing a billowing, yellow Lakers' baseball jersey that falls nearly to the floor, flanked by two girls taller than he is. Thomas's father is 5' 6". His grandfather was 5' 6". Upon reaching adolescence and still awaiting a growth spurt, Thomas tried to accelerate the process. "In my basement, he had one machine that was supposed to stretch him out and another machine so he could hang upside down," says Thomas's mother, Tina Baldtrip (5' 7"). Thomas would tell everyone that he was going to be 6 feet someday, but he is 27 years old and that day is not coming.

He has adapted just fine.

In a year full of stunning individual performances, Thomas has made his case as the NBA's most compelling player. Thomas, who is in his second full season with Boston, has raised his scoring average from 22.2

a year ago to 29.9 (second to Russell Westbrook's 30.8), including a streak of 34 games scoring at least 20 points. His average of 10.7 points in the fourth quarter leads the league by a wide margin, the highest since the NBA began tracking the statistic in 1996 and the foundation of his growing legend. After hitting jumpers on three straight possessions to close out a Jan. 13 victory in Atlanta, Thomas pointed at his left wrist and shouted "My time! My time!" He scored 24 points in the fourth quarter (and 41 overall) in a 113–109 win over the Pistons in Boston on Jan. 30. After that game Detroit coach Stan Van Gundy said, "When they hit the fourth quarter . . . he's just a one-



man team." Thomas has scored 20 or more points in the fourth quarter four times this season; no other player has done it more than once. "That's just me," says Thomas. "That's me in those moments. Like I say, the fourth quarter isn't for everybody."

He has lifted the Celtics on his back. In the fourth season since Brad Stevens was hired away from Butler by general manager Danny Ainge to oversee the rebuilding of one of the league's foundation franchises, Boston is 32–18, on pace to win more than 50 games for the first

time since 2011, the penultimate season of the Big Three and Rondo. The C's have been helped by the off-season acquisition of center Al Horford, the drafting of rookie swingman Jaylen Brown and the continued development of forward Jae Crowder and guards Marcus Smart and Avery Bradley. But the team's blood flows through Thomas's veins. "He makes the decisions, when to attack, when to dish it," says Horford. "And he brings it every night."

Most remarkably, Thomas does these things while rising 69 inches from floor to headband. According to StatsPass, in the last 40 years there have been just 55 NBA players under 6 feet tall (and only 12 were 5' 9" or shorter). This list doesn't include some of the best little men in history: Allen

Iverson officially played at 6 feet; Nate Archibald was listed at 6' 1", ditto John Stockton. Thomas has his own personal list: "Nate Robinson, Tiny Archibald, Allen Iverson, Calvin Murphy, Muggsy Bogues, Spud Webb, Terrell Brandon," he says, and then mentions another, 5' 10" lefthander Damon Stoudamire, who played 13 years, including eight in Portland when Thomas was growing up in the Northwest. "He had a Mighty Mouse tattoo," says Thomas. "So one of my first tattoos was Mighty Mouse." It's inked into Thomas's right arm.

The highest single-season scoring average by a player under 6 feet is 5' 10" Michael Adams's 26.5 in 1990–91; Adams shot just 39.4% (and 29.6% from beyond the arc) for the freewheeling Nuggets, while Thomas is a 47.0% shooter. Murphy is the only other sub-6-footer to have averaged more than 25 points: 25.6 in 1977–78, without the three-point line. Thomas stands to obliterate those numbers.

Thomas succeeds while playing with



THE LITTLE TICKET

Thomas has come a long way since he and Love (top, in 2005) teamed up in AAU ball.



Says Stevens, “He’s got that ultimate chip on his shoulder where there is no success that can make him **TAKE HIS FOOT OFF THE PEDAL.”**

an intense fury, much the same as he played as a kid. “Exact same game,” says Terry. “Fearless, pit-bull competitor, not backing down from anybody.” He is an outstanding three-point shooter (a career-best 38.8% this year, rising to 42.5% in the fourth quarter), but his game grows from relentless attacks on the rim. “He gets low and he explodes,” says Jamal Crawford of the Clippers, a 15-year NBA veteran and, like Terry, a friend and mentor to Thomas from back home. “He’s like an NFL running back going through holes.” Thomas is built accordingly, a solid 180 pounds.

“It’s truly amazing what he’s able to accomplish in that regard, getting to the rim at his height,” says Stevens. “Here’s a guy that’s always had to figure out how to do it. And boy, has he figured it out. He’s got that ultimate chip on his shoulder where there is no success that can make him take his foot off the pedal and no slight that he misses.”

Now Thomas is sitting on a tall chair in a hallway near the visitors’ locker room in Washington. It has been a dizzying season so far, and four months lie ahead. In his sixth NBA season (with his third team), Thomas has both given his own jersey to Floyd Mayweather at courtside in Boston and worn a jersey from Tom Brady on the Patriots’ sideline in Foxborough. He both denies and embraces his size. “Honestly,” he says, “I don’t see height. I just, I figure out a way. I’ve been doing it my whole life. I’ve been the smallest player on every court I’ve ever been on in my life. But I don’t feel small. I feel as big as everybody else.”

SINCE EARLY childhood, Thomas has mixed his lack of height with a thunderous, unshakable drive. When he was between 10 and 14 years old, Isaiah would travel with his father, Keith, all over Tacoma for weekend pickup games—with adults. They would play at the People’s Community Center, at the Pearl Street YMCA and sometimes at McCord Air Force Base. “Isaiah was a little kid and most of the guys were grown men,” says Keith. “And Isaiah was cocky, and he had a smart mouth on him. He’d beat those guys and talk about it, and then they would want to fight him.” One night Thomas called his father from the lobby of the YMCA. “He said, ‘Dad, there’s a bunch of men outside waiting to fight me because I just beat them in a game,’” says Keith. Father picked up son and drove him home. Soon enough, it would happen again. Little boy kicking ass inside, big men waiting in the darkness for revenge.

At 16, Thomas moved across the country to play at tiny South Kent (Conn.) School, a way station for future college players. There was no shortage of talent or size. Thomas brought his attitude along with his game, “Isaiah was cocky and brash,” says Raphael Chillious, Thomas’s coach at South Kent. “Early on, a couple of the bigger guys came to me and said, ‘Man, that little guy, if he keeps talking trash every day, we’re gonna wring his neck.’” At the University of Washington, where Chillious became an assistant coach, a teammate would answer Thomas’s trash talk with a



little of his own and then, says Chillious, “practice would become a game, and Isaiah would just go off.”

In Thomas’s final year with the Huskies, 2010–11, he was on the bench during a timeout late in a game at Washington State. He needed to urinate but refused to leave the bench, so trainers helped him stuff a handful of towels down his game shorts and he peed in the towels. A few weeks later Thomas played 123 of 125 minutes in the Pac-12 tournament, hitting the game-winning shot in overtime against Arizona to win the championship.

Stevens has seen it for two years, a welcoming smile off the floor, a fierce intensity on it. “He’s a nice guy to be around,” says Stevens. “But when he gets on the court, he is one competitive dude.”

IT’S PERILOUS to assess the genealogical stew that produces any human, but Thomas’s lineage offers tempting hints. His father, whose given name is James but who has always gone by Keith, was raised in Inglewood, a few blocks away from the Forum, where he scalped Lakers and Kings tickets. Keith’s father, also named James, was a corrections officer. “Strict as hell,” says Keith, who moved to Tacoma in high school. “So I was strict, too.”

Isaiah’s mother moved with her family from Wichita to Tacoma when she was 12. Tina’s grandfather was a Pentecostal pastor who oversaw three churches. One of them, God’s Pentecostal Church at 25th Street and Tacoma Avenue, was connected to her grandfather’s house. “I used to sneak out during services,” says Isaiah, “and go in the house to watch the morning game on the *NBA on NBC*.”

Tina became pregnant in the spring of 1988. A longtime Lakers fan, Keith took a bet from a friend that he wouldn’t name his son after Isiah Thomas, the Hall of Fame Pistons guard and Lakers nemesis. Keith took the bet, although Tina insisted on the Biblical spelling of Isaiah. Isaiah was born in February 1989, four months before the Pistons defeated the Lakers to win their first NBA title. Keith and Tina did not get married or stay together and Isaiah bounced back and forth between their homes for most of his first 16 years. Keith called his son Bighead, or just Head, for short. “Little body, big head,” says Keith, whose father called him by that same name. Tina called him Zeke, because that was the “other” Isiah Thomas’s nickname, and she liked it. (She did not like Bighead at all.)

Thomas developed into a local legend on the basketball court. He played on a Portland-based AAU team that included Kevin Love. “He and Kevin were like Muppet Babies, little versions of what they are today,” says Bill Feinberg, a p.r. professional and Love family friend who watched many of the youth games. By the time Isaiah was a sophomore at Curtis High, he was filling gyms. “They had to bring his teams in through the back door because the crowds were so big,” says Alonzo Weatherby, who

A LOOK AHEAD

WHOSE TROPHY IS IT?

Handicapping the MVP race

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Bidding to lead the NBA in scoring and assists; only Nate Archibald (1972–73) has done that. His efficiency is decent, and Houston is overachieving. Odds: even.

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KEVIN DURANT FORWARD **WARRIORS**

The best player on the best team always has a chance—and it will get better if Golden State can maintain its 70-win pace. Odds: 15 to 1

THE FIELD

Top sleepers: LeBron James and Kawhi Leonard.

Odds: 25 to 1

—Rohan Nadkarni



was a mentor to Thomas during his teen years. Thomas’s 51-point performance in a junior-year loss to Franklin High in the state semifinals was such a memorable event that *Seattle Times* reporter Jayson Jenks did an oral history of the game last February. Jenks wrote in his lede, “Under the strange, gloomy lights inside the Tacoma Dome, the legend was hatched, and over the next decade, reality gave way to hyperbole.”

Success gave Thomas a big head of a different kind, one that left him indifferent to schoolwork and authority and ineligible to receive a scholarship to play at Washington. At the urging of Huskies coach Lorenzo Romar and assistant Cameron Dollar, and with the full support of Keith—but not Tina, and definitely not Isaiah himself—Thomas was shipped east to spend two

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seasons at South Kent, where students are required to wear jackets and ties to class. Isaiah, desperately homesick, did not like it. “It was something I needed, and it was the best decision of my life,” he says. “But I hated it every day I was there.”

Life in the East was made easier by proximity to New York City, where Crawford and Nate Robinson, another Seattle native, were playing for the Knicks. “We played games where the gym was almost empty and there was Jamal Crawford sitting in the top row,” says Chillious.

Thomas played three years at Washington before declaring for the draft. His family put together a draft-day party in April 2011, in the basement common room of Thomas’s Seattle apartment, but the mood soured when his name went uncalled until the Kings took him with the 60th and final pick. None of the 59 players taken ahead of him have scored more NBA points.

Although Sacramento was a struggle, there was no question about his talent. “So damn fast, such a good shooter,” says Pete Carril, a Kings assistant in Thomas’s first season. “I told him, whatever happens, don’t get tired of making shots.”



“So damn fast, such a good shooter,” recalls Carril of Thomas. “I told him, whatever happens, **DON’T GET TIRED OF MAKING SHOTS.”**

Thomas struggled to get minutes behind Tyreke Evans (drafted No. 4 in 2009) and Jimmer Fredette (taken 10th in ’11, 50 spots ahead of Thomas). “The environment was not conducive to winning,” says Keith Smart, one of three coaches Thomas had in his three seasons in Sacramento. “I kept trying to tell Isaiah, ‘Don’t get caught up in what’s happening now. Focus on where you’re going with this, long-term.’” Smart eventually benched Fredette and moved Evans off the ball for Thomas in his second year. In 2013–14 he averaged 20.3 points for a 28-win team and escaped to Phoenix in a sign-and-trade that he helped engineer. That lasted 46 games and just one start, before he was sent to Boston as part of a three-way deal in February 2015.

The first person to text Thomas after the trade was the other Isaiah Thomas. “I called him back,” says Thomas, “and he told me, ‘This is the best thing that could have happened to you. You’re with a real organization now. And the fans there will love you.’”

INDEED, THOMAS is one of those athletes now who owns a small piece of a passionate sports city. It’s smaller than Brady’s and smaller than David Ortiz’s, but it’s a piece nonetheless. And the city owns a piece of him back. “It’s a little crazy when I go to the mall,” Thomas says. “But I still try to go.” He lives in a Cambridge apartment with his wife, Kayla, and their four-year-old son, Jaiden. (Thomas has a six-year-old son, James, who lives with his mother in Seattle and visits at least monthly.) Thomas wears number 4, not because he kills the fourth quarter, but because it was the only available number he liked. He would like to change to 11, now that former teammate Evan Turner is gone, “but then I would feel bad for everybody who paid money for number 4 already.”

He is not only one of the most productive players in the NBA, but is also one of the most underpaid, in the third year of a four-year contract worth \$27 million. The Celtics can renegotiate him up slightly after this season, but the bigger decision will come in 2018, when Thomas will become an unrestricted free agent while the cap-rich Celtics try to get better. His playoff drive is also a salary drive. “I want to continue to play better every night,” says Thomas. “So when the time comes, I’ll get the

most I possibly can.” Ainge will decide how much to pay Thomas and how much to spend on other stars who are, among other things, probably taller.

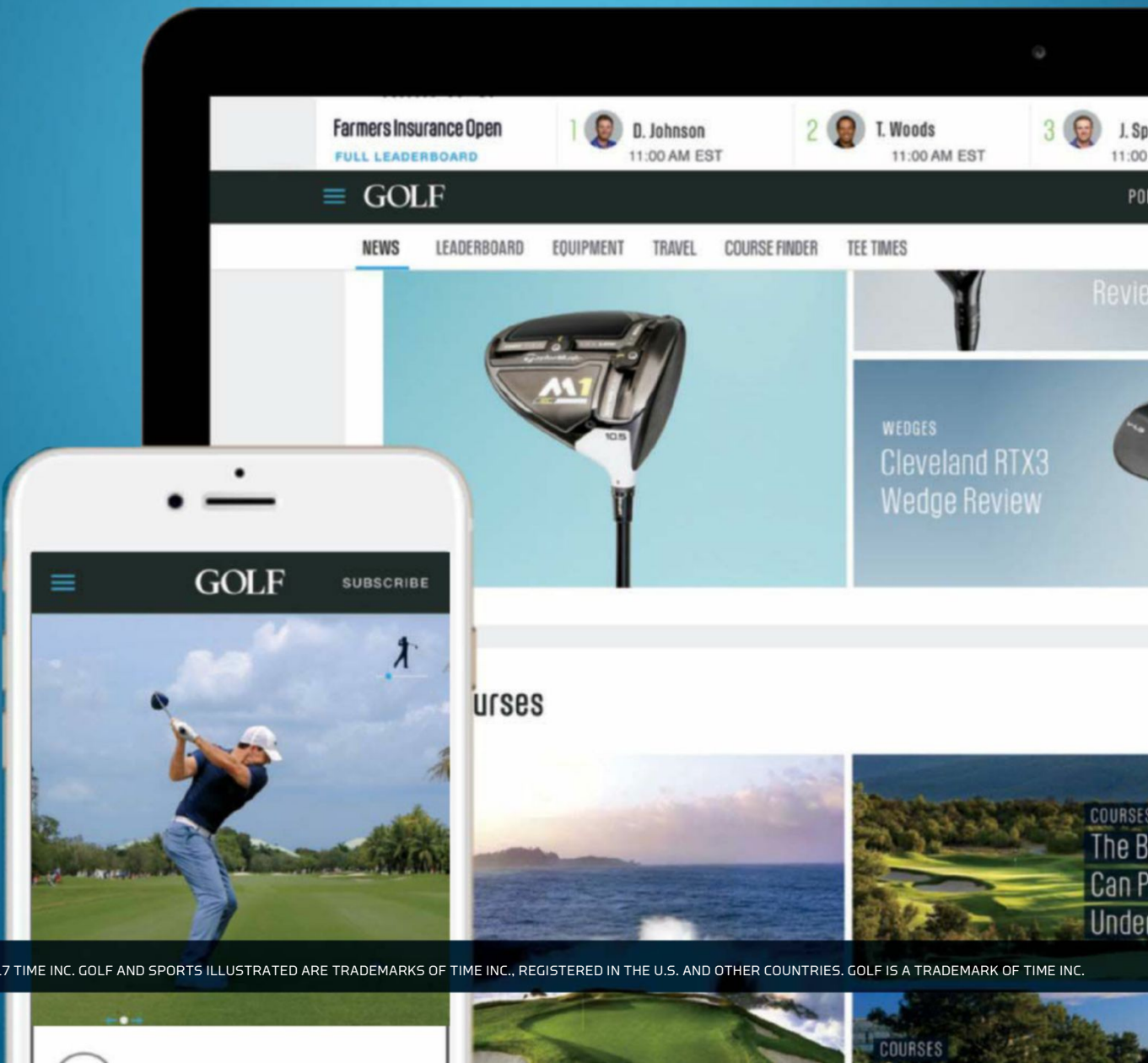
For now, there is a more intriguing question in play: How far can a team go on shoulders so close to the earth? The conference finals? The Finals? A championship? “I don’t look at ceilings,” says Stevens. It will be a punishing run, literally. No matter the degree of Thomas’s survival skills, he will continue to attack the basket. Crawford has advised him to get knocked down less frequently. “He can get to the rim any time he wants to,” says Crawford. “But now he’s on everybody’s radar. So pick your spots. Don’t wind up on the ground. The ground is undefeated.”

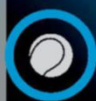
Horford grimaces when presented with this scenario. “But Isaiah puts so much pressure on the rim. It’s tough.”

Thomas says, “It’s hard to change.” Then comes the smile. It is a familiar story, just like outside the YMCA back home. A little man scoring and talking about it. Big men waiting to beat him up. □

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'17 STORIES // *Tennis*

WON FOR THE AGED

With power, finesse and sheer will
ROGER FEDERER and **SERENA WILLIAMS**,
both 35, became Australian Open
champs and served notice that they're
still at the top of their game

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

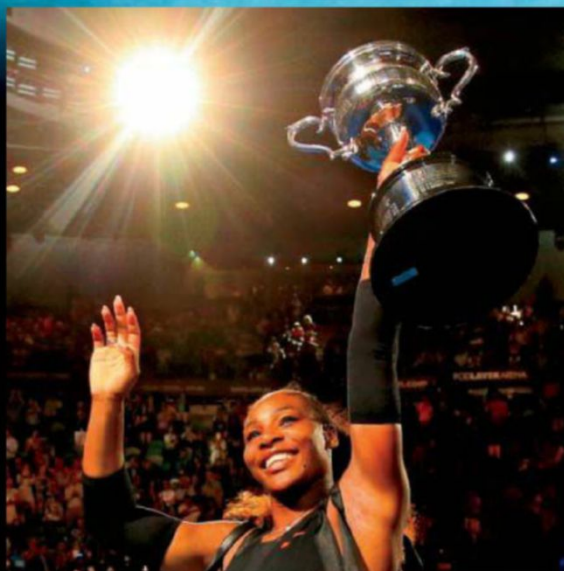
Photograph by
Jack Thomas/Getty Images

IN SUMMER of 1981, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* reigned at the box office, Hall and Oates infected us with a string of objectively awful but undeniably catchy pop hits, and President Ronald Reagan, in his first year on the job, enjoyed encouraging popularity. It was a hell of a season for tennis, too, though that had nothing to do with John McEnroe and Tracy Austin winning the U.S. Open.

Under unfathomably, almost comically, different circumstances, the two best players in tennis came into the world. On Aug. 8, 1981, Roger Federer was born in Basel, Switzerland, to parents so fiercely middle class that they would have giggled at the notion that their only son would become a professional athlete, much less a star. The following month, in Saginaw, Mich., Serena Williams was loosed upon the world, a child who, according to her father, was conceived for the express purpose of becoming a tennis champion.

Their backgrounds, their career paths, their dispositions, their entire modes of being . . . contrast sharply. But Federer and Williams also share a remarkable symmetry. Ultimately, they arrived at the same place: not merely champions, but transcendent figures who have redefined their line of work. And for all their gifts, their ultimate validation might be their longevity. At age 35, here they are, still at the peak of their profession, making balloon animals out of time.

Perhaps never was their greatness more evident than at the 2017 Australian Open. Zigging when the rest of the world seemed to be zagging, globalization and pluralism and multiculturalism thrived, a climate of what you might call xenophilia in the air. It was somehow fitting that both the men's and women's finals featured a rivalry



SCOTT BARBOUR/GETTY IMAGES



ON TOP, DOWN UNDER

Federer bested three Top 10 players to reach the final, while Williams faced a familiar, familial foe for her 23rd major title.



that doesn't polarize, but unites. Serena played her older sister Venus for the 28th time, triggering the inevitable chants of "C'mon, Williams." And when Federer met his nemesis, Rafael Nadal, the following night, the fan holding a sign reading GO FEDAL: I CAN'T DECIDE WHO I WANT expressed the thoughts of many.

While there exists an abundance of choices—23 for her; 18 for him—you could make the case that, for both of them, this event marked the most meaningful Grand Slam title. Over seven rounds, against a field of 127 opponents—128, if you count Time—they put their greatness on display. Sometimes they won with power, other times with shot-making and still other times with sheer will.

In Serena's case she arrived in Melbourne seeking answers. If momentum could be quantified, hers would have fit comfortably in an overhead bin. After winning *only* one major in 2016 and surrendering her No. 1 ranking to Angelique Kerber of Germany, she took time off in the fall and went weeks without playing a tournament. In her first tournament back (the ASB Classic in Auckland in early January), Serena committed a ghastly 88 unforced errors and bowed out to journeywoman Madison Brengle. There were happy distractions, too: before New Year's she announced her engagement to Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian. But when the Australian Open oddsmakers insisted that Serena was still the pretournament favorite, you wondered if they had stopped watching women's tennis.

There are two elements of the game that players can control, independent of the opponent: their serve and their attitude. Serena has mastered both. Winning all 14 sets she played in Australia, Serena blasted 54 aces. But it was her attitude that carried the day. "I'm always thinking, I want to stay out there as long as I can," she said midway through the tournament. Her coach suggested this was mere modesty: "There are not really moral victories with Serena," says Patrick Mouratoglou, who has worked with her since 2012, encompassing 10 major titles. "She feels she should win every time she plays. And to be honest, she's right."

In the Australian final, she had the familiar challenge of facing Venus, now 36. While the salon marveled at the latest chapter of The Greatest Sports Story Ever Told, Serena was not sentimental. She instructed Mouratoglou to scout the opponent, watch tape, and fashion a game

plan. With the trophy on the line, Serena executed, winning their 28th intra-family match 6–4, 6–4. "Playing Venus, it's stuff that legends are made of," she says. "I couldn't have written a better story."

Meanwhile, Federer was on a parallel track in the men's draw. Like Serena, he had played only seven events in 2016, done in by a bum left knee he had injured while drawing a bath for his twin daughters in January 2016. He came to Melbourne seeded No. 17, and it was unclear whether he was there to launch a comeback or a farewell tour. The answer came when he beat three Top 10 players to reach the final.

To win his first major title since 2012, Federer would have to beat his great nemesis, Nadal. Fed-Nadal Bowl XXXV came freighted with so much history, and such significant implications. You can argue that Federer's credentials as the GOAT rode on the outcome. A Nadal victory would whittle the career Slam title gap to 17–15—this, after having given Federer a two-year head start—

with the French Open, in his personal sandbox, next. Entering the match with a whopping 23–11 head-to-head record, if Nadal continued his dominance over Federer, he would amplify the skeptics' question, *How can Federer be the best ever when he's not necessarily the best in his own era?*

It was moot, as Federer played the money match of his life. Marrying his extravagant shotmaking and movement with uncommon aggression, especially on the backhand side—"I told myself, Be free in your head, be free in your shots"—he won the first and third sets. When Nadal made his predictable comeback to win the fourth set and Federer received treatment for an upper leg injury, the match had a familiar ring. In the final set, though, Federer out-Nadaled his opponent, showing a taste for battle not always in evidence and reeling off the last five games to win an insta-classic 6–4, 3–6, 6–1, 3–6, 6–3. "It's all about the comeback," he said, "about an epic match with Rafa again."

Federer became the second-oldest man to win a title in the Open era (behind Ken Rosewall, who won in Australia at age 37 in 1972). Serena became the oldest female. For perspective: During the Australian Open, the International Tennis Hall of Fame announced its class of 2017. Both of this year's inductees—Andy Roddick of the U.S. and Kim Clijsters of



BY THE NUMBERS

LEAGUE OF MAJORS

Serena (above, with Venus) and Federer are going strong at 35. Here's when other greats won their last majors.

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA 33

WIMBLEDON '90

ANDRE AGASSI 32

AUSTRALIAN OPEN '03

PETE SAMPRAS 31

U.S. OPEN '02

STEFFI GRAF 29

FRENCH OPEN '99

VENUS WILLIAMS 28

WIMBLEDON '08

BJORN BORG 25

FRENCH OPEN '81

JOHN MCENROE 25

U.S. OPEN '84



Belgium—are younger than Federer and Serena. “People don’t always realize what it takes not just to be good but to stay good,” says Roddick. “What they’re doing is a joke.”

As is the case when, say, the Super Bowl star quarterback is almost 40, the question “How have they been able to do it?” has been much discussed among the sport’s chattering class. Some explanations:

- “The sport has never been more physical” has become tennis’s unofficial slogan. Full physical maturity is required. The notion of waifish teenagers competing with men in a best-of-five format is laughable. (There are currently no teenagers in either tour’s Top 10, and six of the eight semifinalists in Melbourne were over 30.)
- Federer and Williams both make tens of millions of dollars annually, between prize money and endorsements. This enables them to travel with physios and hire nutritionists and fly privately, all reducing wear and tear.
- The days of top players entering 20-plus events per season are gone. Much in the same way we entitle NBA veterans to take off the occasional regular-season game, Serena played only seven tournaments in 2016. She, Federer and Nadal all took the fall off. After Australia, neither she nor Federer may play until March. Keeping the odometer down adds years to a car—same for these finely tuned instruments.
- While less scientific, there’s also this: Federer and Serena are really, really good, once-in-a-generation talents who resist historical trends. With their skills, the usual metrics aren’t relevant. “You have to realize what special players these two are,” says Paul Annacone, a Tennis Channel analyst and Federer’s former coach. “It was ‘Why stop at 30?’ Now it’s ‘Why stop at 35?’ ”

There’s little to suggest that the Australian Open isn’t

a prologue to the rest of the season. Serena is back at No. 1 and has reached the final in eight of the last 10 Slams. If she comes anywhere close to replicating the level she displayed in Melbourne, she’ll return to juggernaut mode, almost assured of surpassing Margaret Court’s record of 24 majors. “I [am] feeling good about my game; I don’t want it to stop!” she says. “One thing about a champion—they keep fighting, they keep going.” For Federer, too, it’s easy to envision more winning in his future. It has been two years since he entered a major and didn’t reach at least the semifinals. Novak Djokovic, the unrivaled king at this point last year, is still struggling with “personal issues.” Andy Murray is ranked No. 1, but he

has exited early at the last two majors.

Not only is there no sense that the machines are winding down; there’s no sense that their motivation is diminishing. Federer still enjoys competing and winning, but he also still enjoys his role as the sport’s moral compass. He has the means to travel with his wife and four kids but readily refers to the tennis caravan as “my second family.”

Serena is galvanized by something less abstract: history, especially the all-time Slam record. And, as was the case when she started her career, it helps that she has her sister around. “The motivation she gives me, it’s really second to nothing,” she says. After winning the title in Australia, she celebrated with friends in the players’ lounge and treated herself to her usual post-tournament snack, Kentucky Fried Chicken. When she finished off a wing and announced, “I’m still hungry,” she could have been talking about her career.

Speaking of not being fully Fed. . . . Moments after winning the title in Melbourne, a giddy Federer declared he was “going to party like a rock star.” Immediately social media lit up. Was this a veiled suggestion of finality? But at well past midnight he was still making the rounds inside and outside the arena. He orbited a secondary court ringed with fans who had been watching on a monitor, the benevolent king acknowledging his acolytes. He sat for interviews, glad-handed choice sponsors and other tennis bigwigs. At one point, his wife, Mirka, shot him a glance suggesting that perhaps it was time to leave. He shrugged and sent back a warm look that, unmistakably, implied, *There’s still business to tend to. Why the rush?* □

OLD FLAMES

Williams was in top form, blasting 54 aces, and Federer displayed uncommon aggression in his insta-classic win over Nadal.



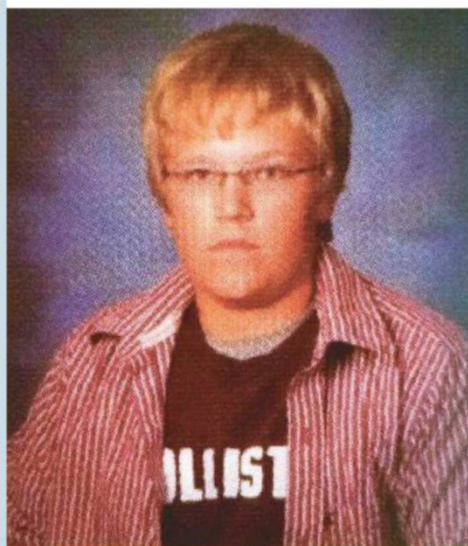
'17 STORIES // MLB

SYNDERELLA

*He's the hardest-throwing starter in the majors, but before he got the flowing locks and the ripped physique, Mets ace **NOAH SYNDERGAARD** was an awkward kid. Then Bumpy turned himself into Thor*

BY BEN REITER

Photograph by
Jim McIsaac/Getty Images



Noah Syndergaard

THE KID in the yearbook photo is you. He is me. He is everyone who was ever mired in adolescent awkwardness. He is 5' 11"—tall for his 14 years—and he weighs 180 pounds, much of it baby fat beneath his XXL T-shirt. He has glasses, a bad haircut and a small, tight frown.

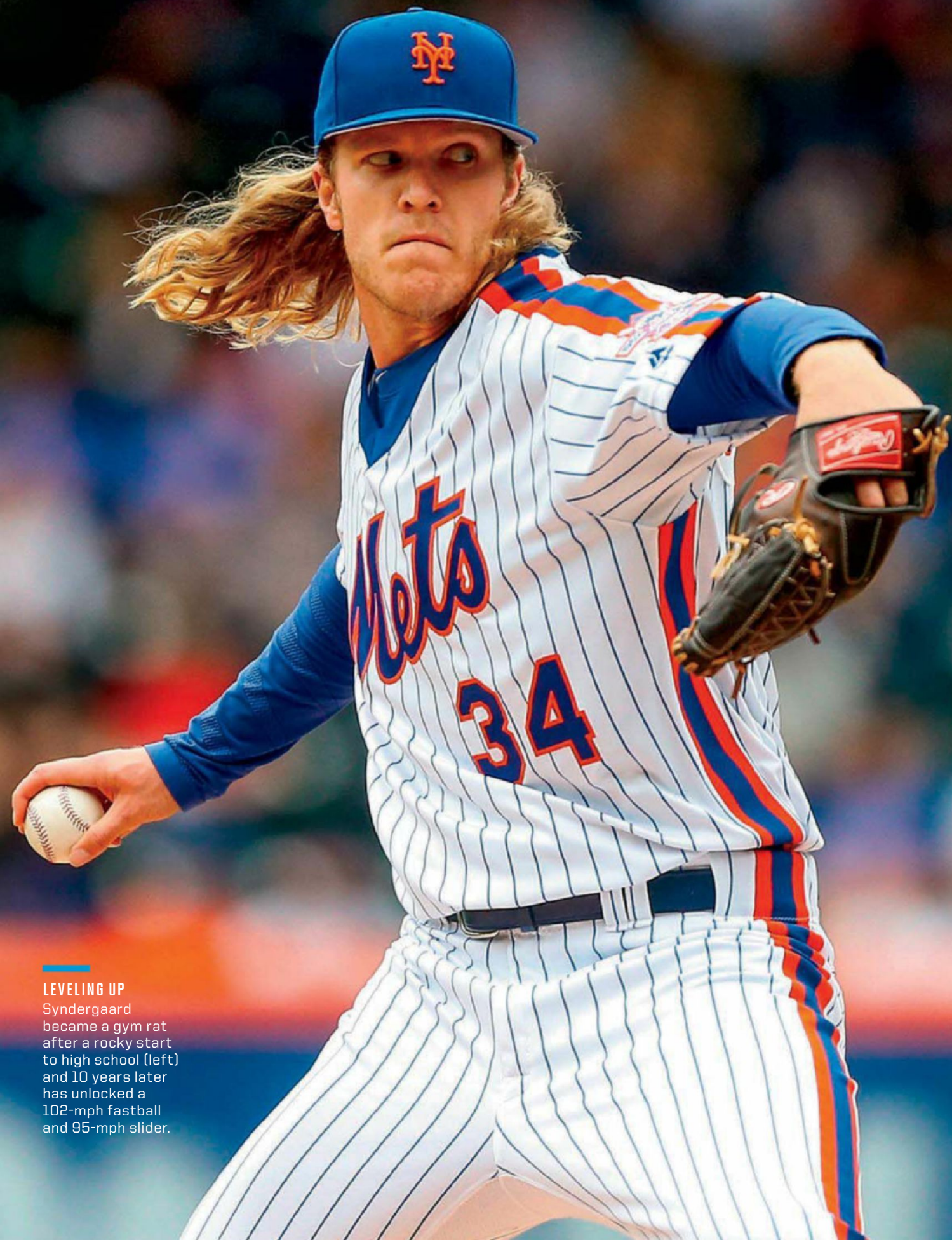
He lives in Mansfield, a suburb of Dallas growing so fast that it seems to add a new high school every fall. All of his friends from middle school have just started their freshman year at Mansfield Summit High, but he is zoned for Mansfield High. He lives with his father, Brad, who raises and breeds horses, and his mother, Heidi, who works in customer service for a medical device company. While he has two half-sisters, his father's daughters, they are 14 and 17 years older and he doesn't see them often.

He loves sports, and he has shown at least some talent for them, especially baseball. A few years earlier, during one of their late-afternoon practice sessions, he hit a Wiffle ball so hard that it broke his dad's glasses, sending him to the emergency room. He can throw nearly 80 mph, which isn't bad. But he is slow and uncoordinated—his family nickname is Bumpy, for the knots that often rise on his forehead due to his clumsiness—and whatever self-confidence he has diminishes by the day.

Being part of a team hasn't helped. He tried football in middle school. The coaches gave him a specially made helmet to accommodate his glasses and large head, put him on the offensive line and watched the much bigger kids from Dallas run him over before the snap reached the quarterback. He once pleaded with his mother to take him home before the game even started. She was protective and wanted to, but she didn't think that would be a good lesson. "What, are you scared?" his coach would ask him. "Well, yeah," he would say.

When he's a freshman on the baseball team, the other kids make fun of him because he's bulky and hardly ever talks and doesn't yet have hair under his arms. He dreams

COURTESY ASHLEY MOORE (YEARBOOK PHOTO)



LEVELING UP

Syndergaard became a gym rat after a rocky start to high school (left) and 10 years later has unlocked a 102-mph fastball and 95-mph slider.



of making the majors, but he can hardly get into a game. He likes animals. Maybe he will become a veterinarian.

Ten years later he folds his powerful, 6' 6" frame beneath a small table at a trendy restaurant in Dallas that serves his preferred cuisine: lean protein, juices, kombucha, not a molecule of gluten. Through his contacts, he examines the freshman yearbook photo on the screen of an iPhone. His name, NOAH SYNDERGAARD, is printed beneath the image in block letters, but even he has trouble believing it sometimes. "I see a very confused kid," he says. He looks again, for a long time, and shakes his head.

How did *that* Noah Syndergaard become this one—the badass ace of the Mets, with flowing blond locks, a physique fit for the cover of a drugstore bodice-ripper, a 102-mile-per-hour fastball and the nickname of a Norse god?

SYNDERGAARD, NOW known as Thor, debuted with the Mets less than two years ago, in May 2015, when he was 22. Since then the righthander has struck out 384 batters in 333 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings and has a 2.89 ERA. As a rookie he earned New York's only win in the 2015 World Series against the Royals. Last year he

carried the Mets back to the playoffs while injuries sidelined the other four members of what was supposed to be their dominant young rotation—Jacob DeGrom, Matt Harvey, Steven Matz and Zack Wheeler. New York lost to Madison Bumgarner and the Giants 3–0 in the NL wild-card game, but it wasn't because of Syndergaard. He threw seven shut-out innings, yielding two hits and striking out 10. He is asked if he is now the club's

with a grueling exercise in which the players pushed a sled loaded with 270 pounds down a gummy track and then pulled one carrying 330 pounds back. Some of the other players had to take several gasping minutes off between each pass. Syndergaard never missed a turn.

His goal at the beginning of the off-season was to bulk up from 237 pounds to 250. A month before pitchers and catchers were due to report, he weighed in at 253



HAMMER TIME

Syndergaard hit three homers last season, adding to the invincible aura that made him a fan favorite and earned him a *Kevin Can Wait* cameo.

"I always want to raise the bar," says Syndergaard. "Right now, with me throwing 100, I'm not sure that's attainable." **BUT I'D LIKE TO TRY.**

leader. "On the pitching staff? I guess you could say that."

The loss stung, but he spent part of this winter enjoying the fruits of his quickly blossoming fame. Dressed as Thor (of course), he guest-starred on the Halloween episode of Kevin James's CBS sitcom, *Kevin Can Wait*. "I said *bro* a lot, which is not really a thing that I say," he recalls. He watched a then undefeated 2-year-old colt named Syndergaard lose by a nose in the \$500,000 Champagne Stakes at Belmont Park. He did a shoot for the New Era cap company at a cavernous old studio in South Central Los Angeles.

Mostly, though, he worked out at the EXOS training facility in Frisco, Texas, with a group of other pro ballplayers that included Diamondbacks pitcher Shelby Miller, Phillies catcher Cameron Rupp and retired reliever LaTroy Hawkins. One two-hour session in January ended

and had trimmed his body fat from 15.1% to 13.5%, meaning that he had added some 17 pounds of muscle. Last year he threw both his fastball and slider—which tops out at 95—harder, on average, than any starter has in the decade the stat has been kept. (While relievers like Aroldis Chapman can throw harder in short bursts, few have ever had the strength to reach triple digits past 100 pitches.) But Syndergaard wants more. "I always want to raise the bar," he says. "Right now, with me throwing 100, I'm not really sure if that's attainable. But I still want to try. And to look good in the uni, of course."

Syndergaard's love of the gym started before his junior year at Mansfield Legacy High—he had switched schools the previous summer—when he asked his dad to take him

to the YMCA to run and to try the workouts he'd read about in *Muscle & Fitness*. Brad would sit in his truck and page through the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* while his son began to transform himself. "I'd always been self-conscious of my weight, how I appeared to other people," Noah says. "I wanted to change that. Then I got hooked."

Genetics took care of the rest. Heidi's family was tall. Brad's was strong. As a kid in Peterson, Iowa, Brad used to watch his father, Ken, pick up four 75-pound bales of hay, one under each arm and one in each hand, and walk out to feed their cows. Noah's friend Michael Smith, a pitcher in the Angels' farm system who is two years older, was working out at a 24-Hour Fitness during his first Christmas break from Dallas Baptist University when a tall, lean stranger approached him.

"Hey, what's up, Mike?" the stranger said.

"Do I know you?" Smith said.

"Dude, it's Noah."

"You are not Noah."

Syndergaard had reached 6' 3" and 190 pounds entering his senior year and could throw in the low 80s. He hadn't been selected for any summer all-star teams. An Angels scout visited his family in November, but that was a rarity. He figured he would follow Smith to Dallas Baptist.

It wasn't long before he gave scouts no choice but to pay attention to him—particularly one from the Blue Jays named Steve Miller. Texas is a difficult place to scout high school players because the schools are far apart and games are played only on Tuesdays and Fridays. It's particularly hard for a newcomer, and in February 2010, Toronto had just recently moved Miller from the upper Midwest. One day he found himself on the side of the road, scanning the newspaper for games to watch after the starter he planned to see got rescheduled.

He ended up at Mansfield Legacy, where he was struck by two things. One was the pitcher, whose name he couldn't pronounce: "This big, beautiful body with a really athletic and polished delivery and outstanding arm action." The other was that he was the only scout there.

That wouldn't last. David Walden, Mansfield Legacy's first-year coach, implored his ace to maximize his remade body. He was convinced Syndergaard could throw much harder, if only he had the confidence to try. "Noah," he would say, "when are you going to let the ball go?" As the spring progressed, Syndergaard started to. One game he hit 92. The next, it was 93. A few weeks later, the Broncos' catcher could hardly get his glove on Syndergaard's fastball.

"Do you know how hard you threw that game?" someone asked Syndergaard.

"No."

"You hit 97."

"What?"

Legacy's stands started to fill with scouts, but no

A LOOK AHEAD

FIRE IN THE HOLE

Four new flamethrowers to watch this year:

ALEX REYES 22 CARDINALS ▼

The righty had 52 strikeouts in 46 innings and a 1.57 ERA in the majors last year, while maxing out at 101 mph.

MICHAEL KOPECH 20 WHITE SOX

Acquired from Boston for Chris Sale, Kopech reportedly hit 105 in the minors last year.

FRANCIS MARTES 21 ASTROS

Houston has repeatedly refused to trade the 100-mph thrower for a new ace.

TYLER GLASNOW 23 PIRATES

The 6' 8" top prospect reached 98 mph during his 23¹/₃-inning big league debut last year. Slowpoke.



one watched Syndergaard more than Miller. He graded Syndergaard's fastball a 70 on the standard 20 to 80 scouting scale, which meant that he projected it to reach 94 to 96 mph in the big leagues. Miller's bosses were skeptical. That year there were only nine major league starters whose average fastballs exceeded 94. "So you're saying this guy's gonna be a freak?" they asked him.

In Walden's memory, the last three high school pitches Syndergaard ever threw—at the end of a roughly 100-pitch outing—came in at 95, 96 and 97 mph. "I was light on that 70," Miller says now.

On June 1, Baseball America had ranked Syndergaard the 32nd-best prospect in Texas. A week later Toronto picked him 38th in the draft.

The Noah Syndergaard of just three years earlier had vanished. He had a girlfriend, a blazing fastball and, best of all, a professional contract, with a \$600,000



signing bonus. “I had been kind of growing up in this bubble,” he says. “Once I got drafted, I finally figured out what was outside of it.”

SYNDERGAARD BEGAN growing out his hair when he was with Triple A Las Vegas in 2015, two years after Toronto traded him and catching prospect Travis d’Arnaud to the Mets for knuckleballer R.A. Dickey, then the NL’s reigning Cy Young winner. People were already calling him Thor, due to his Nordic surname and Hemsworthian size and strength—his belated growth spurt continued long after high school—and he figured he’d run with it. “My hair’s kind of a personality now,” he says. “It’s kind of who I am.” It requires maintenance, and expensive shampoo and conditioner. He currently uses a product named Caviar, which runs \$32 per 8.5-ounce bottle. “If I gotta go to Sephora and pick out some high quality s---, I’m gonna do it,” he says. It’s worth it. “All the girls want to braid it, for some reason.”

He’s also cultivating other aspects of his image. Syndergaard admires the tough old gunslingers, like Bob Gibson and Nolan Ryan, and emulates them on the mound. He famously threw the first offering of his World Series start at 98 mph directly over the head of Royals shortstop Alcides Escobar, who had been swinging at—and hitting—almost every first pitch he’d seen that October. “If they have a problem with me throwing inside,” he said afterward, “then they can meet me 60 feet, six inches away.” During his New Era shoot, he had the quote—which he insists was off-the-cuff—embroidered onto a custom hat.

“I never said anything had to be physical about that altercation,” he says. “If they wanted to come meet me out there, I’m gonna give them my side, they can give me theirs, and we can have a discussion. I’ve never been in a fight in my life. But I like my odds.”

Off the field, he is goofier. He loves comedy, that haven for outsiders, and frequents clubs around New York City. Via clips on Instagram, he has recently become interested in a sitcom that ended its run when he was five: *Seinfeld*. “I love Kramer,” he says.

He displays his own droll chops on a web show for the Mets. In one episode Syndergaard dresses up in a full Thor costume and walks around New York. “Excuse me, sir,” he asks a man wearing a Knicks hat. “Can you tell me how to get to Odenheim, please?”

“Where’s that?”

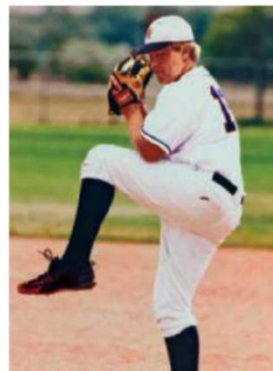
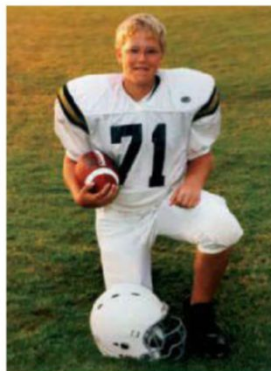
“I was hoping you could tell me.”

The man thinks for a moment. “Probably in the Bronx.”

On the Mets he is closest with the younger, fringier players—he lived with outfielder Michael Conforto last season and plans to room with pitcher Robert Gsellman this year—but he connects with everyone. During spring training last year in Port St. Lucie, Fla., Syndergaard

persuaded slugger Yoenis Cespedes, who was drawing attention for pulling into the parking lot in a series of tricked-out cars, to get his ranch hands to drop off a pair of steeds. The two rode into camp one morning as cameras rolled. “There were times where I was like, I cannot control this beast right now,” says Syndergaard.

His relationship with Matt Harvey, whom he passed last year as the team’s ace, is more businesslike. “It’s pretty good,” he says of their rapport. “I would say so.” Harvey has become guarded after a few headline-grabbing years in the New York spotlight, but his younger teammate is generally an open book, especially on social media, which he loves. There he expounds on things like his distrust of the mascot Mr. Met, his hatred of the wave and the magnificence of Bartolo Colon. “Baseball has a way of ripping your ♥ out, stabbing it, putting it back in your chest, then healing itself just in time for



Spring Training,” he tweeted after the wild-card loss. On New Year’s Eve he issued another observation, on Instagram. “Douche,” he wrote in the comments on a video posted by Nationals rightfielder Bryce Harper, igniting baseball’s first mini-controversy of 2017.

He was just messing around, he says. “Bryce and I aren’t buddy-buddy, but we see each other out, we acknowledge each other. Everybody loves a little bit of rivalry. He and I have the same goal: to make baseball fun again. Draw more fans, draw more excitement to the game.”

If it was fun for fans, it’s also fun for him. Not so long ago, he was invisible. Now he has the power to create a national stir by typing a single word.

FOR ONE of his boyhood birthdays, Syndergaard’s parents took him and some friends to an MLS game at the Cotton Bowl. Afterward, he went down to meet some of the Dallas Burn players. All of them were nice to him, but one stood out: Ted Eck, who was nearing the end of a long and winding



*“My hair’s kind of a personality now,” says Syndergaard. “If I gotta go to Sephora and pick out some **HIGH QUALITY S---**, I’m gonna do it.”*

career. Eck spent 10 minutes with him, just talking. “I can remember every minute of it. How I was sitting, what he looked like—a little bit like Richard Branson,” Syndergaard says. “You just never know if you’re going to create some kind of impact with any little youngster.”

Syndergaard loves living in New York during the season, considering it the best city in the world, even though it meant that he spent much of last summer squeezed onto a full-size bed in what was technically the study of the Upper East Side apartment he shared with Conforto. His is not the doormen-and-black-cars, hermetically sealed version of the city occupied by many celebrities. His favorite off-day activity is to rent a CitiBike and cruise around Central Park, stopping and talking to anyone who recognizes him—and he is very recognizable—the way Eck did with him. “I don’t see it getting old, or me thinking it’s some kind of burden,” he says.

That might be because despite the armor—the muscles, the heater, the glare, the drollness and the braidable blond tresses—he remains the kid in the yearbook

photo. “Underneath is still someone very innocent,” says Syndergaard, who speaks to his mother at least twice every day. “When it’s needed, I can transform into this big guy with a fastball and great hair, tough as nails. But I’m still a geek and a nerd inside.”

The penthouse duplex in uptown Dallas he has shared for the past two off-seasons with three roommates—two medical laser salesmen, who he met at a teammate’s bachelor party, and a junior college baseball coach—has all of the features you would expect of a bachelor pad occupied by guys in their 20s: huge TVs, an enormous beanbag chair, piles of clothes and electronics, a stove they have only recently learned to use. Its most unusual item, though, is in Syndergaard’s sparsely furnished bedroom, hanging on the wall directly above his pillow. It is among the first things he sees when he wakes up in the morning, a daily reminder of who he is now. It is Mjöltnir—the hammer of Thor. □

HAIR TODAY

A tentative young athlete (opposite page), Syndergaard is now confident in his stuff—and in his coif.



'17 STORIES // *O.J. Simpson*

TIME TO BE RELEASED?

*This summer, after eight years in prison for a bungled robbery, **O.J. SIMPSON** comes up for parole. His chances look good, but at age 70, how does America's most infamous defendant face freedom?*

**BY MICHAEL MCCANN AND
L. JON WERTHEIM**

Photograph by
JULIE JACOBSON/POOL/AP

DON'T LOOK BACK

Two decades after his murder trial and eventual acquittal transfixed and divided the nation, Simpson remains forever distanced from his former status.

AS PRISON life goes, you could do worse than a stretch at the Lovelock Correctional Center. The inmates at Lovelock—1,680 when filled to capacity—are fed fresh fruit and permitted to watch ESPN. Each 80-square-foot cell is shared by two men. The facility is designated “medium custody,” so the inmates’ relationship with guards tends to the cordial, and violence is rare. Located in the windswept midsection of Nevada, an hour and a half northeast of Reno off I-80, Lovelock sits on a vast tract of land, allowing for multiple prison yards and sports fields.

Lovelock’s most prominent inmate is number 1027820. Controversial as it may be, his record indicates no prior felonies. It lists him as standing 6' 2", 235 pounds, with a “medium” build and “dark” complexion. Brown eyes. Black hair, though in the official prison photo, it’s more salt than pepper and appears to be in a state of retreat. The same manifest lists a series of aliases that includes “Juice.”

O.J. Simpson turns 70 in July. Incarcerated since 2008, he is due to go before the Nevada parole board as early as this summer. Depending on the board’s recommendation, 2017 might well be the year that perhaps the most famous inmate in America—the subject of an award-winning documentary and an award-winning scripted show two decades after his Trial of the Century—returns to society.

Before handicapping the chances of Simpson’s release, take a moment to reflect on how Simpson ended up here—a journey wreathed in ironies. In 1995 he was acquitted of the murders of his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ron Goldman. Nerves from that verdict remain raw. And they were exposed further last year with the release of the transcendent documentary *O.J.: Made in America*, which argued to great effect that the jurors’ verdict was less about the merits of the case than it was about exacting karmic justice on the LAPD for years of perceived racial bigotry.

Two years later—before a different jury and facing a lower burden of proof—the families of Brown and Goldman won a wrongful-death civil suit against Simpson.

He was ordered to pay \$33.5 million in damages but has avoided that obligation, using federal and state laws that exclude certain assets from civil forfeiture, and moving to Florida, where, under the state's homestead exemption, forced sale of residences can be blocked. While Simpson's NFL pension is estimated to pay him as much as \$25,000 monthly, under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA), it cannot be attached by creditors.

Even as Simpson had treated justice like an open-field tackler, deploying some slick maneuvers to elude its grasp, he would get pancaked less than a decade later. In 2007, Simpson and a team of cohorts confronted memorabilia collectors Alfred Beardsley and Bruce Fromong in a Las Vegas hotel room in an effort to reclaim numerous items of Simpson's, including photos of his children. During the clumsy confrontation, one of the men with Simpson drew a gun, and in the end the crew left with as many as 800 collectibles, many having nothing to do with O.J.

Simpson would be charged with 12 counts, including conspiracy, burglary, robbery, kidnapping and assault with a deadly weapon. On Oct. 3, 2008—exactly 13 years to the day California jurors found Simpson not guilty of murder—Nevada jurors found him guilty on all 12 counts. Judge Jackie Glass sentenced Simpson, then 61, to 33 years

in prison, with a chance for parole after nine years.

Amid a series of unsuccessful appeals, Simpson has spent the last eight years in prison. At the start of his sentence he pledged to officials to be “the best prisoner [they’d] ever have.” By all accounts he has comported himself accordingly. On July 25, 2013, Simpson came before the parole board on five of his charges. In a 15-minute hearing he listed his positive contributions, which included mopping floors and disinfecting prison gym equipment. He took particular pride in his umpiring and coaching of prison-yard sports and his advising of younger inmates, saying he “kept a lot of trouble from happening” at Lovelock. His parole on those charges was granted.

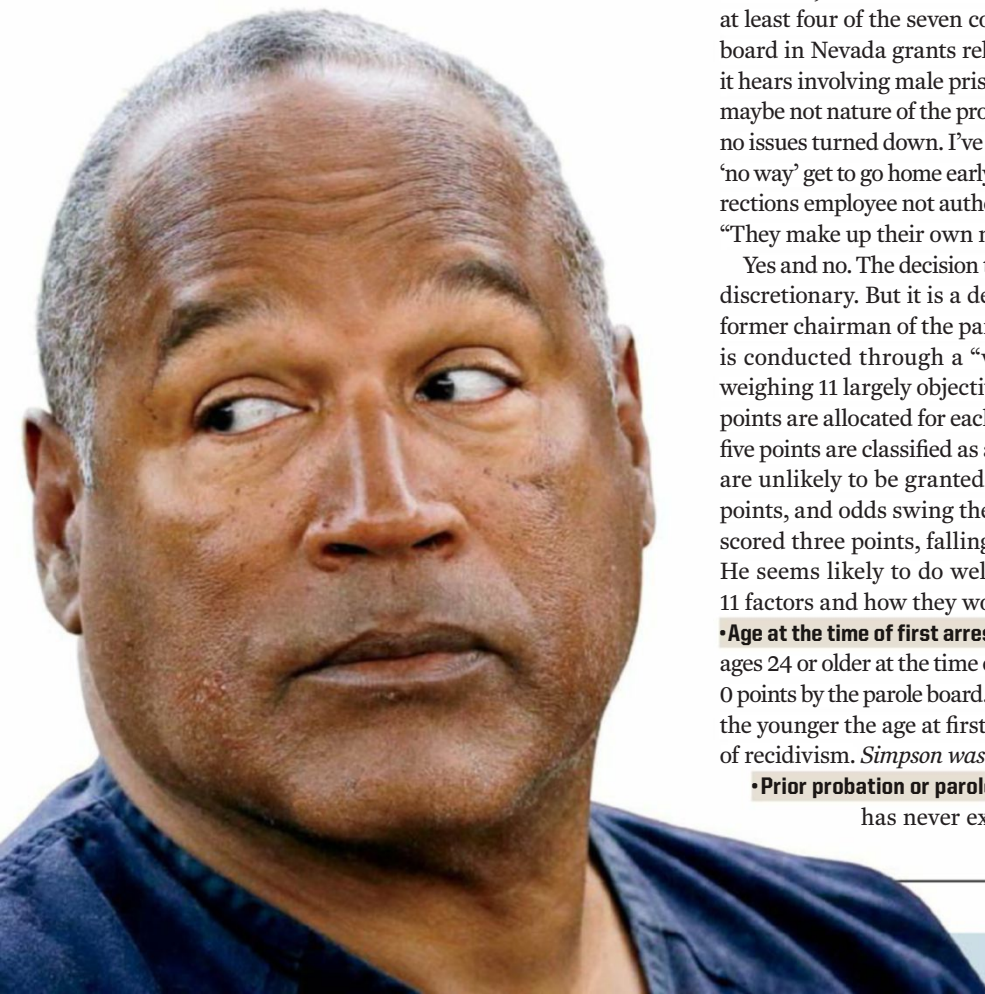
Now Simpson will turn his attention to his upcoming parole hearing. According to David Smith of the Nevada parole board, that will likely take place over the summer. Typically, Nevada parole hearings occur about three months in advance of an inmate's parole eligibility date. Given that Simpson is eligible for parole on Oct. 1, a hearing should occur around July 1. If granted parole, he could be out of prison by the fall. If denied, he could remain in prison until 2022, when he'll be 75.

For Simpson to get a favorable ruling—for the Juice to be loosed, as it were—he'll need recommendations from at least four of the seven commissioners. That the parole board in Nevada grants release in roughly half the cases it hears involving male prisoners underscores the maybe/maybe not nature of the process. “I’ve seen [inmates] with no issues turned down. I’ve seen others where I’ve thought ‘no way’ get to go home early,” says one Department of Corrections employee not authorized to speak for attribution. “They make up their own minds.”

Yes and no. The decision to grant parole is, by definition, discretionary. But it is a decision that Thomas Patton, a former chairman of the parole board in Nevada, stresses is conducted through a “very comprehensive review,” weighing 11 largely objective factors. Between -1 and +2 points are allocated for each criterion. Inmates exceeding five points are classified as a “medium” or “high” risk and are unlikely to be granted parole. Score fewer than five points, and odds swing the other way. In 2013, Simpson scored three points, falling into the “low risk” category. He seems likely to do well again in 2017. Here are the 11 factors and how they would seem to cut for Simpson.

• **Age at the time of first arrest** Under Nevada law, inmates ages 24 or older at the time of their first arrest are assigned 0 points by the parole board. Criminology data indicate that the younger the age at first arrest, the better the chances of recidivism. *Simpson was 46 when first arrested. 0 points*

• **Prior probation or parole revocations** An inmate who has never experienced revocation of pro-





bation or parole receives zero points. *Simpson has never experienced any revocation.* **0 points**

•**Employment history immediately before arrest** A full-time status at the time of the crime works in an inmate's favor, earning zero points. The logic: An inmate more likely to obtain gainful employment—reentering society with proven job skills and an established record—will have more to lose by committing another crime. For parole in Nevada, retirement is treated as full-time employment. *Simpson was retired at the time of the robbery.* **0 points**

•**Offense leading to current or prior convictions** Under Nevada law two points are allocated for property offense convictions, a category that includes robbery and burglary. Data indicate that inmates who have committed property offenses commit future offenses at a rate disproportional to other crimes. *Simpson was convicted of robbery and burglary.* **2 points**

no disciplinary write-ups indicated on his online profile with the Nevada Department of Correction. That he has counseled other inmates and even served as commissioner of Lovelock's softball league will likely count in his favor as well. **-1 point**

•**Custody level** In Nevada inmates in minimum custody receive -1 point, inmates in medium custody receive 0 points and those in maximum custody receive 2 points. **0 points**

Final Tally: 0 to 2 points

INDEED, LAS VEGAS criminal defense attorney Daniel Hill, who is representing antigovernment protest leader Ammon Bundy, predicts Simpson, who is likely to represent himself before the board, will fare well. "He's the kind of person who gets paroled," says Hill. "He has done a significant amount of time and, by all accounts, hasn't caused any problems." Hill also notes that paroling Simpson would be consistent with the underlying principles of "encouraging low-key, peaceful behavior

Simpson treated justice like an open-field tackler, deploying slick maneuvers to elude it. He would GET PANCAKED less than a decade later.

•**History of drug or alcohol abuse** An inmate with a history of abusing alcohol or drugs is, statistically, more likely to encounter legal problems after release. *Simpson admits he drank to excess on the night of the hotel robbery, but he did not drive a car that evening and has no previous charges for drug or alcohol offenses.* **0 points or 1 point**

•**Gender** Owing to social science data indicating that men are more likely than women to reoffend, males receive 1 point while females receive 0. **1 point**

•**Current age** Older inmates are less likely to commit crimes than their younger counterparts. Nevada law reflects this, allotting -1 points to inmates 41 or older at the time of the hearing. *Simpson turns 70 on July 9.* **-1 point**

•**Active gang membership** As one would expect, suspected street or prison gang memberships is viewed with disfavor. *Simpson has avoided any associations with gangs while incarcerated.* **0 points**

•**Completed education, vocational or treatment program during prison term** Inmates improving themselves by furthering their education, vocation or treatment while incarcerated are rewarded when up for parole. *During his 2013 parole hearing, Simpson indicated that he took part in various educational programming and was planning to do more.* **-1 point or 0 points**

•**Disciplinary write-ups** Inmates cited for disciplinary violations are considered worse candidates for parole than are those who stay out of trouble. *As of this month, Simpson had*



within a penitentiary"—something that Simpson appears to have maintained.

Parole would only serve as conditional release from prison. Simpson would still need to meet regularly with a parole officer, obtain permission to travel out of state and submit to periodic searches of his person, car and home. If he violated any of the terms of parole, he could be

sent back to prison, though not necessarily Lovelock.

He also still faces his civil liability. While Simpson is unlikely to come anywhere close to replicating his earning power from the early 1990s, he also owes tens of millions to the Goldman and Brown families. Little of that will ever be recouped, but both families are likely to pursue their debt.

Finally, there's the matter of his reintegration into society. By his own admission, before the summer of 1994, Simpson was ferociously social and status conscious. *Made in America* argued compellingly that after his acquittal, the ostracism visited upon Simpson—expelled from his country club; transformed into a punch line—was severe. Now, at 70, still reviled by so many, still the enduring source of so much public fascination, can he fashion any kind of a normal life?

All of which is to say: Indications are strong that this will be the year O.J. Simpson will be released from prison. As for just how free he will be, that's another matter entirely. □

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American
Voices



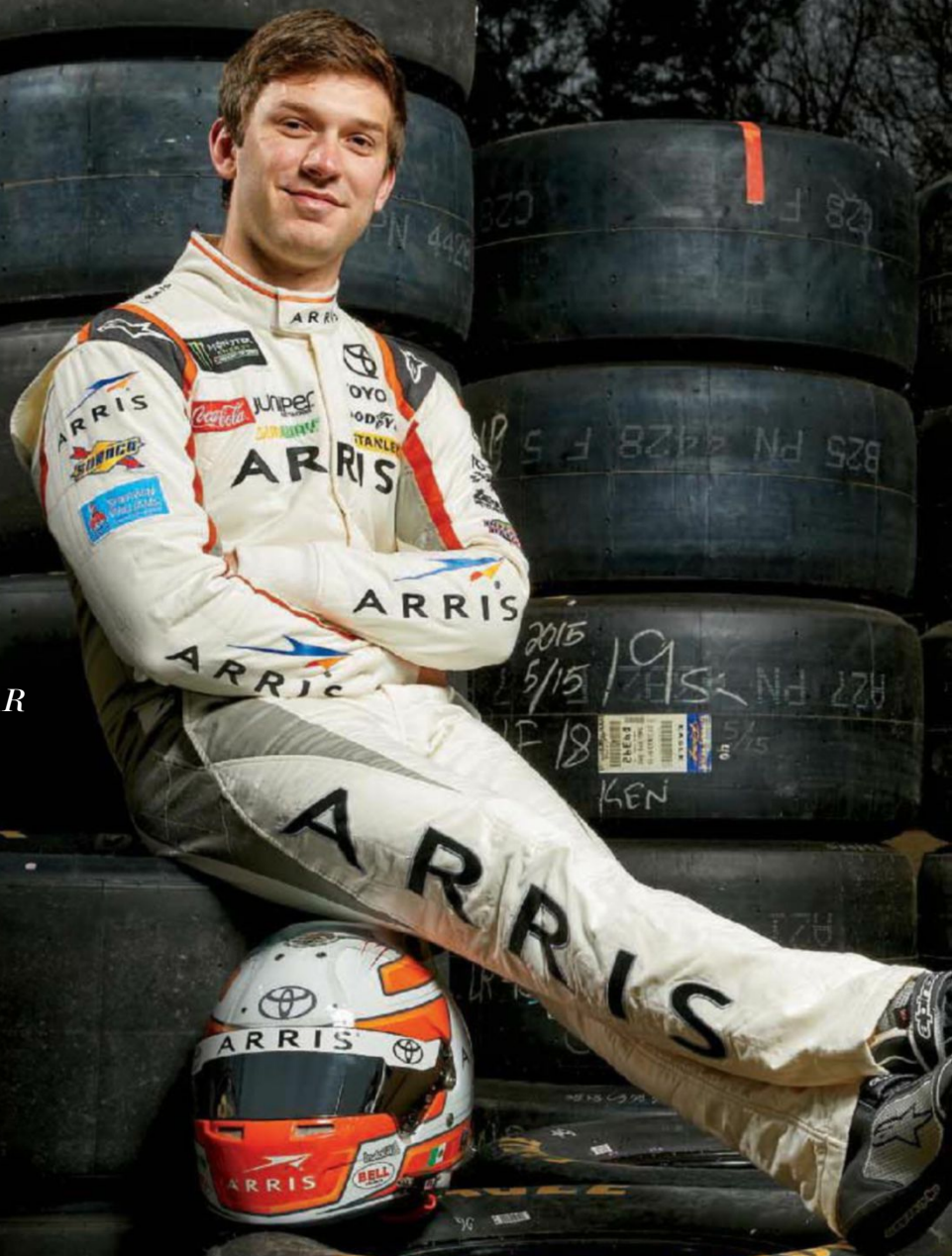
'17 STORIES // NASCAR

WALL? WHAT WALL?

At 19, **DANNY SUÁREZ** left his native Mexico to chase the American racing dream. Now 25 and the reigning Xfinity champ, he's stepping up to the Cup level

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Photograph by
SIMÓN BRUTY





ONE MONTH before the Daytona 500, more than 100 drivers from NASCAR's top series converge on Charlotte's downtown convention center for a two-day media event. Decked out in their fire suits, they speed-walk from meeting room to meeting room for interviews, photo shoots and promotional video tapings. For all but one of them, the day's agenda is a breeze. Cup rookie Daniel Suárez, however, battles a few headwinds.

For starters, English is Suárez's second language. When he first turned up in this town six years ago—after a 1,500-mile road trip from his native Monterrey, Mexico, in a beat-up VW Beetle—he didn't speak a lick of it. And while a steady diet of movies and cartoons has equipped him with a practical (if still heavily accented) fluency, there's still so much that's Greek to him.

Like the word *reliable*—which Suárez keeps pronouncing as re-AL-ible while reading ad copy off a teleprompter. "I just can't say that word," he tells the production crew with a sheepish grin. "It's been . . . for years. . . ."

Or, like the words to "Deep in the Heart of Texas," the request of another crew taping promos for Texas Motor Speedway. When Suárez tries to oblige, with a producer feeding him the lines a few words at a time, his efforts prompt another driver to interrupt a photo shoot in a neighboring stall. "I gotta hear this!" Austin Dillon howls.

Every Suárez shoot, it seems, elicits the same note ultimately: That was great, but would you mind doing one more *en Español*? "I have to translate pretty much everything on the fly," he explains later, noting how rare it is to see another Spanish speaker or a script on these pop-up sets. "I try to figure it out, put the best words together."

That a NASCAR driver can shift gears like this says plenty.

NASCAR IS, of course, a distinctly American show, one in which the good ol' boys have always taken center stage. Now here comes the 25-year-old Suárez, striding into the spotlight—not from the Deep South but from South of the Border. This season, while driving for Joe Gibbs Racing, the most dominating franchise on the grid these days, he'll make history as the first Mexican driver to race in the Cup series full-time, behind the wheel of the number 19 Toyota.

Suárez made a persuasive case for the job

IN A HOT SEAT

Slated for another season in Xfinity, Suárez suddenly found himself boosted to the stacked Joe Gibbs Racing Cup squad.



last year while racing in the Xfinity Series, where he won three races on the way to becoming the first Latin American to claim a NASCAR championship. It was a stunning breakthrough, not least because his Gibbs teammate Erik Jones, just 20, had seemed to be the more likely breakout driver. Twenty races into the 2016 Xfinity Series, Jones was tapped to drive for Furniture Row Racing, a JGR affiliate competing on the Cup level, in '17.

Suárez, meanwhile, appeared to be in for more seasoning. "I'll never forget standing with Coach [aka JGR team owner and Pro Football Hall of Famer Joe Gibbs] in Victory Lane after Daniel won," says David Wilson, the general manager of Toyota's racing program. "We were looking at each other like, Now what? How are we

gonna convince him to run Xfinity one more year? We just didn't have a place for him at the Cup level at that time."

But then, just before Christmas, a spot opened up. Carl Edwards—the backflipping, muscle-rippling Missourian who came a restart away from taking the 2016 Cup crown—told JGR brass

FAST TALK

To get up to speed in the 19, Suárez has been huddling with his crew (below, left) and with predecessor Edwards (below, right).



Suárez doesn't wear his heritage on his sleeve. Unless he opened his mouth, you might reckon he was from **KENTUCKY OR NORTH CAROLINA.**

that his heart wasn't in racing anymore and called it a career after a 13-year run on the Cup circuit. His abrupt departure follows the recent retirements of Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart, two of the sport's major stars. Even more disconcerting: Dale Earnhardt Jr., who has been voted NASCAR's most popular driver for the past 14 years straight, turned 42 last October and is coming off a concussion-related health issue that kept him off the track for half of last season. All the while, attendance figures and television ratings have trended downward.

So it's no wonder that NASCAR moved to shake things up for the new year. In December a new partnership was announced, replacing Sprint as the primary sponsor of the Cup series with noted youth brand Monster Energy. Then, in late January, the sanctioning body rolled out a slew of new competition regulations in a bid to appeal to younger fans. Among the changes, races will be divided into three heats, with points awarded for each segment, in an effort to increase on-track action (*sidebar, opposite*).

NASCAR is also counting on a new generation of fresh-faced racers like Suárez to draw more millennials to the



track. Never mind that the idea that fans would rally around a Mexican driver who—oh, by the way—drives a Japanese car seemed unthinkable once. But Suárez isn't your typical foreign driver. He's more familiar.

SUÁREZ DOESN'T really wear his heritage on his sleeve. A small Mexican-flag belt patch is the only hint of country you'll find on his livery. What's more, his trim build, ruddy cheeks and permanent five o'clock shadow conform to the young NASCAR driver stereotype. Really, unless he opened his mouth, you might reckon he was from North Carolina or Kentucky.

When Suárez does speak, it's with marked confidence.



His capacity for schmoozing is quickly becoming legendary. “We have a lot of things where we have sponsors come in here and do different two- and three-day events,” says Gibbs. “We’d be down at the bowling alley with a sponsor that had nothing to do with Daniel, and I’d turn around and there he is. He’s bowling. Or he’s driving go-karts. Stuff like that—he’s all over it.”

Suárez’s sparkling affability makes it difficult to imagine a time when he was more of a wallflower. But Joey Logano was a witness, some six years ago. “First time he came over to my house, we’re grilling burgers,” the Team Penske standout recalls. “He pulls up in this old Beetle. Didn’t know hardly any English. At the time, he was driving in the K&N series, and my roommate, Coleman Pressley, was his crew chief. I’m like, ‘Coleman, how do you even understand anything he says? How do you fix the car?’ And he’s like, ‘He has a translator, an actual person, to do that.’ He’s come a long, long ways.”

Suárez chuckles at the memory now. “Maybe for him it was just another day,” he says. “But for me it was a big deal to meet Joey Logano. And now that I’m going to be racing with these guys, it just feels very cool. It just feels like slowly I’ve been making my friends here in the United States [after] starting from the very bottom.”

Another of Suárez’s endearing qualities: He isn’t some open-wheel expat attempting a career crossover. He was made in the USA. The bulk of his racing background

A LOOK AHEAD

MAKING CHANGE

The 2017 Monster Energy Cup series is already revving up some juicy story lines. Here are five to track.

THREE-POINT TURNS Races now unfold in three parts. The leader at the end of each of the first two segments earns 10 points, the race winner gets 40, and the drivers carry their totals through the playoffs—which will no longer be called “the Chase.”

LOSE THE FORCE A number of tweaks to bodywork regulations (which kick in at the March 5 race in Atlanta) will lighten the aerodynamic downforce load on Cup cars. Throughout the paddock, drivers are rejoicing because the change gives them more control over their machines.

NO MORE ROOKIE HAZING Cup drivers with more than five years’ full-time experience are now limited to a maximum of 10 races in the Xfinity Series and seven Truck races. Which means that veterans such as Kyle Busch won’t be as free to drop down into the “minors” and dominate. But upstarts like third-year Cup driver Chase Elliott? They can still get their licks in.

CLEAN SLATE Texas Motor Speedway is repaving its 1.5-mile surface for 2017. Look for the field to be thrown for a loop—in April’s race and again in November’s, when a hard stumble could carry playoff implications.

JUNIOR’S MINT? Dale Earnhardt Jr. (*below*) is back in the saddle after missing half the 2016 season with concussion-related symptoms. Every collision will bring a new reason for NASCAR’s fans and stakeholders to hold their collective breath.





is in stock cars. Apart from his 58 starts in NASCAR's Mexico series, Suárez climbed his way up as homegrown talents do, rising steadily from the ARCA level to K&N cars to the Truck series—where he made a different sort of impression. "I thought he was a weapon on the racetrack," Logano says, "the car you didn't want to get near, for sure. To go from someone that you were scared to get around to now winning races? In, like, two years? That's impressive."

It has been a growth spurt that augurs well for Suárez's most recent promotion. When he climbs into the number 19 for the Daytona 500 on Feb. 26, it will mark his first-ever point-scoring race in a Cup car. Beyond a test in Phoenix, a 75-lap all-star race, and the Can-Am Duel at Daytona (a 60-lap feature that sets the field for the 500), Suárez's opportunities to acclimate to the bigger, more powerful Cup car are scarce. In the meantime he crams by turning laps inside Toyota's dynamic simulator and studying video at home.

The pressure is enormous, but Logano can relate. Eight years ago he was an 18-year-old Gibbs rookie when he ran his first full-time schedule, starting at Daytona. "Daniel is far more prepared than I was," says Logano. "He's older, he's more mature, he's got a lot more experience. All I can say is just, Be patient. And I'm not saying for him to be patient. I'm telling everyone that's reading this article—be patient with him. Judging from his past, he struggles, but then he figures it out."

SINGLE-MINDEDNESS has been Suárez's constant seat-mate from the moment he followed a friend into go-karting at age 12. "I don't really know where it came from," he says. "My dad, he has some of that. I'm just one of those persons who likes to get things done. And when I get something in my head, I'm just thinking about it until I get it done."

That laser focus is what would spur his dad, Alejandro, to liquidate their family's business—an auto-restoration shop—and invest the proceeds into his son's racing career. As the kid held his own among a cohort that included future Formula 1 stars Sergio Pérez and Esteban Gutiérrez, other businessmen began taking an interest. One was Carlos Slim Domit, son of Carlos Slim Helú—a man whom *Forbes* three times recognized as the world's wealthiest person. Another was Jose Sabates, brother of Felix Sabates—a minority partner in Chip Ganassi Racing. By age 17, Daniel was at a crossroads: He could either follow Gutiérrez's lead, to England, and try making it there as an open-wheel racer. Or he could go north.

His manager, a promoter named Jimmy Morales, saw a clear choice. "Right now," he told Suárez, "the big thing is NASCAR. We want a Mexican driver in the United States. You can be that guy." Two years later he packed up his Beetle and set off with Alejandro. "It was maybe the longest trip I've ever done," he says. "You learn a lot of things about the United States on that trip."

He couch-surfed for a couple of months until he could

COURTESY OF FOX SPORTS

TALKING POINTS

FROM THE BOOTH

With FOX Sports (and FSI) set to televise the first 21 events of the NASCAR Monster Energy Cup season, SI sat down with the network's commentators, Larry McReynolds and Darrell Waltrip, as the two swapped paint on what to expect in 2017.

DARRELL WALTRIP One of the debates in the off-season was about parity. I'm not a fan of parity in NASCAR—stifles creativity. It's more for the officials than it is for the teams.

LARRY MCREYNOLDS I probably changed my mind a bit over the last few years. But ultimately I like that no one driver, or team,

has a stranglehold on the competition. In fact, I think we could see two newcomers to Victory Lane: Chase Elliott and Austin Dillon.

DW I expect Stewart-Haas [which this season will be running Fords rather than Chevys for the first time in the team's history] will be doing their



usual celebrating there too. In days gone by a manufacturer change would've been huge.

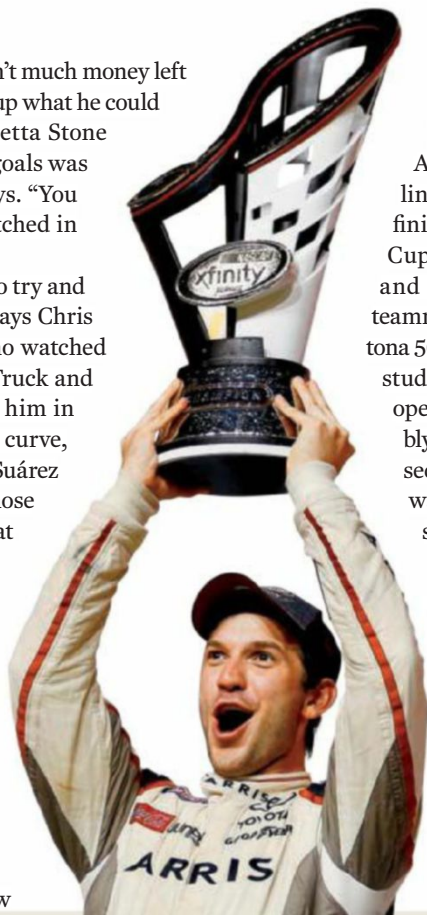
LM You took the words

right out of my mouth. Most of my years as a crew chief, to change manufacturers would almost be like starting

afford his own apartment. There wasn't much money left over for English lessons, so he picked up what he could from the guys at the race shop, Rosetta Stone and binge-watching TV. "One of my goals was to watch two movies per day," he says. "You can imagine how many movies I watched in a year."

"He was just working his guts out to try and learn English as quick as he could," says Chris Osborne, the veteran JGR spotter who watched over Suárez during his years in the Truck and Xfinity Series and will remain with him in Cup. To ramp up his driver's learning curve, Osborne spent a lot of time talking to Suárez over the phone and face-to-face. In those conversations the driver learned what kind of feedback his crew chief and engineers needed, while the spotter gained a better sense of his driver's tics. Those intense months of rapport building provided a far more immersive language experience than those few semesters of Spanish that the 51-year-old Osborne took in high school back in High Point, N.C. "We figured out how to piece things together," he says.

So deep is their understanding now



that Suárez trusts Osborne to overrule him in the heat of competition.

A 2016 Xfinity race at Darlington, which saw Suárez finish third behind veteran Cup drivers Elliott Sadler and Denny Hamlin (a JGR teammate and last year's Daytona 500 winner), typified their

student-teacher relationship. After a solid opening run Suárez started feeling wobbly through the track's 25-degree-banked second turn. "He was saying that the car was too free [meaning the back end was sliding out]," Osborne says. "But from what I was seeing, he was tight until he got to the late exit of the corner—and then it was just snapping loose."

On the next pit stop Suárez asked crew chief Scott Graves to be "tightened up" for the bend. But Osborne suggested otherwise. "I told [Graves] that my personal opinion was that he needed to be freed up in that area," Osborne continues. "So they went off what I said, and we picked up a 10th [of a second],

VIVA VICTORY

His win at Homestead sealed the 2016 Xfinity title, making Suárez the first foreign-born series champion in NASCAR history.

a new race team. But if I was a betting man, I'd be willing to wager we're not even gonna really realize the difference. Kurt Busch's still gonna be in the playoff hunt. Kevin

of 2012. And, honestly, other than winning Sonoma and a couple other decent runs, the number 14 team didn't bear a whole lot of fruit last year. We know they went through a lot with Tony

up at Daytona? Man, that's tough.

LM He did an extensive Darlington test back in early December. Now, I realize a test is not a race and Darlington isn't

Losing him ... that's one of your key guys when it comes to Gibbs. The way the format works, I can't pick a [champion]. Still, I say they're the team to beat.

LM I'm actually gonna

*"I like that no one driver, or team, has a stranglehold on the competition. In fact, I think we could see **TWO NEWCOMERS TO VICTORY LANE.**"*

Harvick's gonna still be a championship contender.

DW The driver on that team under the most pressure, in my mind, is Clint Bowyer. He's coming off a couple of bad years.

LM Three dismal years. He has not won since the end

[Stewart] not returning until about a third of the way through the season.

DW And then Dale [Earnhardt Jr.] was gone half the year. Be good to have him back. No athlete likes to be told, You're done. But starting back

Daytona. But I'm talking to his crew chief, Greg Ives, and he said, 'It's like he hasn't even missed a beat.' I'm glad he's coming back. He's great for our sport, like our Tiger—he moves the needle.

DW So did Carl Edwards.

go with Joey Logano at Penske. He's been a part of the Championship Four now for two of the three years. There's nowhere you go with him that he's not a contender: short track, road course, speedway. He's the guy to beat.



a 10th and a half a lap. Daniel said that the car was a whole lot better. He didn't ask what changes were made."

It wasn't until two days later at their team debrief, that, says Osborne, "I told Daniel of the information that I had fed Scott versus what he was feeding me. Since then he has gotten so much better about the feedback. He's so much more descriptive on exactly what he feels and at every point of the racetrack. He almost seems like a 10-year veteran with the information that he gives now."

By the time the Xfinity Chase rolled around, it was clear

boosted him along the way. He seemed less like a jock than a statesman. But he's hesitant to wander too far down that road. The rise of Donald Trump presents too many minefields.

The new President kicked off his election campaign by vilifying Mexican immigrants as "drug dealers" and "rapists," and since taking office has declared his intent to move forward with plans to erect a wall on the Southern border—a project financed in part by tariffs on Mexican imports. Not only could the potential im-

*"I try to avoid talking about subjects I'm not really good at," says Suárez. **"AND POLITICS IS A BIG ONE."** I don't like politics."*

Suárez had learned his lesson. In the seven-race playoff, Suárez drove with patience and poise all the way through to the last race at Homestead, where he started on the pole and led 133 of 200 laps; after a restart with three to go, he outran Sadler and Jones en route to the checkers.

Afterward, Suárez was at a loss for words—but not because of any language barrier. "It's a dream," he said, exulting in Victory Lane. "It's a dream, and tomorrow I will tell you [what it feels like]."



pact of these machinations be as crippling for Suárez as it has been for many other foreign-born athletes who compete in and, in some cases, for the United States, but the tariff proposal in particular could slow the automotive industry to a pace unseen since the 2008 global economic crisis—from which NASCAR, in many ways, is still recovering.

But what can Suárez do? Of the few celebrities who

campaigns for Trump, a number came from NASCAR; chief among them was Brian France, the sport's chairman and CEO. (Though Earnhardt, for one, has come out against the ban, tweeting that his family immigrated from Germany.) So Suárez does what he's been doing from the moment he set foot in this country. He chooses his words carefully, mindful of how many more people will be watching him now on TV and at the track. "Honestly, most of the time, I try to avoid talking about subjects I'm not really good at, and politics is a big one," he says. "I don't like politics, and I don't really care about politics. That's exactly what I think about that."

So Suárez will let his driving do the talking, safe in the knowledge that he has time to recover should he stumble along the way. "We're very circumspect," says Toyota's Wilson. "This is a long-term investment in Daniel. Ultimately, what's most important is that he has a solid footing underneath him, that he's surrounded by good people and good coaching."

It's only a matter of time before Suárez figures out the rest. In the meantime, he'll keep living the dream. The American Dream. □

IN MEXICO the enormity of Suárez's achievement was not lost in translation. Moments after crossing the finish line at Homestead, Suárez received a congratulatory text from Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto. A month later, while serving as the grand marshal for a NASCAR exhibition in Mexico City, he was mobbed at every turn for pictures and autographs.

Here in the U.S., Suárez resonates too. In October, as the Chase was still raging, he traveled to the White House for a panel discussion about opportunities

in the Latinx community through sports and through My Brother's Keeper—a signature Obama Administration initiative designed to address opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color. Speaking to an audience of about 130 students, Suárez told the story of his father's sacrifice and their border-crossing road trip. He extolled the virtues of Drive for Diversity, the 13-year-old NASCAR program that has

FIERCE FOCUS

While others look to him as a national hero or a role model, Suárez prefers to concentrate on his development as a driver.



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Go
Places



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'17 STORIES // *College Basketball*

PROJECT BIGGIE

At 13, **CALEB SWANIGAN** weighed 360 pounds and faced an uncertain future. So how did he arrive at Purdue and become the nation's top power forward? Hard work

BY LUKE WINN

Photographs by
David E. Klutho



BOILER UP

Swanigan is on pace to be just the third player in 23 seasons—after Blake Griffin and Tim Duncan—to average 18 points, 13 rebounds and two assists.

FOR A NEW WORLD #NEWELLAND

THE SIX Swanigan children were all substantial, and they were nicknamed accordingly. First came Fat Cat (Carl Jr.), then Ice Cream (Corey), Fat and Sug (twins Crystal and Candance), Applehead Cut The Bull (Courtland) and, finally, Biggie (Caleb), the largest of Tanya's babies at 24 inches, nine pounds and three ounces. He kept growing into his name, standing 6' 2" and weighing 360 pounds by age 13, and now Biggie was listening to his new guardian, Roosevelt (Rose) Barnes, tell him something preposterously grandiose as they worked out on an indoor court in Fort Wayne, Ind., during the summer of 2011.

"You're the best power forward in the world! Nobody can stop you!"

Biggie rolled his eyes. His vertical was a few inches, max, and if asked to run, all he could do was shuffle. But Barnes, a sports agent who played baseball, basketball and football at Purdue and then spent four seasons as a linebacker with the Lions, wanted Biggie to believe in his potential. So as they went through a progression of baby hooks, drop-steps and the like, Barnes instructed his protégé, "Say it back to me: *I'm the best power forward in the world.*"

"Come on. *Say it.*"

Reluctantly, Biggie gave in. Two weeks earlier Carl Jr. had persuaded him to fly from Salt Lake City to Fort Wayne to live with Barnes. The family had met Barnes in Indiana in 2003, after they'd fled Utah on a bus with Tanya, who was seeking refuge from their father, Carl Sr., in a domestic violence shelter. "What I endured was horrific," Tanya says, "and I did my best to keep our heads above water." But theirs was a nomadic existence among apartments and shelters in Utah and Indiana. Carl Jr. wanted Barnes to adopt Biggie, to give him stability and a shot at the NBA.

Biggie had emerged from the Fort Wayne airport that June carrying all his possessions in a single duffel bag, waddling toward Barnes's car in his one good outfit:

a shirt, tie and khakis. He was a full two inches shorter and 100 pounds heavier than Fat Cat had described over the phone. After Biggie quickly became exhausted in their first workout, Barnes took him to a cardiologist to check if he had heart problems. Biggie passed all the stress tests, and this gave Barnes the assurance he needed to proceed: "He's not going to die."

That was where Project Biggie began, and six years later Caleb Swanigan is 6' 9" and—after strict dieting and relentless training—250 pounds. He arrived at Purdue in the fall of 2015 as a McDonald's All-American after graduating from Fort Wayne's Homestead High in just three years, then averaged 10.2 points and 8.3 rebounds for a Boilermakers team that was upset by Arkansas-Little Rock in the first round of the NCAA tournament. He has since made the leap from solid freshman starter to dominant sophomore force, with statistical production at a level not seen since Blake Griffin's sophomore season at Oklahoma, in 2008–09.

Averaging 19.1 points and 12.8 rebounds at week's end for the No. 16 Boilermakers, Biggie is a near-lock to be first-team All-America. He has 20 double doubles in 24 games (including four with at least 20 points and 20 rebounds); the highest defensive rebound percentage (33.2%) by a major-conference player in kenpom.com's database; and a chance to become the first since Griffin to average 13 boards in this millennium.

Biggie can now use brute force to score on the block and a soft touch to make threes, and he can pass deftly out of the post or in high-low situations. He is not yet the best power forward in the world, but he has become the best one in college basketball, where no one, this season, has been able to stop him.



BIGGIE HAS always been Biggie, but his story is a series of transformations, some as public as his shrinking waistline, some as private as what happened last September, when a guest speaker came to address the Boilermakers in their film room at Mackey Arena.

Chris Herren was a 1990s phenom at Fresno State whose story of drug addiction and recovery was the subject of a 2011 ESPN documentary. Herren has spoken to hundreds of teams since, and while he encourages his audiences to engage, he says it's rare for college players to



*After Biggie opened up to his teammates about his upbringing, “there were guys in tears,” says Thompson. “Most of them **HAD NO IDEA.**”*

show much vulnerability. But at Purdue, as Herren talked about putting his alcoholic father in rehab and repairing his relationship with his high-school-age son—how he is trying to do the right things but knows there were many ways he failed—it hit Biggie right in the heart.

“Your son definitely does appreciate you,” Biggie told Herren. “I lost my father to addiction; I know what it’s like to see someone never make it back from that side. For you to make it back for him. . . .”

From there, something opened up inside Biggie, who’d been named one of the team’s four captains in the off-season. “When he was done talking, there were guys in tears,” says junior point guard and co-captain P.J. Thompson. “Most of them had no idea.” Vince Edwards, another junior co-captain, says, “There were times last year when we felt like we couldn’t reach Biggie; he’d get so angry that he just couldn’t hear us. After that, it was like, O.K., I understand where it’s coming from.” Says Herren, “It was a breakthrough moment for all of us.”

Biggie had begun by sharing the reason he wears number 50: it was the age at which Carl Sr. died of heart failure in a Salt Lake City hospital in 2013. He had been a prodigious, 6' 7" streetballer, nicknamed Big Smooth, who could shoot ambidextrously, and he was a kind soul when he was sober. “But the whole family,” Tanya says, “was a victim of my husband’s addiction to crack cocaine.” She met Carl Sr. through a Pentecostal church, but one year into their marriage he lost his job and began

dealing crack, and eventually using it too. “It was like living in a nightmare,” Tanya says. At first she tried to rescue him from crackhouses; later she fled his attacks, and he accrued a rap sheet that included a murder charge in Utah. (He was acquitted in 1995.)

By the late 2000s Biggie, who was seven years younger than his next oldest sibling, was the only one living with Jackson full-time. He befriended other shelter kids, for whom naiveté was almost a blessing. “We only knew what was right in front of us,” Biggie says. “We didn’t know how big the world was, how much better it could be.”

Carl Jr. had come close to knowing. He was a 6' 9", 335-pound power forward with three-point range; Barnes describes him as “Zach Randolph with a better jump shot.” Playing for an Indiana-based AAU program at the Kingwood Classic in Houston in 2003, Carl Jr. outshone future lottery pick LaMarcus Aldridge and soon joined Blessed IJN, a program coached by one of Barnes’s friends. Barnes wanted to assume guardian-

ship of Carl Jr. and help him prepare for college—but after a few months Carl Jr. split for Utah to reunite with a girlfriend and play his senior season at Hunter High in West Valley City. “When Rose first found me,” Carl Jr. laments, “I was already 17, stuck in my ways, not coachable.”

In November 2004, Carl Jr. signed a national letter of intent with Mississippi; his recruiter there, Tracy Dildy, called him a “freak of nature” with NBA potential. But over the next two years Carl Jr. surfaced and then disappeared from prep schools in Indiana, Alabama, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, without ever qualifying academically to play D-I basketball. Upon returning to Salt Lake City in March 2006, he got into an altercation outside Club Vortex that resulted in a 5' 9" man firing a 9-mm handgun at Carl Jr.’s head.

It was a tragedy *and* a miracle: The hollow-point bullet entered Carl Jr.’s mouth, deflected off his facial bones and exited through his right eye socket—without impacting his brain. For the first few days that Carl Jr. was in the hospital, nine-year-old Biggie was unable to enter the room. “I couldn’t look,” Biggie says. “People would go in and come out crying.”

Carl Jr. was fitted for a glass eye, ending his pro hoops aspirations. Watching the NBA made him sick: “I’d get disappointed in myself when I saw people playing that I used to dominate.” And so in 2011, when Tanya was plan-

FULLY LOADED

Swanigan developed a blend of touch and toughness once he committed to being trained by a former Purdue star.



ning to leave Salt Lake for Houston, and a significantly out-of-shape Biggie said he wanted to be a basketball player, Carl Jr. stepped up in the one way he knew how. He called Barnes and pleaded with him to take the boy.

"If you don't, he's gonna end up just like us," Carl Jr. said, meaning himself and his other siblings, none of whom made it in basketball. "And Biggie is *different* than all of us. He's got a different demeanor. He's smarter. He's calmer. He's still got a chance."

THEY HAD come so far by spring 2015. Biggie was a five-star recruit who'd just led Homestead High to a state title and been named Indiana's Mr. Basketball, and he and Barnes had an agreement on how they would select Biggie's college. It would not be based on emotion, friends, the campus or anything other than which coach would best position him to be drafted by an NBA team. It would be a business decision.

This philosophy was easier for Barnes, a 56-year-old

then had offered him a scholarship.) He liked Berkeley, and his friends and Hoop Summit teammates Jaylen Brown and Ivan Rabb were already pledged to the Bears.

"I refuse to allow you to go to Cal," Barnes told him, and listed the ways it violated their business-decision criteria. For one, they had agreed to wait until May, when rosters and coaching staffs were more settled. Plus, it was essential for Biggie to brand himself as a power forward rather than as an undersized center, which wouldn't happen if he played alongside Rabb, another power forward.

"This is my career," Biggie protested.

Barnes, who was in Portland at the time, was so upset that he packed up and headed for the airport. At 3:01 p.m. Pacific time, Biggie, still set on making a decision, tweeted (and made national news with) what he figured was a "compromise": He was committing to MSU, a school both he and Barnes liked.

The problem was that the Spartans didn't fit the criteria either. They already had several players who profiled

"Biggie is different than all of us," Carl Jr. told Barnes. "He's got a different demeanor. He's smarter. He's calmer." **HE'S STILL GOT A CHANCE.**

agent, to adhere to than it was for Biggie, a 17-year-old with a grudge. In the summer before Biggie started ninth grade, what he wanted most was a scholarship offer from Purdue. He shone in a showcase in West Lafayette, Ind., with Painter in attendance, but when the coach saw the then 6' 4", 300-pound Biggie, he remembers thinking, "He's going to be an All-Pro NFL left tackle." The Boilermakers wanted to wait and see, which Biggie took as a challenge. After his biggest games as a freshman on Homestead's varsity, he'd text his stats to Purdue assistant coach Jack Owens, and when Biggie returned to the same showcase the following summer he—according to Barnes's unofficial record-keeping—averaged 37 points and 24 rebounds. The Purdue coaches told Barnes they still wanted to wait, and when Biggie heard that, he said, "I'm done. I'm never going to Purdue."

On April 10, 2015, Biggie was in Portland preparing for the Nike Hoop Summit and decided that he wanted to end his recruiting process. "I made up my mind," he told Barnes over the phone. "I'm going to Cal."

Biggie says he "really, seriously" wanted to go to Cal, which was on his public list of finalists along with Michigan State, Kentucky, Duke and Purdue. (The Boilermakers by



as power forwards. They wanted Biggie to live in a general-population dorm; Barnes insisted on an apartment and strict training-table supervision. "If a kid has a drug problem, would you put him in a crackhouse?" Barnes says. "Biggie had an eating problem that he was overcoming. So it was a dealbreaker if he lives in a dorm. You know how college kids are; they're eating pizza, drinking beer, not thinking about nutrition. If he's around that

stuff, it's easier to eat that stuff."

Biggie decommitted from Michigan State on May 7, and on May 19, committed to the school he'd sworn off: Purdue. It was the best business decision. The Boilermakers had two 7-foot centers, A.J. Hammons and Isaac Haas, and no true power forwards, ensuring that Biggie would start at the four. They also had private, apartment-style living available in a building directly across from Mackey Arena, and training table and catering that would accommodate his diet of broiled chicken, fish and vegetables.

"I didn't want to come to Purdue," Biggie says. "I just had to put my feelings aside. Purdue had the best basketball situation, and that's all I based it off of."

He didn't even call Painter to tell him the news—Biggie made Barnes do it. They were mad at each other: Biggie at



BIG IMPACT

BUILDING FROM THE BLOCK

The inside jobs of five more power forwards have been vital to their teams' success

JONATHAN ISAAC 6'10" FRESHMAN **FLORIDA STATE**

The key to the No. 14 Seminoles' revival, Isaac leads them in rebounds (7.9 per game) and blocks (1.5).

TJ LEAF 6'10" FRESHMAN **UCLA**

A reliable scorer (17.1 ppg), he erupted for 32 points and 14 boards against Washington State last week.

LAURI MARKKANEN 7'0" FRESHMAN **ARIZONA**

He's been steady for the turmoil-plagued Wildcats, with team highs of 15.9 points and 7.5 rebounds.

◀ **JOHNATHAN MOTLEY** 6'10" JUNIOR **BAYLOR**

The Bears' top offensive threat (16.2 ppg) has gained more than 20 pounds since coming to Waco.

IVAN RABB 6'11" SOPHOMORE **CAL**

After learning to handle double teams, Rabb is averaging a double double (15.2 ppg, 10.9 rpg).

Barnes for not trusting him to make his own decision, Barnes at Biggie for letting emotion hijack the process. Says Biggie, "It was quiet around the house for a couple of weeks."

To free up a scholarship, Purdue also had to make a business decision. The day he decommitted from Michigan State, the Boilermakers had a transfer recruit in West Lafayette on an official visit. "It was one of the lowest feelings I've had as a coach," says Painter, who had to inform the player his offer was on ice. "I loved the kid, and he would have fit here. But he's not Biggie Swanigan. So you've gotta make the decision that's best for your program."

IT'S NOON on the Wednesday after Biggie had 22 points and 10 rebounds in a home rout of Illinois, and the hood on his black sweatshirt is cinched so tightly that all you can see are his eyes and nose. In matching black sweatpants he cuts a menacing figure—an executioner killing calories on a StairMaster. He practices in long sleeves and pants, a vestige of the phase when he was trying to heat up quickly, perspire and cut weight. He's so used to wearing them that if he doesn't now, it just feels weird. (In high school, according to former teammate Dana Batt, Swanigan's go-to proclamation after hitting big shots was, "I'm always warm!")

Josh Bonhotal, a Purdue strength coach, looks on from

his office doorway in the training facility and says, "He's climbed Everest on there a handful of times." Biggie is so driven that he'll work out after games—even after playing 41 minutes in an overtime loss to Minnesota on Jan. 1—but Bonhotal does not worry about overexertion.

"That pales in comparison to the confidence this stuff gives him," says Bonhotal. "When he steps on the court, he knows without a shadow of a doubt, *There is not one dude out here that works harder than me. I've earned the right to go put up 20 and 20.*"

Indeed, during pregame warmups, Biggie has a new tradition of predicting his rebound total—frequently 20—to assistant Brandon Brantley. And now that Biggie is no longer the boy who's anchored to the ground, it's more effective to motivate him from the other end of the spectrum. Barnes keeps a studio apartment in West Lafayette so that, most mornings, he can run Biggie through similar versions of the old shooting and skill workouts they did in Fort Wayne. Except that the man who helped save Biggie no longer makes him declare that he's the best power forward in the world.

"Let me ask you something, son," Barnes will say lovingly, especially in the wake of Biggie's biggest games. "What are you?"

Biggie will roll his eyes as he yields to the new routine. "I'm garbage," he'll say, "until you tell me I'm not." □

Pyeongchang Olympics // '17 STORIES



HOT IN THE COLD

Some of these athletes are already medal winners, but a year from now these stars of snow and ice will be ascending podiums again at the
WINTER OLYMPICS *in South Korea*

Photograph by
Kohjiro Kinno

INSET: SEAN M. HAFLEY/GETTY IMAGES



CHLOE KIM

SNOWBOARDING, U.S.

The 16-year-old junior at La Palma (Calif.) Christian School is princess of the halfpipe. Until a loss in Aspen on Jan. 28, she had won eight straight international competitions over 11 months.





MIKAELA SHIFFRIN

ALPINE SKIING, U.S.

At one point this season, the 21-year-old won six World Cup slalom races of the seven she skied. First in the overall rankings, the 2014 Olympic slalom gold medalist is likely to become the first American women's overall Cup champion not named Vonn since Tamara McKinney in 1983.



JAMIE GREUBEL POSER

BOBSLED, U.S.

The Newtown, Pa., native competed in multiple sports at Cornell, finishing 13th in the heptathlon at the 2006 NCAA championships, and went on to earn a master's in elementary education from Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass. A bronze medalist in Sochi, the 23-year-old Greubel Poser is second in the World Cup standings.

CHRISTOPHE PALLOT/AGENCE ZOOM/GETTY IMAGES (SHIFFRIN);
PETER DEONG/AP (BERGSMÄ); RICK BOWMER/AP (GREUBEL POSER)



HEATHER BERGSMA

SPEEDSKATING, U.S.

At 27, Bergsma, who's from High Point, N.C., has won every 1,000-meter World Cup race this season. Her 19 career victories in the 1,000 are tied for second, behind Bonnie Blair's.



NATHAN CHEN

FIGURE SKATING, U.S.

The 17-year-old from Salt Lake City won his first (there will be more) national championship last month in Kansas City, Mo., where he was the first to land five quadruple jumps in competition. The worlds—and No. 1 Yuzuru Hanyu of Japan—await in Helsinki next month.

JESSICA DIGGINS

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING, U.S.

A native of Afton, Minn., the 25-year-old is fifth in the World Cup standings, the only North American in the top 15. A four-time U.S. champion, she has won two races this season.



SARA TAKANASHI

SKI JUMPING, JAPAN

In the 2016–17 season, the 4' 11½" 20-year-old from Kamikawa has won six of 12 events. Over her six-year career, Takanashi (above and right) has landed on the podium 74 times in 85 competitions.



GEIR OLESEN/JEPH LUMPHUS; JUN TSUKUDA/ATLO VIA ZUMA PRESS (INSET); NILS PETER NILSSON/GETTY IMAGES (ORIGINAL); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (GREEN)



'17 STORIES // Soccer

BRUCE ALMIGHTY: PART 2

*He took charge of the U.S. team after its World Cup flameout in France and achieved unparalleled success. Now, 18 years later, **BRUCE ARENA** is back, and he's facing a far greater challenge*

BY GRANT WAHL

Photograph by
Jae C. Hong/AP



IN MID-JANUARY, a few days before he led the U.S. men's soccer team into practice for the first time in 11 years, coach Bruce Arena settled in for a long dinner at Mangiamo, his favorite Italian haunt near his home in Manhattan Beach, Calif. One of Arena's companions ordered a Cabernet from Chateau Montelena and told the story of the scrappy Napa Valley winery: how in 1976 it competed in a blind-tasting challenge—the so-called Judgment of Paris—against leading French vintners and won, to the shock and consternation of Old World connoisseurs.

Arena, 65, nodded, knowing full well that this was a conversation about soccer too. If the history of a football culture were all that mattered for World Cup success, “then we should just drop out of FIFA because most of the other countries are far more advanced,” said Arena. “But that’s not the way Americans think. We can be the best. We are advanced enough now to move the sport forward on *our* terms with *our* culture. We will eventually be the envy of every country in the world. I hope to be alive at that point.”

No coach has done more to raise the global profile of U.S. men's soccer than Arena, who first took over the team following a last-place finish at World Cup 1998 and then led the U.S. to the quarterfinals in 2002 (before a first-round exit in '06 led to his departure). Yet the challenge at the start of Arena's second tenure is more immediate: to *qualify* for World Cup '18, by any means necessary. “That,” Arena says, “is my only goal right now.” The U.S. is one of just seven countries to have competed in every men's World Cup going back to 1990, but that streak is in real danger after two straight losses—zero points—to start the final round of regional qualifying, in November, led to the firing of coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

“Once we decided a change was going to be made, I think Bruce was very much the obvious choice, given three things,” says U.S. Soccer president Sunil Gulati. “One, his record and experience. Two, his knowledge of the player base and the work at hand. And three, the timing issue: There’s a relatively short period of time to get ready for our qualifiers. You put all those together, and the catchphrase would certainly be *safe hands*.”

Arena believes that to best position itself, his team needs to pick up at least four points—a win and a tie—in its next two qualifiers, against Honduras (in San Jose)

WHAT? THE HEX

Arena, the U.S. coach with the best winning percentage (.658), has one goal in 2017: Advance from a competitive CONCACAF group.



and at Panama, in March. That would bring the U.S. out of last place in the six-team, 10-game CONCACAF Hexagonal tournament, from which the top three (and perhaps even four) will qualify for Russia. Arena won't make sweeping personnel changes; he believes it's too late to experiment. But he spent the U.S. team's January camp preaching a return to the defiant aggressiveness that defined the U.S. teams of Arena (from 1998 to 2006) and Bob Bradley (from '06 to '11). "We need to take initiative, regardless of who we are playing," says Arena, who famously preached, "First tackle, first foul, first shot, first goal" in the locker room before the U.S.'s World Cup 2002 upset of Portugal. "We can't be intimidated. We want to compete like we compete in everything we do in our society. We are aggressive people. We want to be leaders in every field." In two recent friendlies, a 0-0 tie

against Serbia and a 1-0 win over Jamaica last Friday, it was hard to draw too many conclusions; the results of the March qualifying games will dwarf their importance.

Arena was plenty busy in the 10 years he was away from the U.S. job, guiding the L.A. Galaxy to three MLS championships, bringing his MLS total to a record five (along with five NCAA titles at Virginia).

But he always watched the national team

closely, and never in public. His feelings were just too personal, especially when Costa Rica drilled Klinsmann's outfit 4-0 in November and several U.S. players appeared to quit on the field. "He felt terrible," says his wife of 40 years, Phyllis. "It really bothered him."

The culture of pride that Arena helped build was buckling under Klinsmann. "I was always proud during Bob's tenure," says Arena. "Whether [the team] looked good or didn't, there was fight—the right mentality, the understanding of *team* and playing together. In this business, results don't always go your way, but you want to make sure the group is there *collectively*, and during Bob's tenure that was the case."

"The last four or five years [under Klinsmann], I just didn't feel a connection to the program," Arena continues. "There were too many swings up and down along the way that didn't show the same culture that was developed after '98. Right or wrong, Jurgen marketed a concept that never got there—about how good they were going to be and the style of play. We [coaches] don't have a lot of control over that. If you want us to play like one of the great countries in the world, it's not likely to happen in the short term. That doesn't mean [our style is] wrong or bad—that means we're playing the cards that are dealt to us."

Yet Arena isn't here just to bury Klinsmann, whose U.S. team, after all, did advance from a difficult group in World Cup 2014 before performances started dipping



in the two subsequent years. "He brought enhanced visibility to the program," Arena says, "and he convinced U.S. Soccer that the national team demands a certain level of support it never had before. I remember going to Europe [on scouting trips] and having to buy a cellphone and a SIM card because they wouldn't give me a global phone. I know I step into a position that is greatly supported."

The other side of that equation: With greater investment come expectations that are higher than ever. Hundreds of millions of dollars—and, in many ways, the continued growth of American soccer—are riding on the U.S. qualifying for 2018. Failure is not an option.

ON THE first night of the U.S. team's January camp, Arena spoke at a dinner for the players. He welcomed them, told them it was an honor to be back and laid out his plans for the year ahead, including July's Gold Cup. He also couldn't help but drop a wisecrack: "I did these camps back when we played the Gold Cup in January—remember that, Beaz?" Arena said, motioning to DaMarcus Beasley, the oldest field player in the room. "Beasley was about 30 years old at the time," Arena deadpanned in his native Brooklynese. Everyone laughed, including Beasley (who was a 19-year-old midfielder on that 2002 roster). The Bruce was back.

Eleven years after Arena last coached the U.S., he may be older and a little wiser, but not much else has changed.

YOU GOT SERB'ED

Arena has big plans for Kljestan (16), but a 0-0 draw against Serbia on Jan. 29 may have dulled outside enthusiasm a bit.



A LOOK AHEAD

THE NEW GUARD

Five more players who could become crucial in the U.S. run-up to World Cup 2018

DARLINGTON NAGBE M PORTLAND TIMBERS

Frozen out by Klinsmann, Nagbe, 26, brings an unpredictability on the dribble that's rare in a U.S. player.

STEVE BIRNBAUM D D.C. UNITED

The injury histories of center backs Geoff Cameron and John Brooks mean Birnbaum, 26, could become a starter.

JORDAN MORRIS F SEATTLE SOUNDERS

Leading scorer on MLS champs ... Rookie of the Year ... At 22, he should take a big step forward for the USMNT.

GREG GARZA D ATLANTA UNITED

In Garza, 25, the U.S. might finally have found a natural left back. It helps that he already plays there.

SEBASTIAN LLETGET M L.A. GALAXY

The dynamic 24-year-old midfielder earned Arena's trust over two years with L.A.; he could do it again.

"The nuts and bolts of Bruce are pretty consistent," says U.S. assistant Dave Sarachan, who has worked at Arena's side going back to the 1980s. "All the details are covered. His passion to win hasn't changed. His instincts are still good. I'd say he's got a greater perspective on what the game can bring, the highs and the lows; his patience is better. . . . But the ball-busting, the little jokes and jabs here and there? Nothing will change on that end."

For U.S. captain Michael Bradley, the shift in the team's tenor under Arena is palpable. "From the first day Bruce came in, he's done a really good job of setting the right tone and making sure guys understand that we let some things slip," Bradley says. "He has been clear in terms of what he wants to see, what he wants our team to be about. It's exactly what we needed at this moment."

Away from the field, the biggest changes for Arena since 2006 are his two grandkids—Wayde, 4, and Holden Bruce, 3—who live a block away in Manhattan Beach and are constantly visiting the man they call Pepaw. Their father, Kenny, is also an assistant on the current U.S. staff. And while Arena has never been a social media guy, his late-in-life willingness to laugh at himself has led to

multiple Internet memes, whether it's been a photo of Arena swigging from a champagne bottle at the podium after winning the 2014 MLS Cup title or a snap of him cuddling with his dog at home.

To hear Arena, he's more prepared than ever to take on the challenge. With experience, he says, he can see things on and off the field more quickly, can talk to players and already sense what they're going to say. In comparison to 15 years ago, he says, "I'm probably more understanding—yet I also understand when you need to bring the hammer down. I still have the ability to communicate with players at any level. Anyone can put 11 players on the field, but how you deal with it *off* the field is equally important."

In Arena's camp there are no curfews (as Klinsmann had), and agents are allowed in the team hotel lobby (after being banned by Klinsmann). In January players were required to attend team breakfast and lunch but were free to go out on their own for dinner. Arena essentially has two rules: Be on time, and no cellphones at team meals. "I don't think that being called into the national team means you need to be locked in prison for 30 days," he cracks. "What's the point of



PLANET FÚTBOL

U.S. Soccer president Sunil Gulati, the man who rehired Arena, is the guest on this week's *Planet Fútbol* podcast, hosted by Grant Wahl. To listen, visit si.com/Wahl-Pod



that? Are we going to change their diet and habits for the next 300 days of the year? If you go out and have a beer, the world isn't over. And I have no interest in sitting in a hotel lobby, checking on curfews and all that other s---. I have enough headaches to deal with."

Don't expect many Arena to make many changes to the starting lineup—*Play the cards you're dealt*. A few things are clear, though:

- He sees Bradley, 29, as a defensive midfielder. Whereas Klinsmann often tried to use the U.S. captain in an attacking role (with mixed results), Arena wants Bradley in a ball-winning position in front of the back line. "He's a guy who can help you in buildup and possession," the coach says. "He's got a great work rate. He's a leader. He's vocal. So he checks a lot of boxes."

• Sacha Kljestan should get a lot more playing time. The 31-year-old attacking midfielder had a career year with the New York Red Bulls in 2016 (six goals, 20 assists), and he earned a long-awaited callback to the national team. Now he could become a starter. "We need a better player in the midfield in terms of passing and being more creative," Arena says. "Sacha has some skills that we need on the field."

• The German-based Americans who rose under Klinsmann will still play a big part. Though none of them



• Clint Dempsey is unlikely to play an immediate role. The No. 2 all-time U.S. men's goal scorer, now 33, has been one of the national team's few reliable finishers in big games, but an irregular heartbeat has kept him from playing competitively since last August. Dempsey has started training again with MLS's Seattle Sounders, but Arena has ruled him out from playing for the U.S. in March.

After four decades of coaching soccer, almost nothing is new to Arena. He has an abiding belief in the American footballer, and he thinks today's U.S. players are technically better and more physically advanced than their predecessors. "But mentally, whether they're better or not is a question mark," he says. "One would think that if you're physically and technically better, you should *be* better—but I'm not ready to agree with that. The mentality has to be right; the environment has to be right. There's enough talent to get this team to Russia, but we are behind the eight ball. Zero points doesn't look good."

And so while the only goal right now is to qualify for the World Cup, deep down Arena is aware of something else: How you reach the tournament has nothing to do with how you play once you're there. Consider 2002, when Brazil barely qualified but went on to win the tournament. Arena's U.S. team had the same experience that year—they struggled in qualifying but then enjoyed the best World Cup run by an American men's team in modern history. (Arena knows how slim the margins can be; he saw the other side of that in '06, when he

"The best advice you could give a team is to expect the unexpected," says Arena. "Never feel real good or real bad. S--- IS GOING TO HAPPEN."

were involved in the January camp, which took place outside of any FIFA international window, Arena clearly values their roles. He started his new tenure in December by visiting five players stationed in Germany: winger Christian Pulisic (Borussia Dortmund), forward Bobby Wood (Hamburg), midfielder Fabian Johnson (Borussia Mönchengladbach) and defenders John Brooks (Hertha Berlin) and Timmy Chandler (Eintracht Frankfurt). "That's an important part of it," Arena says. Their performance will be crucial in the eight World Cup qualifiers of 2017. The 18-year-old Pulisic, in particular, is on the verge of stardom.

says "we were probably a couple of players from being in position to advance to the next round [that year].")

Visions of the U.S. again advancing to the quarterfinals can wait for another day. "This could be a real ugly situation in a short period of time—or it could be a much better situation," Arena says. "The best advice you could ever give a team is to expect the unexpected. Never feel real good or real bad, because s--- is going to happen."

The next nine months will feature plenty of potholes and mishaps on the road through Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Arena has been here before. That's why he's here again. □

ARENA, FOOTBALL

The 65-year-old knows the highs (top, after ousting Mexico in '02) and lows (consoling Landon Donovan after crashing out in '06) of the World Cup.

WHAT MAKES A LEGEND?

Brett Favre #4

Nickname "The Gunslinger"
Legendary Quarterback

20

20 NFL Seasons

71,838

71,838 Career Pass Yards,
the Most in NFL History

508

508 Career Pass Touchdowns,
the 2nd Most in NFL History

297

297 Consecutive
Games Started,
the Most in
NFL History

11

11-Time Pro Bowl
Selection

3

3-Time AP
Most Valuable Player
(1995-1997)

1

1 Super Bowl Championship

LIVE LIMITLESS

Be a **LEGEND**.

**Copper-Infused
Compression
Garments**



*Sleeves Available in
Knee, Ankle, or Elbow*



Socks Available in White or Black

COPPER
Fit
LIVELIMITLESS

Available at

hsn.com

Bed Bath & Beyond
Dick's Sporting Goods
CVS, Rite Aid, Walgreens
and Walmart



IN

FOUR YEARS from now, if all goes as planned, Nico Mannion will be on your TV, playing for a big-time college basketball program, like UCLA or Duke or Kentucky. He'll lead the offense fearlessly, rain deep jumpers and regularly dunk on fools. He'll also own a bazillion free pairs of shoes, eat Oreos whenever he wants and have, like, a hundred thousand followers on Instagram. He might even have a girlfriend, though he's not totally sure about that part yet.

And after that? Well, after that the future gets awfully big. The NBA? The face of a shoe company? His own bobblehead, complete with a poof of red hair? Yes, it's all possible. After all, when Nico was in middle school, his youth coach watched him skittering around the court and zipping passes, and declared that if you want to see what an NBA lottery pick looks like, well, there you go, and he'd point at the tiny, goofy-looking pale kid, all elbows and ears, who couldn't weigh more than a wet golden retriever. And of course this was a ridiculous and unfair amount of pressure to put on a 13-year-old, because as any parent knows, extrapolation is an inexact science when it comes to human beings. Many a towering seventh-grader becomes an average-sized adult, and just because little Judy is good at math now doesn't mean she won't end up working the night shift at IHOP.

Still, Nico grew some and kept getting better until, one afternoon in eighth grade, his dad handed him a cellphone on the way back from practice, and the voice on the other end was Cal State-Northridge coach Reggie Theus, who said he just knew that Nico was going to be his kind of player, and that he wanted to make him a scholarship offer right there, on the phone, without even seeing him in person, because that way Nico would always remember that it was Theus, a former NBA star, who offered first, way before all the big schools. And upon hearing this, Nico freaked out a bit but tried to look supercool, because one of his teammates was in the car and, besides, that's what you do when you're a real baller. That night his parents reminded him that the road before him was long, saying, "Be proud, enjoy it for an hour or two, then get your



'17 STORIES // *High School Basketball*

THE MIDDLE

He's an Instagram phenomenon who fascinates college coaches—but he's not quite a sure thing. He's also a high school freshman trying to navigate the awkward phases and social mysteries that come with being a teenager.

*Meet **NICO MANNION**, a 15-year-old (sorta-maybe) basketball prodigy*

BY CHRIS BALLARD

Photographs by
John W. McDonough





head right and keep working.” But in the months that followed, Nico couldn’t help but fantasize about his future, the recruiting trips and packed arenas and body-painted bros cheering for the Ginger Ninja—pronounced GIN-ja NIN-ja—which is what his friend Trent likes to call him.

But all that is way, way off in the future, if indeed it is in Nico’s future at all. For now he is not in college or the NBA. He is still just a high school freshman who loves watching *Friends* with his mom and playing Ping-Pong with his best friend, CJ; a sweet, easily excited kid who’s not sure whether Steph Curry should be his favorite player, because Steph is everybody’s favorite player; a 15-year-old who’s not allowed to use his cellphone after 9 p.m., is terrified of bridges, has only shaved once and gets in trouble if he doesn’t scoop the dog poop in the backyard.

Like all boys his age, Nico’s brain and body are still developing, meaning every day is a tangle of emotions, hormones and sudden, overpowering desires. Like, say,

refuses to play again until he turns 57, which brings Pace much cackling joy but does not yet eat away at Nico, who is competitive with people his own age, but as of yet has no discernible interest in diminishing his current, lofty view of his father, himself once a formidable basketball talent. Nico has seen only a few clips of Pace, but knows he was a 6’ 7” small forward with a sweet mustache who played at Utah, spent six seasons coming off the bench in the NBA, then 13 starring in the Italian league. Similarly, Nico has never seen footage of his mom playing pro volleyball in Italy but knows she must have been legit because, well, she’s all quads and biceps even now, at 42. Also, as Nico’s friends will tell you: Gaia is for real. “A complete badass,” says CJ. It is a running joke in the Mannion family that Nico’s impressive hops and competitive drive originate not from his NBA father but from his spiking, stomping mother, who, if Nico starts to complain, will say, in her Italian-accented English, “Oh, no, call the Whaaa-mbulance!”

Nico was at dinner with his mom and looked down to see that he’d gained
1,500 NEW INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS *during the meal.*

to sleep in the middle of class. Or to eat a whole bag of Skittles. Or to mate with the nearest female life form. While most boys drift through this awkward stage in thankful anonymity, Nico’s relative specialness, in tandem with the era of social media and the overzealous, ethically questionable nature of prep-athlete recruiting, sets him apart, making him a quasi-celebrity. That means he exists in a weird limbo, stuck between boyhood and adulthood, between ordinariness and a certain kind of fame, between naiveté and the realization that the world is not always a kind or fair place.

This is what it’s like to be a sorta-maybe basketball prodigy in the year 2017.



This brings us to a comparison. As you may know, Steph Curry’s mother, Sonya, also played high-level volleyball and is something of a badass. And Steph’s dad, Dell, was also an easygoing NBA player. You might even find it significant—some do—that Steph and Nico share the same birthday. Despite these similarities, and a kindred scrawniness and temperament, Nico’s game—slashing, angular, diming—is not all that similar to Steph’s. Then

again, whose is? Anyway, Nico’s friends prefer to compare him to Brian Scalabrine, Chase Budinger and Matt Bonner, none of whom Nico is remotely similar to as a player but all of whom are similarly endowed in the follicular arena.

Gaia has always told Nico that his hair—bright red, cauliflower-shaped, resistant to styling—makes him special, and Nico embraces it, for he is the type of boy who enjoys being different, wearing bright-green shirts under his uniform and, once, a pink tux to a school dance. Pace tells Nico that his hair gives him five minutes. Five minutes to take advantage of his opponents’ preconceptions. So he does. In the first half of the first scrimmage at a camp in Los Angeles last summer, Nico passed to a teammate, cut, got the ball back, sized up a leaping defender and then—*Ker-rack!* Unless you have seen many, many dunks in your life, you have most likely never seen one this incongruous.

HERE IS what you need to know about Niccolo Mannion. He’s 6’ 1” but projected to grow to between 6’ 3” and 6’ 7”. He weighs 155 pounds, but you’d believe 140. He has lived in Sicily and Salt Lake City and now resides in the cactus-strewn expanse north of Phoenix, in a well-appointed house with his mother, Gaia; his father, Pace; a 6-year-old Rottweiler named Zeus; and a 7-year-old black Labrador named Bella. Though Nico can already beat his dad in one-on-one, he lost the last time they played, on Pace’s 56th birthday. Now his dad



Short white kid in low-tops with crazy hair yaks on a big man. It was like a glitch in the basketball system. Also: It was Nico's first dunk in a game over an opponent.

In an earlier time, Nico's throwdown would have been the talk of the other eighth-graders at the camp. In this age it pinged around the Web after a twentysomething filming the game posted a clip. A Mashable writer tweeted it with the caption: "[The] end of this Vine is more surprising than an M. Night Shyamalan movie." NBA point guard Brandon Jennings retweeted it. Cowboys star Ezekiel Elliott followed Nico on Instagram. Soon enough, Nico was at dinner with his mom and looked down to see he'd gained 1,500 new followers just during the meal. He now has 49,000.

Nico attends Pinnacle High, a school of 2,600 that is ranked in the top third of Arizona public schools academically while demographically skewing white, jocky and SUV-ish. To follow Nico from class to class, through concrete courtyards teeming with self-conscious kids and boisterous kids and cool kids, united by the earbuds looped over or wedged in their ears, as if all are about to take an important conference call, is an overwhelming, almost claustrophobic experience. But Nico moves through the crowds with ease, passed off from one cluster of kids to the next, forever dapping and waving. "Nico! Nico!" says a petite brunette, who scurries next to him so her friend can snap an Instagram pic. "Big game tomorrow, bro!" shouts a tall boy vectoring Nico's way. The attention is welcome. A few months earlier Nico was nervous as hell to start high school.

Sometimes all the love can become a distraction. Like on the first day of a week I spent with him, last December, when the kids in second-period physics wanted to talk about Nico's college offers, and whether he was going to throw one down in the home opener the following night, against Cesar Chavez High.

If all this attention has gone to Nico's head, it's not yet apparent. His English teacher says he's "pretty much a model student." Even Ms. Aguilar, his strictest teacher, likes him, though she is prone to say, while strolling about class and glancing his way, "Education is important . . . right, Nico?"

With status come perks. Sixth period is supposed to be freshman phys ed, but Nico gets out of it so he can hang in the training room with Mason, the team's starting center, halfheartedly icing various appendages. As the other freshmen file by, on their way to mandatory softball in matching gray T-shirts and glum expressions, Nico and Mason coolly stare at their phones, adjust their ice bags and endeavor to talk about various topics with great authority. They use the word *literally* a lot, if incorrectly, and reserve *ridiculous* for the highest of compliments. (Russell Westbrook averaging a triple double? Ridiculous.) Other athletes stop by and join in. Here, in roughly descending order, are what Nico and his friends spend the most time discussing:

1. *Basketball prospects doing dope stuff.* As in "Yo, did you see Marvin Bagley's mixtape!!! It's sick!"

PINNACLE REACHED

Mannion's freshman season hasn't been without bumps—such as an off night against Mesa (above)—but his Pioneers stood 20–6 at week's end.



2. *College offers.* Who has them and at which schools.
3. *Girls.* Naturally.
4. *Instagram.* Which is where you can see other basketball prospects doing dope stuff, post college offers and check out girls.
5. *Snapchat.* Useful for saying “What’s up?” to aforementioned girls and communicating with friends when you’re bored in class. In Nico’s case, also forever in danger of being cut off by wary parents.
6. *Who can bench-press the most.* This is a furiously debated topic, both in literal and hypothetical terms. As in: “Yo, Mason, I bet you if I trained for two weeks I could bench more than you, because you have no chest.”
7. *Coach Wilde.* Distributor of playing time, haranguer of one’s defense and fodder for imitation, due to his propensity to extend the final syllable of the last word of every sentence, as in, “C’m on, boys, you have to play haarrrrrrd.” (Also, understood but not usually mentioned: Charlie Wilde is a hardworking, well-respected 17-year coach at Pinnacle, with two state finals appearances to his name.)
8. *Parents.* Sometimes referred to as “parentals.” A source of income, occasional pains in the butt and an endless topic of fascination. For example: “CJ’s dad is always wearing a scarf, but he pulls it off.” Another father invariably answers “Living the dream” when you ask how he’s doing, which is hilarious. And then there is Gaia, who’s interesting not only because her b.s. radar is finely tuned but also because she can probably kill it on the bench.

SOMEDAY, IF he’s like most of us, Nico will look back on this stage of life with a mixture of nostalgia and embarrassment, each moment rendered in exquisite, excruciating detail. Because a teenager’s synaptic plasticity is significantly better than an adult’s, it’s easier for them to make memories, and those memories last longer. While Nico’s brain is in learning hyperdrive, it is still only 80% formed. And as neuroscientist Frances Jensen points out in her excellent, scary-as-hell book, *The Teenage Brain*, this means someone Nico’s age necessarily lacks in other areas, including but not limited to “attention, self-discipline, task completion and emotions.”

This is to say nothing of Nico’s body. His testosterone level is jacked up from before puberty, so he’s pretty much in a perpetual state of fight-or-flight. He needs more than nine hours of sleep, but his brain releases melatonin two hours later than an adult’s, so good luck nodding off at night and better luck staying awake during Pinnacle’s sadistic 7:30 a.m. first period. The math is brutal: Nico gets up at 6:15 and, after some away games, doesn’t get home and into bed until 11 p.m. Less sleep means his brain has a harder time managing stress and, since growth hormone is released at night, the lack of sleep can even impact his height.

What sets Nico apart is that his life is a bizarre mixture of the stuff all teenagers go through—the pimples and insecurity and clanking front teeth on your first kiss—and the stuff very few teenagers go through. By sixth grade he was being written up by prep websites. (“His composure and savvy play will make him a much-sought-after prospect in time.”) Because Nico holds dual citizenship, the Italian national team has called, but the U.S. beat it to the punch, inviting Nico to the junior national team minicamp this past fall. (He performed admirably.) An impressive edifice of boxed basketball shoes rises on one side of his small, uncluttered bedroom. Of 13 pairs, which retail between \$125 and \$275, Nico says he received 12 for free. The new Curry 3’s, not yet on the market, are supposed to arrive any day.

The man responsible for delivering those Curry 3’s is a 40-ish former nightclub owner named Ryan Silver. An excitable man with slicked-back brown hair, Silver runs the Earl Watson Elite AAU program, which is sponsored by Under Armour, which is in turn endorsed by Curry. Silver



is prone to texting Nico at 3 a.m. to say, “Just thinking about you!” even though he knows Nico’s parents make him plug in his phone in the kitchen overnight. The Mannions allow that Silver is a bit different—“refreshing, really,” says Pace—but they like him because in a vast sea of b.s., he strikes them as a man at the oars of a boat of truth, relatively speaking. For example, if they are walking into a restaurant and Nico is distracted, Silver will say, “Dude, what are you doing? Hold the f----- door for your mother!”

Not incidentally, Silver is also a conduit to the shoe folks. “The Under Armour people told us, We’re going to need a new face of the brand in four or five years, after Steph,” Pace said one night after dinner, sitting on the couch with Nico as the Knicks-Cavs game played on the flat screen. “Someone good who’s different, interesting, marketable.” Pace looked over at his son, sock-encased feet splayed out,

shoulders hunched in iPhone position. “Is Nico marketable? Well, if he grows to 6’ 6” he’ll be good. He’s got red hair, he’s athletic. Who knows?” Pace pauses. “And if he doesn’t, that’s fine too.”

At this age the price of Nico’s allegiance is free gear, but that could change. After all, Curry’s first contract with Under Armour was \$4 million a year; he now makes millions more in equity. First, though: college. Offer number two came last June, from Arizona State, when coach Bobby Hurley saw Nico at a summer camp and was transfixed. Fortunately, Nico had Googled Hurley before the camp—at Pace’s recommendation—and thus understood that when Hurley said Nico reminded him of himself, this was a big compliment.

A couple of days later Dan Majerle—former Suns star, current college coach, no Googling required—came up during a camp game and said, “Nico, Grand Canyon University is offering you a scholarship. Now go back to the game.” San Francisco came next, sight unseen, followed by Utah State and Utah, Pace’s alma mater. This meant Nico had six scholarship offers before he’d played a game in high school, which Pace deems “crazy” but is not all that uncommon. High-profile middle schoolers have been targeted for years.

In Nico’s case, college coaches can’t directly recruit him



lessly, relying on defense to scrap his way to the league—or The League, as Nico’s awestruck friends say—then becoming a legend in Italy, playing against everyone from Mike D’Antoni to a young Manu Ginóbili and finally retiring at 42. In 1995, divorced from his first wife, with whom he has two kids, he met Gaia. He was 35 and a star. She was 21 and a firebrand.

From an early age Pace groomed Nico to be a point guard, because it’s easier to switch from the one to the two than the other way around. Always, he told him to be aggressive and drive to score, not to pass. At first, this seemed a bit ludicrous, as Nico was always the smallest kid, drowning in his jersey. Only in the last year

or so has his body caught up to his peers’.

Now Pace, who works in merchant services, alternates between doting on Nico—“I’m basically a taxi driver”—and cutting him down to size.

When Nico changes shirts at a workout, exposing his chest: “Son, please put that shirt back on!”

At dinner, the night after a game: “Last night’s dunk was weak, you might as well have laid it up. I wouldn’t even count that as a dunk.”

FRESHMAN LIFE

Nico finds time for friends (top, bottom), schoolwork (middle) and, of course, picking up dog poop (not pictured).

“Is Nico marketable?” Pace asks, looking at his son. “He’s got red hair, he’s athletic. Who knows? And if he [isn’t], **THAT’S FINE TOO.”**

until the June after his sophomore year, at which point they’re free to deluge him. Pace plans on getting a dedicated cellphone for Nico to use for “an hour or two hours a day—that’s it.” Until then, however, recruiters can call Wilde or Silver anytime they want, and those two can in turn put Nico on the phone. They can also mail letters, a stack of which Nico keeps in a shoebox. Many are bizarrely written, on account of the myriad NCAA regulations governing recruiting. “Hope you’re doing well,” one reads. “Here is some info on Utah. It’s all we can legally send you right now. We’re very excited about you and looking forward to seeing you on campus soon. Go Utes.”

None of this strikes Nico as weird, for this is the only world he knows. As for Pace and Gaia, they rely on their own experiences. When Pace was 10, he knew he wanted to be a basketball player, so he pursued that goal relent-

While barbecuing at the house: “Son, why’d I have you?”

Nico: “To get you beers.”

Pace: [*Winks.*]

Nico returns with Heineken in a frosty glass.

Meanwhile, Gaia, a personal trainer and cooking instructor, drops the hammer when necessary. She closely monitors Nico’s social media usage—“the biggest challenge of raising a teenager today.” A GPA below 4.0 means no phone for a week. Good nutrition is similarly enforced. Dessert at home is rare. “She’ll buy snacks, and the best thing is, like, Nutri-Grain bars,” Nico moans. Chores—including poop scooping—are not optional. Gaia does not entertain excuses. Whenever Nico complains about a coach getting on his case or a teammate freezing him out, Gaia says the same thing: “You can get bitter or you can get better!”

Nico’s upbringing shows: He looks adults in the eye,



is thoughtful and is almost preposterously clean for a teenager. He is fortunate in many respects, blessed with an enviable genetic and socioeconomic situation. This makes him different from many of the other 15-year-old sorta-maybe prodigies. Both Pace and Gaia have already achieved their own athletic dreams, so they are not living through their child. They can afford sessions with a basketball trainer and a sports-scientist type, and, since Pace worked as a broadcaster for the Jazz—Nico would kiss the TV screen, saying, “Dad! Dad!”—Nico is not cowed by NBA life. His most indelible memory, from when he was nine, is Kobe Bryant kneeling down and speaking Italian to him. “The best player in the world and he’s treating me like a regular person,” Nico says.

Like most of his friends in this era of youth sports specialization, Nico plays only basketball. He tried football for a while but didn’t like being tackled. He hated baseball.



Asked what portion of his life is devoted to playing, thinking about or watching basketball, Nico says,
“ABOUT 85%. A LOT.”

Asked about his hobbies outside hoops, he thinks for a bit. Finally, he mentions fishing. Yes, he sorta likes to fish. Future careers, non-NBA division? None come to mind. Favorite subject? Math, I guess. Asked what portion of his life is devoted to playing basketball, or thinking about basketball, or watching basketball, he pauses, calculates. “About 85%. A lot.”

W, W, W, W, L. This is Pinnacle’s season before the home opener, on Dec. 6. Considering the Pioneers combine a lack of size with a lack of experience, they are surprisingly good. Wilde employs a three-guard attack behind one upperclassman (Mason), three sophomores and Nico.

Before every home game the players meet for a pregame meal at Majerle’s Sports Grill. Then it’s off to the gym, where the Pinnacle Crazies stand and chant, “NI-CO MANN-ION!”

One riser over sit the team parents, in a diamond-shaped cluster, looking serious. Three film the game; one live-streams it. Pace and Gaia sit in por-

table chairs, stomping and cheering and exhorting.

On the court Nico is a blur, attacking and sprinting and firing 24-footers off the dribble. You can see why Hurley couldn’t stop watching: the basketball IQ, competitive fire, athleticism. In the first quarter Nico has two *holy crap!* moves, one chasing a loose ball and finding a teammate for a layup, and the other a soaring, above-the-rim lefty finish around a 6’ 4” leaper. It is easy to forget he’s a freshman.

Still, Pinnacle blows an early lead and is losing at the

half. Wilde, a compact, gap-toothed man who looks as if he might wrestle you at any moment, throws a clipboard in the locker room, lamenting the mental errors. It is, he later says, as mad as he’s been all season.

Despite a late rally, Pinnacle loses by three. In the locker room Mason stands up and announces, “This will make us better.” Eventually Nico walks out to his waiting parents, stopped en route by the opposing team’s star, who wants to take a picture, then two girls interested in hugs. Privately his parents are pleased by the hugs; it’s always good to see your son find a social groove. Still,



they want to set limits. When Nico asks if he can get a ride with Mason to BJ’s, for postgame dinner, Pace thinks for a moment. “O.K.,” he finally says, “but you’re sitting with us.”

An hour later, picking at grilled cheese and drinking a strawberry lemonade, Nico remains despondent over the loss and his play. He did not shoot like Steph tonight.

“Let it go,” says Gaia, putting an arm around Nico.

“It’s over—nothing we can do about it,” says Pace. Besides, it’s noted, this was the first home game of Nico’s first season of high school. Just think of how many more games await in his life. Hundreds? Thousands? Nico looks up. He does not appear reassured. “That means we only have, what, eight more home games this year?”

TWO DAYS later Pinnacle plays at Mesa High, the defending Division I state champs. Wilde has spent two days preparing the boys: film at lunch, more film at practice. At 4 p.m. the players climb onto a long yellow school bus. The starters huddle in the rear. The normal banter—whether J. Cole’s album will be nice, maybe even better than Chance the Rapper’s, maybe the album



of the year?!?—soon gives way to a weightier concern.

This week some freshman got in a scrap at a skate park and then—so the boys heard—threatened on Twitter to shoot up the school on Friday. And today is Thursday.

The boys are freaked out. They are concerned. And they aren't about to show it.

"I told my dad. He said, 'You're still going to school. . . .'"

"They canceled practice. . . ."

"They canceled your mother. . . ."

"Ha, ha."

"Dude, I was watching a documentary on some kid who actually did this. That's why I'm not f----- with that. Go to school? No way, bro! Straight up!"

No one knows what to think. Is it a real threat, a sign of these messed-up times? By the end of the bus ride they reach consensus: Trent will talk to Coach Wilde before the game. Also: Most of the team will be skipping school tomorrow.

MESA'S GYM is smaller than Pinnacle's. Ryan Silver walks in, fresh off a flight from L.A., wearing an Under Armour polo shirt. He is nervous energy in human form. The reason becomes clear: An assistant from USC is here to see Nico, at Silver's urging.

Silver sits in the bleachers, leg tapping, watching Nico. "He's got great bloodlines," he tells me, as if describing a thoroughbred. "Mom's an athlete, and Dad's in the NBA. If he's 6' 5"—*whoooooo*, it's over."

The USC coach arrives just before tip-off and sits in the first row, near the door. Nico starts slowly. Finally, late

in the first quarter, he scores on a tough pull-up from the baseline. Two minutes later he comes out, gassed. "Hydrate!" Pace commands from the stands. Silver thumbs out a tweet, equal parts promotion and flattery: "USC Associate Head Coach Tony Bland courtside tonight at Pinnacle AZ/Mesa for 2020 Nico Mannion. Bland tremendous Coach primed to be HC soon."

Silver looks at me. "Watch. Once I send this out, I'll get texts from, like, 10 coaches."

We wait. Thirty seconds pass. A minute. Ping! An eyeballs emoji from an Arizona coach. UCLA responds as well. Silver is pleased. His job, he explains, is to help Nico get to the best school possible. "After that, it's up to him."

Nico continues to struggle. The crowd, which numbers maybe 400, gleefully chants "o-ver-ra-ted!" At least it's better than the "Fire crotch" chant he hears at one gym. The opposing point guard goes after Nico, as all opposing point guards do now that

he's a phenomenon, banging and elbowing and bumping. Gaia can't stand it. Pace tells Nico to man up. Nico gets crossed over something wicked and falls down, causing the crowd to go nuts. Nico responds with a turnover. In the stands Bland looks down at his phone. Silver is bewildered and frustrated.

"Do you think the pressure is getting to Nico?" he finally asks, and the answer seems obvious.

FOURTH QUARTER, 6:30 remaining: Nico gets his fourth foul. He walks to the bench, upset. He looks young. On the verge of tears. He looks to Pace for kindred indignation, finds none. "You've got your hand on him. If you push, it's a foul, son!"

Fourth quarter, 3:30: Pinnacle rallies to take a lead. Mesa answers, then Pinnacle. Timeout. The gym is buzzing. "Don't Stop Believin'" blares from the speakers, cheerleaders whoop, and the jackrabbit mascot boogies. Little sisters and brothers hop up and down, and the Mesa student section stands as a block, clapping and yelling, and a girl of maybe 13 air-guitars the solo, and no one looks at their phone, and it's hard not to feel like, *Damn, if this isn't the essence of high school sports*, and it strikes you that no matter what's to come for a boy like Nico, whether it's college offers or the NBA or whatever else, this is still a pretty cool moment, one that makes those

MOM GENES

Pace played in the NBA, but the family likes to say that Nico inherited his substantial leaping ability from Gaia, a former Italian volleyball star.



who are not young wish they were, and those who are feel like nothing could possibly matter more.

And then Pinnacle gets a stop and is running down the clock, the lead in hand and—*oh, crap!*—a pass slips right through Nico's hands and caroms off the bleachers, next to Bland. Then, moments later, up 56–54, Nico tries for an ill-advised steal—"Noooo!" yells Pace—only to see Mason, the soft-spoken junior who's hoping that if things break right, he'll get an offer from Cal Poly or Dartmouth so he can study engineering, swoop in from behind and pin the layup on the backboard, sealing the win.

Bland isn't there to see it. He left a minute earlier, vanishing into the night. Nico finishes with 11 points, three rebounds, three assists, one steal and three turnovers. It is easily his worst game of the season.

WALKING TO the car, half an hour later. Pace turns to Nico.

"I can't believe they offered you a scholarship after that performance."

"I know," responds Nico.

And it's true. Bland texted Silver. Silver, excited, put him on the phone with Nico. The coach told Nico that he loved how he wasn't just a scorer. How he D'd up and rebounded and understood the game. How he'd fit in well at USC. And then he offered him a scholarship. Actually, he offered two, "in case your dad wants to come out of retirement."

This put Silver into motion. He texted a recruiting analyst named Josh Gershon, giving him a five-minute head start on the rest of the media. Gershon posted the news. Silver retweeted it, then followed with his own Instagram post 10 minutes later. It carries more weight, Silver explained, if it doesn't come from him initially,

Insane! Then he'll become the face of Under Armour."

Gaia is not about to let this pass without some of the ol' bringing down to earth. "I tell him all the time," she announces, "that I don't care how many followers you have, go pick up dog poop."

LATER, ON the drive home, I ask Gaia and Pace where they hope Nico will be when he's 25. "Happy," Gaia says. "Just happy. But I always worry that he'll be disappointed. The pressure. What if it doesn't work out? Does he understand that he's a valuable human being, that he can be anything he wants to be beyond basketball?"

In the driver's seat, Pace smiles. "Yeah, because I'd have just said, 'I want him to be an NBA All-Star and make a lot of . . .'" He chuckles, winks. "Just kidding."

In reality Pace, who gives the appearance of never worrying, thinks about it a lot. Nico's his third child. The other two were athletes, but neither faced these expectations. "Obviously your biggest fear is he doesn't get to where he wants to get, and the odds are that's the case. Only a few guys get to play professional, and a



"I always worry that he'll be disappointed," says Gaia. "The pressure. Does he understand that he's a **VALUABLE HUMAN BEING?** *"*

because people are always saying he's just hyping his guys.

Over dinner at a nearby Chili's, Nico is quiet while Silver tells cautionary tales: about surefire guys who got offers from Kansas, then just never got better, or got fat, or had the wrong priorities. He tells Nico that he needs to rest, rest, rest, rest. He has a big summer coming up. The Biggest. N.Y.C., Indy, L.A., USA Basketball, probably the Under Armour All-Star game. High school is O.K., somewhat important, but the summer's what matters. That's when the coaches notice. When he sees better comp. "If you're going to go to UCLA or USC, you need to play against those guys." Silver stares at Nico, picking at his grilled cheese. "Bro, it's going to get crazy. By the time Nico is a junior or senior, his following will be insane. Like 100,000 followers.

lot of it is luck and staying healthy." He looks out at the highway. "Last summer I told Nico to try to enjoy every moment. Don't think, 'I'm playing because I want to get a scholarship or this or that.' Just enjoy the game. Because it goes by so fast, and then it's gone. You don't think that right now, because you're 15, or 14, but believe me, it will be over before you know it."

In the backseat of the Lincoln Navigator, Nico has his knees scrunched up, earphones in, face lit by his phone. He looks worn out. And it doesn't seem fair. Here is a boy who works hard and is mature beyond his years, likable and gifted. He'd be primed for success in so many industries but has already narrowed his life to this one goal, and whether he reaches it may be out of

his control. It may come down to his growth plates, or a fluke injury, or some coach's whim.

So yes, he's sorta like Steph. But Steph is also one in a million.

THERE IS no gunfire at school the next day. Security and police are on top of it. "It was just social media running out of control," school principal Chad Lanese said. Most of the players aren't there to find out. Besides, as Pace points out, they could use the sleep. Instead a group meets at Denny's at the very teenager time of 10:30. "I wet my hair with the garden hose on the way out of the house," Trent announces upon arriving 20 minutes late.

The boys order chocolate-chip pancakes and lumberjack specials and generally eat things that would horrify you if you knew the ingredients and quantities. They pass around video of Kyree Walker, the top high school freshman in the country, and a junior named Zion Williamson.

"Holy crap! You see this?!" Nico says, holding up his phone.

CJ watches. "Ooh! He had this move, I think I liked it on Instagram; it was the most lit thing I've ever seen."

They talk about a group text named "Bio is depressing," which everyone had to delete.

"Like, word got out to a parent and they, like, reported stuff and he's, like, all mad now."

"Why, because his class is depressing?"

"No, a parent thought somebody was actually depressed—that's why they reported it!"

"Oh, my God!"

And on it goes, stories about flat tires and missed dunks and weird teachers, the older kids leading the charge while Nico sits, swiveling his head and smiling and occasionally taking grief. In the months to come, Pinnacle will win six in a row, and Nico will score 38 in a game, and *The Arizona Republic* will write about him, and the letters from colleges will continue, giving Nico hope that he will soon need a second shoebox.

But for now, on this morning, as the thin winter light filters in and the waiter comes by wearing a button that reads ASK ME ABOUT ADDING AVOCADO, Nico is not yet an adult or a superstar, but just a skinny freshman among elders, a kid whose father had to drive him to Denny's and who's sitting right over there in a booth by himself—"Hi, Dad!"—pretending not to pay attention. For now life is both amazingly simple and vexingly complicated. Play basketball. Do your homework. Hydrate. Think about the future. Live in the moment. Keep your cool. Scoop the poop. Be yourself. Be different. Act old. Cherish your youth.

Nico picks up his phone, checks to see if he has any notifications, puts it back down, looks back up. The boys are talking about practice that afternoon. It's going to be good, they agree. Real good. □

SUMMARY NOTICE OF PROPOSED SETTLEMENT OF CLASS ACTION

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TO: ALL PERSONS WHO HAD A MORTGAGE SERVICED BY WELLS FARGO AND PAID A BROKER'S PRICE OPINION FEE ASSESSED DURING THE PERIOD MAY 6, 2005 THROUGH JULY 1, 2010, YOU MAY BE ENTITLED TO CASH FROM A CLASS ACTION SETTLEMENT. READ THIS NOTICE CAREFULLY. YOUR RIGHTS MAY BE AFFECTED BY A CLASS ACTION SETTLEMENT.

THIS NOTICE WAS AUTHORIZED BY THE COURT. IT IS NOT A LAWYER SOLICITATION.

YOU ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED that a hearing will be held on **April 4, 2017, at 2:00 p.m.**, to decide whether to approve the Settlement before the Honorable Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers, at the United States District Court, Northern District of California, U.S. District Courthouse, 1301 Clay Street, Courtroom 1—4th Floor, Oakland, California 94612. **Please note that the date and time are subject to change. See the case website for any changes. www.BiasvWellsFargo.com.**

In the lawsuit, the Plaintiffs argued that Wells Fargo violated the law by charging homeowners more than the amount Wells Fargo paid for Broker's Price Opinions ("BPOs"). Wells Fargo denies all the claims in the lawsuit and that it has done anything wrong. Wells Fargo contends that all of its BPO policies and procedures complied with the law. However, rather than continue to litigate the case in court, the parties reached a settlement.

The settlement calls for Wells Fargo to establish a \$50 million dollar fund. Payments to class members will be made from this fund. ***If you are a class member and you want to receive benefits from the settlement, you do not need to make a claim. A check will be mailed to you at your last known address in Wells Fargo's records.*** You are a member of the class if you had a loan serviced by Wells Fargo and between May 6, 2005 and July 1, 2010, you were charged \$95 to \$125 for a BPO and paid for that BPO. If you are a class member and you moved, please go to the settlement website to find out how to update your mailing address: www.BiasvWellsFargo.com. If you are not sure whether you are a class member, you can contact the settlement administrator to confirm your membership in the class.

You may obtain a copy of the Notice of Settlement, which more completely describes the Settlement and your rights thereunder (including your right to object to the Settlement), and a copy of the Settlement (which among other things contains definitions for the defined terms used in this summary), online at www.BiasvWellsFargo.com, or by writing to:

Bias v. Wells Fargo Administrator
PO Box 2876
Portland, OR 97208-2876

Inquiries should NOT be directed to Defendants,
the Court, or the Clerk of the Court.

Happily Ever After . . .

The commissioner and the MVP remade acquaintances on the morning after the Super Bowl



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