

NBA PREVIEW 2017-18

OCTOBER 2017 | SIKIDS.COM

Sports Illustrated

KIDS

Are We There Yet?

**THE SIXERS ARE
YOUNG, FUN—
AND FINALLY ON
THE ROAD TO
CONTENTION**

Plus:
Who will win
the Stanley
Cup?



Markelle Fultz [20], Joel Embiid [21], Ben Simmons [25], and coach Brett Brown have their bags packed for the playoffs.

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Illustrated**
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LINEUP

OCTOBER
2017

VOLUME 29
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Photograph by
AL TIELEMANS

2017-18 NBA PREVIEW

31 What a wacky summer! An unprecedented number of megastars switched teams. So what effect will that upheaval have on the league? Um, not much: The Warriors are going all the way again (unless something *truly* wacky happens). But the future looks bright for teams like the 76ers, who are loaded with young talent.

18 **PRIME TIME** Firmly established in MLS, Orlando City SC forward Dom Dwyer has a chance to represent the U.S. on the world stage.

22 **FROM THE PAGES OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED SENT FROM MOUNT ZION** The viral thunder-dunks delivered by Zion Williamson don't merely demoralize opponents. They have made him better known than any prep star ever. (Yes, including LeBron.)

54 **WHO'S THERE?** It's late on Halloween, and your team is playing in the bottom of the ninth of a tied World Series. A spooky someone is knocking on your door. *Dare you answer?*

FAVORITES

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44 **2017-18 NHL PREVIEW** Young talent is a big reason why Canada is reasserting itself as the center of the hockey universe, but we're picking the Capitals (*above*) to go all the way. Plus: The Vegas Golden Knights are the league's 31st team. How have the other 30 fared over the years?

COVER

Photo Illustration by Joe Darrow

SIMMONS COMPOSITE: JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES, JEFF HAYNES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; FULTZ COMPOSITE: MICHELLE FARSI/GETTY IMAGES, RON TURENNE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; EMBIID COMPOSITE: BOBBY METELUS/GETTY IMAGES FOR NEW ERA CAP, MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES; GARY DINEEN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); NYC SHOOTER/GETTY IMAGES (CAR)





FREEZE FRAME

WHO TURNED OUT THE LIGHTS?

August 21, 2017 • Perryville, Missouri

Things got dark all of a sudden for these hoopsters during the first total solar eclipse in the United States since 1979. This photo was taken as the moon passed directly in front of the sun; the images of the other stages of the eclipse were taken using a camera equipped with a special solar filter.

Photograph by
DAVID E. KLUTHO

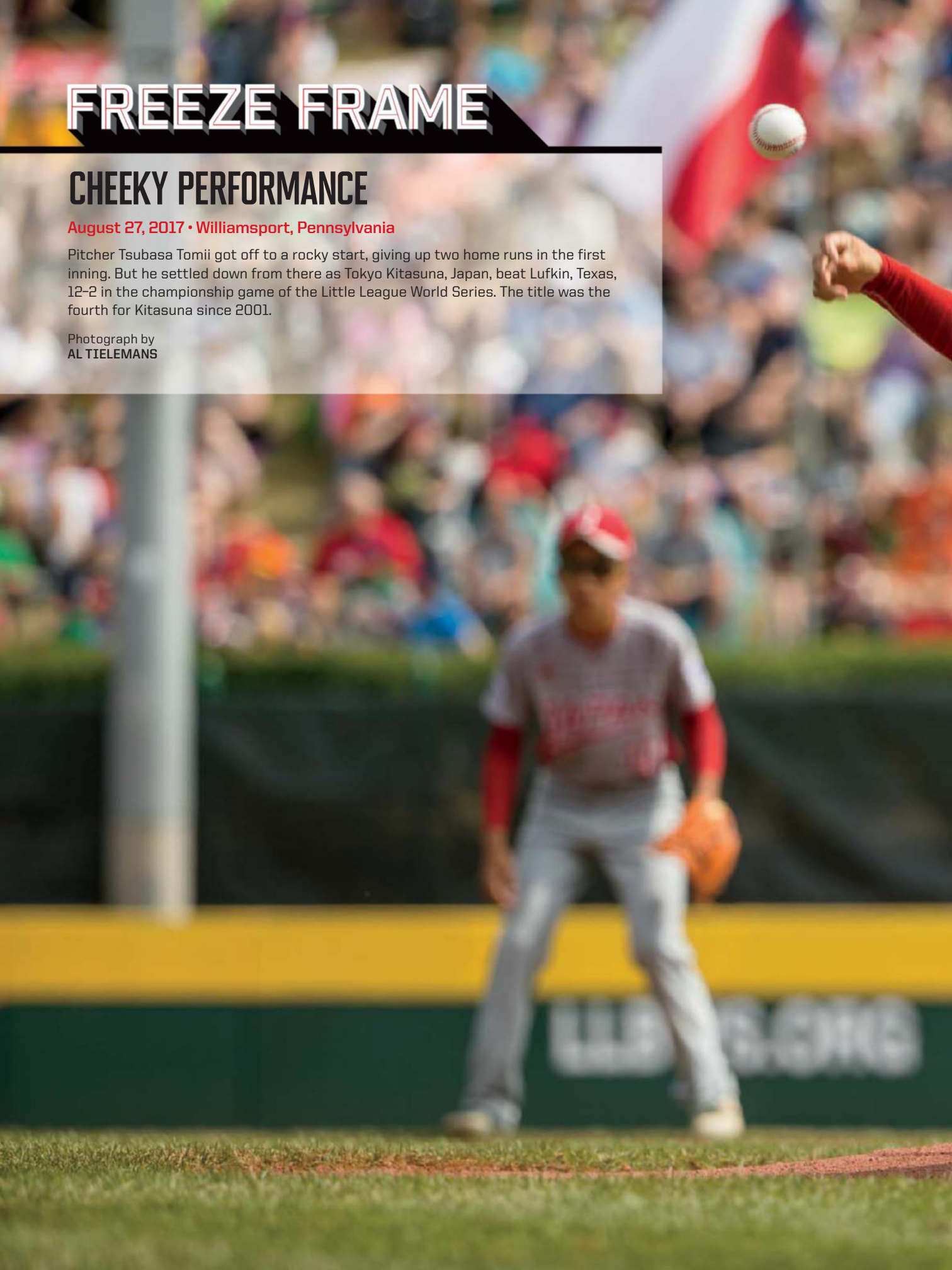
FREEZE FRAME

CHEEKY PERFORMANCE

August 27, 2017 • Williamsport, Pennsylvania

Pitcher Tsubasa Tomii got off to a rocky start, giving up two home runs in the first inning. But he settled down from there as Tokyo Kitasuna, Japan, beat Lufkin, Texas, 12-2 in the championship game of the Little League World Series. The title was the fourth for Kitasuna since 2001.

Photograph by
AL TIELEMANS





DO YOU WANT TO BUILD A SUPERTEAM?

Free agency and trades mean stars can team up to win titles. It's your turn to play NBA general manager. Grab a buddy, and get to it!

THIS MONTH, WE'VE got a special batch of sports cards. They can be used to play Superteam, an NBA card game for two players. The object of the game is to assemble a team of two guards and two forwards. After four rounds, each player reveals his or her team and receives points for the total star power of the team (**SCORE**, below) and the number of friends on the team.

DEAL

Shuffle the deck. Each player is dealt four cards for the opening hand. The cards that are not dealt remain in the deck. The players do not show each other their hands.



STARRY NIGHT Friends Wade, James, Anthony, and Paul (from left, at the 2015 All-Star Game), would make quite the superteam.



PLAY

The first round begins. Players take turns performing actions. Each player may take one action per round. Here are the three actions available.

Propose a trade A player may show a card to his or her opponent, offering that card in a one-for-one trade. The opponent may or may not offer one of his or her cards in return. The player who initiated the proposed trade has the right to refuse any offer.

Draw a free agent A player may place one of his or her cards into the discard pile and draw a free agent from the top of the deck. This action is the only guaranteed way to get a new card in a round.

Pass Any player who is happy with his or her hand may choose to do nothing.

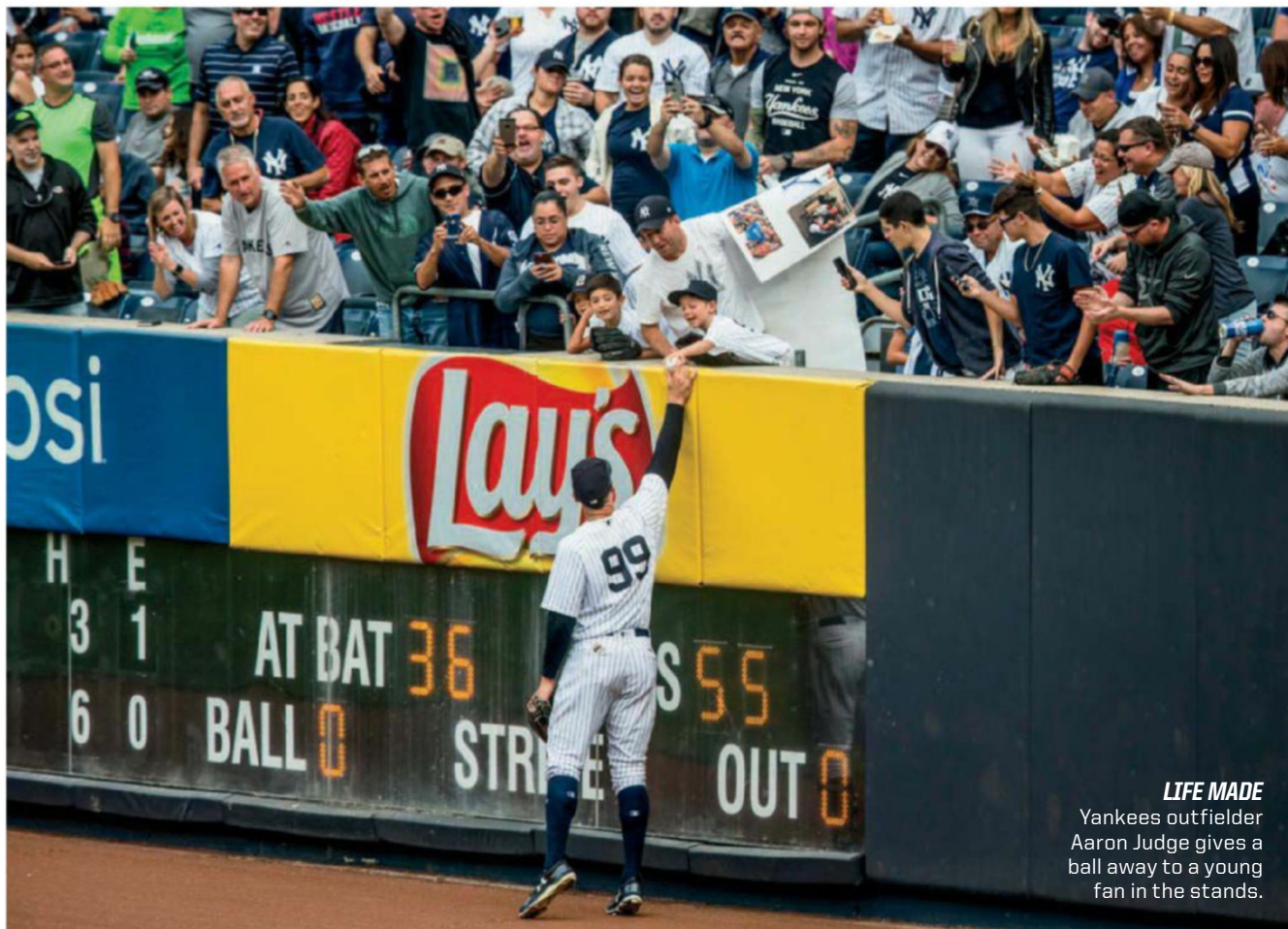
SCORE

After the fourth round, the players must present their hands. A player without exactly two guards and two forwards cannot win (certain cards can fill either role). Assuming both players have two guards and two forwards, the teams are scored to determine the winner. Players get points for two reasons.

Star points Each card is worth one, two, or three stars. Add up the total numbers of stars on the border of the four cards. Each star is worth one point.

Chemistry points Players receive one bonus point for every matching "LeBron's Friend" or "Warriors" card. For instance, a player with a team of LeBron James, Chris Paul, Stephen Curry, and Draymond Green would receive 10 points for total stars, two bonus points for having two of "LeBron's Friends," and two bonus points for having two "Warriors," for a total of 14 stars. The yellow cards with no affiliation do not count toward chemistry bonus points.

WARMUP



LIFE MADE

Yankees outfielder Aaron Judge gives a ball away to a young fan in the stands.

BURNING QUESTION

IS IT O.K. TO BALLHAWK AT A BASEBALL GAME?

BY SAM PAGE

Photograph by
Rob Tringali

HAVE YOU EVER caught a foul ball or home run at a Major League Baseball game? Chances are you haven't. Estimates vary, but the odds of grabbing a flying souvenir at a game are about 1,000 to 1.

And if baseball megafan Zack Hample is at the game, your chances are even worse. The 40-year-old so-called "ballhawk" travels to MLB games all season and tries to collect as many balls as possible. As of the beginning of September, he had snagged more than 10,000 major league souvenirs.

He has collected all these mementos

WARMUP

by taking something that usually happens randomly and turning it into more-or-less a full-time job. Hample uses both research (he tracks players' home run patterns) and deception. (He'll change his shirt and hat so he can beg players from both teams for balls.)

Hample's antics have drawn the ire of both athletes and fans. When he asked Dodgers pitcher Clayton Kershaw for a ball this June, Kershaw told him he already had enough.

When Alex Rodriguez hit a homer for his 3,000th career hit, Hample caught it—and refused to give it to the Yankees' slugger. (Hample ultimately relented two weeks later after certain demands were met.)

Hample's biggest controversy yet came when he found a way into the 2016 game between the Marlins and Braves at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, supposed to be only for military personnel and their families. Hample

caught 11 balls, but after receiving considerable backlash he gave them away, apologized, and made a donation to charity.

Most people object to Hample's behavior because it seemingly takes away opportunities from kids to make lifelong memories. Every ball he catches could have been snagged by a younger fan. Ironically, kids seem to be Hample's biggest supporters.

His YouTube channel, where he posts videos of ballhawking, boasts more than 180,000 subscribers. Among his most popular videos are those in which he takes young fans to a game and helps them catch balls.

He doesn't just help these kids out of the goodness of his heart, though. For \$1,000, you, too, can join Hample at a game (travel expenses not included).

SURRENDER TERMS
Hample finally gave Rodriguez his 3,000th-hit ball at a press conference in 2015.



There is, at least, a money-back guarantee if he doesn't get you a ball.

Are the adults railing against Hample and his fellow ballhawks just out of touch? It's really no surprise kids look up to him, since young fans will go to great lengths to get that elusive prize.

So feel free to be a ballhawk—just try not to go overboard.

UNBOXED

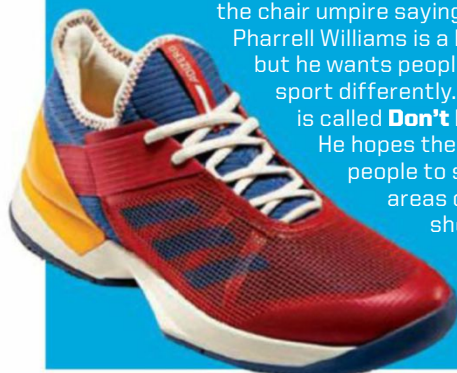
PRESENTED BY **FINISH LINE**

Taking the lid off the coolest sports gear.



◀ If you're reading this, you probably hadn't been born when Nike released the classic **Presto Fly** in 2000.

Well, now you've got a chance to get your hands (and feet) on a pair of the most comfortable shoes imaginable. The mesh upper is amazingly flexible and breathable, but flywire cables that anchor the laces provide plenty of support. As Nike says, it's like a T-shirt for your feet.



▼ Tennis matches usually begin with the chair umpire saying, "Quiet, please." Pharrell Williams is a huge tennis buff, but he wants people to look at the sport differently. So his Adidas line is called **Don't Be Quiet Please**. He hopes the motto inspires people to speak up in all areas of life. And in these shoes, you can look good doing it.



▼ Are you a real fan of your favorite NFL team? Are you loyal from head to toe? If so, then you'll probably want to check out the **Nike Free Trainer V7 NFL** line. Available for all 32 teams, the shoes are comfy and stylish—and they leave no doubt as to whom you're pulling for. (There's also a college line if that's your game.)

SHOES SO
FRESH



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SPARE TIME

PIANO MAN

Soccer superstar **NEYMAR** likes to unwind by tickling the ivories, a skill he's learning by watching videos on the Internet.

By Brian Straus



ON THE FIELD he's the graceful, creative, and spectacularly skillful star of both Brazil's national team and one of soccer's wealthiest, most ambitious clubs. In early August, the 25-year-old moved from Spain's

FC Barcelona to France's Paris Saint-Germain in the most expensive soccer deal ever. He's known simply as Neymar, and he brings fans all over the world to their feet.

But sitting at the piano, he's Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior. That's his full, given name, and during a June photo shoot inside a crowded studio, it took

him several minutes to gather the nerve to try a couple of songs, including the theme from the classic track-and-field film *Chariots of Fire*.

Neymar left Brazil for Barcelona in 2013 and says, "There was a piano in the house when I moved in!" It was fate. He enjoys being around musicians—there's video of him playing soccer with Justin Bieber—and he's even been known to climb onstage during concerts back home.

"I like to get to know people I admire," he says. "Some of them are athletes, and some of them are singers."

Maybe someday he'll be able to play along. Neymar has been using YouTube clips to teach himself piano, and he enjoys a variety of

music—from Brazilian *sertanejo* to Bieber and John Legend. It's a valuable diversion for someone who's under a very bright spotlight.

"Sometimes I'm a little flamboyant—an extrovert—sometimes I'm quiet. I like to have fun," he says. "We have only one life, so we have to figure out a way to be happy."

#WISEWORDS

BUSTER POSEY

The San Francisco Giants' catcher urges volunteerism.

Interview by
Kid Reporter Hollis Belger

At the start of the 2016 season, Posey and his wife, Kristen (left), decided to focus their charitable foundation on helping children diagnosed with pediatric cancer.

To what extent do you think it's the responsibility of sports celebrities to give back?

I think it's everybody! I don't think it's sports celebrities; I think that's the unique gift that we all have. It doesn't matter if you're impacting people at a very high level, or maybe it's a friend at school who's having a tough day, and you pat 'em on the back and say, "Hey, I'm here for you."

What would you say to kids who want to make a difference in their own communities?

You don't have to try to make a difference on a large scale. You can do anything from picking a friend up on a tough day, to volunteering for your city to make it a better place. I think the most important thing is to realize that whenever you are trying to help others, it's not about the attention you receive from it, it's about making a difference for the people you're trying to impact.



THIS MONTH

OUT IN FRONT

The following titles will be awarded in October. How well do you know each event?

2016 IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP, HAWAII

CHAMPIONSHIP	First contested	Most recent winner	Most victories	This year
World Artistic Gymnastics Championships (October 2-8)	1903	Japan (men's team event) U.S. (women's team event)	Soviet Union (111 gold medals)	Simone Biles, three-time defending world champ (individual all-around), is out. Could new U.S. champ Ragan Smith (above) help the team repeat?
FIFA U-17 World Cup (October 6-28)	1991	Nigeria	Nigeria (five)	Timothy Weah (left), son of former FIFA World Player of the Year George Weah of Liberia, will lead the U.S.
Ironman World Championship (October 14)	1978	Switzerland's Daniela Ryf (women) Germany's Jan Frodeno (men)	Paula Newby-Fraser of Zimbabwe and the U.S. (eight)	Ryf and Frodeno, both two-time defending champions, have been dominant on the circuit again this year. Three-peat?
WNBA Finals (Dates TBD)	1997	Nneka Ogwumike (right) and the L.A. Sparks	Houston Comets (four)	The Sparks and the Minnesota Lynx, last year's finalists, are again shaping up as the teams to beat.
World Series (Tentative Game 1: October 24)	1903	World Series MVP Ben Zobrist (left) and the Chicago Cubs	New York Yankees (27)	The Dodgers were looking awfully good heading into the season's final stretch....

OCTOBER BIRTHDAYS

1 ▶ Olympic freestyle skier **Gus Kenworthy** celebrates his 26th birthday.

2 Pittsburgh Penguins right wing **Phil Kessel** turns 30.

5 ▶ Guard **Jewell Loyd** of the Seattle Storm is 24.

6 Minnesota Lynx center **Sylvia Fowles** turns 32.

9 ▶ Detroit Red Wings captain **Henrik Zetterberg** celebrates his 37th birthday.

11 Memphis Grizzlies point guard **Mike Conley** turns 30.

14 Los Angeles Rams quarterback **Jared Goff** is 23.

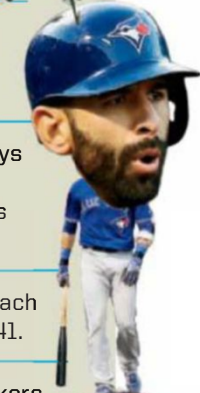
19 ▶ Toronto Blue Jays rightfielder **José Bautista** celebrates his 37th birthday.

22 Boston Celtics coach **Brad Stevens** is 41.

27 ▶ Los Angeles Lakers rookie point guard **Lonzo Ball** turns 20.

29 New York Giants cornerback **Janoris Jenkins** is 29.

31 Striker **Marcus Rashford** of Manchester United celebrates his 20th birthday.



TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES FOR IRONMAN (SWIMMERS); EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH); NICK POTT'S/EMPICS/PAI IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (OGWUMIKE); STEPHEN GREEN (ZOBRIST); DOMINIC STEINMANN/GETTY IMAGES (KENWORTHY); CHRIS MARION/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (LOYD); DAVE REGNER/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (ZETTERBERG); EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (BAUTISTA); JACK ARENT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BALL)



Submit your caption at SIKIDS.com/FunnyPhoto. Your entry could appear in a future issue of the magazine.

FUNNY PHOTO

The winning caption from SIKIDS.com:

"I CAN'T SEE THE SUNSET THROUGH THESE! HAND ME THE BATS."

— MATT, 11, CALIFORNIA

"I am officially Carlos 'Martnez' since I have no I's."

— Everett, 12, British Columbia

"These glasses are amazing! Everywhere I look I see baseball!"

— Ava, 10, Wisconsin

"We come from Mars in peace!"

— Charlie, 11, North Dakota

"Do these balls make my hair stand out?"

— Ben, 9, Pennsylvania

"Keep your eyes on the balls."

— Lauren, 13, North Carolina

"Ahh . . . so that's a solar eclipse!"

— Matthew, 13, New Jersey



SOUND OFF

Describe a recurring dream you have.

I have a nightmare four or five times a year that I slept through the first half of a football game. Like I wake up, and it's not as if the team meeting just ended. It's 2:30. Then I start running. I've had it since college. I've always been like, 'I don't want to screw up. I don't want to mess up.' And it's gotten worse as I've gotten older, because now I feel like I'm being a bad example. It was bad before because I had [a fear] of getting cut. Now it's bad because I feel like I'm [messing up].

ZACH STRIEF
Saints offensive tackle

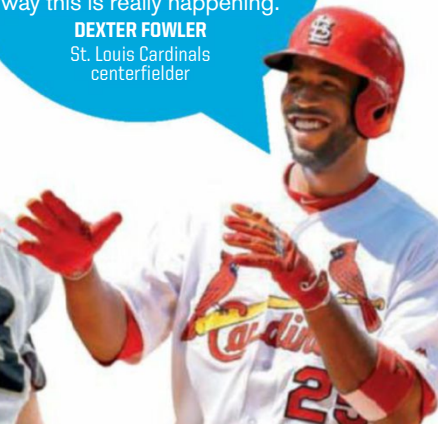
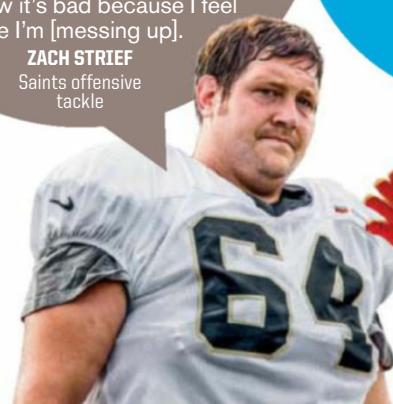
That I miss my baseball game. That I'm watching the game, and I'm thinking it's a rerun, and they're actually playing. The place varies: Sometimes I'm at home, sometimes I'm at the hotel. I feel anxious, and I think, No way this is really happening.

DEXTER FOWLER
St. Louis Cardinals centerfielder

I have some really powerful flying dreams, which is so fun. I'm in this meadow in Tahoe [in California], and when I can tell I'm dreaming, I take off running and fly up to my favorite mountain, Mount Tallac. It's pretty insane, because obviously flying is not natural, but I actually wake up feeling high on life, like a million bucks. It is a really cool feeling.

JAMIE ANDERSON

Slopestyle snowboarder and Olympic gold medalist*



*Interview by Eden Laase

JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES (FUNNY PHOTO); CAMERON SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES (ANDERSON); STEPHIE LEW/ICON SPORTS/WIRE/GETTY IMAGES (STRIEF); SCOTT KANE/GETTY IMAGES (FOWLER)

ON OUR RADAR

ZAMIR WHITE

HEIGHT: 6' 0" HOMETOWN: LAURINBURG, NC

BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 18, 1998 SPORT: FOOTBALL



■ Zamir began the 2017 season by scoring three touchdowns in each of Scotland County High's first two games. (The team began the year 1-1.)

■ Rivals.com ranks Zamir, a senior, as the nation's seventh-best recruit and top running back, and the No. 1 prospect in North Carolina.

■ Last December, Zamir was named the state Gatorade Player of the Year. He rushed for 1,774 yards and 26 TDs, helping the Fighting Scots make the Class 4A semifinals and finish with a 14-1 record.

■ Zamir rushed for 2,159 yards and 41 scores his sophomore season and was the conference player of the year.

■ The first time Zamir, who is nicknamed Zeus, ran the ball in a varsity game, he rushed more than 60 yards for a TD. By the end of his freshman year, he was splitting time with the starter, and he finished the season with 1,231 yards and 18 TDs.

SPORTSKIDS OF THE MONTH

BRADY SULLIVAN, 8
Centennial, CO
HOCKEY

Brady led all age levels in the Arapahoe Youth Hockey League with 45 goals and 19 assists during summer league play. He helped his team to a 15-3 record and a 2-0 win in the title game, during which he scored and had an assist.

CLAIRE CURZAN, 13
Cary, NC
SWIMMING

At the 2017 North Carolina Swimming Long-Course Age Group Championships, Claire won the 13-14 girls' 100-meter butterfly in 1:01.09, a time that would have qualified for the 2016 Olympic trials. She currently holds the 11-12 age-group record in the 50-meter, 50-yard, and 100-yard butterfly.

JEREMY KAIN, 13
Scotts Valley, CA
TRACK AND FIELD

At a Los Gatos all-comer track meet in July, Jeremy set the unofficial record for 12-year-olds in the mile (4:36.8), beating the previous mark by six seconds. He came in second in the race.

ARE YOU A SPORTSKID?

Do you have what it takes to be a SportsKid of the Month? Submit your nomination at: SIKIDS.com/SportsKid





Do you have a tip you'd like to see in our magazine? Email us at: SIKIDS.mailbox@gmail.com

TIPS FROM THE PROS

PICK OFF A PASS

with **HA HA CLINTON-DIX**, Green Bay Packers safety

By Kid Reporter Wilson von Bohlen

Ha Ha Clinton-Dix challenges opponents on every snap as he tackles, blankets receivers, and makes interceptions. In 2016, the fourth-year safety earned his first Pro Bowl invitation and was named second-team All-Pro. He tied for second among safeties with five interceptions and was one of four players in the league who was on the field for every one of his team's defensive snaps.

How does he do it? "Making an interception happens in the blink of an eye. It happens so fast, it's just a reaction, and you have to be ready for every play," says Clinton-Dix as he takes SI KIDS through the art of making a pick.

1 PRACTICE! Being an NFL player doesn't mean you stop learning. "I watch the film after games to see how [an interception] happens. I practice, play, and trust my instincts from all of that experience to be aggressive on the ball," says

Clinton-Dix (*right*), adding that it helps to work with a quality QB in team scrimmages. "Aaron [Rodgers] does a great job in practice, so I get great looks outside of games. I get to have the best practice ever because I'm going against the best quarterback in Aaron."

2 USE EYES, HANDS, AND FEET. "On the snap of the ball, I'm looking at the tackle, and I'm always looking at the quarterback," says Clinton-Dix. "I keep my hands to my side, unless I'm in man-to-man coverage. My feet are the most important things on the field. I make sure I keep my feet moving, rapid-fire, so I can get in and out of breaks. Playing defense is a reaction game, so it's important you are always in position to react."

3 MAKE THE CALL. "It's very important you make the right decision because any wrong choice can really mess up the play," Clinton-Dix advises. "If you feel it's a pass you can go get, then you commit. If you don't feel you can get it, then you use caution and knock the ball down. It all depends on what you see, and you trust your practice, experience, and feeling to make the best decision."



4 PROTECT THE BALL. After making an interception, it's important for a defender to secure the football, but Clinton-Dix manages to have a little fun too. "I like to have the ball out and show it off! I'm a defensive player, so I rarely get to have the ball in my hands. When I do, I like to have it everywhere," Clinton-Dix laughs. "But I am very protective of it, I promise!"

LET'S PLAY!

A new section and a new SI Kids family member



Welcome back to the newest section of the magazine, featuring content for and about young athletes. We're calling the section Play, in conjunction with our new sister brand, SI Play, which shares our mission: giving kids the best possible sports experience. SI Play's app does that by connecting players, coaches, teams, and leagues. It allows you to share highlights, provide live updates, and even make player cards. You can check out everything the new app has to offer by going to SIPlay.com.

Dom DWYER

TEAM

Orlando City SC

POSITION

Forward

SPOTLIGHT

Firmly established in MLS, Dwyer is part of American soccer's "first family." Now he has a chance to join wife Sydney Leroux in representing the United States.

BY JEREMY FUCHS

Dom Dwyer had quite a summer. Just 19 minutes into his first game with the U.S. men's national team in July, he redirected a shot with his left leg to score a goal in a friendly against Ghana. Seven days later, Dwyer, 27, scored again, this time in a 1-1 draw versus Panama in the Gold Cup. Then in August, he scored the tying goal against Real Madrid in the MLS All-Star game in Chicago. This all came after he became a U.S. citizen last March and a father in September 2016.

For the England-born, Texas-and-Florida-schooled Dwyer, it has been a year of success. But his life hasn't always been this charmed. A decade ago, Dwyer was cut from his team in England and was nursing a thrice-broken right foot. Today, he's a long way from home. For the striker, that's been the catalyst for everything.

ACROSS THE POND

Dwyer grew up in King's Lynn, England, a city about 100 miles north of London. Although Dwyer showed scoring prowess as a kid, he never caught

HEADS ABOVE

After jump-starting his career while starring on Orlando's United Soccer League team, Dwyer has moved back to the city, now as one of Major League Soccer's stars.

Photograph by
Andrew Bershaw/
Icon Sportswire/
Getty Images



PRIME TIME



on in the club system in his home country. He was cut by Norwich City Academy, a feeder system into the pro squad, at 16, and while moving from team to team, he ended up breaking his right foot three separate times. Doctors told him that professional soccer was out of the question. “But I still felt I could do something special in the game,” he says.

Dwyer would find his soccer salvation in, of all places, Tyler, Texas, a land of a different kind of football.

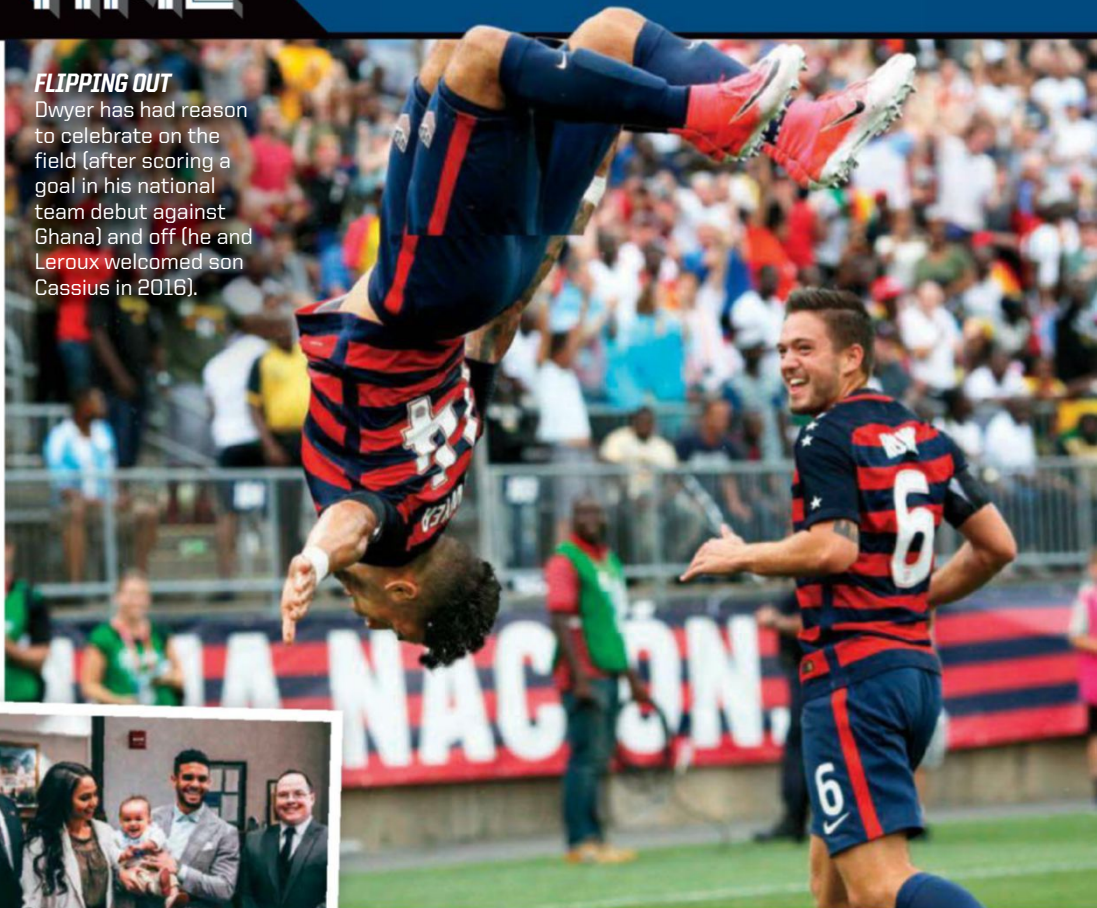
But Tyler Junior College wanted the British striker for its soccer team. His talent was evident right away. “He could always score,” says Steve Clements, Dwyer’s

coach at TJC. “He doesn’t get nervous around the goal. You can’t teach that.” Dwyer scored 15 goals in his first season with the Apaches, in 2009, and 37 the next, which led the NJCAA. Tyler won two national championships, going 41-0-1 in two seasons, and Dwyer was named the NJCAA Player of the year in ’10.

No longer an afterthought, Dwyer was considered a hot recruit as a junior college transfer. He landed at South Florida, where he led the Big East with 16 goals in his only season. “He had a bit of confidence about him,” says Shane Wixted, Dwyer’s teammate with the Bulls and now an assistant coach at Stony Brook University in New York. “His talent was clear-cut right from the beginning.”

FLIPPING OUT

Dwyer has had reason to celebrate on the field (after scoring a goal in his national team debut against Ghana) and off (he and Leroux welcomed son Cassius in 2016).



Dwyer earned second-team All-America honors and was a semifinalist for the MAC Hermann Trophy as the best player in the nation. In January 2012, Sporting Kansas City selected him in the first round of the MLS draft. He was on his way. But he still had a lot of work to do.

BACK TO BASICS

He may have been drafted in the first round, but Dwyer went to a Sporting KC team with a ton of talent at forward. After he spent one season on the bench, the team assigned him to the United Soccer League, which was created in 2010 as a developmental league a level below MLS. “It was a humbling experience,” Dwyer says. “Going from MLS to a lower league, the pampering is gone.” Instead of

dwelling on yet another team doubting him, Dwyer lit up the USL that season, scoring 15 goals for Orlando in 13 games, plus four in the 7-4 championship win over Charlotte. That performance helped him stay with Kansas City for good, and two months after taking the title with the Lions, he scored the winning goal in the Eastern Conference final to lead KC to the MLS Cup.

With Sporting KC, Dwyer established himself as a top striker, scoring 57 goals in 128 games and making two All-Star teams. From 2014 through ’16, his 50 total goals were second most in MLS. In July, Kansas City traded him to Orlando City SC as part of the most expensive transfer (\$1.6 million) in league history. “His value to us was greater than to other teams in the league,” says Orlando general manager Niki Budalić. “It was

important for us to bring in a long-term target such as Dom, someone in the prime of his career, who can help now and in the long term. The price we paid reflected that.” Not bad for a player no one wanted in England.

GOAL MATE

Dwyer met Sydney Leroux in 2013, when she was training with the national team in Kansas City. Leroux, 27, was born in Canada but has played in 77 games with the U.S. women’s national team as a forward, scoring 35 times and winning gold at the 2012 Olympics. They married in January ’15, five months before Leroux helped the USWNT win the World Cup.

And now that they have son Cassius, who was born in September 2016, the three have become American soccer’s “first family.” (Cassius’s godmother is U.S. legend Abby Wambach.)

In March, Dwyer became a U.S. citizen at a ceremony in Kansas City. Flanked by his wife and son, Dwyer took the oath of allegiance and signed his paperwork. “It’s real,” he told a video crew from Sporting KC. “It’s done.” Now, he has his eyes set on a bigger goal. “It’s a lie if any player says the World Cup is not on their mind,” Dwyer says.

Dwyer and Leroux are already the first husband-and-wife pair to score for the U.S. national teams. Although Dwyer was left off the squad for World Cup qualifying matches in September, his Gold Cup performance placed him on the radar for future national team membership. “He’s shown he can perform at that level,” says Budalić. “He has the ability.”

And he certainly has the drive. “It’s been a fun adventure,” he says. “Hard work and dedication got me there.”

NEXT MAN UP

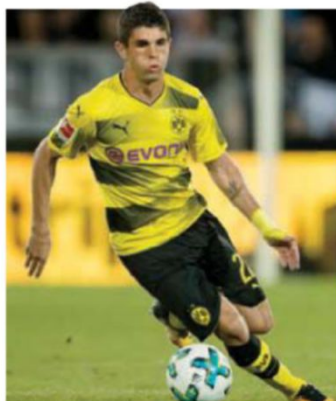
There will be plenty of turnover for the U.S. at the 2018 World Cup—but there are plenty of young, talented players who could fill in. Here are a few top contenders to make their debuts in Russia.



BOBBY WOOD

Hamburg

A 24-year-old forward, Wood has 32 caps for the national team, but none in the World Cup. The striker has eight international goals, including one in the 2015 CONCACAF Cup. Playing for Hamburg in Germany’s ultracompetitive Bundesliga, Wood has scored six goals in 30 games. He would add scoring punch to the front line.



CHRISTIAN PULISIC

Borussia Dortmund

Called the future of U.S. Soccer, Pulisic became the youngest foreign-born player to score a goal in the Bundesliga and the youngest American to score a goal in World Cup qualifying last year. The attacking midfielder, who captained the U-17 World Cup team in 2015, just turned 19 and is a lock to be one of the featured players on the senior squad.



JORDAN MORRIS

Seattle Sounders

After scoring the game-winning goal in this year’s Gold Cup final, Morris is primed to make his World Cup debut. The 22-year-old forward has a winning pedigree. He helped Stanford win the 2015 NCAA title and Seattle win the ’16 MLS championship. Through 22 games with the Sounders, Morris has three goals.

Sent From Mount



THE VIRAL THUNDER-DUNKS
DELIVERED BY **ZION WILLIAMSON** DON'T
MERELY DEMORALIZE OPPONENTS.
THEY HAVE MADE HIM BETTER
KNOWN THAN ANY PREP STAR EVER.
(YES, INCLUDING LEBRON.)



+

HIGH SCHOOL
BASKETBALL

BY CHRIS
JOHNSON

Photograph by
SIMON BRUTY

N THE OBLITERATION was not an ad-lib. As the fast break unfolded, Zion Williamson watched the 6' 4" shooting guard on the team he was facing gather the ball near the free throw line. From just beyond midcourt Williamson darted toward the basket, shortened his stride, and timed his approach before exploding off two feet, extending his arms like a volleyball player trying to block a spike at the net, and swatting the ball off the glass. Witnesses would express concern for Williamson's safety after he appeared to slam his head before landing with a thud, though not before wondering: Is the backboard O.K.?

The sequence on July 13 was recorded by many of those packed into the Upward Star Center, a 60-acre sports complex in Williamson's hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina, but the version captured by the app Overtime was retweeted and liked more than 16,000 times combined and served as the centerpiece for a handful of blog posts. ("Zion Williamson Is a Man Among Boys and This Block Proves It," SB Nation proclaimed.) The possibility that Williamson would pull off more plays like this kept fans around until the final buzzer, even as his South Carolina Supreme team was on its way to a 16-point loss in the Adidas Gauntlet Finale.

Afterward the 6' 7", 240-pound 17-year-old retreated to an enclave outside the main entrance to carve out a few minutes away from the intense spotlight he feels almost everywhere he goes. Despite the presence of a family friend serving as a de facto bodyguard—a 35-year-old former security guard with a shaved head and a thick red beard—Zion was intercepted over the course of the weekend by an autograph-seeker bearing a custom-made version of

Williamson's high school jersey, a man with a ponytail, and a giddy woman in a Mexico national soccer team jersey, which Williamson politely signed.

The chase-down rejection was a viral hit, but Williamson is known primarily for his mind-blowing dunks. He has claimed the No. 1 play on *SportsCenter's* Top 10, attracted interest from *Good Morning America*, received a Twitter shout-out from Steph Curry, and struck up a texting relationship with Canadian rapper Drake. Among high school basketball players Williamson is a celebrity on a scale perhaps not seen since LeBron James.

His exalted status almost obscures the fact that Williamson is rated no lower than No. 3 in the class of 2018 by any major recruiting service, including No. 1 by 247Sports. Although the lefty says he views himself as a two or a three, he seems like a cross between Larry Johnson and Blake Griffin. Williamson is a bouncy power player in a jumbo tight end's body with a tight handle, the left to bang in the low post, and the quickness to fly by wings. One NCAA assistant describes Williamson as a "freak of nature" and says, "You don't see people his height play that high above the rim."

WILLIAMSON IS the son of two former athletes—Sharonda Sampson, a 5' 10" sprinter, and Lateef Williamson, a 6' 4" defensive lineman—who both attended Division II Livingstone College in Salisbury, N.C. Sampson chose his first name as she was "thumbing through the Bible, but Zion just came to me." When he was five, Zion remembers telling his stepdad, Lee Anderson, a former guard at Clemson and the coach of Zion's club team, that he wanted to play college hoops. He was waking up at 5 a.m. for workouts by the time he was nine, and he received his first scholarship offer in the ninth grade.

Williamson dominated opponents in the South Carolina Independent School Association (SCISA) early in his career, but he needed to prove himself against better competition. The summer after his sophomore year he earned co-MVP awards at a pair of prestigious recruiting showcases. While those honors cemented Williamson's status as a top-tier recruit, something else lifted his profile to the point where he's even recognized on other continents: Kids approached him while he was in Italy for an Adidas basketball trip in June and asked, "Are you Zee-on Williamson?"

In January 2017, Drake posted a photo of himself wearing a Williamson Spartanburg Day jersey to his 37 million Instagram followers. (Giants wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. followed suit a few months later.) The post nudged Williamson's level of fame into the mainstream, and the two stars now text each other periodically.

At Spartanburg Day last season, game times and venues were adjusted in anticipation of large crowds for Williamson, who often hung around for 30 to 45 minutes for photo and autograph sessions. Fans drove hours—from as far

MIX MASTER

With his tight end build and eye-popping hops, Williamson has a game well-suited to filling mixtapes, drawing views online, and building a star-studded legion of fans.



as Maine—to see him up close. Spartanburg Day hired a professional-events staff to deal with the surge of Zion devotees trying to get into their home gym, which has a capacity of 1,000. Rachel Deems, the head of school, recalls a group of young men who drove from Florida hoping to secure a lunch meeting with Williamson. He wasn't around. "They looked so downcast," Deems says. Williamson may have a hard time going out without constantly drawing double takes, but he doesn't resent the attention. "No part of this bothers me," he says.

The crowds that cram into gyms for his games are usually treated to the sight of a teenager performing an in-air ballet before pulverizing the rim. There was the time when Williamson cupped the ball with his left hand, spun 360°, and

jammed during warmups. Or the game when he skied for an alley-oop and pulled off a one-handed windmill. These slams are catnip for mixtape outlets, which package highlights into short videos. Bryce Lanning of EliteMixtapes estimates that he went to about a dozen games last season, and Ballislife East had one of its videographers, Donnie Bui, relocate from Raleigh to Charlotte to be closer to Williamson. “As crazy as that sounds, my company literally moved me last year for four months because of a kid,” Bui says. The 11 Williamson videos Ballislife uploaded to its main YouTube channel had amassed more than four million views by mid-July.

IT IS HARD to imagine that Williamson won’t finish his high school career as one of the top-ranked players in his recruiting class, but skeptics will continue to question whether he’s anything more than a dunkmaster. Williamson counters that the jams impact the game by energizing his teammates and demoralizing the opposition. The intricate choreography of a vintage Zion banger—the run-up, the liftoff,

Naruto and *Dragon Ball Z*, and maybe he’ll test his conviction that he’s an “unstoppable” Connect Four player. If nobody challenges Williamson, this will: keeping his daily life at least somewhat ordinary.

On a Tuesday night in mid-July, Williamson walked into a McDonald’s in Spartanburg for a quick meal following a workout that concluded with a determined TV reporter doing several takes of a segment in which he tossed Williamson alley-oop passes. A woman in the restaurant got Williamson’s attention to tell him that she had seen videos of him and to ask for a picture. He trudged over to the soda fountain, only to be confronted by a man who implored him to attend North Carolina. After Williamson sat down with his 20-piece Chicken McNuggets box and large fries, the man returned with a surprising request. “That’s a Bible,” Williamson said of the object the man wanted autographed. “I don’t know how I feel about signing that.” He obliged.

Less than a day later Williamson was back in the gym with teammates, pumping out five push-ups as punishment for

ZION'S GREATEST ONLINE HITS



DECEMBER 10, 2016

The most sensational moments from his 47-point game against Anderson [South Carolina] Christian. 1,625,875 views on *EliteMixtapes*



FEBRUARY 14, 2017

A 360° windmill dunk against Shannon Forest Christian [Greenville, SC] ranked No. 1 on *SportsCenter's* Top 10. 683,748 views on *EliteMixtapes*



MARCH 13, 2017

Almost four minutes of highlights covering his junior season, with at least 49 indelible throw downs. 767,593 views on *Ballislife*



MARCH 31, 2017

Clips from another 47-point outburst, this time against the tough Arkansas Wings in EYBL play. 1,177,388 views on *MeetMeAtTheRim*



JULY 13, 2017

A stunning, from-behind block against the backboard—followed by a frightening fall. 391,093 views on *Ballislife*

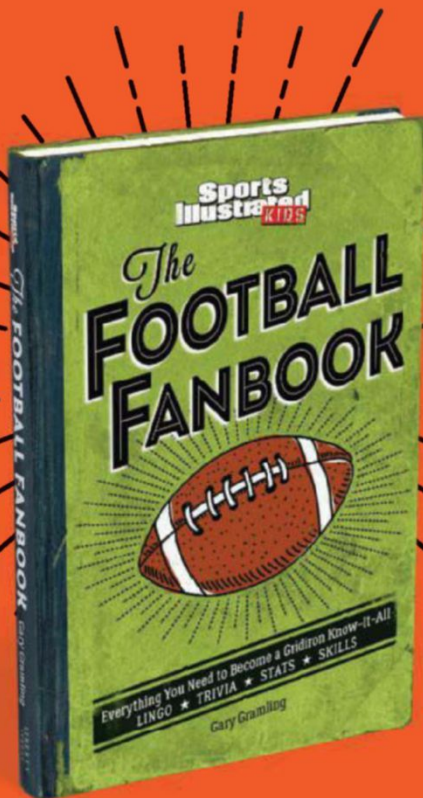
the grip, the throw down—belies his simple mind-set when he’s grinding toward the basket. It is destruction, not showmanship, that consumes him in that split second before he brings the house down. “I’m thinking, *I’m about to crush this dunk*,” he says.

Williamson has not set a timetable for choosing a college, though he hopes to make the decision before his senior season. He plans to stay at Spartanburg Day despite attempts from other prep programs to poach him. For now, he’ll keep trying to get better, although he isn’t focused on any one skill. “I’m still young,” he says. “I have a lot to learn, so I’m going to continue to work on everything.” Williamson’s time away from the court will include heavy doses of anime shows like

a missed free throw. Soon he was sprinting, backpedaling, and pivoting—palms up, shoulders square—while grinding through a defensive shuffling drill. Anderson looked on, barking words of encouragement. “Good work, Z!” The squeaking sneakers, rim clanks, and loud echoes provided a familiar sound track, but something felt off. There was a sense of calm that eludes Williamson in most public settings.

The workout took place at Spartanburg Day’s Stone Family Court, the same hardwood where, next winter, hundreds of Zion devotees will hoist their smartphones in unison. They won’t want to miss a moment of action before recording his dunks and posting them on the Internet. □

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STRATEGIES ★ TRIVIA

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when you read it.”**

—Peter King, Editor-in-chief,
The MMQB, and *Sports Illustrated* NFL expert

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POSTER FACE-OFF



**JOEL
EMBIID**

Philadelphia 76ers, center

VS.

**AUSTON
MATTHEWS**

Toronto Maple Leafs, center

23	AGE	20
7' 0", 250 pounds	HEIGHT, WEIGHT	6' 3", 216 pounds
Yaoundé, Cameroon	HOMETOWN	Scottsdale, Arizona
The Process	NICKNAME	Papi
Volleyball. Embiid planned to play the sport professionally in Europe before he was discovered at age 15 at a basketball camp in Cameroon. He moved to the United States to play hoops in high school a year later.	OTHER SPORT	Baseball. Matthews grew up loving the game, which his father had played in college. But Auston preferred the pace of hockey. "He couldn't stand waiting around," his dad, Brian, told <i>The Globe and Mail</i> . "If he could bat every two minutes, he would have been in high heaven."
Speaks French and Bassa, one of the native languages of Cameroon. Embiid had to learn English when he moved to the United States.	MULTI-LINGUAL	In addition to English, Matthews can speak some Spanish. His mother, Ema, is from Mexico.
Missed two full seasons with a broken bone in his right foot. Embiid finally made his NBA debut last October. His season was cut short due to an injury to his left knee.	OUCH!	Broke his thigh bone while playing in USA Hockey's Under-17 National Team Development Program.
Embiid is so fond of drinking Shirley Temples (a sugary, non-alcoholic drink) that the Sixers started selling them at home games.	YUMMY	Loves his mom's tortilla soup—and she's the reason the dish has fans in Switzerland. Ema made it for Auston and his teammates to help her son celebrate his 18th birthday. (Auston was playing in the Swiss league at the time.)

MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES (EMBIID); NICK TURCHIANO/CON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MATTHEWS)

OCTOBER 2017

Photograph by
STACY REVERE/
GETTY IMAGES

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2016-17 After missing two full seasons with right foot injuries, Embiid finally made his professional debut. He averaged 20.2 points and 7.8 rebounds per game and drained 36.7% of his three-point attempts. Even though his season was cut short by a left knee injury after 31 games, Embiid made the All-Rookie first team and was voted Comeback Player of the Year by his NBA peers.

2013-14 In his only season at Kansas, Embiid was a finalist for the Naismith College Player of the Year award. He averaged 11.2 points and 8.1 rebounds for the Jayhawks, and following the season the 76ers made him the third overall selection in the draft.

2011-12 After leaving his native Cameroon at age 16, Embiid got his first taste of competitive basketball at Montverde (Florida) Academy. He transferred after one season to The Rock School in Gainesville and blossomed into a prized recruit.

JOEL EMBIID

PHILADELPHIA 76ERS
CENTER

Sports
Illustrated
KIDS

OCTOBER 2017

Photograph by
MARK BLINCH/NHLI/
GETTY IMAGES

AUSTON MATTHEWS

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
CENTER



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2016-17 In his first season in Toronto, Matthews won the Calder Trophy as the NHL's top rookie. He was the first Maple Leafs player to win the award in 51 years. Matthews led the NHL with 32 even-strength goals. He added eight on the power play to become the 16th rookie to hit the 40-goal mark.

2015-16 Since he was too young—by two days—to enter the 2015 draft, Matthews spent a season playing in Switzerland with the ZSC Lions. He finished 10th in the league in scoring. Matthews also played for the United States in the World Junior Championship. He tied for the tournament lead with seven goals in seven games as the U.S. won the bronze medal.

2014-15 Matthews led the U.S. to back-to-back gold medals in the under-18 world championships. In the 2015 tournament, he was named MVP, with eight goals and seven assists.

Sports
Illustrated
KIDS

NBA PREVIEW

2017-18

What a wacky summer! An unprecedented number of megastars switched teams. So what effect will that upheaval have on the NBA landscape? Um, not much. But if you liked the Finals the past three years, you're in luck.

Photograph by
Greg Nelson

EAST FINALS

Cavaliers
over **Celtics**

WEST FINALS

Warriors
over **Rockets**

NBA CHAMPIONS

Warriors

Yes, Golden State will cruise to its third title in four years.

UNLESS... →

In the scouting reports, which begin on page 34, the car icons show how far along each team is on its road to a title.



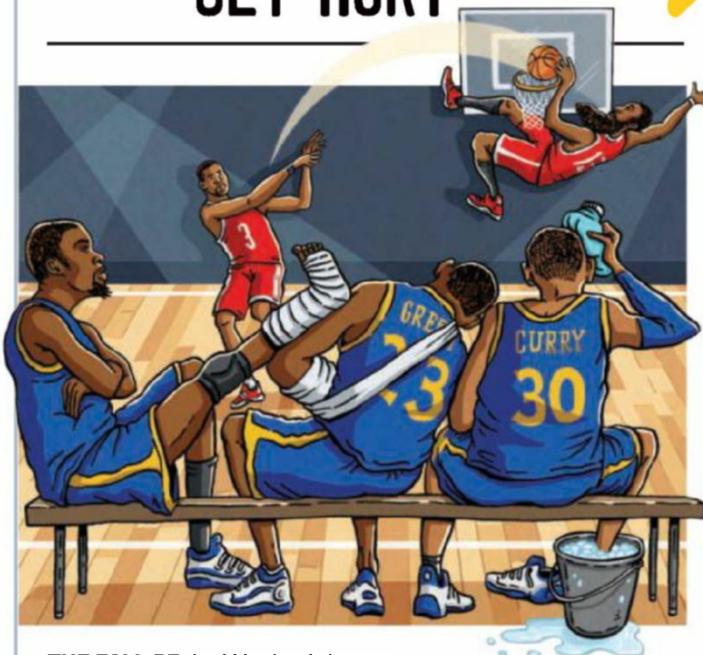
Yes, the Warriors will coast to an easy win, unless

...THIS HAPP

THE DUBS' STARS GET HURT

OR...

THEY CATCH HARRY POTTER FEVER



THE FALL OF the Warriors' dynasty starts with a harmless play in November. Driving to the basket for a layup, Steph Curry lands awkwardly on his right ankle. Though he seems able to walk it off at the time, that sprain restarts a cycle of increasingly serious injuries, reminiscent of the ankle problems that plagued Curry early in his career. Unfortunately, Curry isn't the only one haunted by old injuries. Kevin Durant refractures his right foot. Even the usually durable Draymond Green hurts his arm.

Still, a core of Andre Iguodala, Shaun Livingston, and Klay Thompson play well enough to keep the Warriors in the thick of the Western Conference playoff race. But while the Golden State players battle through their injuries, the Houston Rockets take off behind the pairing of Chris Paul and James Harden. Houston's new backcourtmates play like superheroes, propelling the Rockets to the No. 1 seed in the West and a convincing five-game victory over the Warriors in the playoffs.

THE WARRIORS SIGN veteran shooting guard Nick Young for his ability to hit a spot-up three. They don't anticipate, however, the effect he will have on their locker room.

Young has never read a Harry Potter book. David West first realizes this after quizzing Young on horcruxes. With a tattoo of Harry's pet owl, Hedwig, on his left biceps, West is recognized as the undisputed biggest Potterhead on the team. The 37-year-old veteran declares a state of emergency and invests a small portion of his \$2.3 million salary into a crate of 98 books—one copy of each installment in the series for all 14 of his teammates.

Pottermania grips the locker room, as book clubs replace practice, quiet reading sessions replace workouts, and *Deathly Hallows* becomes required in-flight entertainment.

With the team coasting halfway through the season, the fad takes a dark turn. Inspired by a quiz on Facebook that told Andre Iguodala he would have been assigned to Hufflepuff, the whole team decides to sort the locker room into the four houses of Hogwarts. Pretty soon, the Slytherin faction, led by Draymond Green and Zaza Pachulia, declares war on Gryffindor, which includes Steph Curry and Shaun Livingston. As wands are drawn, bystander Klay Thompson is accidentally poked in the eye by one, ruining his depth perception and ability to hit three-pointers.



ENS!

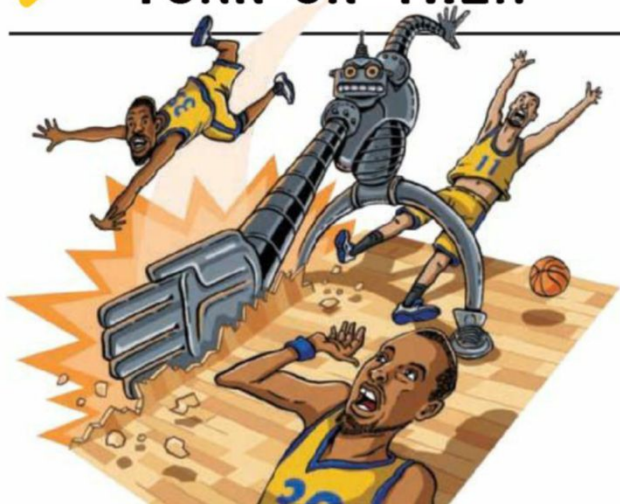


OR...

THE ROBOTS TURN ON THEM

OR...

THEY'RE ACTUALLY ALIENS



THE WARRIORS HAVE many ties to nearby Silicon Valley. Owner Joe Lacob is a venture capitalist, someone who invests in up-and-coming companies. The organization uses cutting-edge methods for everything from tracking players' shots to pitching potential free agents on life in California.

During the 2017–18 season, however, that reliance on technology cripples the team. Hoping to integrate all their play-tracking and fitness-measuring info into a centralized computer system, the Warriors' front office creates a system called Software With Integrated Sharable Hardware, or SWISH. The initiative involves building cyborg basketball players who demonstrate plays and scrimmage against their human counterparts. By having computers play against their stars, the Warriors' front office hopes to collect the best data on how they're playing.

One Golden State executive, however, makes a monumental error by storing his collection of classic kung fu films on the SWISH server. The software uses the movies to become self-aware. As the Warriors get ready to practice the next day, they have no idea they're about to battle robots who believe themselves to be ninjas. The ensuing melee leaves four players on the injured reserve list before the plug can be pulled.

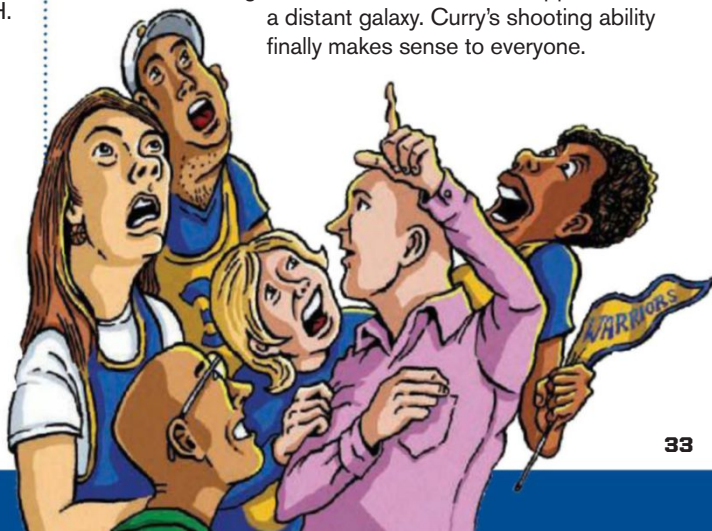
IT'S THE FOURTH quarter of Game 5 of the 2018 Finals, and the Warriors are on the verge of beating the Cleveland Cavaliers. With eight minutes left in the game and his team up 101–77, coach Steve Kerr removes Golden State's starters. Steph Curry, Klay Thompson, and Kevin Durant sit on one end of the bench, arms locked, jumping up and down as each second bleeds off the clock.

With 4:22 left in the game, however, the celebration stops. The Warriors on the court and on the bench allow their arms to fall slack and their expressions to go blank. Andre Iguodala, mid-shot, simply falls to the floor, causing the ball to roll out of bounds. Confused fans and opponents watch as the team assembles in a triangular formation, and the players raise their hands to the sky.

"We have enjoyed our time here on Earth," Curry says in a strange voice as a single antenna springs from his head. While the building begins to rumble, fans stream for the exits. Only when the entire crowd has left does Oracle Arena rise from the ground, revealing its true form and purpose.

"We came to your planet to study the secret of pizza," a voice that sounds like Draymond Green's says to the bewildered city of Oakland below. "Having gained that knowledge, we no longer have a reason to remain in these human forms. Our home world calls us to return."

In a flash of light and smoke, the arena disappears into a distant galaxy. Curry's shooting ability finally makes sense to everyone.



1 BOSTON CELTICS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 2

THIS YEAR: What do you do after winning a conference-best 53 games and advancing to the East finals for the first time in five years? If you're the Celtics, you completely blow up your team and start over. Only four players remain, and just one, C **Al Horford** (14.0 ppg), started regularly. First Boston signed free agent SF Gordon Hayward (21.9 ppg, 5.4 rpg with Utah).

Then the C's made a huge trade, sending their top scorer, PG Isaiah Thomas (28.9 ppg) and one of their best defenders, SF Jae Crowder, to the Cavaliers for PG Kyrie Irving (25.2 ppg). Irving wanted out of Cleveland because he didn't want to be in LeBron's shadow. We'll now see what he can do when he's the big dog.

DOWN THE ROAD: Things will only get better.

Thanks to a shrewd trade, Boston will get the Lakers' first-round pick next year (as long as it falls between second and fifth overall, which it should).

2 TORONTO RAPTORS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 4

THIS YEAR: The Raptors won more than 50 games for the second time last year, so they did what they had to do to keep their stars. In free agency, they gave big contracts to PF Serge Ibaka (14.2 ppg) and PG **Kyle Lowry** (22.4 ppg, 7.0 apg). Ibaka was brought on board to help with defense, but the Raptors had no way of stopping Cleveland in the playoffs. The Cavs scored at least 109 points in every game of their second-round sweep. And Toronto lost its best perimeter defender, P.J. Tucker, in free agency. If the Raptors can't tighten things up, their stay in the 2018 playoffs could again be a short one.

DOWN THE ROAD: Toronto locked up SG DeMar DeRozan (27.3 ppg) a year ago, so the Raptors will be able to count on their Big Three for the next three years. But

those contracts are all huge, leaving little wiggle room for adding complementary pieces.

3 PHILADELPHIA 76ERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 6

THIS YEAR: The Sixers have averaged more than 63 losses over the past four seasons. The good news is that all those L's allowed them to amass draft picks. And now they're finally ready to be competitive. The last piece of the puzzle was PG **Markelle Fultz**; Philly traded up to take him with the top overall pick. He'll run an offense that includes C Joel Embiid, SF Ben Simmons, and PF Dario Saric (12.8 ppg, 6.3 rpg), the only one with a full season of experience. Still, that's enough raw talent to push Philadelphia back to the playoffs after a five-year absence.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Sixers are one of the youngest teams in the league, and they're dreaming of keeping their core together for years. Watch out, though: Embiid and Simmons have a history of injuries.

4 NEW YORK KNICKS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 11

THIS YEAR: New York has one of the game's most exciting players: PF **Kristaps Porzingis** (18.1 ppg, 7.2 rpg). But the Knicks can't live without drama, so Porzingis skipped his exit interview with team president Phil Jackson after last season. Soon after, Jackson lost his job. At least that eliminated one distraction; now the Knicks can build around Porzingis without Jackson insisting on the team running his beloved triangle offense. But Porzingis needs help, and the Knicks' biggest acquisition was signing free agent SG Tim Hardaway Jr. (14.5 ppg for the Hawks), whom they traded away two years ago.

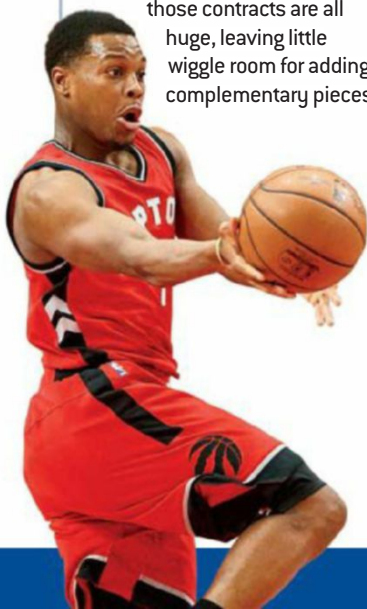
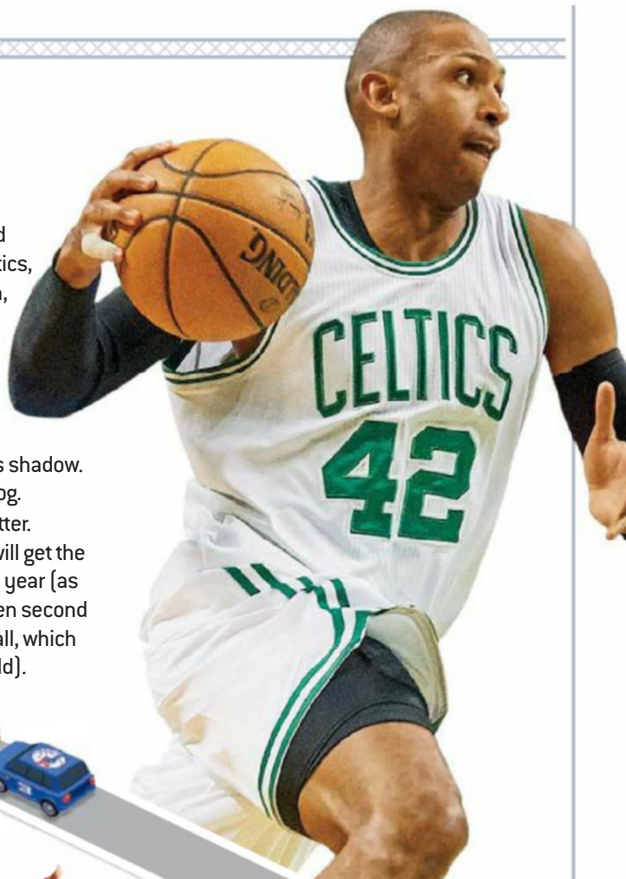
DOWN THE ROAD: This is no longer SF Carmelo Anthony's (22.4 ppg) team. New York will go as far as the Zinger takes them.

5 BROOKLYN NETS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 15

THIS YEAR: It's going to be another long year. Center Brook Lopez (20.5 ppg) was traded away for promising PG D'Angelo Russell (15.6 ppg with the Lakers). He'll likely start alongside another point guard, **Jeremy Lin** (14.5 ppg)—which is what happens when you have as few scoring threats as the Nets.

DOWN THE ROAD: Four years ago Brooklyn made a trade that has crippled the franchise, sending three first-round picks to the Celtics for Paul Pierce and Kevin Garnett. The good news is that the 2018 first-rounder is the last pick the Nets have to give up, so they can finally begin to rebuild.



EAST

CENTRAL

1 CLEVELAND CAVALIERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 1

THIS YEAR: After **LeBron James** (26.4 ppg) led them to their third straight Finals (and a second loss to the Warriors), the Cavs had to deal with some drama in the off-season. All-Star PG Kyrie Irving (25.2 ppg) asked for a trade in July. Cleveland eventually swung a deal with Boston for a package centered around PG Isaiah Thomas (28.9 ppg), a childhood teammate of PF Kevin Love (19.0 ppg). Also included in the deal was SF Jae Crowder (13.9 ppg), a versatile defender who will help immensely if the Cavs end up facing Golden State again next June. (And they probably will.)

DOWN THE ROAD: James can become a free agent next summer, and there's been constant speculation that he wants to play in Los Angeles. The Cavs also got a first-round pick—likely a top-three selection—in the Irving deal. (It originally belonged to the Nets.) The pick could be used to help trade for another star to convince James to stay near his hometown. And if the King does leave, Cleveland will at least have a valuable tool when it enters rebuilding mode.

2 MILWAUKEE BUCKS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 5

THIS YEAR: No player made a bigger leap last year than **Giannis Antetokounmpo**. The Greek Freak played just about everywhere on the floor, averaging 22.9 ppg, 8.8 rpg, and 5.4 apg. He was named the league's Most Improved Player. He wasn't the only Buck to add to his trophy case: SG Malcolm Brogdon (10.2 ppg) was named Rookie of the Year. Not wanting to tinker too much, Milwaukee avoided any big moves over the summer. The team should get a full year out of SF Khris Middleton (14.7 ppg), who was a little rusty after missing the first 53 games last year with a torn hamstring. And things will get even better late in the season when PF Jabari Parker (20.1 ppg) returns from his ACL injury.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Bucks inked Antetokounmpo to a four-year contract extension before last season, and Brogdon is under their control for the next three seasons. Should he stay in Cleveland, the King will need to keep his eye on this bunch.

3 DETROIT PISTONS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 7

THIS YEAR: Entering last season, C **Andre Drummond** seemed poised for a breakout. But the 2016 All-Star saw his scoring average fall from 16.2 ppg to 13.6, and his rebounding dipped from 14.8 rpg to 13.8. He wasn't helped by erratic play from PG Reggie Jackson (14.5 ppg, 5.2 apg). The Pistons added defensive stopper Avery Bradley from the Celtics after he averaged a career-best 16.3 ppg.

DOWN THE ROAD: Bradley will be a free agent after the season, and he is likely to be in demand. Detroit's chances of re-signing him would be helped by impressive play from Drummond and Jackson. Even if that does happen, it likely won't be enough to get the Pistons out of the rut that has seen them miss the playoffs in seven of the last eight years.

4 INDIANA PACERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 12

THIS YEAR: After SF Paul George informed them that he was going to opt out of his contract and become a free agent next summer, the Pacers decided to trade their star while they could still get something in return. George was shipped to Oklahoma City for SG Victor Oladipo (15.9 ppg) and PF Domantas Sabonis (5.9 ppg), two solid—but unspectacular—players. That sent a clear signal that Indiana is playing for the future. But the present doesn't look totally awful, thanks to C **Myles Turner** (14.5 ppg). In his second year, the big man blossomed into a two-way threat.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Pacers are on a difficult path. But Turner and Oladipo give them two young, dependable players. And first-round draft pick T.J. Leaf (16.3 ppg, 8.2 rpg at UCLA) is a 6'10" forward with a soft touch.

5 CHICAGO BULLS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 13

THIS YEAR: After sneaking into the playoffs last year, the Bulls decided to clean house. The biggest deal sent SF Jimmy Butler to Minnesota for SG Zach LaVine and two other players. LaVine averaged 18.9 ppg, but he's better known for his dunk contest prowess, and he's still recovering from a torn ACL suffered in February. The only starter from last year who's still around is C **Robin Lopez** (10.4 ppg). **DOWN THE ROAD:** The Bulls successfully got rid of their big contracts. But the return for Butler doesn't give them much to work with. It's going to be a while before Chicago—a 50-win team three years ago—contends again.

1 WASHINGTON WIZARDS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 3

THIS YEAR: It was a good summer for PG **John Wall**. After making the All-NBA team for the first time, he signed a three-year extension worth \$170 million. That contract dwarfed the one signed by SF Otto Porter Jr. (13.4 ppg), who "only" got \$106 million for his four-year deal. So the Wizards will look very similar to last year, when they won 49 games and nearly beat the Celtics in the conference semifinals. Washington's starters are among the NBA's best, but after their spending spree, the Wizards couldn't afford any bench upgrades.

DOWN THE ROAD: SG Bradley Beal (23.1 ppg) is under contract for four more years, so this Wizards core will be around for a long time. But with little flexibility, there's not much reason to think the Wiz will make the jump from very good to elite.

2 CHARLOTTE HORNETS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 8

THIS YEAR: Charlotte rolled the dice in the off-season, signing free-agent C Dwight Howard. The big man continued his offensive decline last year, averaging just 13.5 ppg with the Hawks. He'll move into a starting lineup that also includes SF Michael Kidd-Gilchrist (9.2 ppg), who made only one three-pointer last year. The Hornets will clearly need some outside shooting help, which they hope to get from rookie SG **Malik Monk** (19.8 ppg, 39.7% 3FG at Kentucky). Charlotte had a disappointing 2016–17 season, winning 12 fewer games than the year before and missing the playoffs. Injuries were a factor; a healthy season and a rejuvenated Howard could have the Hornets primed to surprise.

DOWN THE ROAD: PG Kemba Walker (23.2 ppg) and SG Nicolas Batum (15.1 ppg, 6.2 rpg) give Charlotte a nice nucleus to build around. The Hornets could be a factor in a weak division for years.

3 MIAMI HEAT

CONFERENCE POSITION: 9

THIS YEAR: It was a tale of two seasons for the Heat. They started off 11–30 in 2016–17, then won 30 of their remaining 41 games to finish at .500. Which version of the Heat will we see in 2017–18? It could depend on SG Dion Waiters (15.8 ppg). Shortly after he returned from an extended injury layoff in January, he led Miami on a 13-game winning streak during which he made half of his three-point attempts. The question with Waiters has always been consistency. He's a career 41.3% shooter who needs to knock down shots more regularly. **DOWN THE ROAD:** PG Goran Dragic (20.3 ppg) had another great season, but he's 31. And C Hassan Whiteside (17.0 ppg, 14.1 rpg) is 28. The only real up-and-comer under 25 is first-rounder **Bam Adebayo** (13.0 ppg, 8.0 rpg at Kentucky), a power forward who wowed with his offense in summer league.

4 ATLANTA HAWKS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 10

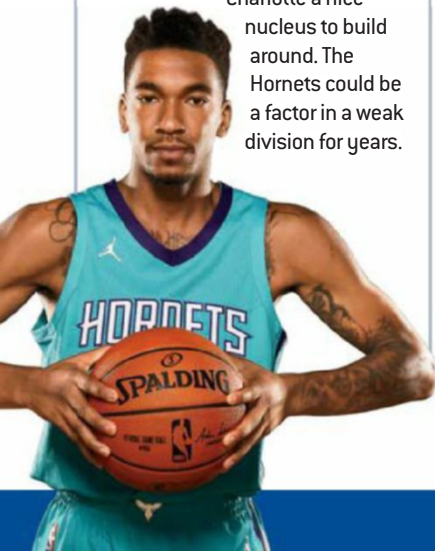
THIS YEAR: Just three seasons ago, the Hawks had four All-Stars and won a conference-best 60 games. With the departure of PF Paul Millsap, who signed with Denver, that All-Star quartet is gone, which means Atlanta is a team in search of an identity. PG **Dennis Schröder** (17.9 ppg) emerged as a dependable scorer in his first year as a starter and will carry much of the offensive burden for the Hawks.

DOWN THE ROAD: By letting Millsap go, Atlanta opened itself up to the T-word. But the Hawks see their situation as rebuilding, not tanking. Barring a miracle, they'll find themselves in the draft lottery next summer. And they've also traded for two additional first-round picks next year, so they'll be able to start their makeover right away.

5 ORLANDO MAGIC

CONFERENCE POSITION: 14

THIS YEAR: It's amazing what a change of teammates can do. After the Magic traded PF Serge Ibaka last year and went with a smaller, faster lineup, PG **Elfrid Payton** turned into a triple-double machine, with five in his last 20 games. But even when their point guard flourished, the young, erratic team struggled, winning just seven of those contests. **DOWN THE ROAD:** The Magic will have to decide if they want to offer long-term extensions to Payton, who is 23, and 22-year-old SG Aaron Gordon (12.7 ppg). That means that this season will be filled with growing pains—but they should help out in the long run.



1 HOUSTON ROCKETS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 2

THIS YEAR: Houston has what might be the best backcourt in the history of the NBA. The Rockets traded for PG Chris Paul (18.1 ppg with the Clippers) and will stick him in the lineup next to SG **James Harden** (29.1 ppg). If Houston can't catch the Warriors in the standings, they can at least surpass them in scoring.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Clippers traded Paul largely because he'll be a free agent next summer and will command upward of \$200 million over five years.

L.A. decided it would be too hard to build a solid roster with that much money devoted to one player. Well, now the Rockets will face that dilemma next summer.

The appeal of keeping Paul is obvious.

The reality is much trickier—and could put the team in a tough spot.

2 SAN ANTONIO SPURS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 3

THIS YEAR: In his second season with the Spurs, PF LaMarcus Aldridge saw his scoring average continue to drop, to 17.3 ppg. (That's down from 23.4 ppg in 2014–15, his final season with the Trail Blazers.) It's possible he's not the ideal complement to SF **Kawhi Leonard** (25.5 ppg), and there were rumors in the summer that Aldridge could be dealt. Chemistry issues aside, the Spurs still won 61 games and advanced to the conference finals.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Spurs have won at least 50 games in every one of coach Gregg Popovich's full seasons. As long as Pop is around, San Antonio is going to be a prime destination for free agents. And though the Spurs won't find themselves in the lottery anytime soon, they have a way of uncovering talented players with later picks. That 50-win streak isn't ending anytime soon.

3 NEW ORLEANS PELICANS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 8

THIS YEAR: The acquisition of C **DeMarcus Cousins** (24.4 ppg, 12.4 rpg) at the All-Star break last year gave New Orleans a powerful pair of big men. PF Anthony Davis (28.0 ppg, 11.8 rpg) once again played like an MVP candidate. But will the Boogie-and-the-Brow experiment succeed?

The Pelicans were just 11–14 after the trade, and New Orleans did little to address the lack of perimeter scoring.

DOWN THE ROAD: If the Pelicans can figure out how to use Cousins and Davis, they will have unparalleled size in a league that is increasingly moving away from big men. If they can't, well, it's back to the drawing board for a team that seemed to be on the brink of a breakthrough just two years ago.

4 DALLAS MAVERICKS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 10

THIS YEAR: If there's one thing SF **Harrison Barnes** knows how to do, it's play with guys named Curry. After leaving Steph's Warriors to become the focus of the Mavs' offense, Barnes (19.2 ppg) was joined in the lineup by SG Seth Curry. Steph's little brother blossomed into a fine scorer, averaging 16.2 ppg after the All-Star break. But the Mavs failed to address their biggest weakness: rebounding. Dallas was last in offensive, defensive, and total boards.

DOWN THE ROAD: At some point, ageless PF Dirk Nowitzki (14.2 ppg) is going to have to retire. When he does, the team looks to be in good hands with Barnes and rookie Dennis Smith Jr. (18.1 ppg at N.C. State), who shone in summer league.

5 MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

CONFERENCE POSITION: 11

THIS YEAR: Who's the best player in the league who's never been an All-Star? Probably PG **Mike Conley** (20.5 ppg, 6.3 apg), who has been running the Grizzlies' offense for a decade. These days, through no fault of Conley's, the offense is pretty ugly. Memphis shot a league-worst 43.5% from the floor last year. A big culprit was SF Chandler Parsons, who shot a woeful 33.8%.

DOWN THE ROAD: In 2019–20, Conley will be 32 and C Marc Gasol will be 35. They'll make a combined \$58 million. Parsons will be making \$25 million. Memphis needs a youth injection. Fast.

1 OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

CONFERENCE POSITION: 4

THIS YEAR: The **Russell Westbrook** Show was must-see last year. The Thunder point guard became the second player to average a triple-double (31.6 ppg, 10.7 rpg, 10.4 apg) after his running mate of seven years, Kevin Durant, left for Golden State. Now Westbrook has a new sidekick: SF Paul George (23.7 ppg with the Pacers), who only cost the Thunder one player they'll miss, SG Victor Oladipo. George will ease some of the burden on Westbrook and add some skill to a defense that was a top-10 unit last year. It's nice to have a player like Westbrook who can do it all. It's even nicer not to need him to.

DOWN THE ROAD: George can become a free agent following the season, and he reportedly would like to play in Los Angeles. It's possible that he'll love playing with Westbrook and re-sign with OKC. It's also possible both he and Westbrook, who can opt out as well, will sign elsewhere and the Thunder will bottom out. These are nervy days in Oklahoma.

2 MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES

CONFERENCE POSITION: 5

THIS YEAR: The Timberwolves entered last season as one of the most exciting young teams in the league, with C **Karl-Anthony Towns**, SF Andrew Wiggins, PG Ricky Rubio, and SG Zach LaVine. What they were lacking was a veteran presence. That won't be a problem this year. LaVine was the centerpiece of a trade that landed Bulls superstar SF Jimmy Butler (23.9 ppg). Rubio was dealt for a draft pick, and he'll be replaced by 29-year-old former All-Star Jeff Teague (15.3 ppg with Indiana). The T-Wolves will be more experienced, significantly better on defense, and loads of fun to watch.

DOWN THE ROAD:

Minnesota has a great nucleus, a great coach, and plenty of salary cap room to keep adding pieces. Butler, Towns, and Wiggins could make the T-Wolves serious challengers to the Warriors for years to come.

3 PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 7

THIS YEAR: The thrilling backcourt combo of PG Damian Lillard (27.0 ppg) and SG **CJ McCollum** (23.0 ppg) gives Portland plenty of outside scoring. But if the Trail Blazers are going to make waves in the West, they'll need some help inside. They might have found it last year in C Jusuf Nurkic. After being acquired in a trade with the Nuggets, Nurkic averaged 15.2 ppg. (He averaged just 8.0 in Denver.) Portland won 14 of the 20 games he played, which translates to 57 wins over a full season. That's why the Blazers didn't make any big moves; they want to see how good the existing squad can be.

DOWN THE ROAD: McCollum and Lillard are both locked up through 2021 (at around \$60 million per year combined). That gives the Trail Blazers plenty of time—but not much financial flexibility—to surround them with some quality big guys.

4 DENVER NUGGETS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 8

THIS YEAR: The Nuggets haven't made the playoffs in four years, but they'll be on the verge of a return thanks to a pair of skilled big men. **Nikola Jokic** blossomed in his second season. He averaged 16.7 ppg and 9.8 rpg while dishing out 4.9 apg—an amazing number for a 6' 10" center. This year he'll be joined by perennial All-Star Paul Millsap (18.1 ppg for Atlanta), who signed as a free agent. The Nuggets were fourth in offensive efficiency but 29th on defense. A vet like Millsap will make the team tougher.

DOWN THE ROAD: At 32, Millsap is getting on in years. The Nuggets wisely structured his deal so they can part ways after two years if they want.

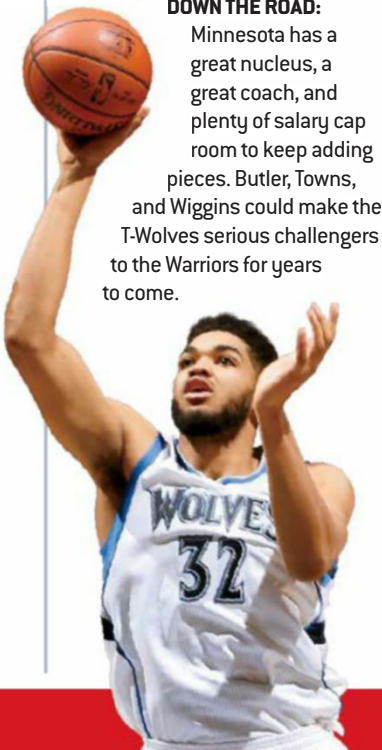
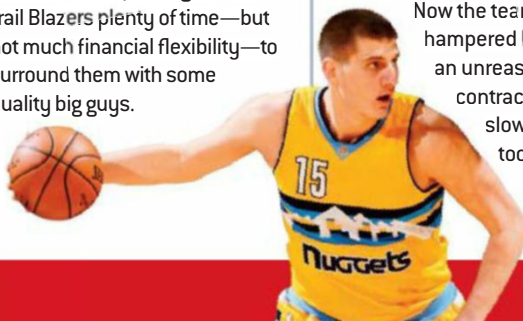
Now the team won't be hampered by an unreasonable contract if he slows down too much.

5 UTAH JAZZ

CONFERENCE POSITION: 12

THIS YEAR: The Jazz boasted an impressive inside-outside combination in C Rudy Gobert (14.0 ppg, 12.8 rpg) and SF Gordon Hayward (21.9 ppg). Now they're down to just their inside man, as Hayward signed with the Celtics. Utah picked up PG Ricky Rubio (9.1 apg for Minnesota) and added a few other decent vets. But the loss of Hayward, with nothing coming in return, will likely leave the team out of the playoffs after a 51-win year.

DOWN THE ROAD: Gobert is just 25, and he's signed through 2021. And the Jazz may have uncovered a gem in rookie SG **Donovan Mitchell** (15.6 ppg at Louisville). The gunner, who is 6' 3" but has a 6' 10" wingspan, had a summer league—best 37-point outing.



1 GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 1

THIS YEAR: After leading his team to its second title in three years, PG **Steph Curry** (25.3 ppg) finally got the rich payday he deserved: a five-year “supermax” deal that will pay him \$201 million. Teammate Kevin Durant, on the other hand, signed a new two-year deal that will pay him less than he earned last year. Why did Durant give up the money? To help the Warriors re-sign Andre Iguodala (7.6 ppg) and other key vets. Golden State even had enough cash to strengthen its bench with SG Nick Young (13.2 ppg with the Lakers) and SF Omri Casspi (5.2 ppg with three teams). So the best team in basketball didn't lose anyone significant and made a couple of nice additions.

DOWN THE ROAD: SG Klay Thompson is next in line for a massive contract, but not until 2019. And Durant might not be so giving next time his deal is up. But until that happens, the Warriors are going to stick together—and likely win a few more rings.

2 LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 6

THIS YEAR: The departure of PG Chris Paul, who was traded to the Rockets, means that PF **Blake Griffin** (21.6 ppg, 8.1 rpg) is now the undisputed face of the franchise. Losing a player like Paul hurts, but the Clippers never got past the second round of the playoffs in his six seasons. Things clearly weren't working. Griffin will be surrounded by several new faces, including PG Patrick Beverley (9.5 ppg with Houston) and SF Danilo Gallinari (18.2 ppg with Denver). L.A. has enough talent to be competitive, but there will be bumps.

DOWN THE ROAD: The Clippers definitely need another megastar to pair with Griffin. The fact that

they play in L.A. could help lure free agents. Whether or not that happens could depend on Lawrence Frank, who took over front office duties from coach Doc Rivers in August.

3 SACRAMENTO KINGS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 13

THIS YEAR: The Kings have had one All-Star in the past 12 years: DeMarcus Cousins. The center was traded to the Pelicans last season, leaving Sacramento with no choice but to move in a new direction as the Kings try to return to the playoffs for the first time since 2006. They got SG Buddy Hield in the Cousins deal; the rookie averaged 8.6 ppg with the Pelicans, but 15.1 ppg with the Kings. He'll share backcourt minutes with first-round pick SG **De'Aaron Fox** (16.7 ppg with Kentucky). At least Fox will have someone to watch UK games with: He's joining a team that includes former Wildcats big men Willie Cauley-Stein (8.1 ppg) and Skal Labissiere (8.8 ppg).

DOWN THE ROAD: The Kings are loaded with youngsters who are long on potential but short on proven NBA ability. Adding 19-year veteran Vince Carter to provide guidance was a smart move.

4 LOS ANGELES LAKERS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 14

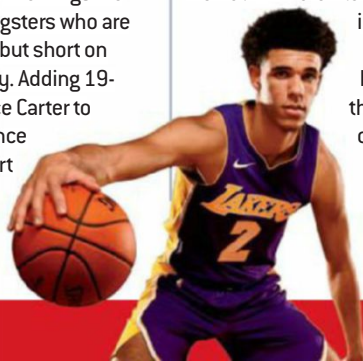
THIS YEAR: Perhaps you've heard of **Lonzo Ball**. His father has certainly done everything possible to make sure you have. The Lakers took the UCLA point guard with the second pick, and he immediately became their most intriguing player. C Brook Lopez (20.5 ppg) was acquired from the Nets, and SG Kentavious Caldwell-Pope (13.8 ppg with Detroit) signed as a free agent to give Ball some immediate help.

DOWN THE ROAD: Lopez has one year left on his deal, and Caldwell-Pope signed a one-year contract. That means that the Lakers will have plenty of cap space next summer to chase free agents. LeBron James and Paul George are both rumored to be interested in coming to L.A. Whatever happens, the Lakers are certainly going to be more interesting.

5 PHOENIX SUNS

CONFERENCE POSITION: 15

THIS YEAR: The past two seasons have been among the three worst in Suns history. You wouldn't know it from the lack of urgency Phoenix showed in the off-season. Apart from drafting athletic SF **Josh Jackson** (16.3 ppg at Kansas), the Suns didn't make a significant addition. Phoenix was terrible defensively, and, while the Suns scored a lot of points, they were very inefficient. **DOWN THE ROAD:** SG Devin Booker (22.1 ppg) turned into a bona fide scorer as a 20-year-old, and PG Eric Bledsoe (21.1 ppg) had a career year as well. But if Phoenix is going to return to respectability soon, the Suns can't just rely on their guard play.



THEIR TIME IS NOW

After a painful four-year “process,” the 76ers have become one of the NBA’s most exciting teams.

BY MARK BECHTEL

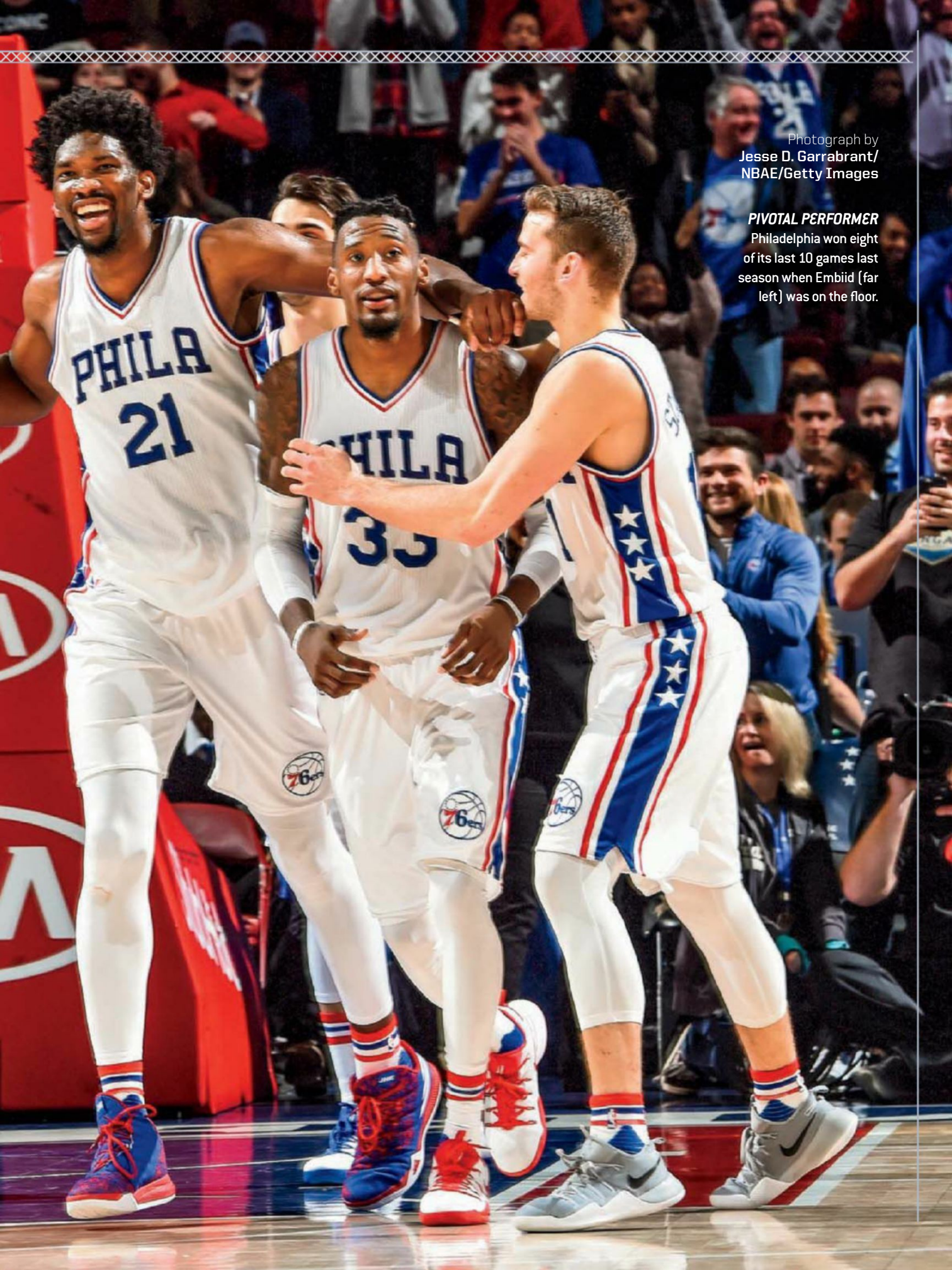
The 2017 off-season will long be remembered around the NBA as the Summer of Crazy Moves. Never before has the league seen so many big-name players move to new addresses. Longtime Los Angeles Clippers point guard Chris Paul was traded to the Houston Rockets.

Paul George, the cornerstone of the Indiana Pacers, was sent to the Oklahoma City Thunder. The Boston Celtics paid a king’s ransom for Cleveland’s Kyrie Irving, potentially altering the power balance in the East. Even the Minnesota Timberwolves, who haven’t made the playoffs in 13 years, got in on the act. They acquired Jimmy Butler from the Chicago Bulls.

That’s four teams who went out and traded for Olympic-caliber players. Why?

Well, other franchises look at the Golden State Warriors and—understandably—quake in their boots. The Warriors have won two of the last three NBA titles. And the one they lost came in a season in which they won a league-record 73 games.

So basketball is undergoing an arms race. Dynamic



Photograph by
Jesse D. Garrabrant/
NBAE/Getty Images

PIVOTAL PERFORMER
Philadelphia won eight
of its last 10 games last
season when Embiid (far
left) was on the floor.

Duos? Forget it. You're going to need more than that. Big Three? Maybe, but to really feel good about your chances you'll want a Fab Four. (How long before we see a Fantastic Five?)

But here's the funny part: Until they went out and signed Kevin Durant last summer, the Warriors were largely a homegrown franchise. Steph Curry, Klay Thompson, and Draymond Green were all drafted by Golden State.

The Warriors are proof that you can build a champion from the ground up. And at least one team has taken notice. The Philadelphia 76ers have been building through the draft for years. It hasn't always been pretty, but it's about to start paying off.

THE PROCESS

Brett Brown was hired as the Sixers coach in 2013. For the decade or so before his arrival, Philadelphia had been a middle-of-the-road team in the Eastern Conference, never good enough to challenge for a title but never bad enough to pick up a high lottery pick.

That all changed the summer Brown arrived. The Sixers hired Sam Hinkie as general manager. Hinkie made several trades that depleted the roster—and caused fans and rival teams to accuse him of purposely setting up the team to lose. And lose it did. (“Trust the process,” Hinkie said.)

In Brown's first season, the 76ers were 19–63. Things only got worse from there. They won just 18 games in 2014–15. Then it got really ugly. In 2015–16, the Sixers lost their first 18 games. After a win over the Lakers, they dropped 12 more, meaning that on Christmas Day the team was 1–30. Philly eventually notched 10 wins, barely avoiding setting the record for the most defeats in history.

All the losing didn't wear on Brown. “My past four years, coaching



our guys—in a kind of sadistic way, I really enjoyed it,” he says. For 11 years before coming to Philadelphia, Brown was an assistant with the Spurs. He spent a lot of effort trying to cultivate an atmosphere like the one in San Antonio. “My goal was always to try to grow the culture of the team through how we work,” he says. “How do you set up your coaching staff? How did you set up your

weight room? How do you watch tape? How do you practice? Now all of a sudden you're looking at players who can actually fill in that infrastructure.”

Those players were acquired because by consistently being at or near the bottom of the standings, the Sixers loaded up on high draft picks. In 2014 they snagged Kansas center Joel Embiid with the third pick. (In a nod to Hinkie, who was replaced last



HOMEGROWN
Embiid (left) and Fultz (below) were both acquired in the draft, just like Golden State's Curry, Thompson, and Green (above).

year, Embiid began calling himself the Process.) The next year they got big man Jahlil Okafor with the third pick and traded the 10th pick,

Elfrid Payton, for forward Dario Šarić. In 2016 they took Ben Simmons first overall. And this summer they traded up from third to first to acquire point guard Markelle Fultz.

Embiid and Simmons have struggled with injuries. Embiid missed two full years before finally taking the court last year. And Simmons, a 6' 10" giant who can run the offense, has yet to see the court. But Brown viewed that as an opportunity to teach, often holding his injured kids back in the locker room at halftime and asking them what they saw on the court and what adjustments they would make if they were coaching.

When he finally found the floor, Embiid was often

brilliant in 31 games last year, playing well enough that he garnered significant support for Rookie of the Year (while becoming a fan favorite with his dunks, three-point range, and clever tweets). Šarić averaged a solid 12.8 points and 6.3 rebounds last year as a rookie. And Simmons and Fultz—a more traditional point guard who averaged 23.2 points and 5.9 assists per game last year at the University of Washington—give Brown an intriguing dilemma. “Those two guys have talked a lot about making the opportunity [of sharing the point guard responsibilities] work,” Brown says. “The modern-day sport we’re seeing, having two primary ballcarriers—that is an asset.”

THE WAY FORWARD

The Sixers’ rebuilding project shows just how valued picks have become in the NBA. Back in 2013, the Boston Celtics traded two future Hall of

Famers, Kevin Garnett and Paul Pierce, to the Brooklyn Nets for four first-round selections. When the Nets became one of the league’s worst teams, those picks suddenly took on huge value. Boston gave up high-scoring point guard Isaiah Thomas to get Irving—but what the Cavaliers valued most was Brooklyn’s first-rounder next year.

The Celtics have amassed several



“My goal was always to try to grow the culture of the team through how we work,” says Brown. “Now all of a sudden you’re looking at players who can actually fill in that infrastructure.”

other high picks, giving them the opportunity to restock their roster with promising kids—or flip the picks for established players who might prove to be the missing pieces that push Boston past the Cavaliers in the East.

Philadelphia also added a few veterans in the off-season who will complement the young, exciting core the Sixers have put together. Most notably, shooting guard J.J. Redick and forward Amir Johnson were signed as free agents. Along with forward Jerryd Bayless, they are the only players on the team with more than four years of NBA experience. “It’s a proven fact that if you take a small group of people and you include a senior member, the group has a greater opportunity to improve,” Brown says, citing military and academic studies. “There’s a higher level of accountability. There are shared experiences coming from a peer that resonate deeper than [if they are] always coming from a coach.”

After four years during which losing was expected, Brown is ready to compete. “For the first time you’re looking at people that you can touch,” he says. “You can feel like they’re going to be part of us for a long time.”

Brown’s team might not be the best in the East. (Yet.) But they’re going to be loads of fun—and they’ll likely serve as a blueprint for plenty of teams trying to catch up with those pesky Warriors.

Whoa, Canada!

After years of U.S. dominance, the birthplace of hockey now boasts the game's most exciting young talent.

By Sam Page



Photograph by
Jonathan Kozub/NHLI/Getty Images



REFEREE CHRIS LEE and Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock had plenty to talk about. In the third period of Toronto's November 5 home game against the Vancouver Canucks, the Leafs had been assessed 69 total penalty minutes. Four Toronto players, including goaltender Frederik Andersen, had been ejected, and two more were in the penalty box with five minutes for fighting.

But as the camera zoomed in on the conversation between Lee and Babcock, viewers began to focus on the two Leafs players directly to the coach's right. In the midst of all this violence and acrimony, they were singing along to Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer," the song blaring over the Air Canada Centre speaker system:

Take my hand. We'll make it I swear.

Oh-oh, livin' on a prayer.

"He was just screaming in my ear, so I had to kind of start singing along with him," Leafs center Auston Matthews said after the game, placing the blame squarely on his accomplice and teammate, winger Mitch Marner.

Toronto's would-be rock stars can be forgiven for horsing around while their teammates iced knuckles. They were, after all, just a couple of 19-year-olds having fun on a Saturday night in the big city.

Despite being the age of sophomore-year roommates, however, that rookie pair led the Maple Leafs to their first playoff appearance in four years. Matthews, the Calder Trophy winner as the rookie of the year, led the team in goals (40) and points (69), while Marner led in assists (42). They are only two of the young stars that have helped Canada reassert itself as the center of the hockey universe. In 2015–16, not a single team from north of the border made the playoffs, for the first time since 1969–70. Just one year later, five of those seven squads were in the postseason.

The resurgence coincides with those teams debuting a wave of top rookies. Despite making up less than a quarter of the league, the Canadian teams boast five of the nine Calder finalists from the last three years: Matthews, Winnipeg's Patrik Laine, Edmonton's Connor McDavid, Ottawa's Mark Stone, and Calgary's Johnny Gaudreau. And another two skaters under 25, Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl and Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele, ranked in the top 10 in points in the NHL last season.

The change was obvious from Day One of last season. On opening night, the Leafs played the Senators in Ottawa. Matthews scored his first NHL goal at 8:21 into the first

HEAD TO HEAD

McDavid and Scheifele, just two of the elite young centers playing for the NHL's seven Canadian teams, figure to do battle for years to come.

period on a pass from Zach Hyman (age 24). The Senators then scored twice in the period before Matthews responded, unassisted, with his second career goal coming less than six minutes after the first. He completed the hat trick at the start of the second period on a beautiful pass from defenseman Morgan Rielly (age 22). Then, as time expired in the second period, he became the first NHL player to score four goals in his debut after a two-on-one fast-break feed from William Nylander (age 20).

The Senators would ultimately win in overtime, behind three points from their 26-year-old captain, Erik Karlsson. But a message had been sent.

“That’s the best night I’ve had since I’ve been here by 10 miles, and it’s not even close,” said Babcock afterward. “Because now we have an opportunity.”

BUILDING A WINNER

The NHL is a copycat league. And whatever success these Canadian teams enjoy in the coming years, they owe a debt to an American team that showed them the way: the Chicago Blackhawks.

One of the era’s most dominant franchises, the Blackhawks wouldn’t have won three recent Stanley Cups if they hadn’t picked in the NHL draft’s top three in consecutive years (2006 and ’07) and selected forwards Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane.

The Leafs took Marner fourth overall in 2015 and Matthews with the top pick before last season. Similarly, the Oilers took Draisaitl third in ’14 and McDavid first in ’15. That duo combined for 177 total points last season, 16 more than Penguins stars Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

The Jets, one of the two Canadian teams to miss the 2016–17 playoffs, nonetheless found a stellar combination in the 24-year-old Scheifele and 18-year-old Laine, the player picked directly after Matthews. They scored 68 goals. Even Montreal, one of Canada’s more veteran teams, added 22-year-old Jonathan Drouin this off-season to a lineup that already features 23-year-old Alex Galchenyuk.

“More younger players are getting pushed into bigger roles,” says Dougie Hamilton, the Flames’ 24-year-old top-four defenseman. “I think that’s obvious with Toronto last year. Seeing those guys as rookies playing so much and doing so well. . . . A couple years ago, I don’t think that would have happened.”

Hamilton’s Flames are led on offense by their own



And the winners are...



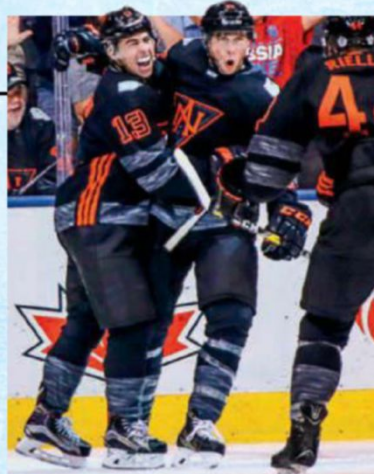
Stanley Cup **WASHINGTON CAPITALS**

The Caps will finally win the Cup in Ovechkin’s 13th season. They have to eventually, right? They return more or less the same team that pushed the Pens to seven games in the second round of the playoffs last spring.

young center-winger duo: Sean Monahan and Gaudreau. Their rise, combined with McDavid’s in Edmonton, has reinvigorated the Battle of Alberta, one of Canada’s—and hockey’s—all-time great rivalries.

But the Blackhawks have become as much a cautionary tale as a model. Toews and Kane now make a combined \$21 million per year through 2023. The “cap crunch” caused by those salaries has forced Chicago to jettison plenty of good depth players. Starting in 2018–19, McDavid and Draisaitl will also make a combined \$21 million. And similar contracts for Matthews and Laine are surely on the way.

“Sooner or later these young stars have to get paid, and when they do, that changes everything,” says Hall of Fame broadcaster Gord Miller. “You look at what’s happened in



BUDDING TALENT
Nugent-Hopkins (near left, center) and Gaudreau (near left, 13), who shared a line for Team North America, join Laine (below right) and pals Marnier (far left, 16) and Matthews (far left, 34) as the best crop of young forwards Canada's NHL teams have seen at one time.



Hart Trophy
CONNOR MCDAVID

After logging 100 points and winning the Hart (MVP) in his first full season, expect McDavid to improve, especially if Leon Draisaitl stays on his wing.



Norris Trophy
DREW DOUGHTY

He has two rings and a Norris Trophy as the league's top defenseman. Now Doughty has a new coach, which should mean more points.



Vezina Trophy
CAREY PRICE

No goalie is more talented. If Price stays healthy, he should reclaim his title as the best stopper in the league. A strong supporting cast means he'll have plenty of wins.



Calder Trophy
JOSH HO-SANG

The supremely skilled Ho-Sang scored 10 points in 21 games last season after his call-up, which both showcased his talent and preserved his rookie eligibility.

Chicago, where, since the Kane and Toews extensions kicked in, they've won three playoff games in two years."

Unlike in the glory days, when a star like Wayne Gretzky or Guy Lafleur could lead a team to a decade of dominance, these youngsters will likely have smaller windows in which to win. But there are still reasons to expect the most fan-friendly era in Canadian hockey history.

Many of these guys are pals, having played together on Team North America in the 2016 World Cup. During the tournament, Matthews and Scheifele were McDavid's wingers, while Gaudreau skated with Edmonton's Ryan Nugent-Hopkins.

"When you spend a whole month with someone in a group like that, you become close," says McDavid. "We're

all young guys and we had a lot of fun. I think naturally you keep in touch with a few guys, and I certainly have since that tournament."

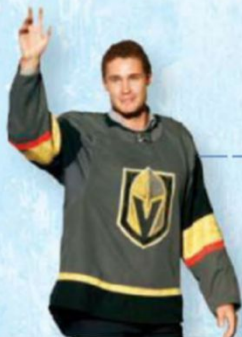
They are also all playing at the same time. Lafleur took the Canadiens to great heights in the 1970s, and then Gretzky matched him with the Oilers in the '80s. Their primes didn't overlap. Matthews and McDavid could have two of the sport's most storied franchises facing off in the Cup finals for years to come.

At least, that's the dream for fans in Canada. Until then, they can take solace in the words of Bon Jovi:
*It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not.
We've got each other and that's a lot for love.
We'll give it a shot!*

BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES (TEAM NORTH AMERICA); DAVID DENNIS/ICOM SPORTS/WIRE/GETTY IMAGES (LAINE); ANDY DEVLIN/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (MCDAVID); JUAN OCAMPO/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (DOUGHTY); MINAS PANAGIOTAKIS/GETTY IMAGES (PRICE); JOHN RUSSELL/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (HO-SANG)

Gold Standard

With the Vegas Golden Knights set to enter the league, here's a look at how every franchise in NHL history has fared.



The Vegas Golden Knights are the 31st team in the current NHL, and the 40th franchise in the history of the league. The first "major league" team in Las Vegas, the Golden Knights are also the first expansion team to enter the NHL in 17 years, since the Blue Jackets and Wild joined in 2000.



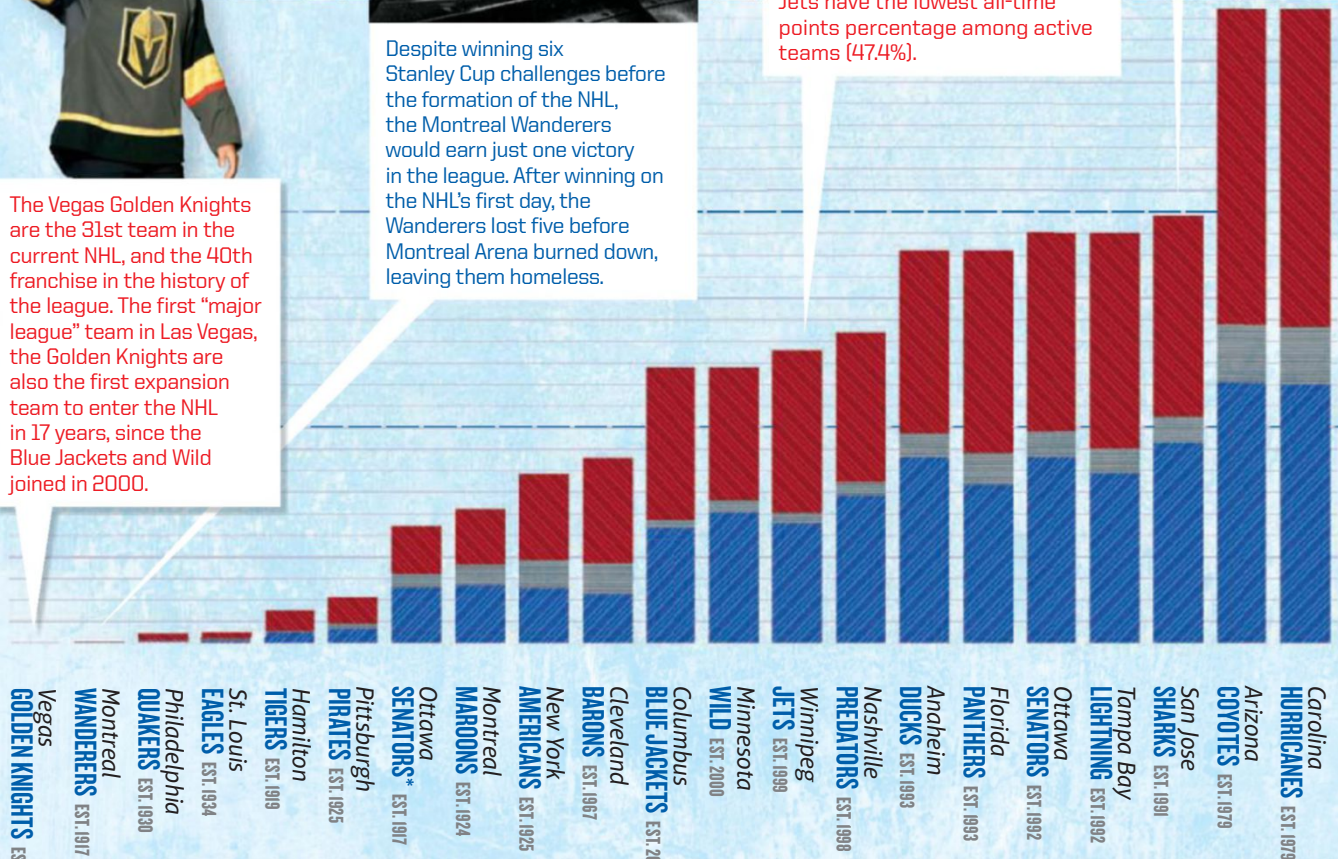
Despite winning six Stanley Cup challenges before the formation of the NHL, the Montreal Wanderers would earn just one victory in the league. After winning on the NHL's first day, the Wanderers lost five before Montreal Arena burned down, leaving them homeless.



Of the nine teams to enter the league from 1991 to 2000, the Sharks have been the most consistently competitive, with 19 playoff trips in 26 seasons. Of those nine, however, only the Ducks and the Lightning have won the Stanley Cup, with one victory each.



This Winnipeg Jets team—the modern iteration that was originally the Atlanta Thrashers—is not to be confused with the original Winnipeg Jets, now the Arizona Coyotes. The Thrashers/Jets have the lowest all-time points percentage among active teams (47.4%).

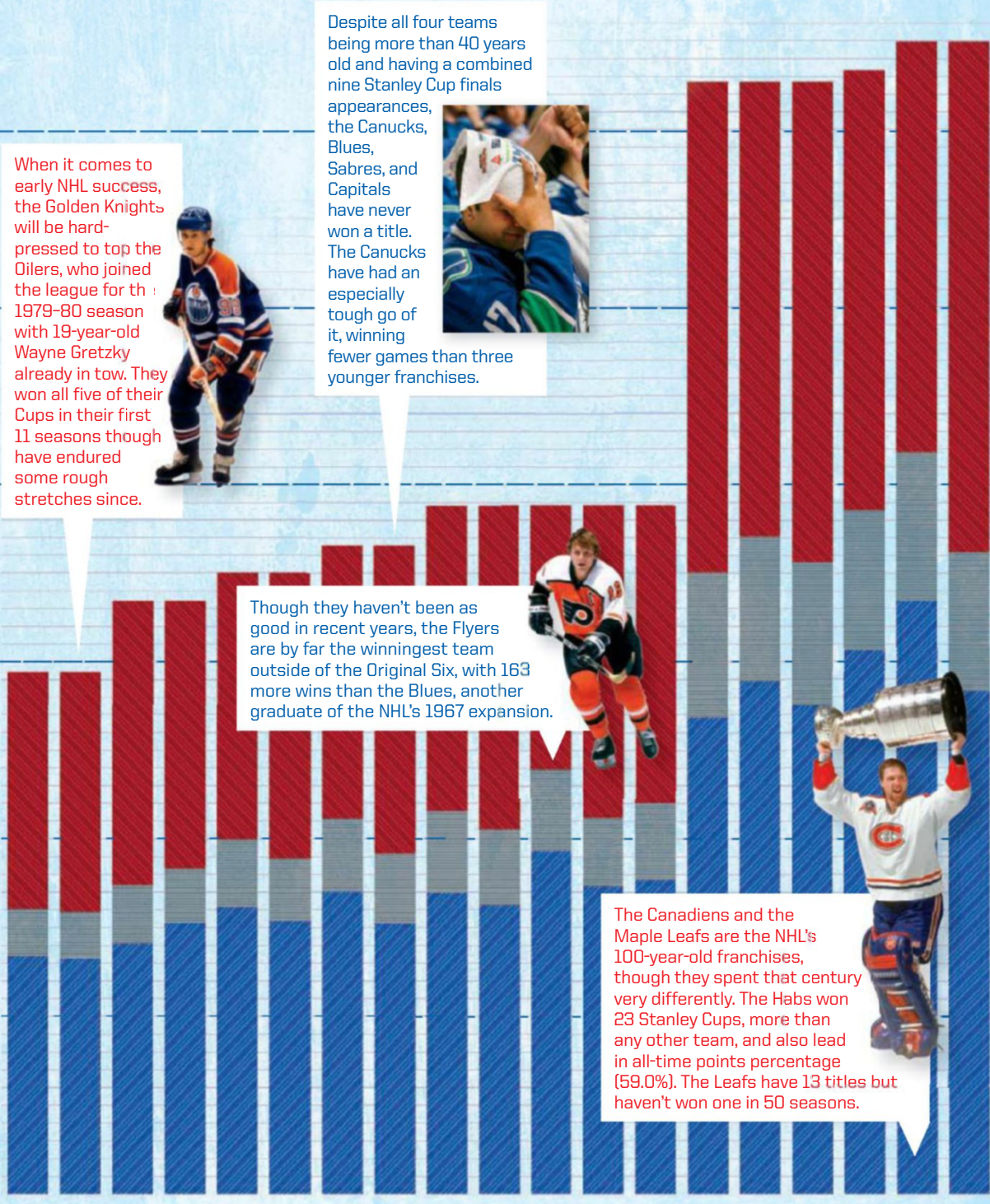


*THIS TEAM IS DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE ESTABLISHED IN 1992.

JEFF VANCE/SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGES (GOLDEN KNIGHTS), MCCORD MUSEUM (MONTREAL ARENA), ELSA GETTY IMAGES (SHARKS), SCOTT CUMMINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES (THRASHERS)

Games played

6,000
5,000
4,000
3,000
2,000
1,000
0



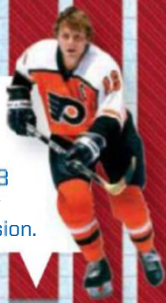
When it comes to early NHL success, the Golden Knights will be hard-pressed to top the Oilers, who joined the league for the first time in the 1979-80 season with 19-year-old Wayne Gretzky already in tow. They won all five of their Cups in their first 11 seasons though have endured some rough stretches since.



Despite all four teams being more than 40 years old and having a combined nine Stanley Cup finals appearances, the Canucks, Blues, Sabres, and Capitals have never won a title. The Canucks have had an especially tough go of it, winning fewer games than three younger franchises.



Though they haven't been as good in recent years, the Flyers are by far the winningest team outside of the Original Six, with 163 more wins than the Blues, another graduate of the NHL's 1967 expansion.



The Canadiens and the Maple Leafs are the NHL's 100-year-old franchises, though they spent that century very differently. The Habs won 23 Stanley Cups, more than any other team, and also lead in all-time points percentage (59.0%). The Leafs have 13 titles but haven't won one in 50 seasons.



- Colorado ANVALANCHE EST. 1979
- New Jersey DEVILS EST. 1974
- Edmonton OILERS EST. 1979
- Washington CAPITALS EST. 1974
- Calgary FLAMES EST. 1972
- New York ISLANDERS EST. 1972
- Buffalo SABRES EST. 1970
- Vancouver CANUCKS EST. 1970
- Dallas STARS EST. 1967
- Los Angeles KINGS EST. 1967
- Philadelphia FLYERS EST. 1967
- Pittsburgh PENGUINS EST. 1967
- St. Louis BLUES EST. 1967
- Chicago BLACKHAWKS EST. 1926
- Detroit RED WINGS EST. 1926
- New York RANGERS EST. 1926
- Boston BRUINS EST. 1924
- Montreal CANADIENS EST. 1917
- Toronto MAPLE LEAFS EST. 1917

B. BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES (GRETZKY); DAVE SANDFORD/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (CANUCKS FAN); DENIS BRODEUR/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (FLYERS); BRUCE BENNETT STUDIOS/GETTY IMAGES (CANADIENS)

END ZONE

WHAT'S THE CALL?

Illustrations by Sean Tiffany



1 DOUBLE TROUBLE

In a basketball game between the Suffolk Surfers and the Nassau Nets played under NBA rules, Surfers shooting guard Davey Stripes attempts a two-point field goal. As he jumps, Nets defender Cody Murray touches Stripes's arm and is called for a foul. Angry because he thinks Stripes jumped into him to draw the call, Murray shoves Stripes down. The referee assesses Murray a personal foul for the first contact and a flagrant foul for the shove. Does Stripes get to shoot four free throws?



2 POINT OF ORDER

The Knoxville Knicks are playing the Memphis Mets in baseball under MLB rules. The Knicks send up third baseman Andre Carter to lead off the top of the fifth inning. With the count 2 and 0, however, the umpire and the Knicks realize Carter is batting out of order—he should have started the inning on deck. The Knoxville manager tries to have the batter before Carter in the lineup, Bates Gerlad, finish the plate appearance. You're the umpire. Is Carter out? And who steps to the plate?



3 FLYING ACE

Maggie Maples is playing a tennis game under WTA rules against her dreaded rival, Lois Applebaum. Unable to reach the ball in time, Maples tries to return one of Applebaum's serves by throwing her racket in the air. The racket hits the ball back to Applebaum, who is unable to return the shot. Maples catches the racket on its way back down, and it never hits the ground. Who gets the point?



ANSWERS ON PAGE 53

ART GALLERY

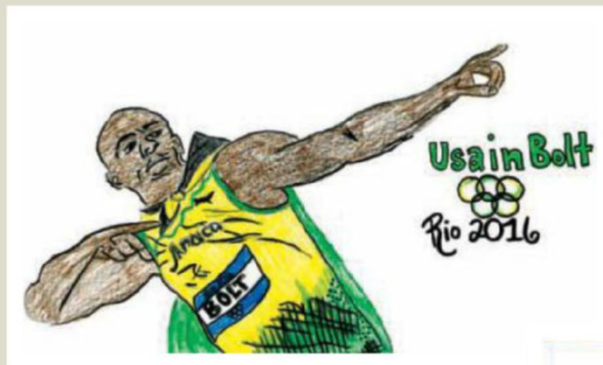
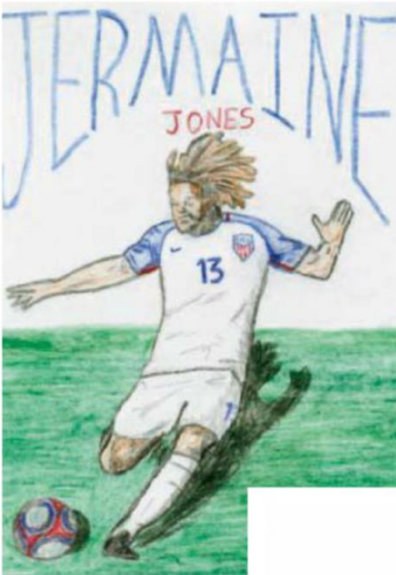
Mario Lemieux
and Jon Casey

Eric, 15,
Pennsylvania



Jermaine
Jones

Cooper, 13,
New Jersey

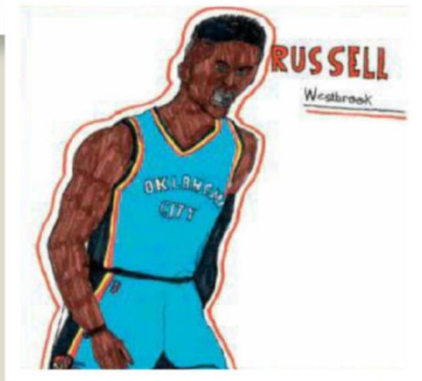


Usain Bolt

Nani, 14,
Massachusetts

Russell
Westbrook

Rahi, 13,
New York



Lewis
Hamilton

Alexandra, 13,
New Jersey

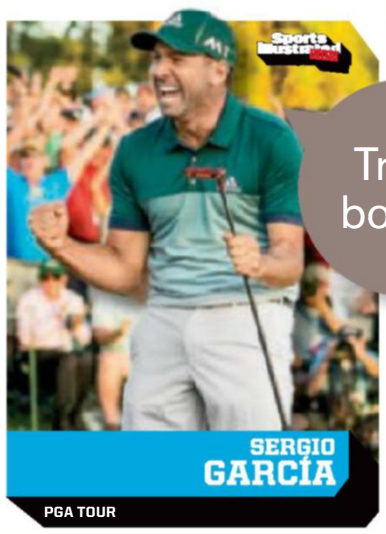


Send your drawings to:
ART GALLERY, SI Kids,
225 Liberty Street,
7th Floor, New York, NY 10281.
Please include your name,
address, date of birth, and
the name of the athlete.



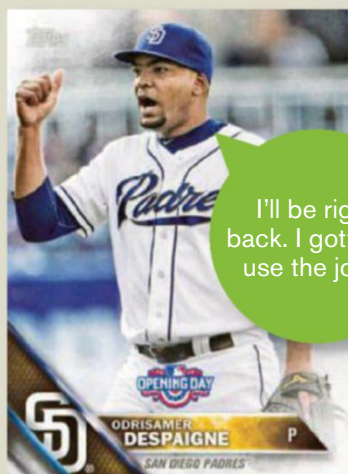
Send your cards to: **COMIC CARDS, SI Kids**, 225 Liberty Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10281. Please include your name, address, and date of birth.

COMIC CARDS



Triple bogey!

Carson, 10, North Carolina



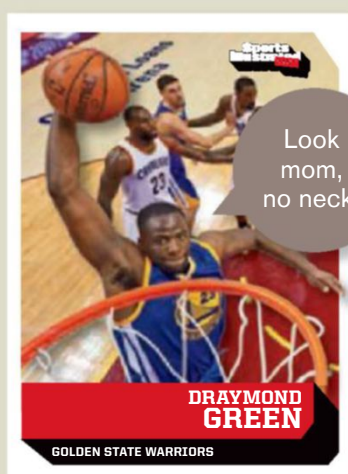
I'll be right back. I gotta go use the john.

Noah, 9, Michigan



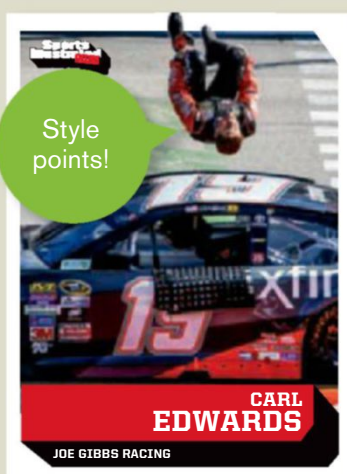
Who sticky-glued us together?

Aaron, 15, New Jersey



Look mom, no neck!

Aaron, 8, Oklahoma



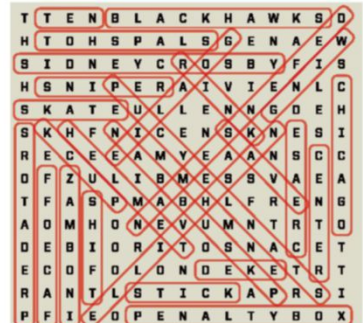
Style points!

Nevin, 10, Michigan

ANSWERS

- **What's the Call?** (page 50)
 1. Yes, Stripes gets to shoot four free throws—unless he makes the first three. A player cannot score four points on free throws alone.
 2. Carter is not out. Because he had not finished the at bat—and because the next batter had not begun *his* at bat—Gerlad steps in to bat with a 2-and-0 count. The Knicks are not penalized.
 3. Applebaum gets the point. The racket must be attached to a player's hand when contact is made.

• Word Search (page 51)



Answer: "The Nashville defenseman is from Toronto, Ontario."

- **Trivia** (page 51)
B. Christy Mathewson (1912 Giants)
- **Mystery Athlete** (page 51)
Dale Earnhardt Jr., NASCAR Cup driver



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WHO'S THERE?




By Elizabeth
McGarr McCue

(With a tip of the witch's
hat to **Edgar Allan Poe**,
author of "The Raven")

Just last year on Halloween, I was part of quite a scene. Let me tell you all about it—promise I won't be a bore! While I rooted, madly clapping, suddenly there came a tapping, As of someone gently rapping, rapping, you see, on my door. "Trick-or-treaters," I did mutter, "wanting candy at my door." Only this and nothing more.

Yes, it was All Hallows' Eve, but, Ugh, I thought. They'd better leave. Surely I'll get *some* reprieve. (Maybe I'll pretend to snore.) We'll likely go to extra innings; man, I wish my team were winning! How my brain is wildly spinning, wishing that my team would score. "No candy here!" I shouted then, willing that my team would score And be the champ for evermore.



Then I grew a bit uncertain; dare I peek around the curtain?
It's too late for trick-or-treaters. (Yay, I think we might just score!)
Already my heart was beating fast; and then I stood repeating:
"It's just people trick-or-treating, wanting candy at my door—
Older kids just trick-or-treating, wanting candy at my door."
This it is, and nothing more.

Then I heard a bat go *crack!* The outfielder went back, back, back.
The runner on first, he tagged up, and then the crowd did give a roar.
The winning run was in position; I now had a big decision:
Must I leave the television to see who is at the door?
I'm a little scared to go and find out who is at the door.
Plus, I must not miss the score!

Panic sets in. Now I'm peering 'round the curtains, wondering, fearing,
Doubting, thinking scary things I never would have thought before.
Halloween will do that to you, make the shivers pass right through you.
Still, I thought, You have no clue, you monster. We're about to score!
Whatever beast or ghost this must be, I must stay and watch the score.
It's just the Series, nothing more.

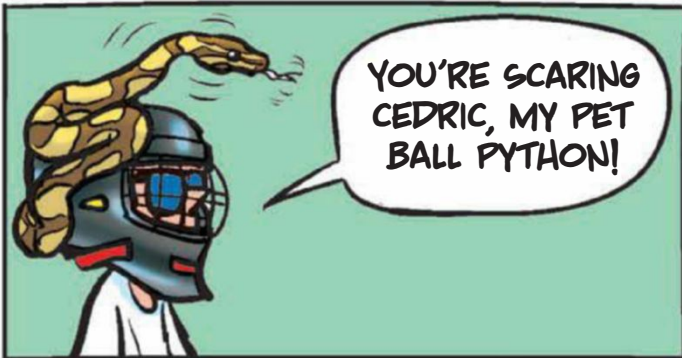
The World Series! Am I crazy? Or are things a bit too hazy?
How can I be so distracted, more scared than I was before?
(Pitching change. This *is* a duel!) "Goblin, ghost," I shout. "Or ghoul!
Do you think I am a fool? I'll not open up my door!"
He must think me daft. Of course, I will not open up my door—
MY TEAM IS ABOUT TO SCORE!

How my heart did dance and flutter (oh, the pitcher threw a cutter)
When the lock did click and the knob turned and turned on my front door.
A ghostbuster could save the day! (I really think I'm going cray!)
Will this goblin even stay, stay to see if my team scores?
"I give up!" I shouted to the creature opening my door.
Then my jaw 'bout hit the floor.

"Pardon me, my name's Mike Trout. And my cable just went out.
Could I watch the game with you, or would that be a great big chore?"
"Ha!" I nervously did cry. Then said, "No sweat!" and heaved a sigh.
Who could be more scared than I was when Mike Trout was at my door?
"Look!" Trout yelled. "He's rounding third and going home, about to score!"
No extra innings—nevermore!

BUZZ BEAMER

By Bill Hinds



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