

**LEARNING TO FLY**  
**ONE (SHORT) MAN'S**  
**QUEST TO DUNK**

By Michael McKnight

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**NBA PLAYOFFS**  
**MY TOWN, MY TEAM:**  
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# SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

## HEAR THEM ROAR

38 THE ROYALS WANT  
YOU TO KNOW:  
**OCTOBER WASN'T A FLUKE**  
BY TOM VERDUCCI

PLUS  
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ERIC HOSMER IS  
PLAYING WITH A  
LOUD BAT IN HIS  
HANDS AND A  
LARGE CHIP ON HIS  
SHOULDER. IT'S  
BEEN CONTAGIOUS

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In motion, he's a perfect storm of energy, talent and instincts

By Tom Verducci



#### BETTS IN SHOW

When the Red Sox' 22-year-old centerfielder breaks on a ball, it's a thing of beauty.

Photograph by Michael Ivins  
Boston Red Sox/  
Getty Images

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Each of the NBA's four conference finalists represents a title-starved fanbase—especially Cleveland

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He was 6' 1" and 42, with three kids. His goal: learn to jam

By Michael McKnight

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*Peyton Manning:*

My last late night with Letterman

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS

THIS WEEK:

Ed Zurga/Getty Images (Eric Hosmer); Greg Nelson for Sports Illustrated (LeBron James); John W. McDonough for Sports Illustrated (Stephen Curry)



# Collision Course

**LeBron James** [page 30] is a two-time NBA champion, four-time league MVP and the game's best player, averaging 27.9 points and 10.5 rebounds in the playoffs. **Stephen Curry** [page 33] is the 2014-15 MVP and the best shooter on the planet, averaging 29.9 points and shooting 44.8% from three-point range this postseason. So who has the edge if these two meet in the Finals? Go to [SI.com/nbaplayoffs](http://SI.com/nbaplayoffs) for predictions from our hoops experts and for complete postseason coverage, including breakdowns and analysis of every game, plus Chris Ballard's look at the unconventional post defense on display in the 2015 playoffs.

SI DIGITAL BONUS



**Sign of The Times?**  
From the SI Vault  
May 25, 1992

Twenty-three years ago, Larry Bird's career may have ended when the Cavs eliminated the Celtics in the Eastern Conference semifinals

**By Jack McCallum**

To read this and other stories from the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED archive, go to [SI.com/vault](http://SI.com/vault)

## SI.COM'S Top Stories

**1 A Top 10 Moment**  
Peyton Manning's tribute to David Letterman

**2 Feeling It**  
For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com, including retired MMA fighter Julie Kedzie on how it feels to cut weight before a fight, go to [SI.com/topstories](http://SI.com/topstories)



**3 NBA Mock Draft 2.0**  
With the lottery over, who will be picked first? What will the Knicks do?

**4 Still Cruising**  
Mario Andretti's business ventures are thriving

**5 Mommy for Hire**  
How Jim Harbaugh hired a team mom for Michigan

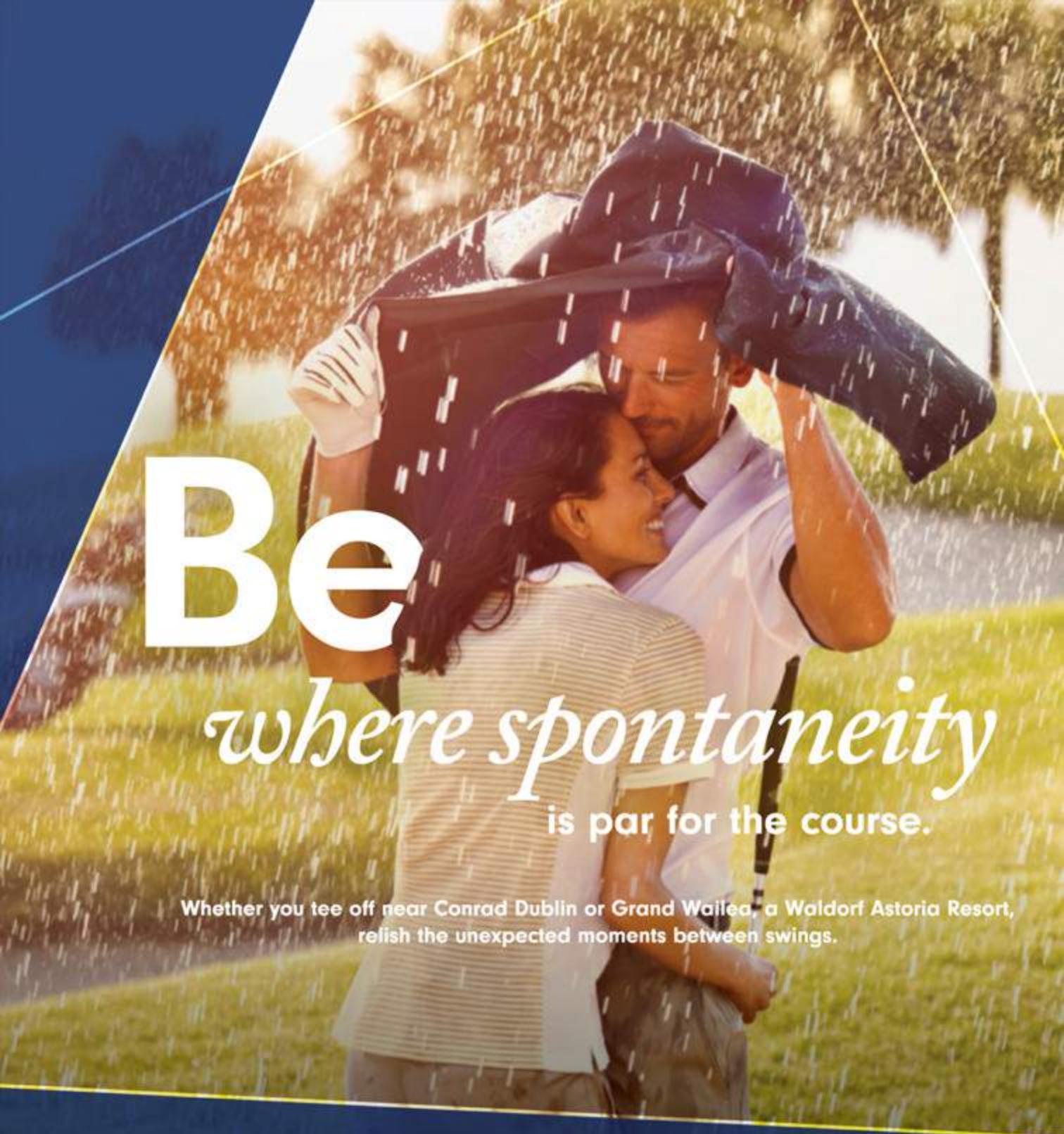
**SI PRO-FILES**

As successful as many athletes are on the field, some find greater success after they retire. To see videos of athletes turned business leaders, go to [SI.com/pro-files](http://SI.com/pro-files), a series from the editors of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED and FORTUNE.



For the second Grand Slam of the tennis season, SI.com has partnered with IBM to create data-driven visualizations and to illustrate all the action from Paris. For two weeks SI.com and IBM will bring the French Open to life in the second-most engaging way possible. [Of course, courtside at Roland Garros is still best.] To learn more, go to [si.com/french-open-data](http://si.com/french-open-data)

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JAMES); BILL BAPTISTAZAR/GETTY IMAGES (CURRY); MANNY MILLAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BIRD); JOSH HEDGES/ZUMA LLC/GETTY IMAGES (KEDZIE)



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# INBOX

FOR MAY 18, 2015

As the mother of a 13-year-old girl, I thought it was phenomenal to see Ronda Rousey on the cover as the world's most dominate athlete. This is a strong and much needed message to young women everywhere that their beauty comes from their strength, confidence and hard work.

Jamie Murphy, Aliso Viejo, Calif.



When I went to my mailbox and saw Rousey on the cover, I thought, Wow! What an amazing woman! She has elevated her sport, can rip your head and limbs off and still appear in the Swimsuit Issue.

Mario Valdez, Tehachapi, Calif.

I want to see Rousey vs. Floyd Mayweather in a knock-down, drag-out, tap-out match. I would love to see her take him down.

George Drennen, Morgantown, W.Va.



It should be noted that 49ers guard Alex Boone, who previously defended Jim Harbaugh before telling HBO that players thought he was clinically insane, attended Ohio State. I'm sure that explains his change of heart, because Harbaugh is now the coach at Michigan.

Bradley W. Shinn, Findlay, Ohio



POINT AFTER | PG. 68

Greg A. Bedard needs to realize that for the many NFL fans who live outside of Boston, the world does not revolve around the Patriots. Many of us believe that Bill Belichick and the Pats are the biggest cheats in the NFL. If you want to question loyalty, integrity and character regarding Deflategate, the conversation shouldn't start with Roger Goodell. It should start with the Patriots.

Jim Kenton  
Trinidad, Colo.

If Robert Kraft esteems loyalty above integrity and character, why are we surprised that there's a problem in New England?

Randolph G. Bias  
Austin

Tom Brady and Barry Bonds went to the same high school, Junipero Serra in San Mateo, Calif. Tarnished legacies abound!

Stephen Schlepomo  
Malibu, Calif.

In almost any other circumstance, the punishment for cheaters is to erase their accomplishment. To be fair, the Pats should have been stripped of their Super Bowl title.

Jonathan Cohen  
Seattle

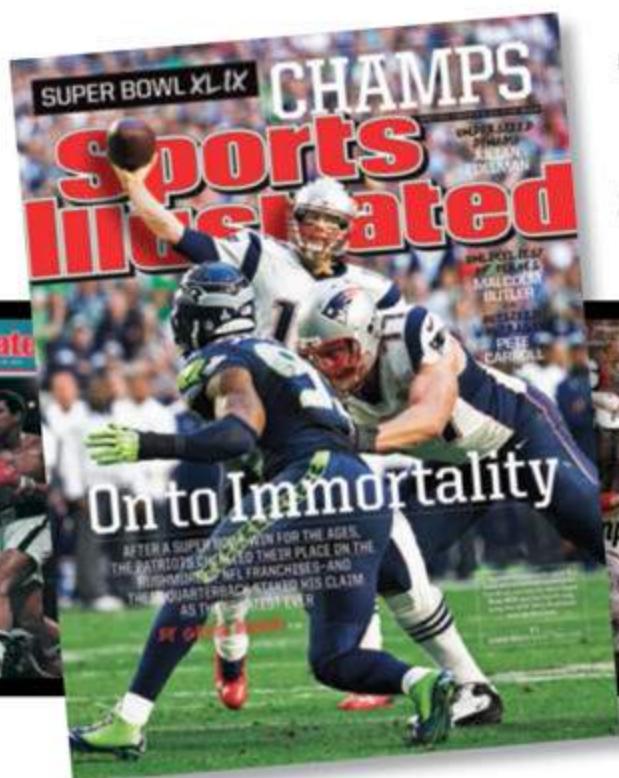
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1  
of  
3



**Leading  
Off**

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## Peer Pressure

■ Hawks power forward Paul Millsap ventured way beyond the paint to stare down—and try to slow down—Cavaliers star LeBron James in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals. While Millsap's peek-a-Bron D paid off at times, James still torched the Hawks for 31 points in a 97-89 win that stole home court advantage for Cleveland, which jumped out to a 3-0 series lead.

---

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
**GREG NELSON**  
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



## Leading Off

# Grid Pro Quo

Drivers lined up for the start of the 99th Indy 500 on Sunday at Indianapolis Motor Speedway (page 21). Juan Pablo Montoya (number 2, fifth row), who began in 15th position, was rear-ended during the caution period after a first-lap crash. Dropping to 30th in the 33-car field, he rallied to win the Borg-Warner Trophy for the second time (inset).

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
**JAMIE SQUIRE**  
GETTY IMAGES

INSET  
**MICHAEL CONROY**  
AP



+

2  
of  
3







+

33

**Leading  
Off**

## West Side Story

■ Sophomore attackman Connor Cannizzaro flung a headlong shot past Maryland goalie Kyle Bernlohr to put Denver up 4-1 in the NCAA final on Monday in Philadelphia. The Pioneers went on to win 10-5, becoming the first school from a state not on the Atlantic seaboard to take the title. Bill Tierney, who won six championships in 22 seasons as coach at Princeton, took over the Pioneers in 2010. Denver is one of only three Division I programs (with Marquette and Air Force) outside the Eastern time zone.

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
**AL TIELEMANS**  
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

# SCORECARD

## Hiring Fees

Three NHL franchises took different routes to choosing a coach—driving up salaries and ushering in a new era in decision-making

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

**LAST WEEK** Mike Babcock stood in the same spot where he had stood after so many Red Wings games and held the strangest press conference. Babcock had already been introduced as the Maple Leafs' new coach in Toronto 24 hours earlier. He flew back to Detroit to explain why he had chosen the Leafs over returning to the Wings, a large offer from the Sabres and various other opportunities. His chin quivered, and his eyes teared. "It's way easier," he said, "just to get fired."

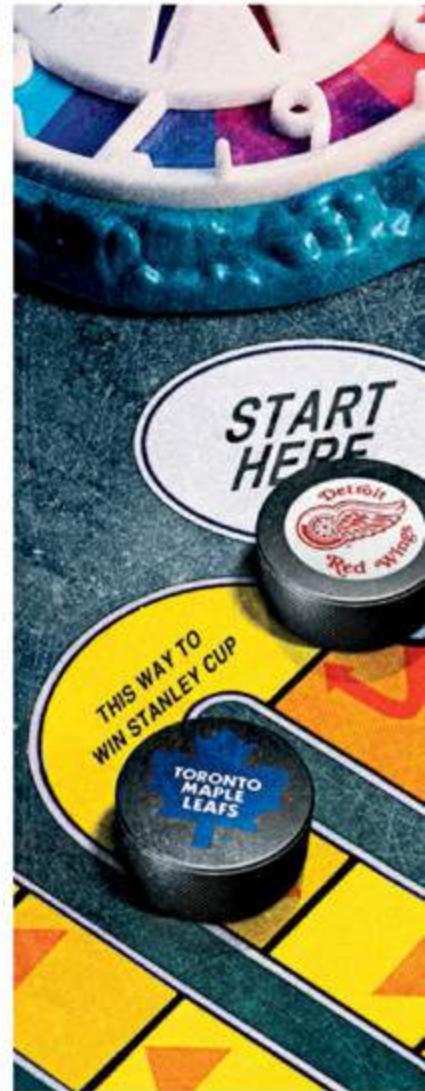
Getting fired reduces the stress of choosing. This is true for teams too: Firing a coach is easy; hiring a new coach is hard, which is why three teams took such disparate tacks this year.

The Maple Leafs gave Babcock an eight-year, \$50 million contract, more than double what the Blackhawks pay the NHL's previously highest-paid coach, Joel Quenneville. The Leafs have the money, and it's not like they're going to spend it on a parade any time soon. The hope is that Babcock can restore the team's credibility with the Canadian public (he helped Team Canada win two Olympic golds) and rebuild the franchise after several failed regimes. And the Leafs might be right.

The Red Wings, meanwhile, are expected to replace Babcock with Some Guy. He calls himself "Jeff Blashill," and he coaches their AHL affiliate in Grand Rapids. Blashill would be

a system hire; the Wings groomed him. They think their franchise is so strong and stable that while they wanted to keep Babcock, they didn't need him. And they might be right too.

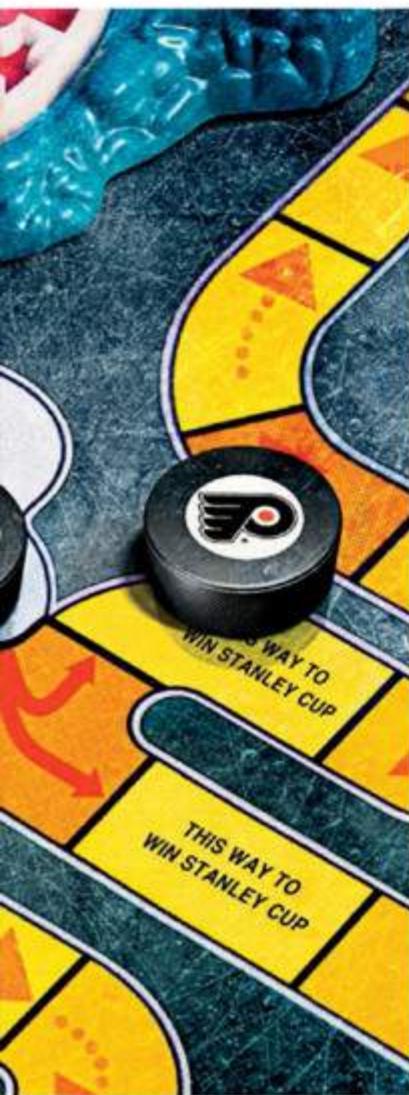
In Philadelphia on May 18, the Flyers introduced their new coach, Another Guy. He calls himself "Dave Hakstol." He is only a household name in North Dakota—where there are not many households. Hakstol has never coached in the NHL, and he will be the first coach in 33 years to jump from NCAA hockey to NHL head coach. (He has been the coach at the University of North Dakota since 2004.) The Flyers think Hakstol will bring a fresh approach and help them return to Stanley Cup



contention. And they might be right as well.

Babcock's deal signals a shift in coaching salaries; every other coach in the league should thank him by taking him to dinner, then suggesting he pick up the check. But as salaries rise, teams will be wise to ask: What are we getting for our money?

If you say the Maple Leafs overpaid for Babcock, you are missing the point. He is worth more to Toronto than



still spend on players.

Babcock's popularity tends to rise the moment he leaves his team's dressing room. Veteran players often chafe at his methods. Sometimes he comes off as condescending with the media, which will not play well in Toronto. But Babcock is a great coach, as driven as he was a decade ago, and even players who don't love him produce for him. There is a reason the Red Wings wanted him back for an 11th season. Toronto's future is brighter today than it was 10 days ago.

The Red Wings have one of the best general managers in sports, Ken Holland, and a core of young players who responded well to Blashill in Grand Rapids. Blashill is not a sure thing, but even Babcock gushes over him.

The Flyers took a risk. But after 40 years without a Cup, why not? Why pay big for a coach who has proven he is not as good as Babcock, as Edmonton did on May 19 by hiring San Jose retreat Todd McLellan for \$3 million a year?

Hakstol has not shown he can coach in the NHL, but he was 289-143-43 at North Dakota. Another team in town, the NFL's Eagles, hired a college coach, Chip Kelly, and has no regrets.

The Flyers made a bold move, and so did the Maple Leafs, and so will the Red Wings. And they have an option if the new coaches fail: Fire them. □

he is to any other team. The city's media are the most intense in hockey, by far. It would be ridiculous to throw Blashill or Hakstol into that shark tank.

The Leafs' enormous following puts extreme demands on a coach, but it also enables the franchise to rake in money even when the team is lousy. Toronto hasn't made it past the first round of the playoffs since 2004. The Leafs can pay Babcock and

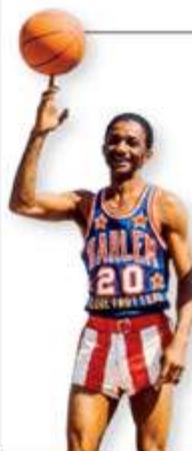
SUNDERLAND AFC/GETTY IMAGES (DROGBA); HEINZ KLUTMEIER FOR SPORTS

## GO FIGURE

# 381



Games played for Chelsea by striker **Didier Drogba**, who is leaving the team. After Drogba was removed for a sub during a 3-1 win over Sunderland on Sunday, his teammates carried him off the pitch. In two stints with the Blues he scored 164 goals, including the tying and winning scores in the 2012 Champions League final. He had seven goals this year and helped Chelsea win the Premier League title.



# 89

AGE OF HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS LEGEND **MARQUES HAYNES**, WHO DIED LAST FRIDAY. HAYNES, OFTEN CALLED THE BEST DRIBBLER EVER, PLAYED FOR THE GLOBETROTTERS FROM 1947 TO '53 AND '72 TO '79. HE WAS ELECTED TO THE BASKETBALL HALL OF FAME IN '98.

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The equivalent, in U.S. dollars, of the £10,000 a British judge ordered Stewart Muir to pay John Ure after Muir sliced his tee shot on the ninth hole at Bellshill Golf Club in Lanarkshire, U.K., and hit Muir in the head on March 9, 2013.



# 32

Strikeouts by Pirates starters in a sweep of the Mets last weekend. **Gerrit Cole** had 10 last Friday, A.J. Burnett had 10 the next day and Francisco Liriano had 12 on Sunday. It's the first Bucs trio to each toss double-digit K's in a three-game series since 1969.





NHL

## Playing Daze

Chicago's D puts in crazy minutes

**CHICAGO IS** experiencing a touch of old-time hockey, when marathon men logged big minutes in the playoffs. This postseason, few have had heavier workloads

than the Blackhawks' top four defensemen—Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook, Niklas Hjalmarsson and Johnny Oduya, each of whom is averaging more than 25 minutes a game.

### MINUTES MEN

Seabrook (7) and Keith (2) are earning their paychecks this spring.

What has made that workload extra tough is the Ducks' deep and physically imposing attack, led by 6' 4" center Ryan Getzlaf and 6' 3" wing Corey Perry. Trying to shelter his bottom two blueliners, Chicago coach Joel Quenneville has leaned particularly hard on his top pair, even splitting Keith and Seabrook up after Game 1. In the 261:59 played in Games 2, 3 and 4, the Blackhawks had either Keith or Seabrook on the ice for 183:18—or 70% of the time. With the series tied 2–2, Quenneville has minimized the fatigue factor, but Chicago's top four D-men have averaged 17 more minutes than Anaheim's. The Hawks' foursome was a combined –6 while the Ducks' was +5. —Sarah Kwak

### THEY SAID IT

*"A lot of my timeline is still filled with Americans who can't spell."*

#### Tom Bradby

British political journalist commenting on Twitter about the deluge of NFL fans who have been mistakenly sounding off about Deflategate on his feed.



## Triple Threat

Tampa Bay's Triplets have been dominant...

**WHEN LIGHTNING COACH** Jon Cooper put Tyler Johnson, 24, Ondrej Palat, 24, and Nikita Kucherov, 21, on one line in October, the threesome showed an intuitive connection, prompting Cooper to compare them to triplets. Now the trio is propelling Tampa Bay through the playoffs: Through Game 5 of the Eastern Conference finals (the Lightning held a 3–2 lead), the trio had scored half of the team's postseason goals. The kicker is that two of the three were not highly regarded prospects, and the third is among the lowest earners on the team.

### GOALS

An even 50% through Monday... (TEAM TOTAL: 50)

12 GOALS  
7 GOALS  
6 GOALS



### SALARY

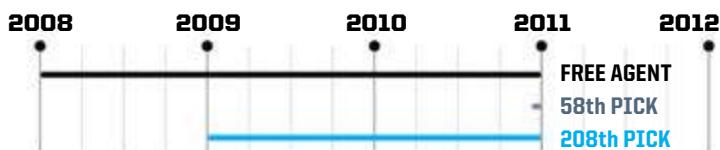
... while taking up about 11% of the payroll. (TEAM TOTAL: \$66.25 MILLION)

\$3.3 MILLION  
\$700,000  
\$3.3 MILLION



### DRAFT

Johnson went unpicked for three years before signing as a free agent while Palat lingered for two.



### KEY

- TYLER JOHNSON
- NIKITA KUCHEROV
- ONDREJ PALAT



## MOTOR SPORTS

+  
He's Back

Juan Pablo Montoya's  
Indy 500 win caps a  
return to racing's elite

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

**LATE ON SUNDAY**

afternoon in Victory Lane at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, a joyful Juan Pablo Montoya climbed from his car and pumped his fist overhead in celebration of his dramatic win in the 99th running of the Indianapolis 500. For the 39-year-old Montoya, who'd won this same race 15 years before, this 500-mile drive represented a triumphant finish to a far longer journey.

A year and a half ago Montoya might well have been the coldest property in motor sports. He had just been let go by Ganassi Racing—the team that in 2006 had boldly hired the Colombian open-wheel star

away from Formula One to spearhead the organization's NASCAR enterprise. In his nine seasons racing stock cars, Montoya had produced only two wins and 24 top five finishes in 253 starts.

What's more, the flinty, supremely confident Montoya had also earned a reputation for not being the easiest driver to cozy up to. "An incident waiting to happen" is how NASCAR fans dismissed him. All of it made Montoya's chances of landing another gig racing stock cars or anything else, really—especially at his age—seem remote.

And then during a Sprint Cup race at Michigan in August 2013, just five days after Ganassi had announced its intention to part ways with Montoya at the end of the season, and with 14 Sprint Cup dates still to race, the lame-duck driver ran into Tim Cindric, the president of Team Penske. While Cindric wasn't well acquainted with Montoya, he was familiar enough with Montoya's non-

The win puts Montoya back in contention for the title of his era's **best driver in American racing.**



stock-car racing résumé—which included the 1999 CART championship, as well as victories in the 2000 Indy 500, '03 Monaco Grand Prix and the '07, '08 and '13 24 Hours of Daytona—to make Montoya an offer he couldn't refuse.

"If you want to get in a race car, come get in our IndyCar," Cindric said.

"If you guys want me in there," Montoya replied, "I'm there. You just let me know."

The two connected again the following Monday, and a deal was quickly roughed out on a napkin. "No sponsors, no nothing," Cindric says. "We believed that he could be the one if we gave him the right stuff."

**ON THE LINE**

After beating teammate Power to the finish, Montoya savored his second 500 victory.

It's not as if Team Penske was hard up for talented open-wheel drivers when Cindric approached Montoya. Helio Castroneves, a three-time Indy 500 winner, had been on the team payroll since 2000. And Will Power, who would go on to take the '14 IndyCar series title, had been in the fold since '09. That fearsome one-two would make a combined 13 appearances on the podium in '14. (In the off-season Team Penske moved swiftly to further bolster its roster, grabbing IndyCar's top free agent—Simon Pagenaud, who was running third behind Power and Castroneves in points going into the final race before finishing the season ranked fifth.)

Montoya, it seemed, would have enough trouble just keeping up with his own garagemates and face a further disadvantage getting back up to speed on road courses—which are far more common in IndyCar than in NASCAR, where only two events, at Sonoma and Watkins Glen, feature right turns. Montoya's rust was obvious in his average finish of 11.9 on road courses during the 2014 season. But his immediate success on oval speedways, where his average finish leaped to 5.2, suggested that Montoya hadn't been completely worn down by the years he spent turning laps in NASCAR's drawn-out affairs.

In fact, his stock car experience had just the opposite effect. "The long races taught me how to look at the bigger picture," he says, "how I've got to be there in the end, that if I have issues, it doesn't matter. I can overcome them."

He showed as much during an eventful May at the

Brickyard, a month that saw five other drivers involved in serious crashes that came as IndyCar manufacturers Chevy and Honda introduced a revised aerodynamics package for speedway racing. After qualifying safely in 15th place, Montoya struggled early on Sunday, falling to 30th when Simona de Silvestro rear-ended him under caution, forcing Montoya to make a lengthy pit stop to replace his entire rear wing panel. Improbably he would storm all the way up to fourth with less than 20 laps to go and share the lead with Pagenaud, Power and the pole sitter, Ganassi's Scott Dixon, before leaving them all behind with three laps left.

The victory not only extends Montoya's lead in the IndyCar standings—a lead built on an uptick in his average road course finish (to 5.2)—and keeps him ahead of teammates Power (second in points), Castroneves (fourth) and Pagenaud (11th), it also puts Montoya back in contention for the title of best driver in American racing of his generation. The nominees range from single-circuit stars such as NASCAR's Jimmie Johnson (a six-time Cup champion) and Dario Franchitti (a four-time IndyCar champion and three-time 500 winner) to multidisciplinary standouts such as Tony Stewart (a three-time Cup champ and 1997 IRL series titlist) and Jacques Villeneuve (winner of the '95 Indy 500 and the '97 F1 world championship).

Now that he's back in a familiar series and—more important, perhaps—racing for a squad with a swagger to match his own, Montoya can only strengthen the case for himself. You get the feeling that he's only just starting to heat up. □

## In the Fast Lane

Even as the rejuvenated Juan Pablo Montoya has surged to the front of the IndyCar pack, a cohort of other drivers—both newcomers and a couple of familiar faces—appear poised to contend for victory.



**Gabby Chaves, 21,**  
*Bryan Herta Autosport*

Colombian-born like Montoya, he placed 16th in the 500 in his rookie outing. The fact that he has completed every race he's entered this season is a strong sign of his promise.



**Simona de Silvestro, 26,**  
*Andretti Autosport*

Apart from her run-in with Montoya, the Swiss pilot, once an F1 prospect, has acquitted herself well while running an abbreviated IndyCar schedule. Her fourth-place showing at Avondale earlier in the year bodes well for her chances of scoring a podium finish on another road course this season.



**Sage Karam, 20,**  
*Chip Ganassi Racing*

A standout high school wrestler and friend of the Andretti family in Nazareth, Pa., Karam saw his 500 end in the very first turn after taking ninth just a year ago. Look for him to bounce back in IndyCar's four remaining races on ovals, where he is among the strongest drivers.



**Josef Newgarden, 24, CFH Racing**

The Henderson, Tenn., native rallied for ninth after a scary practice-session crash at the Brickyard. He remains a contender on ovals and road courses, where he has already picked up a victory this year—the first of his career—at Birmingham.



**Graham Rahal, 26,**  
*Rahal Letterman Lanigan*

Saddled for years with the legacy of his father, Bobby, winner of the 1986 Indy 500, the Columbus, Ohio, native has at last emerged as a major contender. His fifth-place finish at the Brickyard was the highest among Honda cars and follows second-place showings at Birmingham and the Indy GP.



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## Patriot's Game

On May 12 the 76ers introduced a secondary logo featuring a balling Ben Franklin. The statesman had the size (6 feet, 240 pounds) to be a solid point guard. Based on his history and the illustration, SI's hoops experts envision him in today's NBA.

### BRAIN

His key role in holding together the Constitutional Convention indicates promise as a floor general—and as a negotiator on the CBA.

### GLASSES

He can't run the triangle with those rectangles on his face. Even with a pair of Kareem's old goggles, there would still be questions about his court vision.

### RIGHT ARM

Despite all the years he spent eating, drinking wine and wooing allies in Paris, his muskets look NBA-ready.

### MOUTH

He'll confuse opponents with his old-school trash talk: "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

### RIGHT HAND

Could be foul-prone. That stiff arm looks intimidating on paper, but extend it on the dribble-drive and the refs will whistle you every time.

### LEFT HAND

A lefty, he's awkward to D up, but that palm-on-top-of-the-ball thing shouts Bob Cousy. To last in the league, he'll need to develop his carry-and-travel game.

### HIPS

He's got moves. He fathered an out-of-wedlock child. Why should Shawn Kemp have all the fun?

### PANTS

He's taking long shorts to a new low. One would expect such a noted libertine to show some skin, if not some righteous ink.

### SHOES

What are those, low-top Chuckie T's? Indicates branding savvy but raises questions about long-term knee health.



### SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Marlins charged \$100 for an event billed as a chance for fans to interact with players, but no one on the team showed up.



### Foreign Substances

Two pitchers in one week were nabbed with illegal goo on their person, taking baseball full circle. Pine tar is the new clear.



### Bryan Price

A month after his infamous 77-curse tirade, the Reds' manager was ejected before last Saturday's game against the Indians, a 2-1 loss, the team's seventh of nine in a row.





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## TRAINING WITH

## Drawing Lessons

Fast hands are key to winning face-offs

**TREVOR BAPTISTE** crouched at midfield to start the second quarter of Denver's Big East semifinal against Villanova. At the referee's whistle he clamped the head of his stick onto the ball, pulled it away from his opponent and scooped it up. Then, after passing to a teammate, he sprinted off the field.

The play lasted all of 10 seconds, but Baptiste's value—he was the Big East midfielder of the year—can't be quantified by playing time. "I haven't seen any

freshman come in and be so dominant," Terry Foy, the editor of *Inside Lacrosse*, said of the 18-year old from Denville, N.J. Baptiste (*above, right*) has helped the Pioneers win a national title by dominating on the draw, an activity that has become so specialized it spawned its own acronym: FOGO (face off, get off).

Baptiste found lacrosse in sixth grade and started taking face-offs during his sophomore year at Morristown-Beard School. He plunged into the role, taking hundreds of reps a day and working with Chris Mattes, a face-off specialist who plays for the MLL's Florida Launch. He even made a playlist on his iPhone titled "Down, Set" with 20 whistles of different cadences that he uses to hone his reaction time when he's practicing on his own. In games,

Baptiste sticks with four main moves—the clamp, jam, razor and quick rig—but there are dozens of variations on each. "It's a very technical position and there are a lot of nuances that most people look past," Mattes said. "Trevor has dedicated himself to the craft."

The work has paid off. The 5' 10", 215-pound Baptiste set the season record for face-off wins by a freshman (259), and led Division I this season in win percentage (.699). His eight goals have all come on fast breaks triggered by face-off wins, often the only time he stays on the field. "He's strong, he's athletic, he's quick, he's smart," said Marquette coach Joe Amplo. "We threw the kitchen sink at him, but nothing could slow him down."

—Nelson Rice

Greg Gurenlian, a face-off specialist for Team USA, offers drills to improve reaction time and hand speed



### One-handed dumbbell press

Drive your hand up as hard as possible. The faster you can press the weight, the faster you can push your hand forward at the whistle. Five sets of five.



### Sled Press

Stand in front of a weighted sled, palms forward, and thrust your hands out as far as possible; this develops speed and explosion with power. Five sets of five.



### Boxing

Hitting a heavy bag increases hand speed and strength. Try throwing one-two combinations at a moderate pace for five-minute sessions.

For more athlete training profiles and tips, go to [SI.com/edge](http://SI.com/edge)



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## UPDATE

## Go North, Young Sam

■ **Michael Sam** will play pro football next season, but he won't be chasing a Lombardi Trophy. Sam, a defensive end who in 2014 became the first openly gay player drafted into the NFL when the Rams took him in the seventh round, signed a two-year deal with the CFL's Montreal Alouettes. He had been an NFL free agent since the Cowboys released him from their practice squad last October. Since then Sam has competed on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* and proposed to his longtime boyfriend, Vito Cammisano. The Alouettes had owned Sam's CFL rights since his senior year at Missouri. Sam celebrated his return on Twitter, writing, "Cannot wait to get back on the field and bring a Grey Cup to #Montreal!"

—Ben Baskin



**Alicia Boren** | *Franklin Lakes, N.J.* | *Gymnastics*

Alicia, a senior at Indian Hills High in Oakland, N.J., who competes for North Stars Gymnastics Academy, won her fourth straight Junior Olympic national Level 10 all-around championship in Des Moines with 38.8 points, including a 9.9 on the vault. Alicia will compete for three-time defending NCAA champion Florida.



**Jeff Giannettino** | *Burlington, Iowa* | *Track and Field*

Jeff, a senior at Burlington Notre Dame Catholic, cleared 7' 1" at the Drake Relays, becoming the first three-time high jump champion in the 106-year history of the event. His jump ranks fourth in the nation this season. A three-time state titlist—with a 6' 11" jump for this year's 2A crown—Jeff will compete at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.



**Karley Whittington** | *Vicksburg, Miss.* | *Golf*

Karley, a freshman at Warren Central High, shot an eight-under 136 at Clear Creek Golf Course in Vicksburg to break the state tournament record and win a second straight Class III title, by five strokes. In the first round she set a women's course record with a six-under 66. Karley is the reigning Mississippi Women's Junior Amateur champion.

# FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By ALEXANDRA FENWICK



**Kenneth Brinson Jr.** | *Kennesaw, Ga.* | *Football, Wrestling, Track*

Kenneth, a senior at the Marist School, set a school mark for career sacks (29) and won a third straight state 4A title as a wrestler (220 pounds) and as a discus thrower (185' 6"). First chair in trombone for the Marist wind ensemble and the Touchdown Club of Atlanta's scholar-athlete of the year, Kenneth will play football at West Point.



**Elena Ciccarelli** | *Whitesboro, N.Y.* | *Soccer, Basketball, Softball*

Ciccarelli, a recent graduate of Division III Gallaudet in Washington, D.C., who was born deaf, became the first athlete in school history to play three sports for four consecutive years. She had 60 career starts as a fullback, averaged 5.2 points and 6.8 rebounds as a forward and batted .216 with a .939 fielding percentage as an outfielder.



**Mitchell Frank** | *Annandale, Va.* | *Tennis*

Frank, a senior at Virginia, earned the final point to clinch the Cavaliers' second NCAA championship, defeating Andrew Harris of top-seeded Oklahoma 7-5, 7-5 at No. 2 singles. Frank also clinched UVA's first national title in 2013 with a three-set win over UCLA's Adrien Puget. He was named Most Outstanding Player of the '15 tournament.

Nominate Now ▼

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to [SI.com/faces](http://SI.com/faces). For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow @SI\_Faces on Twitter.



# JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

**DAN PATRICK:** *It's pretty cool to be the NBA logo. That's one of the greatest nicknames of all time.*

**JERRY WEST:** It's flattering, but honestly, I don't think like that. I'm so happy I was able to live my dreams and be able to do something I absolutely loved. Most people don't get that opportunity.

**DP:** *[How much] do you love the sport?*

**JW:** I loved it. I loved the competition. . . . When I went to a game, I never even noticed there was anybody in the building. My concentration was ridiculous. All I cared about was winning.

**DP:** *Did you ever play basketball after you retired?*

**JW:** When I stopped playing, I didn't want to touch a basketball. I knew my time was up. I knew I had given everything that I had. I wanted to concentrate on having a more normal life. I kind of got addicted to golf.

**DP:** *When you were GM of the Lakers, could you watch the game?*

**JW:** I spent a lot of nights in the parking lot at the Forum.

**DP:** *Did you feel guilty that you brought only one title to L.A. as a player?*

**JW:** Absolutely.

**DP:** *Is that part of why*



JERRY WEST

## LIVING LEGEND

The 77-year-old Hall of Fame guard and two-time NBA Executive of the Year continues to apply his basketball expertise, now as a member of the executive board of the Western Conference finalist Warriors.

*you wanted to win so badly as a GM?*

**JW:** No question.

**DP:** *Do you get a ring if the Warriors win the title?*

**JW:** Yes. I'd love to get another ring.

**DP:** *How many do you have?*

**JW:** I don't know, I've got a couple.

**DP:** *If you don't know how many, then that's a lot.*

**JW:** I think seven. I don't wear them. They're getting bigger. They're so ugly now.

**DP:** *Finish this sentence: If Shaq and Kobe had stayed together . . .*

**JW:** I don't think there's any question they'd have won more championships.

**DP:** *It seems that they'll be remembered as much for what they weren't able to accomplish.*

**JW:** You had two completely different personalities. Kobe was a basketball junkie. A perfectionist. Shaquille O'Neal was a big, playful guy. Still, he would just ruin basketball games. If I were a center, I would not have wanted to play against him.

**DP:** *Is Steph Curry the best shooter you've ever seen?*

**JW:** He's an incredible shooter. But he's not only a shooter, he's also a shotmaker. He makes shots other people can't make.

**DP:** *Game on the line, any player in history to shoot a three, who would you choose?*

**JW:** I can't answer that.

**DP:** *Sure you can.*

**JW:** I hate to be braggadocious, but I would love to shoot that. □

## GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



NBC's **Al Michaels** told me the sport

that he believes is the most challenging to call: "Hockey," said the broadcaster, a Kings season-ticket holder. "It's hard to follow because possession is changing every couple of seconds. It's the hardest sport to see in your brain." . . . Former MLB pitcher and current NFL throwing coach



**Tom House** explained why he

expects his pupil, Eagles QB Tim Tebow, to improve. "With his year-and-a-half hiatus, he got a chance to put in the proper repetitions," House said. "Now he's programmed to throw more efficiently." . . .

TNT's **Charles Barkley** said Floyd Mayweather needs



to tone down his bravado: "All of

the noise leading up to the fight [against Pacquiao], talking about how much money he makes, took away from how he made a great fighter look average."

*My  
Town,  
My  
Team*

# CLEVELAND'S REVENGE

**EACH OF THE NBA'S FOUR  
CONFERENCE FINALISTS  
CARRIES THE BURDEN  
OF REPRESENTING A  
TITLE-STARVED FAN BASE.  
THAT'S ESPECIALLY TRUE  
OF THE CAVALIERS, WHO  
HAVE TORN THROUGH THE  
EAST—AND GOTTEN A LITTLE  
PAYBACK ALONG THE WAY**

**BY MARK BECHTEL**

---

#### **WINNING ON EMPTY**

James couldn't find the energy to stand after a Game 3 performance in which he had 37 points, 18 rebounds and 13 assists—a stat line unsurpassed in postseason history.

Photograph by  
**Nathaniel S. Butler**  
NBAE/Getty Images







**IN HIS LETTER** last summer announcing his homecoming, LeBron James wrote, “I want kids in Northeast Ohio . . . to realize that there’s no better place to grow up.” Compare that view of life in the area with that of Cavaliers shooting guard J.R. Smith, who in a January interview with *NBA.com* said of Cleveland, “There’s nothing, there’s no going out, there’s no late nights. There’s video games, basketball and basketball.”

Smith doesn’t paint the most flattering picture of Cleveland, but few do. It brings to mind *Caddyshack* minx Lacey Underall’s lament that she was “tired of having fun all the time” when asked if life in the Midwest was a change from dreary old Manhattan. But Cavs fans have, like Judge Smails, brushed aside the slight with chuckle. (“Ah. Ho ho. Ha ha ha.”) Because Smith’s nocturnal boredom has led to some of the most scintillating basketball of his career, including a stunning 28-point performance in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals, an endless heat check in which he dropped eight threes on the Hawks.

Cleveland had been expecting to rely on point guard Kyrie Irving and power forward Kevin Love, who—with all due respect to Larry Hughes and Shaq—would finally give James

**JAMES’S  
POSTSEASON PLAY  
HAS BEEN AN  
EXERCISE IN THE  
EXCEPTIONAL.  
IT’S ALSO BEEN  
AN EXERCISE  
IN EXORCISM.**

**TUNNEL VISION**

James has had his eyes focused on the task at hand, while Smith (5) has knocked down plenty of good looks (and a few bad ones too).

the help necessary to break the city’s championship drought, which has now reached 51 years. But Irving has been slowed all postseason by myriad leg injuries, and Love has been sidelined since Celtics forward Kelly Olynyk attempted to take his left arm home with him as a souvenir in Game 4 of the first round. Enter Smith and a few other gritty sidemen, including defensive whiz Iman Shumpert, versatile center Timofey Mozgov and Australian punching bag Matthew Dellavedova. Their play—and ability to withstand being on the business end of mediocre Randy Macho Man Savage impressions—had the Cavs entering Tuesday night’s Game 4 with a chance to sweep the top-seeded Hawks and reach their first Finals since LeBron I, in 2007.

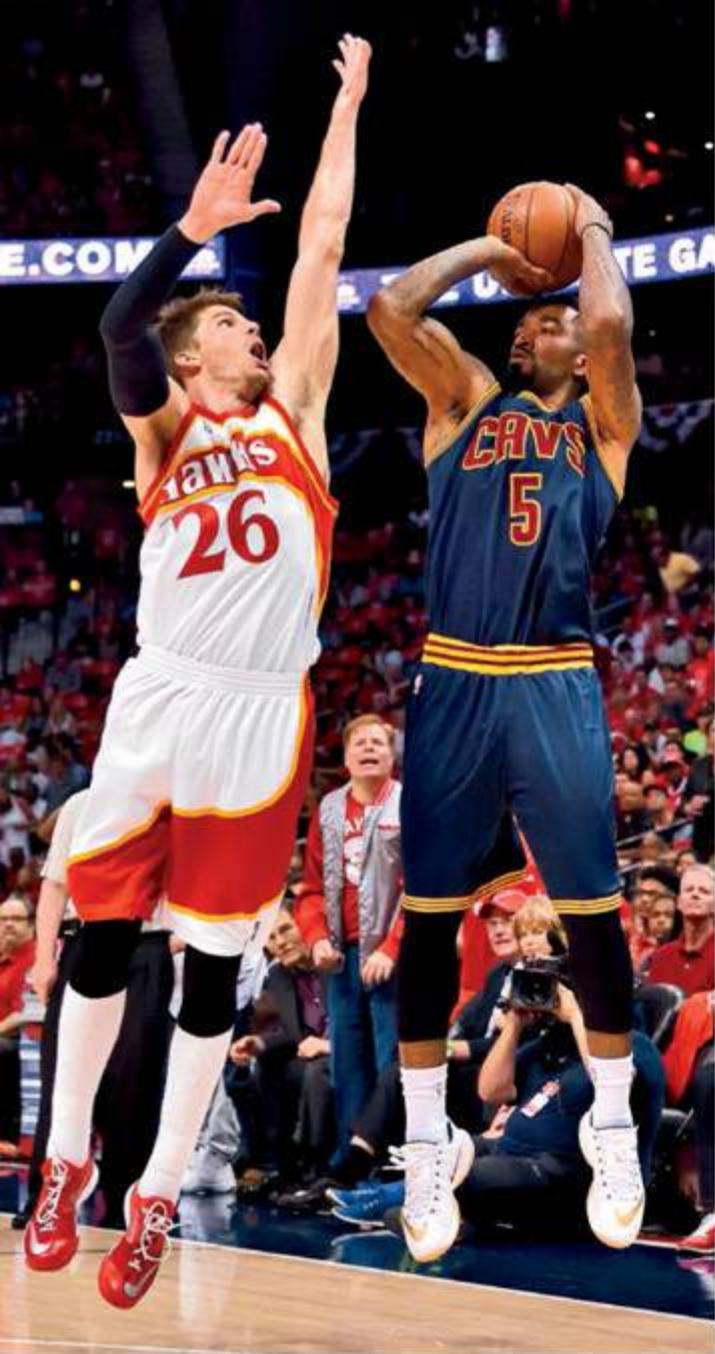
But let’s be clear: Cleveland isn’t going anywhere James doesn’t take them. You know those stories about average men getting a surge of adrenaline that allows them to lift an Escalade off a trapped baby? When LeBron gets that rush, though, he doesn’t just lift the Escalade. He holds it in the air for 48



minutes of basketball. (From the Letter: “In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.”) That has to take a lot out of a man, even one as seemingly superhuman as James, which explains why, the instant the horn sounded to end Game 3—a 114–111 overtime victory in which he overcame the worst shooting start of his professional life (0 for 10) to amass a triple double by the end of the third quarter—he dropped to the floor, looking like a man who belongs in an oxygen tent.

James’s play has been an exercise in the exceptional. It has also been an exercise in exorcism. This postseason the Cavs have already bounced two towns responsible for inflicting serious pain on their fan base: Chicago (a certain Shot by another decent baller in a number 23 jersey) and Boston (the Indians’ epic 2007 ALCS collapse at the hands of the Red Sox, and a

GREEN NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)



capitulation by the Cavs in '10 that preceded—and possibly precipitated—the Decision). Throw in the fact that the team snagged James back from Miami (1997 World Series), relegating the Heat to dread mid-lottery status, and the impending defeat of Atlanta ('95 World Series), and you can almost picture James announcing, à la Michael Corleone, that today Cleveland is settling its old scores. What next? Harry the Hawk's head in Al Horford's bed? (Hey, Warriors, three words, from the Browns' playoff loss to Oakland in '81: Red Right 88.)

As pleasant as the payback has been, it's not what's driving James. The Letter made that clear. "[W]hat's most important for me is bringing one trophy back to Northeast Ohio." This story appears under the banner MY TOWN, MY TEAM. But make no mistake. This is LeBron's Town. This is LeBron's Team. And it's starting to look like this might be his time too. □

My  
Town,  
My  
Team

# WARRIORS

BY CHRIS BALLARD

**T**HE GHOSTS still haunt the halls of Oracle. Steph Curry cannot shoo them away with his jump shot, nor Andrew Bogut with his grimace, nor Steve Kerr with his cheerful pragmatism. They have been here too long. Only a banner can banish them.

And so they drift down the concrete stairways, bumping into things and dropping easy passes and setting inadequate screens. There is Todd Fuller, and Chris Washburn and P.J. Carlesimo, faint red rings encompassing his ghostly neck. The Warriors have played in this building on and off since 1966, when it was the Oakland Coliseum Arena, leaving occasionally for San Jose, San Francisco and, once, San Diego, where the team played six "home" games during a bizarre stretch in 1971–72 when it was marketed as "California's" team.

The rest of the time they've been in Oakland, for better or worse. Though mainly worse. Few teams have been as inept for as long. The Warriors turned Robert Parish and the draft pick used on Kevin McHale into center Joe Barry Carroll, who in turn transformed himself into a center so listless that he earned the nickname Joe Barely Cares. In 1996 the Warriors drafted the plodding Fuller over the decidedly unplodding Kobe Bryant and Steve Nash. While the Lakers and the Bulls collected titles, Golden State collected bumbling big men: Washburn and Tellis Frank, Les Jepsen and Uwe Blab, Felton Spencer and Andrew DeClercq. And who can forget Erick Dampier, around whom the Warriors constructed a marketing campaign titled, with admirable optimism, "The Center of Attention"?

Not my brother and I, that's for sure. We were born too late to remember the team's 1975 title but early enough to witness all that ensued. The most exciting—only exciting?—moment of our youthful fandom came in '87, when Sleepy Floyd, the team's skinny scoring guard out of Georgetown, improbably dropped 29 points in a quarter to lead the Warriors to a 129–121 victory over Magic Johnson's Lakers

in the Western Conference semifinals. It was as electric a sports moment as I can recall, in part because it was so unexpected. A few years later we recorded a rebroadcast on VHS and it became a prized family possession, busted out for repeat viewings, each one capped by Grep Papa's classic, hoarse-throated call of "Sleepy Floyd is Superman!"

Of course the Warriors lost that series 4-1. And later logged 14 losing seasons in a 16-year span. I wonder, though, if all that losing only strengthened our bond to the team. To grow up with success is to take it for granted. But the Warriors made you earn your fandom. Maybe that's why they possess the most loyal supporters in the Bay Area. To feel the roar and swell of Oracle at its best is to breathe in decades of history and misery and hope, to feel the heart of Oakland beating, to know what eternal optimism amid perennial disappointment feel like.

And now, suddenly, the Warriors are good. Not just sorta good but title-favorite good. They're so deep that David Lee, a former All-Star who represents so much of what the team once was—a big guy who's not quite big enough, an offensive talent not given to playing D—is rooted to the bench. Meanwhile, the Bay Area is besotted. An Oakland brewer sells DubNation IPA; Berkeley buses read GO WARRIORS! instead of a destination. Longtime fans, not sure how to behave as overdogs, exist in a state of bewildered euphoria. Jeff Chang, a season-ticket holder who wore Purvis Short's number 45 when he played high school ball, returned from watching the Game 1 win over the Rockets in the conference finals and realized he'd totally forgotten that night's draft lottery. Which was funny, Chang told me, "considering that was usually the highlight of any season."

John Fike, another longtime season-ticket holder from the East Bay who in 2003 launched StayGilbert.com to try to persuade free-agent guard Gilbert Arenas to remain in Oakland, is in awe. As he writes in an email: "We aren't some scrappy, plucky, overachieving Cinderella, with every win some sort of shooting-star, four-leaf-clover lottery ticket." San Francisco native Rich Harper, an old friend, now lives in Washington, D.C. and has been attending the Wizards-Warriors game for years, a speck of yellow in a sea of red. For him, this year is all about validation. "For all the bad years, for all the bad trades, for all the bad draft picks, false starts and one and done playoff runs."

Then there is my friend Chris Heine, born and raised in Berkeley. His father took him to his first Warriors game in 1981, and he says he's never loved a player more than onetime Warriors



#### PIVOTAL POSITION

After witnessing a parade of inept centers, Dubs fans can appreciate Bogut, who has helped keep Dwight Howard and the Rockets in check.

LONGTIME FANS,  
NOT SURE HOW TO  
BEHAVE AS OVERDOGS,  
EXIST IN A STATE OF  
BEWILDERED EUPHORIA.

forward Larry Smith, an African-American, blue-collar hero in a predominantly black, industrial city. A couple of weeks ago, when Golden State advanced to the conference finals for the first time in 39 years, he found himself tearing up. It was a lot to process—savoring a historic victory and purging a lifetime of disappointment. And yet, Chris says he feels a sense of urgency. "Now that the team is at long last rich and beautiful and the darlings of the league, the City [San Francisco] wants them back," he tells me. "I get it. Dotcom billionaires fill courtside seats. Winning is for winners. The City can have any and all championship trophies. The soul of the organization will remain always in the East Bay."

Indeed, but the future lies in San Francisco.

An arena in Mission Bay, reportedly in the next few years. Restaurants and shopping complexes. Money—an ungodly amount of it—flowing to the Warriors' coffers. But for now, the team still plays in an old concrete bowl hard by the 880, rising in the flatlands of south Oakland. The parking lot smells of malt liquor and weed and despair. It's beautiful.

Recently, I took my two daughters—Callie, eight, and Eliza, six—to a game. They screamed for Steph Curry and ate soggy hot dogs and, when it wasn't too loud for their liking, had the time of their lives. When we got home Callie decided to create a color-coded chart in which she ranked each Warriors player as either Good, Great or Excellent. When she was done, all but two—Leandro Barbosa and Justin Holiday—were in the last two categories. (No offense, guys.)

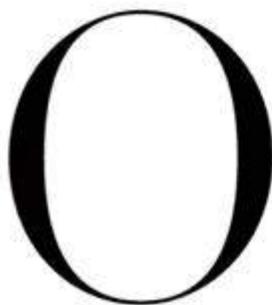
I found it amusing. When I was her age, my Warriors categories would have been Pretty Good, Overmatched and At Least He Tries Hard. Then again, I was conditioned for pessimism. Bay Area kids my daughters' age don't know better. As far as they can tell, the Warriors have always been good.

And who are we to ruin it for them? □

My  
Town,  
My  
Team

# HAWKS

BY LANG WHITAKER



**OVER THE DECADES** Atlanta sports fans have been scattered, smothered and covered by their teams. Since 1968, when the Hawks joined the Braves and Falcons in Atlanta, these franchises have combined for one total championship. More recently the Braves announced they were moving to the burbs, then dumped fan favorites in what felt like a yard sale. The Falcons closed the Mike Smith era with back-to-back losing seasons. It rained at the Masters. Heck, even OutKast had a series of farewell concerts.

Into this abyss stumbled the Hawks. Last summer they made a play for free-agent Carmelo Anthony but instead came away with a pair of bench players (Thabo Sefolosha and Kent Bazemore). General manager Danny Ferry was given a leave of absence for making racist comments on a conference call, and controlling owner Bruce Levenson self-reported a racist email and put the franchise up for sale.

Then, just when things couldn't seem bleaker, the Hawks had the greatest season in franchise history. They looked above average in November, even better in December, and then went 17 for January, the best month by a team in NBA history. For the faithful, this was mind-blowing stuff. Until now the most exciting Hawks team in my lifetime was in 1987-88, when they took the Celtics to Game 7 in the Eastern Conference semis. I was barely a teenager but saved my money and bought a season ticket the next year to watch 'Nique, Moses, Doc and Reggie—and was treated to seeing them bounced by the Bucks in the first round. I renewed anyway for '89-90—only to be rewarded with a lottery team. It was as if I were receiving a warning: Don't get your hopes up, kid.

The Hawks have since had spikes of quality, but they've never induced anything close to championship fever. Even this year's team isn't particularly electrifying, its four All-Stars notwithstanding. Coach

Mike Budenholzer strolls the sideline with the mildly alarmed look of a man realizing he shouldn't have had that second cup of coffee before getting stuck on the Downtown Connector. When it's clicking, the offense is a riot of movement, with players picking and cutting as the ball whips from side to side. Watching a team knock down open jumpers may not be all that thrilling, but it wins games. Curry and Harden and LeBron produce Vines; these Hawks are kudzu—constant and consistent and effective.

After the overtime loss in Cleveland on Sunday the Hawks were down 3-0 in the conference finals, with LeBron James playing the role of General Sherman to Atlanta's Atlanta. But lamenting the way the season is ending misses the greater point. The crowd at Philips Arena—usually marred by empty seats or packed with fans of the opposition—was full and in full throat for the Hawks in Games 1 and 2. Driving through Buckhead last weekend I saw multiple cars proudly flying Hawks flags, something that would have been unthinkable even nine months ago.

Will Atlanta build on this season and become a perennial contender? History says probably not. But at least these Hawks have shown Atlantans that it can be worthwhile to forget the

#### WHO'S THE MAN?

The lack of a superstar didn't slow Atlanta's ruthlessly efficient attack—at least until the Hawks ran into the Cavaliers.

past and savor this moment, however improbable it feels. Chug that sweet tea while it's available, Hawks fans. It's delicious now, but who knows how long it will last? □

*Lang Whitaker writes for NBA.com*



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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My  
Town,  
My  
Team

# ROCKETS

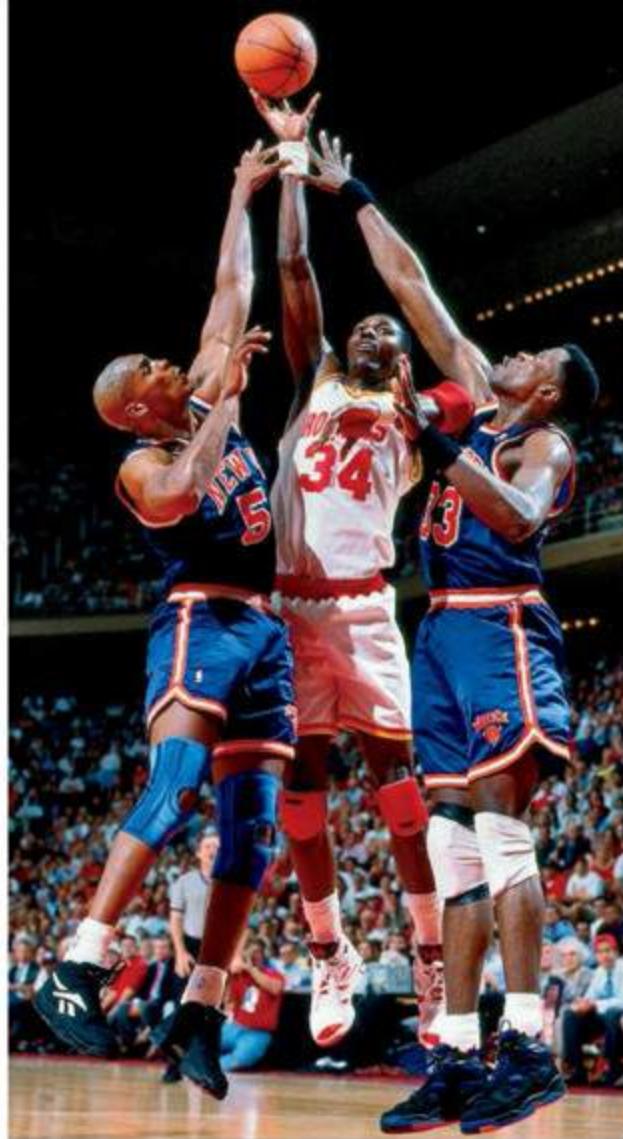
BY LEE JENKINS

**H**OUSTON IS not my town, and the Rockets are not my team, but marriage gives us things, whether we want them or not. Things we love, like a recipe for sweet potato casserole with orange juice, and things we don't, like a teal COWGIRLS ARE FOREVER sign, and things we thought we'd hate but came to love, like a bulletin board bigger than Dwight Howard that can display every holiday card sent from the metropolitan area. We make room for all of it, and eventually our spouses' things become ours, even the *Felicity* DVDs. We share passwords, PayPal accounts and Pandora stations. But not teams. Something must be sacred. A line must be drawn.

A good friend, from San Francisco, is married to a woman from Indianapolis. He is a 49ers fan, and on fall Sundays, I see him in a Colts jersey. Maybe he is more of a man than I, but I'd rather be fitted for a straitjacket. When I began dating my wife, it was 1998 and my hometown baseball team played hers in the first round of the playoffs. She flew back from college for Game 1 to root them on, an act of betrayal so grave I'd have preferred she go to a frat party with another guy. I still maintain that had the Padres not outlasted the Astros in the National League Division Series our two children would never have been born.

But the Rockets were different. I didn't have an NBA team, and hers was as endearing as Hakeem Olajuwon, who handed her one of his size-18 sneakers after a game at the Summit, only for some jerk to snatch it from her and leave her in tears. She and her family flew to Boston for the 1986 Finals, and she introduced herself to Ralph Sampson on the plane, back when teams traveled commercial. He rode down the escalator at Logan Airport by her side, 7' 4" and 4' 0".

As high school seniors, she and her friends drove to San Antonio for Game 1 of the 1995 Western Conference finals, stopping at a midway point called Grumpy's Motor Inn in Flatonia. The night they graduated, they watched Game 6 on a big screen at prom. When Magic guard Nick Anderson clanked his free



## JUST FOR KICKS

Olajuwon and his oversized, purloined shoes played a part in one girl's lifelong love affair with the team.

throws in Game 1 of the '95 Finals, lights were out in the Hill Country summer camp where she worked as a counselor, but she listened on a radio in her cabin with a homesick eight-year-old girl. Marriage gives us this, too, a scrapbook of stories

that are so familiar we eventually adopt them.

In April my wife took our son to Houston for spring break, and they saw James Harden drop 51 points on the Kings at Toyota Center. I cover the NBA, so I only root for helpful p.r. staffs and GMs who return calls, and the Rockets have both. But I won't mourn when they are eliminated by the Warriors, which is imminent, and I won't rejoice when they land their next megastar, which is inevitable. They are my wife's team, not mine, and these boundaries must be respected.

Two years ago I visited Olajuwon's ranch, where he teaches post skills to young big men. On the way to his basketball court, which is inside a barn, I passed through a room where he keeps some of his memorabilia. I told my wife about the photos and game balls, but not the size-18s, preserved behind glass. I didn't want her to cry again. □

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BASEBALL'S  
**NEW  
BLOOD**  
2015

Rowdy <b>Royals</b>	Quarterly <b>Report</b>	Joc <b>Pederson</b>	Mookie <b>Betts</b>
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**BRING THE  
CAIN**

An October hot streak made him the ALCS MVP; now the Royals centerfielder is hitting with a maturity that has made him an early MVP front-runner this season.



# ALL GROWN UP

*A quarter of the season is in the books, and baseball has a new pecking order. The young Astros (the Astros!) are running away with the AL West—two years ahead of schedule. In Boston and L.A., young centerfield studs are infusing old-money franchises with new energy. And the suddenly badass Royals are proving last fall was no fluke. You got a problem with that?*

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**BY TOM VERDUCCI**

Photograph by  
Dilip Vishwanat  
For Sports Illustrated



**A SOUND AROSE** among the Royals after a 5–1 defeat to the Yankees on May 16, one you hear in a losing clubhouse about as often as Mendelssohn: laughter. First baseman Eric Hosmer and outfielder Jarrod Dyson yukked it up so much that losing pitcher Danny Duffy had to raise his voice to answer questions from reporters.

“We’ve been through it before,” Hosmer explained later. “You can’t live and die with every game. [Manager] Ned [Yost] gave us the freedom to create our own atmosphere.”

If you want convention—baseball played under the ancient, unwritten code of conduct, stiff upper lips firmly in place—don’t come to Kansas City, where the Royals have become the most rambunctious team in baseball.

Wait. The Royals? The same team that before last season went 28 playoff-less years while losing the most games in baseball? The same team that would have been everybody’s homecoming opponent for almost three decades if baseball adhered to football’s best-chance-for-a-win tradition? The same team whose best player this season could, as recently as 12 months ago, “pretty much go anywhere in town and nobody would recognize me”?

Well, not exactly the same team, because this version of the Royals, having grown muscles from a wholly unexpected playoff run last year that took them to the seventh game of the World Series, has gone rogue. It’s not



just that Kansas City leads the American League Central or that it is 75–40 since July 30, including that chest-thumping, fist-pumping postseason. It’s also that this team, extra-large chip placed firmly on shoulder, is more than happy to play the kind of baseball that practically announces over the P.A. system, “Hey, you got a problem with that?”—which helps explain why in an 12-day span in April it was involved in five bench-clearing incidents that resulted in the most exiled Royals (nine ejections) since the Romanov Dynasty.

“They don’t back down,” Yost says. “In fact, if other teams were trying to get us so mad we couldn’t be successful, the opposite happened. We actually got better after every one of those incidents. I think teams started to see, ‘You want to stir up the beehive? Go ahead. But you’re going to get stung.’”

The core Royals are six players between the ages of 25 and 31 who have been together for five years: Hosmer, 25; catcher Salvador Perez, 25; third

**BLUE HEAVEN**  
After decades as a place visitors loved to play, Kaufmann Stadium is rocking—and on pace for a franchise record in average attendance.



baseman Mike Moustakas, 26; shortstop Alcides Escobar, 28; outfielder Lorenzo Cain, 29; and outfielder Alex Gordon, 31. They are the backbone of the ultimate postmodern team: The Royals sacrifice power to put the ball in play in a strikeout-dominated game (they are last in baseball in strikeouts for a fourth straight year), perform the lost art of defense with sleight of hand that would make the Harlem Globetrotters envious (they turn 73.7% of batted balls into outs, the best conversion rate in baseball) and have taken modern bullpen specialization to Mariana depths of offensive deprivation (9–2, 1.68 ERA, opponents batting .190 against).

Though Kansas City exhibited all such traits last October, *Baseball Prospectus* pegged the team for a 72–90 fallback season this year, a slight that should be officially recorded as the first beehive kick of the season (the second: SI’s prediction of a 78–84 finish). “You go through the postseason run we had and see predictions that you’re going to win 70-something games, that just fires you up,” Hosmer says. “It was the same last year. We all watched it. The TVs are on. You definitely see everybody picking somebody else.”

Says Cain, “I feel like we’re even better than we were last year.” Not only does he hit .303 out of the third spot in the batting order and, with his glove, cover the most ground in Missouri since Marquette and Jolliet, he also is the best example of how quickly the Royals have ascended.

At age 16—the same age Escobar signed as a professional—Cain had never played baseball. But after getting cut from the basketball team at Madison County High in the Florida panhandle and being barred from football by his concerned mother, Patricia, Lorenzo (then a sophomore) asked a friend who played baseball, Jeremy Haynes, “Do you think I could make the team?” Haynes took him to the office of the coach to find out.

“Have you ever played?” the coach asked.

“No,” Cain said.

“Perfect. We have only eight guys on the JV team. We’ll stick you on JV.”



*"You go through the postseason run we had and see predictions that you're going to win 70-something games," says Hosmer. "That just fires you up."*

#### MUSCLE MEN

Thanks to heavy hitters like Kendrys Morales (left), the Royals lead the AL in slugging percentage—and all of baseball in temper-flaring showdowns.

Toward the end of his senior year Cain was playing video games at home when his mother told him he had a telephone call.

"Hello?" Cain said.

"Hello, this is Doug Reynolds of the Milwaukee Brewers. We just selected you in the 17th round of the draft."

"Oh, thank you," Cain said, and promptly hung up the phone as if it were a solicitor.

"Who was that?" his mother asked.

"Somebody with the Brewers. He said they drafted me in the 17th round."

Says Cain, "I just went back and played video games. I didn't tell anybody. I think a few days later there was something in the newspaper. That's when I thought, I guess it's a big deal, because I didn't know the draft was a big deal. I didn't keep up with baseball. I didn't know anything about baseball."

Cain eventually told the Brewers he wasn't ready for pro ball yet. He played one season at TCC and then signed for \$95,000. He reported to minor league camp in Arizona in the spring of 2005 and was so bad ("Embarrassing," he calls it) that he heard that coaches and officials were questioning Reynolds about the signing. But then the games started. Cain went 3 for 4 in the first game, banging two doubles off the wall. Just three years after playing baseball for the first time, Cain hit .356 in the Arizona Rookie League.

Five years later he was in the big leagues, hitting .306 in 43 games for the 2010 Brewers. By then, Zack Greinke, Kansas City's ace pitcher, who was two years away from free agency, was so fed up with the Royals' losing that he asked general manager Dayton Moore to trade him. Yost asked Greinke to reconsider.

"I kept telling Zack, 'Look, we've got these guys coming; we're going to win, and we're going to win in the near future,'" Yost says. "And he said, 'I don't believe it.' I said, 'Look, I'm telling you the truth. These guys are going to find a way to win. You just have to stay with it and stay patient and you'll be a part of it.' He goes, 'I don't believe it. I've heard it too many times.'"

Cain showed up at his first practice wearing a collared shirt, jeans and basketball shoes. He did not own a bat (he wouldn't get his first one until his senior year), a glove (his first was the kid-friendly kind with a seam cut through the middle of the palm to facilitate closing around the ball) or a cup (he played third base his first two weeks without one, booting "two or three balls a game" before he was stashed safely in the outfield).

Cain spent his sophomore year playing on the JV team and his junior year sitting on the varsity bench. He played only one year of varsity baseball. Only one college made him an offer: Tallahassee Community College. "Our own little college didn't even offer me a scholarship," says Cain, referring to 2,000-student North Florida Community College. "It kind of hurt a little bit."

## NEW BLOOD

On Dec. 19, 2010, Moore traded Greinke and shortstop Yuniesky Betancourt to Milwaukee for Cain, Escobar and pitchers Jake Odorizzi and Jeremy Jeffress. Cain slowly developed into a solid player for the Royals, but he hit another level last September when Yost, who most often had been batting him seventh or eighth, graduated him to the three hole. Cain, a career .277 hitter to that point, has hit .313 since, including .533 while being named American League Championship Series MVP.

"It's confidence more than anything else," Yost says. "He always has been a guy with tremendous talent. But something transformed him in the middle of September. He just turned into a totally different player. His attitude went from a mild-mannered, steady player to a total beast."

*People fell in love with this team for a number of reasons," says Yost, "but the biggest reason was they saw the joy this team had playing together."*

**I**T WAS Cain who kicked off this Battle Royale of a season for Kansas City. On Opening Day, on the next pitch after Moustakas hit a home run, White Sox pitcher Jeff Samardzija drilled Cain with a fastball off his left arm. As Cain walked slowly to first base, he stared down Samardzija and then barked at him. Cain said Samardzija hit him "for no good reason."

Seventeen days and four Royals bench-clearing incidents later, Cain and Samardzija tried to take swings at one another in a brawl that began with Kansas City pitcher Yordano Ventura and Chicago centerfielder Adam Eaton yelling at one another after an otherwise routine ground ball back to the box.

"With me, I guess I was still upset about being hit Opening Day," Cain says. "My emotions definitely came out, which is very hard for me because I'm so laid back. It just goes

to show you how tight a group we have. We're not going to take it. We're not going to back down."

The climate has changed so much around Kansas City these days that Oakland third baseman Brett Lawrie, one of the principals in another April incident with the Royals, blamed Kauffman Stadium fans—previously known for politeness if they showed up at all—for "antagonizing everything." For 22 straight years the Royals ranked in the bottom five in the AL in attendance. This season they rank third, with a 28% jump at the gate and a much higher profile around town, as the formerly anonymous Cain attests. "Since the World Series," he says, "I can't go to Chick-fil-A or someplace without everyone recognizing me. It's cool."

Says Yost, "I think last year, especially during the playoffs, people fell in love with this team for a number of reasons, but the biggest reason was they saw the joy this team had playing together. This enthusiasm and passion they showed was infectious. Does it [tick] off other teams? Yeah, probably. But that's who they are. I'm not taking any of that away from them."

In the stands, on the scoreboard and on the field, it's as if the 2014 post-season never ended in Kansas City—it simply went on hiatus for five months before firing up again. *Hey, you got a problem with that?* □



### FEAR THE BEARD

Keuchel's breakout last year was the real deal: He hit Memorial Day with the AL's best ERA.



# REALITY CHECK

*It's late to say it's early: Here are the season trends with staying power (you've arrived, Houston) and those certain to fade (sorry, Dee Gordon)*

**BY JOE SHEEHAN**

Photograph by  
**Bob Levey**  
Getty Images

## **ASTRONOMIC ODDS**

When the Astros traded for Evan Gattis and Luis Valbuena and signed Colby Rasmus and Jed Lowrie last winter, they were making a statement—they didn't care about strikeouts in building their offense. A quarter-season later that strategy has been vindicated: Yes, the Astros have struck out more than every team but the Cubs, but they also lead the majors in home runs, are fourth in the AL in walks and third in runs scored, and got off to a 29–17 start. Houston has scored 49% of its runs on long balls, a number that would be second highest all-time (after the 2010 Blue Jays) if sustained all season.

It's not just the offense, however. The Astros are fourth in the AL in runs allowed. Dallas Keuchel is repeating his breakthrough 2014 with a 1.98 ERA, thanks to command of a two-seam fastball that helps produce the lowest fly ball rate, and second highest ground ball rate, in the majors. Keuchel doesn't miss many bats, but the defense supporting him has been better than average at turning balls in play into outs. Houston has also

## NEW BLOOD

put together its best bullpen in a long time, perhaps its best ever, so the leads those home runs generate are far more likely to be maintained. The group's 2.14 ERA is second in the majors and half—*half*—the ERA of any Astros bullpen since 2009. The '14 Astros were 61–28 (.685) when leading or tied after six innings; this year's team is 26–2 (.929).

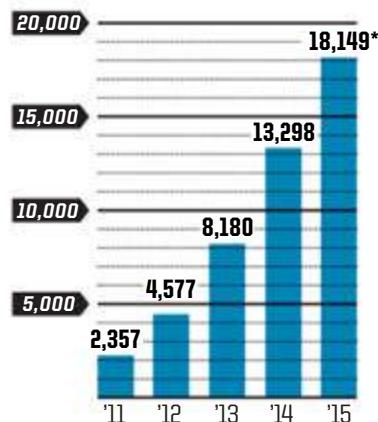
The improvements in the bullpen and defense are real and should be sustainable. There are concerns about the offense, which because of all those strikeouts has a poor .303 OBP, and the rotation outside of Keuchel, which has struggled. The team has called up pitching prospect Lance McCullers and could later follow up with righty Mark Appel and shortstop Carlos Correa, drawing from minor league depth few teams can match. The Astros aren't supposed to win the World Series until 2017, but their improvements along with the struggles of other AL West contenders have made them a threat two years early.

### SHIFTING STANDARDS

No modern tactic has caused as much gnashing of teeth as defensive shifts, the aggressive positioning of infielders in nontraditional spots. The availability and reliability of data on where batters are likely to hit the ball has freed managers to do what their counterparts in the NFL and the NBA have done for years: to place their defenders where they are most likely to

make plays. Despite some push-back this winter, which included new commissioner Rob Manfred noodling about restricting the practice, even more teams are on the bandwagon this season. Per ACTA Sports, the frequency of shifts is on pace to grow by 36% this year, as teams such as the Diamondbacks, Rockies and Tigers begin to shift more often, and early adopters such as the Astros and the Rays get even more aggressive. Maybe, instead of complaining about “shifting,” it's time to just start admiring it as “defense.”

SHIFTS PER SEASON



### DINGERS AND K'S

After dropping to just over four runs per game per team last year, scoring has rebounded to roughly where it was in 2013, 4.20 runs per game.

Batting averages and OBPs are the same as last year—the entire scoring bump is due to slugging, which is up to .394 from .386. That number is due to more fly balls leaving the yard: 10.6% of them, after just 9.5% did a year ago. Despite some small changes in walk and strikeout rates, again

**4.20**

Runs per team per game so far in 2015, up from 4.07 last year

**.394**

MLB-wide slugging percentage, up from .386 in '14

**10.6%**

Home run rate on fly balls this season, up from 9.5% last year

**52.1%**

Percentage of pitches Gordon has swung at this season, a career high

**.406**

Ted Williams's average in 1941, the last time any player topped .400

**.394**

Tony Gwynn's average in 1994, the last time a player topped .380

**.376**

Gordon's MLB-leading average through Sunday

**.372**

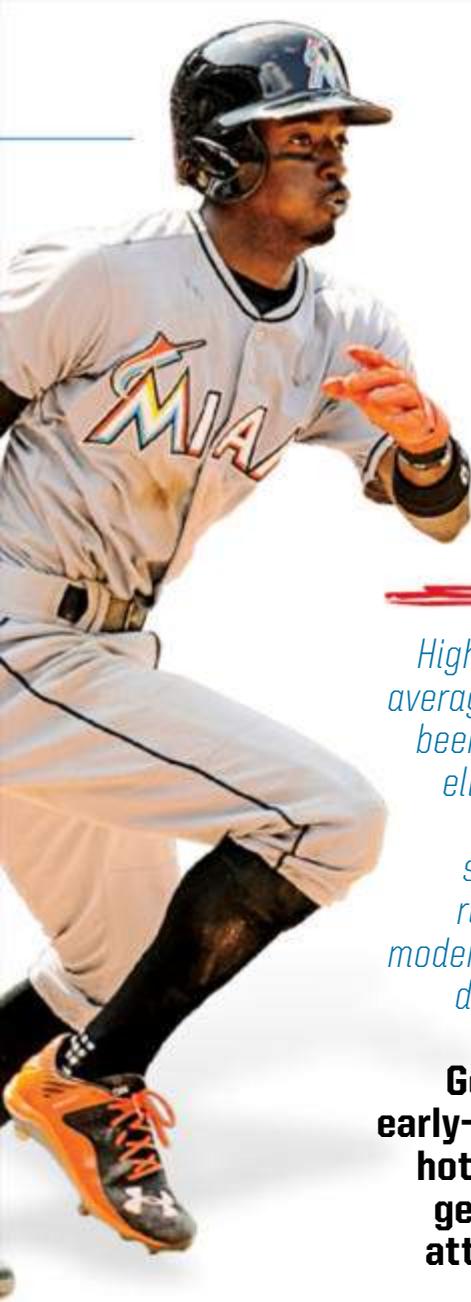
Ichiro's average in 2004, the last time a player topped .370

just rolling them back to 2013 levels, the game is still dominated by the K, with more than one in five plate appearances ending in a strikeout and teams relying more than ever on the long ball to score runs.

### ABOVE AVERAGE

Famously, no player has hit .400 since Ted Williams's .406 in 1941. But even the rate of challenges to that number has slowed in the last 20 years. No player has batted as high as .370 since Ichiro Suzuki hit .372 in 2004; no player has hit .380 since Tony Gwynn hit .394 in the strike-shortened 1994 campaign. High batting averages have been eliminated by rising strikeout rates caused, in part, by the specialization and high velocities of modern pitchers.

So Dee Gordon's early-season hot streak gets your attention. The second baseman, picked up



*High batting averages have been almost eliminated by rising strikeout rates and modern infield defenses,*  
**so Dee Gordon's early-season hot streak gets your attention.**

by the Marlins from the Dodgers over the winter, was batting .400 or better throughout most of May, dipping to .376 through Sunday. Gordon, a career .272 hitter coming into this season, has doubled down on his aggressive approach—swinging at a career-high 52.1% of pitches he's seen—and keeping the ball on the ground. He leads the majors with 16 infield hits and a whopping 32 hits on ground balls, good for a .360 average.

In those numbers, though, are the best indicators that Gordon won't be able to finish at .400—or close to it. Just one player hit even .350 on ground balls last year (Marcell Ozuna, .360), and modern infield defenses are machines designed, through skill and positioning, to turn grounders into outs. Gordon has no power to speak of and is on pace to strike out 100 times—an 0 for 100 that is nearly impossible to overcome on contact. Gordon has

made himself into a far better player than most people expected, and he's a bright spot in a Marlins season spiraling out of control. He's just not going to challenge Williams—or even Ichiro.

### TWIN WINS

They're not leading their division—O.K., they're barely in second place—but the Twins are quietly building a playoff cushion, up  $3\frac{1}{2}$  games in the wild-card race through Sunday. Among the teams off to surprisingly hot starts, however, the Twins are the likeliest to fall apart quickly. They are sixth in the AL in runs but just 11th in OBP and 12th in slugging and have been disproportionately good with runners in scoring position, something that will be hard to sustain. They pair the worst strikeout staff in the majors with a below-average defense, so it's hard for them to keep other teams off the board. They're seven games over .500 while outscoring their opponents by just 13 runs. Even with their good start, the Twins will struggle to finish .500 this year, much less reach the playoffs.



### COMEBACK CANDIDATE

Expected to contend for the NL Cy Young Award, the Nationals' Stephen Strasburg has a 6.50 ERA and has averaged less than five innings per start. Look deeper, though, and you see a pitcher who is fundamentally the same as he was in 2013, when he had a 3.00 ERA in 30 outings. Strasburg is still hitting 95–96 with his fastball, and he still has a terrific changeup and a low walk rate. This year, however, every ball hit off Strasburg seems to find a hole: His .396 batting average allowed on balls in play leads the majors (minimum: 30 IP) and is more than 10 points higher than second-most-unlucky pitcher. (He's allowed a .385 batting average on ground balls.) Strasburg's ERA is a fluke driven by terrible luck; he'll be one of the best pitchers in baseball over the next four months. □





Rowdy <b>Royals</b>	Quarterly <b>Report</b>	Joc <b>Pederson</b>	Mookie <b>Betts</b>
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# NEW JOC CITY

## STROKES OF GENIUS

Pederson's short-and-sweet home run swing sent seven straight hits out of the park in one April-May stretch.



*A Rookie of the Year candidate in Dodger blue? That's not unusual, but Joc Pederson stands out for his maturity, defensive polish and throwback blend of power and speed. Get ready, Mike Trout: You're about to share the SoCal stage*

**BY ALBERT CHEN**

Photograph by  
**Jed Jacobsohn**  
For Sports Illustrated



**SUNSET OVER** Dodger Stadium, and the sky is tinted cotton-candy pink, the mountains and palms beyond the wavy roof in leftfield beginning to fade to black. The ushers with their clip-on ties and boater straw hats squeeze through the aisles; Vin Scully is at the mike, Nancy Bea at the organ, and the old Dodger with the silver hair and royal-blue polo shuffles to his second-row seat along the third base line. He's a step slower these days, but Tommy Lasorda, who turns 88 in a few months, is still as fired up as ever about the old ball club. Someone says that it's a great time to be a Dodgers fan, and the former L.A. manager roars back, "It's always a great time to be a Dodgers fan!"

Good vibes pulse through Chavez Ravine on this cool May night, and later, after the Dodgers have rolled to their 10th win in 12 games and stretched their lead in the NL West to five games, Lasorda will acknowledge that, yes, there is something about this team, and something in particular about the new kid in centerfield: Joc Pederson, the 23-year-old rookie who won the starting job during spring training.

From the day Lasorda met Pederson five years ago in rookie ball, Lasorda was in love: with the home run swing, short and sweet like Robinson Cano's;

with the kid's instincts in the outfield and the way he chases fly balls with his head down to maximize initial acceleration, "the way it used to be taught," says Lasorda; with the fact that Pederson (whose father, Stu, was drafted by the Dodgers in 1981 and spent eight years in the organization) has bled Dodger blue since he was a boy growing up in Palo Alto. "He's a throwback to the days when we had 30/30 guys—the combination of power and speed, you don't see that in the game anymore," says Lasorda. "He's going to be a star here for a long, long time."

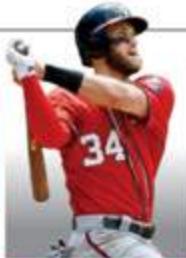
Pederson grabbed baseball's attention with a home run binge—seven of his hits in a row over a 10-day stretch beginning on April 27 were homers—but he does more than bludgeon baseballs. He is a key part of the third-highest-scoring offense in the league (Pederson, hitting mostly leadoff, had a .382 on-base percentage through his first 43 games, 12 home runs and a .928 OPS) and an elite fielder at a premium position ("As far as getting to baseballs, he's already one of the best out there," says third base coach Lorenzo Bundy). And on a \$270 million team, in a clubhouse of guarded, high-priced superstars like Clayton Kershaw, Adrian Gonzalez and Zack Greinke, the youngest player on the team adds a critical element: comic relief. As part of their rookie hazing, the veterans have sent Pederson on Starbucks runs dressed in full uniform and hijacked his walk-up songs, leaving Pederson to approach the batter's box not to his usual hip-hop—Drake, Snoop Dogg and, of course, Yung Joc—but to boy-band classics from New Kids on the Block, One Direction and Hanson. "He's a rookie. It's our duty to embarrass him as much as possible," says infielder Justin Turner. "But he can handle it like he can handle a 95-mph fastball."

Of course, in this town baseball phenoms come and go like Hollywood ingénues; the famous ex-manager knows this better than anyone. Lasorda managed nine NL Rookies of the Year in his two decades as a skipper—"Nine! Can you

## A VERY GOOD YEAR

A handful of prospects born in 1993 or later have appeared in the majors, but the youngest players making the biggest impact are the ones turning 23 this year. Joc Pederson and Mookie Betts (page 50) are just the tip of the born-in-'92 talent wave.

VINTAGE 1992



### Bryce Harper *OF, Nationals*

In his fourth season, Harper is starting to meet the sky-high expectations that have followed him, leading the NL with 16 homers and a 1.198 OPS.

believe that?"—and while some found stardom (Fernando Valenzuela, Mike Piazza), others underwhelmed after their smashing debuts (Steve Howe, Todd Hollandsworth). For the Dodgers' newest next big thing, the game tonight in L.A. would serve as a microcosm of his young career, with moments of greatness obscuring lapses of youth: Pederson struck out for the 40th time in 31 games; he was caught stealing for the fourth time in six attempts; he committed another base running gaffe that nearly cost the Dodgers the game (thrown out trying to advance to second with two outs, nullifying a run)—and then made up for it all with a two-out, go-ahead RBI single in the seventh inning, helping the Dodgers win again. On nights like this, yes, you can believe that Joc Pederson will be the Next Great Dodger. You also cannot ignore the mistakes and his logic-defying stats. How much longer can this Season of Joc last?

**I**T'S A long season, and you've got to pace yourself," Pederson says as he pats a towel on a nasty slasher-film gash above his left knee, the product of a mistimed slide into second. It's past 11 p.m. at Dodger Stadium, and Pederson, sitting at his locker, is a combination of exhausted, contemplative and edgy. He's just 50 games into his major league career, and while Pederson looks his age—blond and boyish, 6' 1", 215 pounds with room still to grow—he also has some of a veteran's seasoned weariness. He looks at the gash again and shrugs, "Just part of the game."

Unlike many of his teammates, the rookie isn't in a rush to get home. He's typically one of the last players to leave the ballpark. After each game he spends 15 minutes in the video room dissecting his at bats and notable plays,

VINTAGE 1992



### Noah Syndergaard *RHP, Mets*

The righty Mets fans call "Thor"—a first-round pick acquired from Toronto in 2012—has 16 strikeouts and five walks in three promising big league starts.



though he has become better at not overanalyzing the game. Early on in the minors, when he was a young prospect struggling to find his swing, Pederson would stay up all night on his phone, watching at bats of major league stars on YouTube—Mike Trout, Robinson Cano, Jose Bautista—and then show up at the park the next afternoon with an ill-considered new timing mechanism.

"I'd have no idea what the thinking was behind what they were doing," he says. "I've realized now that there are certain things that make Mike Trout special and certain things that make me different."

"When he gets information and digests it, he's a workaholic at it until he gets it," says Dodgers minor league hitting coordinator Damon Mashore. Pederson covers the field like Novak Djokovic covers a tennis court, "even though he's not a flier—he's not a Billy Hamilton," says Bundy. "But his instincts and his positioning put him in a position to make plays." The Dodgers, under a new data-driven front office headed by former Rays general manager Andrew Friedman, have been more aggressive this season with strategic alignment of their fielders—but more than anything, it's Pederson's aptitude, refined through his daily work, that makes him exceptional. "He works on it," says Dodgers manager Don Mattingly. "There wasn't a day during spring training that he wasn't out there working on making sure he's at his spots when a ball is hit out to him."

Pederson's defense was the reason the Dodgers were confident that he could take over for All-Star Matt Kemp, whose trade to San Diego in December was the key move in the Dodgers' winter overhaul.

DENIS POROV/GETTY IMAGES (HARPER, PEDERSON); CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SYNDERGAARD)



## NEW BLOOD

*Last year at Triple A Albuquerque, Pederson became the first player in the Pacific Coast League to hit 30 homers and steal 30 bases in 80 years.*

The team shipped out All-Star second baseman Dee Gordon and replaced him with veteran Howie Kendrick, plucked Jimmy Rollins from Philly and committed to a rookie with 28 major league at bats to replace Kemp, one of their biggest offensive stars. That in turn allowed Yasiel Puig and Andre Ethier to leave centerfield and focus on the corner outfield positions they are better suited to. The moves were intended to make the Dodgers more athletic, more versatile and better defensively, and that defense has been a big part of the Dodgers' winning formula thus far: One of the worst fielding teams in baseball in 2014, L.A. through Monday ranked eighth in the majors in Fangraphs' comprehensive defensive metric, Def., compared with 20th last season.

"When you talk about our defense, it's all centered around Joc," says Bundy, "because now we have guys playing in their natural positions. When you have a guy that is a natural centerfielder who knows what he's doing, everything falls into place."

Pederson's glove has been a difference-maker in L.A., but it's his bat that has gotten the most notice. Pederson is not big like Giancarlo Stanton. His stroke is short, simple, stripped of all frills, and he generates power with his hands—"Fred Lynn hands," Mashore says, "with enough strength in them that even if his body is out of position, he's still able to put the barrel on the ball with authority." Pederson's power hasn't come out of nowhere; he had 33 home runs in 121 minor league games last year. He seems only to homer, walk or strike out (through 43 games, he had almost as many homers as singles, along with 31 walks and 53 strikeouts), and while April's home run blizzard

was unsustainable, there are indicators that his overall start is for real. Not only was he reaching base at an impressive clip, he ranked 22nd in the majors in hard-hit-ball percentage, not far below established mashers such as Stanton, Paul Goldschmidt and Miguel Cabrera.

"The power has come sooner than we thought it would," says Mattingly. "The strikeouts are too high, but the thing is, he's getting on base. The patience is there. The approach is there. All the signs point to him only getting better."

**P**EDERSON LIVES with his childhood friend David DiPaola and DiPaola's girlfriend, Kelsea Smith, in a condo in Sherman Oaks, a sleepy San Fernando Valley suburb a 30-minute drive from Dodger Stadium. It's not the place you might expect a single 23-year-old to land in L.A., but Pederson's choice to stay away from the glitzier parts of town makes perfect sense to anyone who knows him. "If you're young and living in L.A., if you want to make time for it, you can be partying every day," says DiPaola. "But that's not who he is."

Away from the park, Pederson is a fairly typical 23-year-old, who shops for dinner at Whole Foods, unwinds by playing *Call of Duty* and has the TV tuned to *SportsCenter* at all hours. "We were watching ESPN when Bryce Harper had that three-home-run day," says DiPaola, "and we saw the first one, and he's like, 'Oh my God.

That's unbelievable.' And I'm like, 'Well, Joc, you hit two home runs tonight—that's pretty cool too!'"

Part of his daily ritual away from the park is to call the people he refers to as "my mentors." They include his father, who lives with Joc's mother, Shelley, in Palo Alto, and Mashore, who was Pederson's outfield coach last year at Triple A Albuquerque, where Pederson was the first 30/30 player in the Pacific Coast League in 80 years. "It's part of his process and part of what makes him successful," says Mashore. "He listens to everyone, figures out what's going to work for him and applies it."

One of those voices belongs to a bellowing octogenarian baseball icon. Pederson began working with Lasorda on minor league fields soon after the Dodgers drafted him in the 11th round in 2010. Last year they started going to Clippers and Lakers games together, and out to dinners ("Italian—always Italian, of course," says Pederson), where Uncle Tommy tells old baseball stories over plates of pasta. Now that the kid's a major leaguer, the long talks have been less frequent, but when they come, the old manager's message is usually simple, and Pederson has taken it to heart.

"I'm just 50 games into my career, and pretty much everyone here has 10 years on me," says Pederson. It's nearing midnight in L.A., and Pederson looks around at an empty clubhouse. "So far it's been cool, it's been fun, but I just have to keep learning." He repeats the words of the baseball lifer: "It's not how you start—it's how you finish." □

### YOUNG JOE

For all his power, Pederson is no hulking slugger; smart positioning and speed help him cover wide swaths in center.



Rowdy  
Royals

Quarterly  
Report

Joc  
Pederson

Mookie  
Betts

# MOVEABLE BEAST

*At rest, Mookie Betts is a wisp. But in motion, he's a perfect storm of energy, talent and on-field instincts. No wonder he's risen so fast*

**BY TOM VERDUCCI**

Photograph by  
Tom DiPace



**MOOKIE BETTS** sticks out in a static game, like a CGI effect edited in from another era. His Red Sox uniform, as if cut from flannel, blouses around a wispy frame that lacks obvious musculature. His face is boyish, with the optimistic suggestion of a mustache. His appearance hints at nothing special. It's when Mookie moves that jaws drop.

Betts is the winds of a nor'easter, the essence of movement. It defines him. There is that don't-try-this-at-home-kids idiosyncrasy of pumping his bat just before he swings, like trying to shake ketchup from a bottle (which only means the New England kiddies will clone it, same as they did Nomar's toe-taps or Big Papi's spit-clap). There are the flight-school tactics he brings to centerfield, covering runways of terrain before making swooping leaps that extinguish the promise of would-be extra-base hits. There is the derring-do on the base paths that astonishes even baseball lifers.

It all has happened so fast. Mookie fast. A major league career microwaved. At 22, and having never played the outfield until last year, he is the youngest everyday Red Sox centerfielder since seven-time All-Star Reggie





*After a 24-month rocket trip through seven levels of pro baseball, the 22-year-old Betts is the youngest everyday Red Sox centerfielder in nearly half a century.*

#### MOTOR SKILLS

Betts is the first Red Sox player since 1987 to score 47 runs, steal 12 bases and hit seven homers in his first 75 big league games.

Smith in 1967. He is here on the doorstep of stardom, just one year after his major league debut capped a 24-month rocket trip through seven levels of pro baseball; four years after he was an overlooked prospect better known for bowling than baseball; and 10 years after the scariest moment of his life.

For the man in motion, it was a moment of frightening stillness: One instant the 12-year-old boy was asleep in the back of the family car, and the next he was facedown on an interstate highway at rush hour, bits of asphalt embedded in his broken jaw, bones in his right wrist dislocated and bones in his foot broken. The car lay flipped near the median, the end of a cascade of events triggered by the scrape of a utility pole. The boy's stepfather was behind the wheel, bleeding from the nose. His mother could not open her door. Her shoulder was shattered. There had been four kids in the car, teammates on a bowling trip. She saw three of them climb out a window. None were her son.

Mookie was lying still on the interstate. His door had been flung open, and the boy, beltless, had been ejected. One horrific thought quickly seized his mother: oncoming traffic.

From the moment Betts was born—even before he was born—Diana Benedict knew her boy was special. On the night before his birth Diana took part in one of her usual three-nights-per-week league bowling matches in Nashville. She rolled her last frame at 9:30 and went into labor at 11. She and Willie Mark Betts, Mookie's father, a railroad superintendant, named him Markus Lynn Betts, borrowing from Willie's middle name and her middle name but also well aware of what they hoped would be fortuitous initials: MLB.

Soon after the baby was born, Diana and her sister were watching an Atlanta Hawks game on television when they noticed an especially good performance by guard Mookie Blaylock. Diana's sister is named Cookie. The boy would be known as Mookie from that day on.

The genes were there. Diana, granddaughter of a sharecropper, grew up playing baseball and softball on a Paducah, Ky., field built by her grandpa. "I didn't know anything about ribbons and lace," she said. Willie ran track and played basketball. Diana's brother, Terry Shumpert, played parts of 14 years in the big leagues. One of Mookie's cousins, George Wilson, played safety for nine seasons in the NFL. The boy would become a whiz at baseball, basketball, bowling and asking questions.

It could not end there on that interstate asphalt. There was too much for the boy to do. By age 22,

VINTAGE 1992



### Kris Bryant *3B/DF, Cubs*

Since his big league debut in April, Bryant is hitting .282/.401/.460 with five homers—and more in the forecast, considering he jacked 43 in the minors last year.

Betts would bowl two perfect games, become the first future major league star discovered in part because of high-tech neuroscouting, reach base in 66 straight minor league regular-season games, and at 5' 9" and 180 pounds, bring sorely missed athletic excitement to an increasingly stationary game while embracing the profile of an African-American baseball role model. "I like being somebody people look up to," Betts says. "It helps me stay on the right track. And I also want to keep kids off the streets and get them into something positive."

The microwaving of a big leaguer is a tale worth telling. Just don't expect Mookie or Diana to brag about it. "We don't want to be arrogant," Diana says. "Like Mommy always tells him, 'Anything can happen. Let other people make compliments for you. Don't brag on yourself.'"

**ONLY FIVE** major leaguers last year hit at least 20 home runs and stole at least 20 bases, down from a high of 19 players in 1999 and tying the record low since baseball expanded to 30 teams in '98. Thirty percent of all plate appearances ended in a home run, a walk or a strikeout, the so-called three true outcomes—or, in other words, baseball in which defense is not required.

Dynamic players like Betts stand out. In his brief career he's already pulled off two plays that made 57-year-old Boston third base coach Brian Butterfield fairly gasp. Betts turned a ground ball to shortstop into a double last July 9 (he beat out an infield hit and, a few steps past the bag, dashed for second when he saw the base uncovered), and on April 13 he stole two bases on the same pitch (he swiped second, popped out of his slide and, upon seeing third uncovered because of a defensive shift, took that base like a sprinter running two consecutive legs of a 4 × 100).

"He's done two things in the last two years I've never seen before," Butterfield says. "It's easy to see the physical part, but the intelligence, the instincts, the trusting of his eyes are way above average. Young players tend to err on the side of caution. They don't want to make a mistake. But he's let his hair down from the first day he came up here. He trusts what he sees on the bases and on defense and just *lets . . . it . . . go!*"

Betts fills up a stat line like a bingo card. In the first 75 games of his career he scored 47 runs, stole 12 bases and hit seven home runs. Only one other

VINTAGE 1992



### Manny Machado *3B, Orioles*

Like Harper, Machado debuted at 19 and shows signs of truly coming into his own now that he's recovered from knee surgery, on track for career highs in OBP and SLG.



player in Red Sox history matched those 75-game numbers: Ellis Burks in 1987.

As baseball desperately seeks the next generation of hitters to combat this era's dominant pitching, clubs frequently draft raw, superior athletes hoping they develop fine baseball motor skills. Rare is the superior athlete who enters pro ball with athleticism *and* advanced baseball skills. Betts is one of them. "The [Andrew] McCutchen comp is the best comp," says Cubs president Theo Epstein, who drafted Betts in 2011, his last year as Boston's general manager. "It's the combination of a short swing, bat speed, superior hand-eye coordination and athleticism."

"What stands out," Boston DH David Ortiz said, "is his plate discipline. I saw that last year when he first showed up. I said, 'This [guy] is going to be a stud.' He knows exactly what he's doing at the plate."

Diana and Willie separated when Mookie was eight years old, though Willie has remained a constant and close influence in his son's life. "He was the whole family's child," says Shumpert, who talks or texts with Betts every day. Inadvertently, the Red Sox had a hand in shaping Betts as a baseball player: In 2004, Shumpert went to spring training with Boston, but when he strained a hamstring and saw he wasn't going to make the team, he asked for his release. The Red Sox obliged. The Pirates offered Shumpert a roster spot with their Triple A team, the Nashville Sounds, and he jumped at the chance to live that summer with his sister in Music City. Most every day, when Shumpert left for the ballpark at 2 p.m., he would bring with him 11-year-old Mookie and his own son, Nick, now a potential first-round pick in this month's draft. The boys shagged batting practice balls in the

DAVID BUTLER (11)/USA TODAY SPORTS (SLIDE); JARED WICKERHAM/GETTY IMAGES (BRYANT); G-FLO/REUTERS (MACHADO)



outfield, asked questions and watched how professional ballplayers worked.

"I knew once he came out he got addicted," Shumpert says. "He was watching and picking things up."

Alas, after Betts hit .291 in 52 games last year, major league pitchers schooled him early this season, especially with cruel breaking pitches. Betts swore he never looked at the scoreboard in April to see his batting average. Forty-three games into this season he was hitting .233.

"I can honestly say I haven't looked," he said. "I came into the season not even worried about numbers, just pretty much worried about finding some way to help the team win. It's about moving the guy over, keeping the double play in order on defense, going first to third, pushing across a run. Batting average changes every day. Stolen bases, runs only go up. Those are the things I want to look toward."

**O**NE DAY in the spring of 2011 a Red Sox area scout named Danny Watkins pulled Betts out of his lunch period at Overton High in Nashville and handed him a laptop. Watkins explained that for the next 15 to 20 minutes Betts would play four or five different computer "games." In reality these were high-tech exercises designed to measure hitting skills traditionally considered unmeasurable,



*"Young players tend to err on the side of caution," says a Red Sox coach. "They don't want to make a mistake."*

**But Betts trusts what he sees on the bases and on defense and just lets... it... go!"**

#### WELL ROUNDED

Betts caught Boston's eye with his rare combination of speed, athleticism, plate discipline and baseball smarts.

such as pitch recognition and decision making.

The concept of neuroscouting, or the science of measuring how fast a baseball brain works, was in its infancy; the Red Sox had partnered with a technology company only the previous year to develop a proprietary system. Hitting is a chain with three links: visual (seeing the pitch), cognitive (reading the pitch) and mechanical (swinging at the pitch). A scout can break down the last link, but to measure the first two you have to get inside the brain. That's the mission of neuroscouting. Take two similar high school prospects: If one sees spin and reads break more quickly than another, he may be more likely to hit the faster and better pitching in pro ball.

In one "game" a spinning baseball would pop up on the screen. Watkins told Betts to tap the space bar as soon as he saw it spinning in a certain direction. In addition to such skills as pitch recognition and reaction time, the games are also designed to reveal something about character. They include built-in "mistakes" in which it is not possible to provide a right answer; the scout on hand observes how the prospect responds to these traps. A "soft" prospect complains and makes excuses. The prospect with the better makeup may note the difficulty of the game, but he presses on without getting frustrated—which is how Betts reacted. When the technology company tabulated his neuroscouting scores that spring, it was blown away by how well Betts did.

"It was the best we had ever seen," one team source says. "The guys who run it for us said it was ridiculously high for his [high school] level, his age. He was an outlier." (Of course, Betts's trouble reading the spin on breaking pitches this year may indicate that neuroscouting is still developing reliable data. Jackie Bradley Jr. was another Boston 2011 draftee with extremely high neuroscouting marks, and he has hit .192 over parts of three MLB seasons.)

The Red Sox loved Betts, then a shortstop. One scout, Mark Wasinger, included in his report that

Betts reminded him of Derek Jeter. The Boston player development people began to think they might have a rarity when it came to draft-eligible high school hitters: a hidden gem.

Betts, the 2010 Tennessee high school bowler of the year, played basketball and bowled in the winter rather than traveling the well-worn baseball showcase circuit. Early in the spring of his senior season he sprained an ankle and got off to a slow start. Some scouts didn't like his "handsy" way of hitting. These events, to Boston's delight, helped to keep Betts's profile low, though the Red Sox were not the only team on him. One Boston cross-checking scout noted in his report that a surreptitious Royals scout was hiding in a thicket of trees while watching Betts play.

Just before the 2011 draft *Baseball America* published a list of top prospects. Betts was not among the 200 players listed. "Nowhere to be seen,"

## NEW BLOOD

Shumpert says. “I was one frustrated uncle.”

Betts had committed to play at Tennessee, but if drafted high enough with the right amount of money, he was prepared to turn pro. He lasted until the fifth round, when Boston took him after 171 players were picked ahead of him. “From June all the way into August,” Diana says, “we talked about depending on the size of the signing bonus, was it more beneficial to go to college or straight to the pros.”

The Red Sox were in a buying mode. Spurred by commissioner Bud Selig’s desire to tap the brakes on draft spending, baseball planned to institute a harder cap the following year. Boston knew this would be the last year to easily pay “over slot,” which could mean giving first-round money to, say, a fifth-round pick. Epstein saw a financial edge closing for his high-revenue team, so he decided to be aggressive with offers. The Red Sox met Betts’s price: They offered \$750,000. Betts signed 30 minutes before the midnight deadline. He took his bonus and banked it.



**LITTLE PAPI?**  
Ortiz (above, right) said he knew early on that Betts was going to be a stud. He knows exactly what he’s doing at the plate.”

**B**OWLING HELPED put the boy in the middle of the interstate. The kids had competed in a national tournament in Kansas City and were heading back to Nashville.

“I pretty much grew up in the bowling alley,” Betts says. Every year around Christmas for at least two decades, the extended family has gotten together for a tournament. They rent 10 lanes at a Paducah alley, and 30 to 40 family members, from little kids to Shumpert to Wilson to Diana’s 70-year-old aunt, compete for bragging rights. Sometimes Diana will challenge Mookie. “We go neck and neck,” she says. “I try to catch him when he comes off baseball, when he hasn’t played for a while. He can roll.”

Betts and his doubles partner finished third in the Kansas City tournament. Heading back on the highway, he fell asleep—and woke up with his face pressed on asphalt. “I don’t remember being in the road,” Betts says. “I just remember I kept my eyes closed. I didn’t know what was going on, so I just kept my eyes closed for some reason. My mom said I was screaming.

“She said somebody came out of one of the cars behind me and got me out of the road. She said cars could have run me over if they kept going, but the man stopped traffic. The next thing I really remember is being in the hospital.”

Says Diana, “To this day I don’t know who saved him. I asked for him to come forward just to thank the guy and hug him. He blocked two lanes of traffic. He was God’s little angel. I’m thankful for my little boy. He’ll be O.K. if he keeps his head on straight.”

Diana would seem to have little reason to worry. So unassuming is Betts



**Carlos Rodon** LHP, White Sox

Though he struggled with his command in his first MLB appearances, Rodon’s combo of a 99-mph fastball and devastating slider makes him one of the game’s top prospects.

VINTAGE 1992

that when Boston manager John Farrell gave him the green light to hit on a 3-and-0 count in the first week of the season, a stunned Betts had to ask him later why he would allow him such a freedom.

Ask Betts what he loves most about baseball, and his answer is a sociable one. “Probably just getting to meet a lot of guys,” he says. “People you see on TV, you actually get to talk to them and be around them. It’s taught me a lot as far as life things. This is a long season, and you can’t get too high or too low. And you can apply that to life.”

There are times, as when he went 5 for 34 in the middle of April, when the expectations seem enormous for such a slight, young ballplayer. He must learn centerfield, decode breaking balls with major league spin, set the table for a highly scrutinized team and serve as a role model for young African-American ballplayers at a time when, as noted in a recent HBO monologue by comedian Chris Rock, the sport is losing cachet in the African-American community.

“We’re not a big fan of the man because he uses the n-word and profanity,” Shumpert says. “But I was in favor of what he said. It made a lot of sense. Mookie’s aware of it. But I think it’s more about promoting the game of baseball, promoting what you enjoy in life. For Mookie, saying he can blaze a trail for African-American kids is only part of it. Hopefully all kids can comment on what a great role model he is just by being who he is.”

Inevitably, you see another one of those moments aglow with the beautiful movement of Betts, and you understand how such big expectations became possible. The nimbleness of another catch in centerfield; the quickness and lightness afoot as he seems to compress the space between bases; and, only after his front foot and hands have completed their busy work, the flash of his bat. It was Shumpert, after Betts was drafted, who suggested he develop that odd rhythm with his hands before swinging. It was a way to generate more power out of that little body.

Watching Betts hit is like watching the engine of a sports car run: It is a symphony of fast-moving parts. There is a moment, as the pitcher brings the baseball behind him, when contact seems impossible. The constant waggle of Betts’s bat has left the barrel low and behind him. The front foot is only beginning to kick upward. But then the gearbox gets busy. Foot, hips, shoulders and hands fire in rapid succession. And a baseball in flight for just .40 seconds is met by the swift swipe of his bat. It is a wonder to behold: how someone this unique, this small and this young can be right on time. □

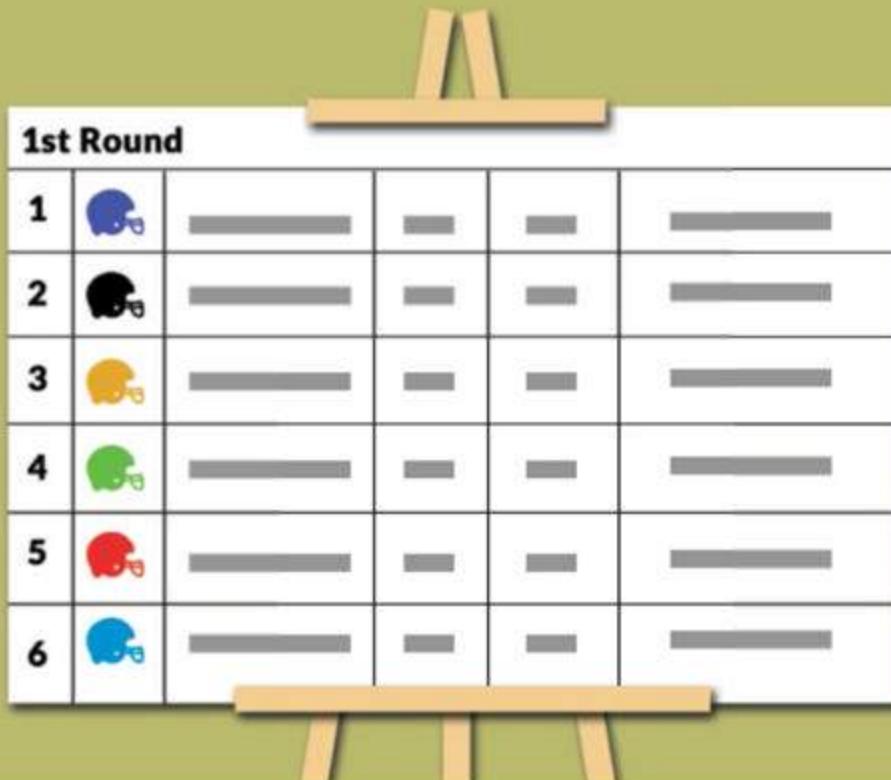
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The table is a draft board for the 1st Round of the NFL Draft, displayed on a wooden easel. It has 6 rows and 5 columns. The first column contains the round number (1-6) and a helmet icon. The second column contains a horizontal line. The third, fourth, and fifth columns each contain a shorter horizontal line.

1st Round				
1		_____	_____	_____
2		_____	_____	_____
3		_____	_____	_____
4		_____	_____	_____
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6		_____	_____	_____

# JUST

HE WAS 6' 1" AND  
HIS GOAL: LEARN TO JAM

**WHEN JOE FORTENBERRY**, a farm boy from Happy, Texas, threw one down at the West Side YMCA in New York City on March 9, 1936, he may not have been the first man to dunk a basketball, but he was the first to do it in an aesthetically stirring way, and in front of the right people. Cameras of that era were too crude to capture the split second when the rules of both Newton and Naismith were bent, so it was fortuitous that *New York Times* writer Arthur J. Daley was at the Y that day covering the tournament that would decide which Americans sailed to Berlin for the Olympic debut of the 45-year-old sport. This new “version of a lay-up shot,” Daley wrote, “left observers simply flabbergasted. Joe Fortenberry, 6-foot 8-inch center . . . left the floor, reached up and pitched the ball downward into the hoop, much like a cafeteria customer dunking a roll in coffee.”

Seventy-nine years later, the feat that Daley unwittingly named “the dunk” still flabbergasts. But how it felt to Fortenberry, a pioneering barnstormer whose name we’ve forgotten despite the gold medal he and his teammates won, remains a mystery. “He never talked about being the first person to dunk,” says 65-year-old Oliver Fortenberry, the only son of Big Joe, who died in ’93. Indeed, the famous dunkers throughout history have been either reticent on the subject or unable to adequately express how it felt to show Dr. Naismith that he’d nailed his peach baskets too low. After more than a year of rigorous research on the subject, I’ve concluded that the inadequacies of modern language—not the ineloquence of the dunk’s practitioners—are at fault. In the eight decades since Fortenberry rocked the rim, words have repeatedly fallen short in describing the only method of scoring, in any sport, that both ignores one of its game’s earliest tenets and, in its very execution, carries a defiant anger.

Which is why, on April 1, 2014, I dedicated myself to dunking a basketball for the first time. So that I could live it, breathe it, perhaps take a crack at it with my pen. I had tossed this idea around for years, realizing with each passing birthday that my chances of success were dimming. However, on that April Fool’s Day (a coincidence) I spent three hours on the court and at the gym, with a promise to myself to return several times each week until I threw one down like Gerald Green. Or at least like Litterial Green, who played in 148 NBA games between 1992 and ’99, and who, like me, was born in the early ’70s, stands 6’ 1”, 185 pounds and is at no risk of having DUNKER carved into his epitaph.

I gave myself six months to dunk because that was the low end of the “six to eight months” prescribed on the website of Brandon Todd, a 5’ 5” former D-III star who set the same goal for himself in 2005, and then, at age 22, accomplished it. When I first contacted him, Todd perfectly expressed the more shallow



**BY  
MICHAEL  
MCKNIGHT**

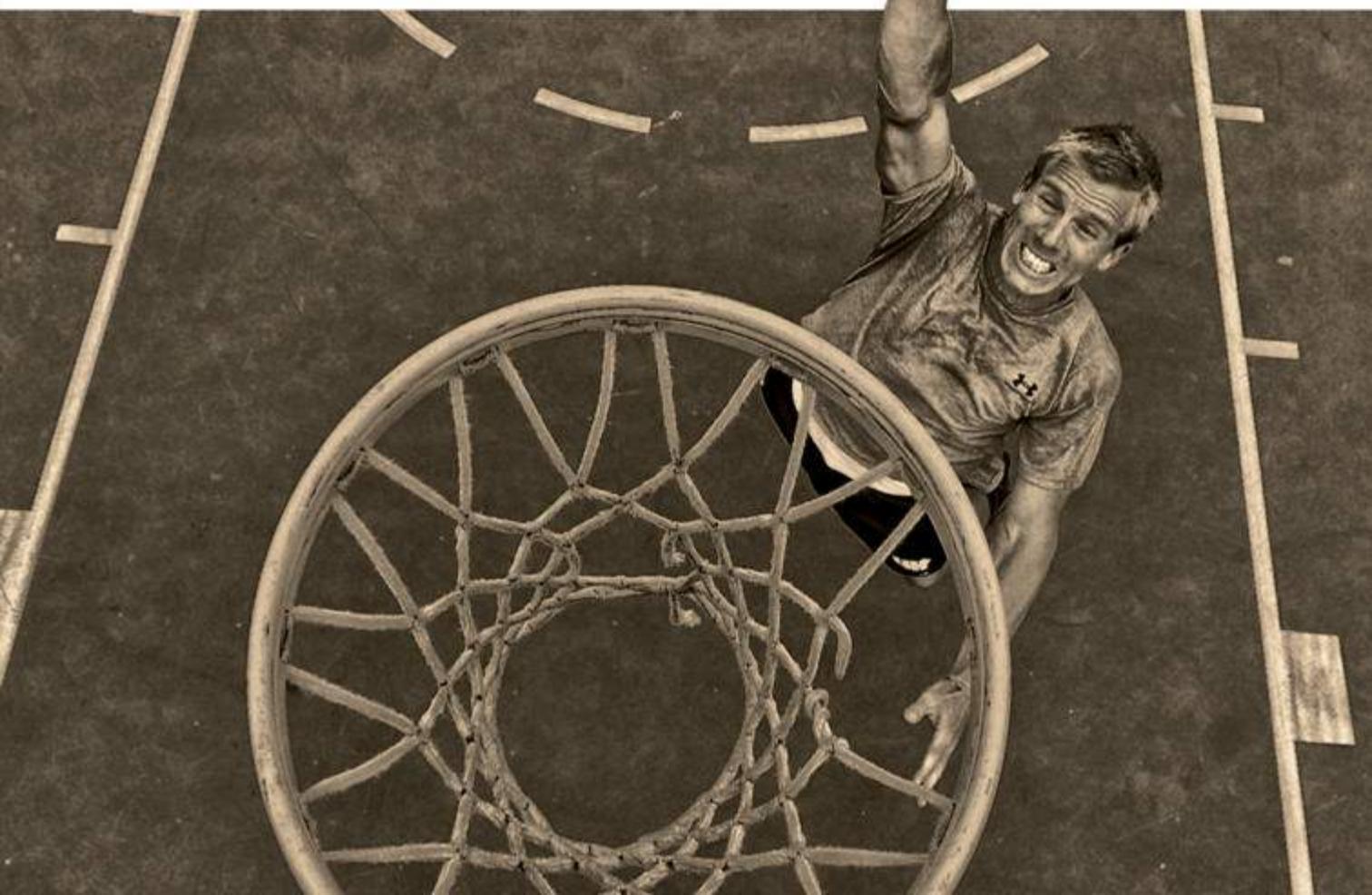
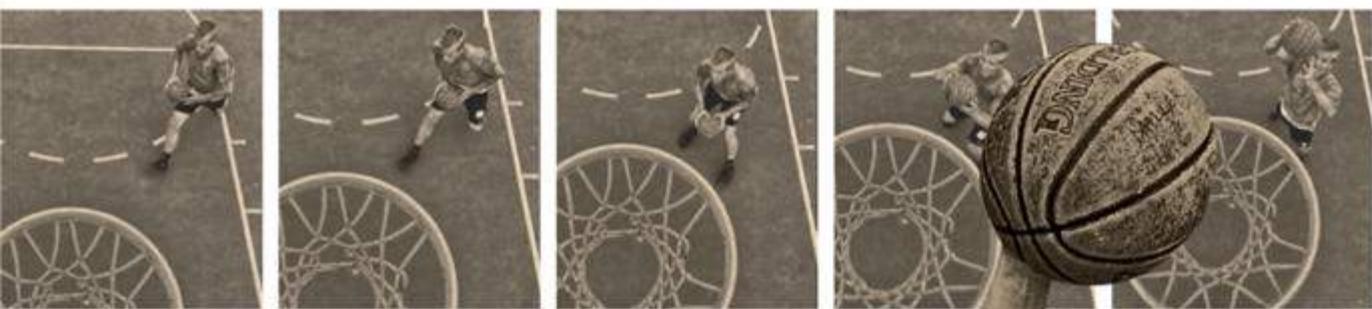
Photographs by  
Donald Miralle  
For Sports Illustrated

## WITHERING HEIGHT

That last inch or so to 10 feet is no cinch, the author learned as he pounded the pavement at playgrounds across south L.A.

# DUNK

**42, WITH THREE KIDS AND SMALL PALMS.  
—HOWEVER LONG IT TOOK**





## TALL ORDER

Fortenberry (with ball), the original dunker, had more than half a foot on our author, who made up the difference in sweat.

and myriad Slam Dunk champions with whom I have nothing else in common athletically) as opposed to a one-foot jumper (see: Julius Erving, Clyde Drexler, Michael Jordan). This meant that my best shot at dunking would be to elevate like an outside hitter in volleyball—stepping forward with one foot, quickly planting my trailing foot next to it and propelling myself upward off both.

Less helpful was my early realization that I was a *two-hand* dunker, in light of my inability to palm a basketball. It's common knowledge among dunkers that throwing down with two hands is harder than with one; the former requires a higher vertical leap. So as I flailed haplessly at the rim last spring with one hand, I felt not just discouragement but also fear. Fear that I would miss big chunks of my kids' early years on earth just so I could come up embarrassingly short on a senseless goal that my wife and I would later estimate consumed 15 to 20 hours a week. And fear that I had shared this idea with my editors way too soon.

**F**OUR TIMES a week, from April through October, I embarked on 90-minute explosive lifting sessions based on the years I'd spent working as a strength coach to college and pro volleyball players. Squats, squat jumps, deadlifts, lunges, box jumps, sprints. . . . Three or four days a week I visited one of my local blacktops, where I tried to dunk tennis balls on 10-foot rims

reason behind my goal: "When you can dunk, it means you're a good athlete. Period. It takes away any subjectiveness." I also chose six months because I am prone to tragic spells of overconfidence.

The things I had going for me: an understanding spouse; a modicum of leaping ability, flashed during the occasional Motrin-supported pickup game; proximity to one of the world's best training centers; and, again, an understanding spouse. The forces working against me included (but were far from limited to) my average hand size and arm length, a lower-back injury I suffered while playing semipro football in 2009, and my age. I was 42.

My wife of 11 years knit her brow in confusion when I raised this idea. She wanted to care but could not muster the attention span, for she had given birth just three weeks earlier to our third daughter. I would be needed at home in the coming weeks. Although I look back today with pride at how I balanced that responsibility with the far less important dedication to dunking, I knew at the time that I would miss a lot of bath times and diaper changes so I could ride my bike to the gym or to local playgrounds, with no guarantee that I would even come close to my goal.

Justifying these selfish priorities in my head as I stuffed a ball into my backpack and pedaled away from our home would turn out to be one of the most formidable obstacles in my path. I must have whispered, *What the f--- am I doing?* as many times as I leaped toward one of the rusty rims scattered around the south Los Angeles beach community where we live. That latter number tallied somewhere around 5,000, according to my journal. Many of these jumps were attempted while wearing a weighted vest that pulled me downward, the same way that home pulled me sideways.

**THOUGHT** I needed a rim. But what I found I really needed was a constellation of them. Having choices would prove useful because of the daytime obstacles, like elementary school PE students and our own kids' afterschool activities; and the nighttime obstacles, like chain-link and padlocks, that I encountered. My training windows were narrow, so I learned to employ these outdoor rims strategically, the way the skateboarders in *Dogtown and Z-Boys* timed their secret sessions at drained swimming pools. The six or seven courts nearest our house featured rims measuring anywhere between 9 feet and 10' 2", a variance that allowed for different kinds of practice. The blisters and flayed cal-

luses that soon bloodied my hands instructed me in the value of breakaway rims. Because a Snap Back wasn't always available, local residents may have spotted a sweaty fortysomething man rubbing Vaseline on his hands in the corner of their child's favorite playground last year. Sometimes he wore a weight vest that made him look like a jihadist. What I'm saying is, Thanks for not calling the cops.

My early efforts were clumsy. Jumping willy-nilly as high as I could, I occasionally felt my finger graze the underside of the rim. Most times I did not. What I did feel early on was a firm self-awareness that I was a two-foot jumper (like Dominique Wilkins, Vince Carter



## LONGFORM

Watch McKnight's journey to jamming—culled from more than 24 hours of video footage—at [SI.com/longform](http://SI.com/longform)

or throw down basketballs and volleyballs on lower ones. One month in, I could dunk a tennis ball on a 9' 10" rim. I considered this a better-than-good start, not realizing that compared with dunking a basketball, this tennis-ball jam was akin to a child scrawling the diagonal line that begins a capital A on his first day of learning the alphabet.

About 100 yards away from this 9' 10" breakaway rim was a brown, oxidized, immobile 9' 1" version, a hand-ruining iron maiden where I practiced (and practiced) the timing and the hand and wrist work required to dunk. I knew early on that my regulation dunk, if it ever came to pass, would have to come from a lob of some sort—a bounce to myself, either off the blacktop or underhanded off the backboard—after which I would control the

50 to 200 times a day. My legs never got used to this bludgeoning, never got better at recovering from it, despite my daily foam-rolling, stretching and icing. Even on my off days, a quick game of tag with my kids or a bike ride to the park meant daggers in my thighs and a gait like Fred Sanford's.

"The approach you're taking is right," I was told by 38-year-old Grizzlies forward Vince Carter, whose first dunk in a career defined by gravity defiance happened on the outdoor courts at Ormond Beach (Fla.) Elementary, after "thousands" of failures. "That's how I started. Tennis ball. Then a volleyball. Then a girls' ball. Finally I took a dodgeball. I dunked that and said, 'You know what, I'm gonna try it.' Next thing you know. . . ." He shrugged and smiled, the gray whiskers on his jaw sinking into a dimple.

"How old were you?"

"It was seventh grade. No, it was sixth grade. I was, what, 12 or 13?"

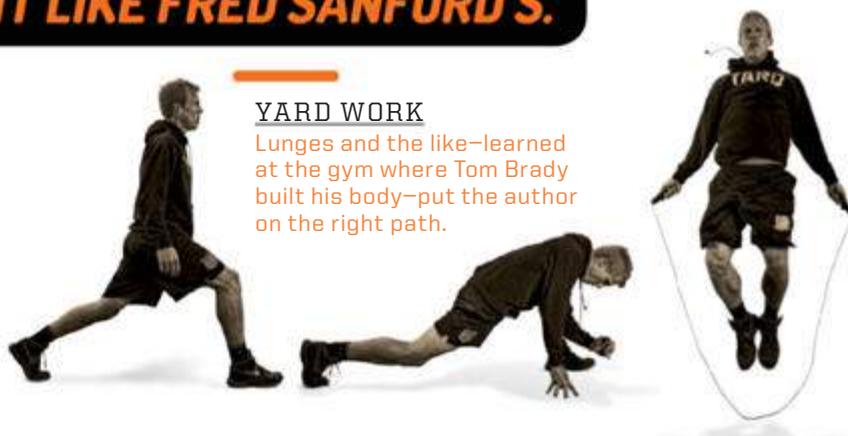
Joe Fortenberry was 18 or 19 when he first dunked. "He was 6' 7" back then too," said his son, Oliver. "He and his friends would practice on a barrel ring or a wagon-wheel ring nailed to a barn."

## A GAME OF TAG WITH MY KIDS MEANT DAGGERS IN MY THIGHS AND A GAIT LIKE FRED SANFORD'S.

ball with one hand just long enough to flush it. Mastering the placement and the delicate timing of such lobs would prove to be a quixotic pursuit in and of itself. But it was necessary, not just because of my hand size (7¾ inches) but also because I needed to keep my arms free so I could swing them at takeoff, adding lift to my leap.

A two-foot Dominican jump, a perfect lob (and I mean *per-fect*) and a quick flush with my right hand—that was my only shot. My odds, I sensed, were extraordinarily s-----.

If anything came to surprise me about this journey, it was the sheer volume of physical pain. I had taken on impressive physical feats before. I had run a sub-3:30 marathon back in 2003 after putting in the hundreds of training miles required. I'd done some of the most grueling weight training on offer, most of it either on the beach or at The Yard, a nearby temple of athletic performance where Kobe Bryant and Tom Brady, among others, have kneeled with exhaustion. But the physical toll of trying to dunk made the marathon and the semipro football and the parenting and everything else I'd ever attempted seem like mere rubber-band snaps to the wrist. The lifting didn't hurt as much as the jumping, the banging of my quadragenarian appendages into the ground, taking off and landing



### YARD WORK

Lunges and the like—learned at the gym where Tom Brady built his body—put the author on the right path.

For legions of daydreaming mortals like me, unblessed with the height or hops of a young Fortenberry or Carter, the dream of dunking still has a strong gravitational pull. Brent Barry, who is not only a 43-year-old dad and a neighbor but also the 1996 NBA Slam Dunk champion, nodded knowingly when I brought this up over coffee last fall.

"There's something about dunking a basketball that lures us in," he said, reflecting on his first jam, during lunch period his sophomore year at De La Salle High in Concord, Calif., back when his driver's license read 5' 11", 112 pounds. "It stokes the imagination. It's something you always dream of doing. I have a friend whose father, at age 50, is trying to dunk."

Barry, who retired from the NBA in 2009, recalled that a few days before our sit-down he "drove out to the Clippers' practice facility, wearing sneakers and board shorts, just to get my basketball fix in. Between games I pick up a ball. In the back of my mind I'm thinking, You're 42, man; can you still? So I do a little power dribble and, sure enough, throw it down. I put the ball down and walked out. I can still do that. That's good."

Unfortunately, I'm not the 6' 7" son of a Hall of Famer, so I had to

## THE RIGHT STUFF

With his low-tech arsenal (opposite), the author aspired to jam like the 5' 5" Todd (below) and even the arm-bending Carter.

resort to desperate devices—like Hennessy, an inexpensive cognac that, according to one of the two NBA players who recommended it, “will give you that *Yah!* That bounce. That little bit of meanness you need.” The minibar-sized bottle that I downed 30 minutes into an intense session on a sweltering day last summer had no effect other than scorching my esophagus and releasing from my pores an aura that, as my six-year-old put it, “smells like medicine.”

After four months of failing to pull off anything even resembling a real dunk, the planets aligned on Aug. 9: Nineteen or so failed attempts into that afternoon, I dunked a soccer ball on a middle school court whose rim measured 9' 11". (Naismith's original basketball, incidentally, *was* a soccer ball.) Video from that afternoon shows me standing there, looking confused, in the moment afterward. *Did that just happen?* Failing had become so routine that even this small success felt foreign.

The soccer dunk was fool's gold, of course. I knew I could never swing my arms that pendulously, that fast, while palming a basketball. The good news: I had reached that height despite jumping, as Brandon Todd would describe it, “wrong.”

I sent a video of my soccer ball dunk to Todd, the #fivefivedunker, who informed me that I was leading with the wrong leg. I'd been taking my last big step with my left foot, which, as a righty, was like swinging a bat cross-handed. A few days later I encountered a blogger and 43-year-old dunker named Andy Nicholson who showed me, among many other things, that I wasn't the only one with blood on my hands. Nicholson was one of dozens of YouTubers, young and old (mostly young), who were documenting online their attempts to dunk. “Yes!” he yelled when I told him about the open sores on my fingers. “Those are badges of honor!”

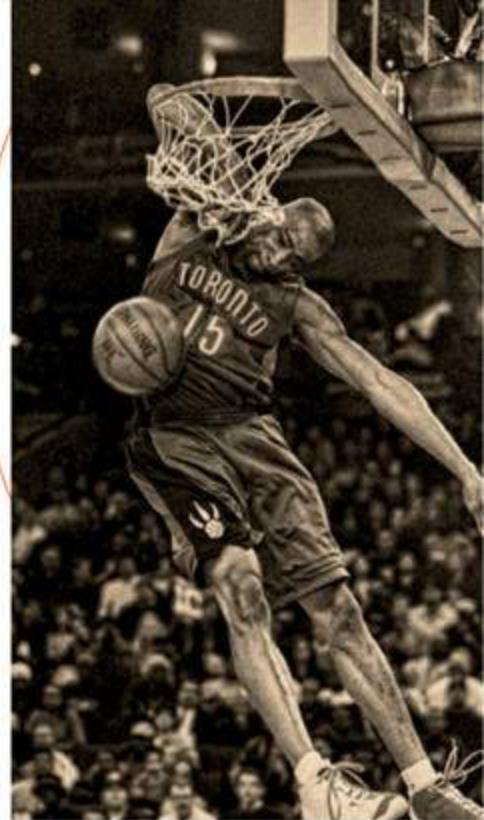
Like Todd and me, Nicholson was a two-foot jumper, and he echoed what Todd had told me was another flaw in my technique: “Your next-to-last step has to be a lot bigger. That big leap forward with your right foot—your penultimate step—that's what allows you to explode off the ground.” To demonstrate, Nicholson sent me a video of Carter's performance at the 2000 NBA Dunk Contest, which was a bit like showing a Monet to a finger-painting kindergartner and saying, “No, like *this*.”

The way Arthur J. Daley and the other spectators at the Y felt when Fortenberry dunked—that's how fans at the Oakland Arena felt on Feb. 12, 2000, when Vince Carter shoved his forearm into the rim and swung there by his elbow. What only the initiated noticed about Carter's dunk was that if you froze him during his approach, he looked like Bob Beamon. Carter long-jumped some 12 feet, right foot leading the way, before landing for a nanosecond and blasting off into his two-footed ascent.

“That big step before the explosion,” Carter explained to me, “is for the sole purpose of getting height above the rim. Ever since I was a kid trying to dunk, I never aimed for the rim. I tried to jump toward the top of the backboard. Aim for the moon and get the stars, right?”

“What single piece of advice,” I asked Carter, “would you give a teenage kid—or a 43-year-old [as I had turned by then]—who is trying to dunk?”

“Put in the work. It's muscle memory, first and foremost. Trainingwise, people say, ‘You gotta do this, you gotta do that.’ I didn't believe in that. I



WHICH ONE NBA

never worked on my legs in high school or middle school. I would just go through this routine over and over, visualizing that day when you dunk on the court. And then you live in that moment.”

Three weeks after I received that counsel, on a rare afternoon when I felt fully rested, I dunked a volleyball on a 9' 11" rim. Again, I knew I could never swing my arms while palming a basketball the way I'd swung them while palming that volleyball, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel badass. Thirteen failed attempts later, I did it again. Then two more times, each one an unexpected thunderclap. All of the explosive Olympic lifting I'd been doing was paying off, but my problem wasn't going anywhere: How could I get my hand *and* a basketball over the cylinder? A lob to myself off the backboard? A big bounce off the blacktop?

Imperfect as my two options were, I had to choose one and commit. I didn't have time to play around. I had kids to raise, other projects to work on, an impending hip replacement to schedule.

What if someone lobbed it *for me*, though? This would violate my criterion that I do this all by myself—but no one has ever claimed that those Clippers who throw home Chris Paul's lobbs aren't dunking. I didn't decide on this third option; not yet. But it was on the table. My main task was still finding a way to jump higher.



## THE DUNK PROJECT

would survive intact: my corny belief in hard work or my patellar tendon?

When a scheduling conflict arose with my usual lobber, another friend, Jeff West, a 45-year-old neighbor whose daughters are the same ages as mine, offered to jump aboard my journey to irrelevance. He also ended up injecting a crucial element that I hadn't realized was missing. Fun.

I had allowed what began as an adventure to turn into hard labor, an eternal grind. I realize now that one of the reasons I had trained and jumped in solitude for so long was embarrassment, fear that passersby would judge me for embarking on this vain vision quest.

I had worked alone in this vacuum for so long that when Jeff, in our first session together, began responding to my near misses with stuff like, "You are *right there!* You got this, bro! You just have to visualize it!" it hit me as if Jordan himself were saying it.

Dunking became a game again. After my closest misses I'd hop around and swear like a golfer whose playoff putt had lipped out. These outbursts were no longer harsh self-admonitions but celebrations of my progress, acknowledgments that I was getting tantalizingly close. I could feel my legs gaining in bounciness. I could feel my hips, quads and calves learning to fire simultaneously. My original lobber returned to the scene and suggested I try dunking in the morning instead of the evening, when the batteries in our old bodies are as low as the ones in our phones. I added this sage advice to the long list of microdetails "that help you steal inches," as Todd had phrased it. "A quarter-inch here, a half-inch there."

March 27 was yet another in a long string of days, each feeling as if

### ONE SHINING MOMENT

... And then?

Rest. The author has since scrapped the squats and dead lifts, dedicating that time to his wife and daughters.



it would be *the day*. Fully rested and caffeinated, I arrived with Jeff at a court, recommended by Brent Barry, whose rim heights fluctuated but which I'd recently measured at 10 feet. The rims at New York City's famed Rucker Park, incidentally, both measured under 9' 9" on a recent visit, which raises all sorts of questions about what a dunk is and what it isn't. The famed outdoor rims along Venice Beach, if lined up next to each other, would look like a graphic equalizer during a Ray Manzarek keyboard solo: 9' 9", 9' 11", 9' 8".

MICHAEL MCKNIGHT

## Two irresistible flavors

I can't believe they're making a megastar like me do this.

Hey, I know those guys.



---

After warming up, I proceeded to slam Jeff's best lobs off the back rim at least 10 times, watching these missed dunks rebound high over the lane and land somewhere near the three-point line. It's tough to express how difficult it was to pack up and walk away from the court on such days, to listen to my body when it told me it had reached the point of diminishing returns. To come up with yet another way to tell the wife: No, not today, Sugar. But I came *really* close.

**M**Y WARMUP on March 29 left me feeling hoppier than I'd expected, and not nearly as achy. After 10 devastating near misses, and several others that weren't as close, Jeff lofted the best lob I would see during this journey. I leaped, controlled it with one hand and—*boodaloomp*—in and out. I could have wept. "You got this!" Jeff implored. "You know you got this!"

*Maximum force into the ground*, I whispered to myself, a key reminder I'd picked up at The Yard.

*Big step.*

*Jump through the backboard.*

Forty-five seconds later, when Jeff's next lob

---

drifted into place, I reminded myself to mentally record what happened in the next half second so I could replay it whenever I wanted. Sure, I could always watch the video, but the lens in my mind provided a clearer view, a closer angle of the ball leaving my hand, shooting downward, denting the net.

The first sound I heard was Jeff's single clap of celebration. I erupted, sprinting to the iPhone that had captured the moment and thanking my friend, my wife, The Yard. It had taken 363 days.

Afterward, as planned, I delivered the footage to two judges so they could deem my dunk official. Barry's response came by text. "As Marv Albert would say: *Yes! And it counts!*"

When Oliver Fortenberry saw the video, he let loose a rousing, "Yes, sir!" that reminded me of a story he had told during our first talk:

"My dad tried dunking when he was in his mid-50s. Got a wild hair one day and went out in the driveway with a ball. We all followed him. He was wearing slacks and hard-soled shoes, and when he went up, his pipe and his tobacco flew out of his shirt pocket. He lost his balance and almost fell over when he landed. But he did it."

Joe would die some 30 years later, at age 82, but what he said that day as he stood in a puddle of dry tobacco—his clothes disheveled, the other Fortenberrys yelping a chorus of excited *Yessirs*—spoke to me in a way that can only be understood by those who blindly take on missions that exact a greater toll than was envisioned. "Well," he said with a grin, "that's the last time I'll ever do that." □

# under 200 calories.

*I don't like the way people are looking at us.*



*I better be getting paid overtime for this.*



# #ThanksDave

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**I'VE BEEN A** part of some great moments, but for many reasons, standing in the Ed Sullivan Theater on May 20 and being part of the 6,028th and final *Late Show with David Letterman* was one of the greatest in my life.

I love David Letterman. I've never done any other late-night show. When I watch him, I feel he hits the right note—every time. So to be asked to be a part of the final Top 10 List, along with Alec Baldwin, Barbara Walters, Steve Martin, Jerry Seinfeld, Jim Carrey, Chris Rock, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey and Bill Murray, was an incredible honor. Getting ready to do the segment, I looked around at those stars and thought, Am I just a stand-in for someone who couldn't make it? Did they need a tall guy to even out the height difference with the other guests?

The Top 10 List was, "Things I've always wanted to say to Dave." I was No. 3, and the writers gave me a good line. I said, "Dave, you are to comedy what I am . . . to comedy."

After that I slipped into the back of the theater to watch the rest of the show. Having been a high school and college player for eight years, then an NFL player for 18 years, I really appreciated Dave's taking the time to thank all the people who worked on the show behind the scenes: the writers, the makeup people, everybody. It's just like in the NFL, where the equipment guys and the trainers and so many other people are crucial to your success.

My favorite memory of Dave—which says so much about him as a person—isn't from any of my five appearances on the show. It's from the day before the 2012 NFL draft, when the Colts had the first pick. I had just signed with the Broncos, and I was working out at their facility, trying to learn Denver's offense. I got word that Dave was trying to reach me, so I got on the phone with him. He explained that he was going to have Andrew Luck on the show and present him with his new Colts jersey. Dave said, "I don't want to do it if it makes you uncomfortable at all."

I said, "Dave, it doesn't matter what I think. You do what you feel is best for the show." Really, I didn't care. But he said, "That's it! We're not doing it. Forget it."

That meant so much to me. I can tell you this: No other host

would have called to ask what I thought.

Being on *Letterman*, you always wanted to bring something to the table. My first time was two days before the Heisman Trophy presentation, my senior year at Tennessee. That was in 1997. I was in New York City and got an invitation from *The Late Show*, and it was a thrill. I was on with Courteney Cox and Shania Twain. My older brother, Cooper, who is one of the funniest people I know, helped me prepare. The staff does these prep interviews, going over stuff you could talk about during the show. They were curious about my decision to stay for my final college season. So I talked to Cooper, and he came up with a good line. When Dave asked me about it, I said, "Dave, it's just like when you stayed for your senior year at Ball State."

After I cracked another joke, Dave said, "This kid's got writers!"

I got asked to do the show again in 2006, and we threw footballs into the windows of moving yellow cabs outside the Ed Sullivan Theater. And I got asked again in '07, after Indianapolis won the Super Bowl. Then, last spring, I went to New York to see Derek Jeter play one last time, and I went on with Dave once more. I wrote him a letter saying how much he had entertained my family and me over the years. He wrote back and signed it, "Your friend, Dave." That'll be a lifetime keepsake.

I think one reason I was asked to be on *The Late Show* finale was our Indianapolis connection. Dave is grateful to anyone who has helped his hometown. On the show last year he said he appreciated things I had done as a Hoosier, on and off the field.

When we finished the Top 10 List, Dave thanked the 10 of us. I thought, I should be saying that to him, for all the years of great TV and great comedy. I'm really going to miss him—and the show. I'll always be a Letterman guy. □

Getting ready to do *The Late Show's* final Top 10 List, I looked around at those people and thought, Am I just a stand-in for someone who couldn't make it?



What is Peyton Manning's funniest TV commercial?

Join the discussion on Twitter by using #SIPointAfter and following @P\_Manning18



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