

Sports Illustrated

WORLD SERIES MVP
GEORGE SPRINGER



LIKELY AL MVP
JOSÉ ALTUVE



THE ASTROS HAVE COME A
LONG WAY SINCE 2014

“A WILD RIDE”

AND THIS WORLD SERIES TROPHY WON'T BE THEIR LAST

BY
**BEN
REITER**
Photograph by
Greg Nelson
P. 26



Oksana Masters
U.S. Paralympian,
Nordic Skiing

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YOU CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS.**

The will to prevail. It's inside each and every one of us. It's that willingness to dig deeper and go further in the name of success - and to not give up even though we might want to. It's what drives athletes like Oksana Masters. And it's the reason we're a founding partner of U.S. Paralympics - because it's that same will that drives us in helping over 20 million Americans overcome challenges every day.¹ She will. We will, too. Will you? Discover more at thehartford.com/WillToPrevail.



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¹Based on The Hartford's internal reporting as of December 2017 combined with the Aetna acquisition.

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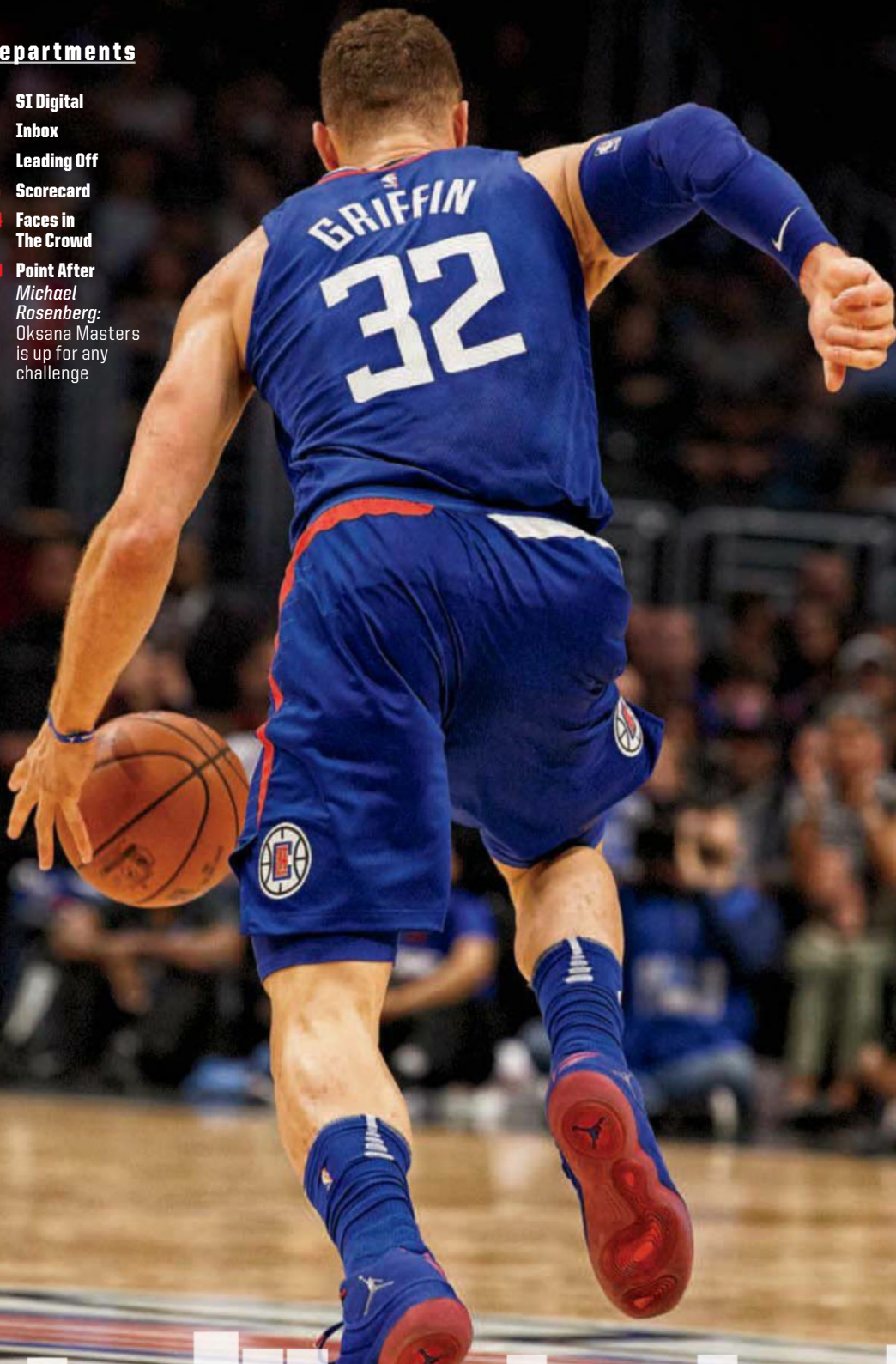
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Michael Rosenberg: Oksana Masters is up for any challenge



Photograph by
John W. McDonough

Sports Illustrated

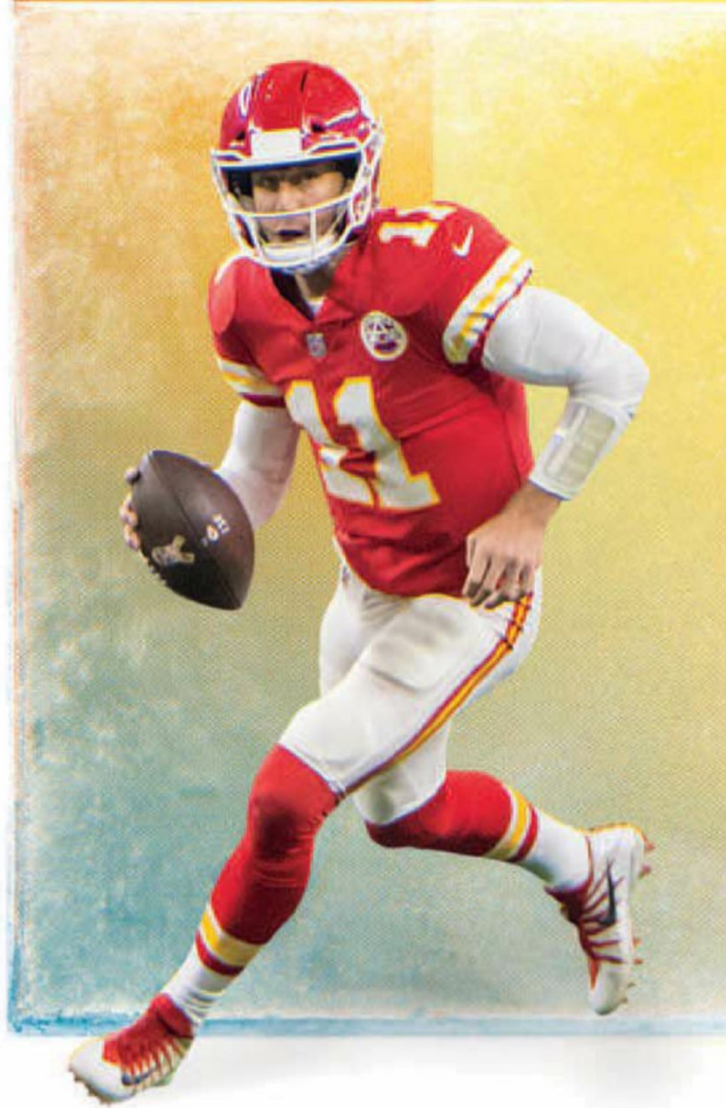
SI.COM

FOR NOV. 13, 2017



HALFWAY HOME

At the midpoint of the NFL season it's time to take stock. We've already had plenty of surprises. The Rams, 4-12 just a year ago, are rolling at 6-2 and eyeing the playoffs. Carson Wentz has the Eagles atop the NFC, and he's battling the likes of Tom Brady and **Alex Smith** [yes, seriously] for MVP. What else has shocked us so far, and what should we expect the rest of the way? How does your team look in a crowded field of contenders? For The MMQB's midseason predictions, as well as grades for every team's performance at the halfway mark, go to si.com/nfl



EARLY LIGHT

A few things are already becoming clear in this young NBA season. For one, the Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo has reached a new level of stardom—he might even be the best player in the league. Meanwhile, **Karl-Anthony Towns** [32] and the new-look Timberwolves are starting to figure things out as they work to become real challengers to the West's elite. The Crossover weighs in on both topics [and much more] at si.com/nba



Paper Anniversary

This week marks the one-year anniversary of the 2016 presidential election. Given a full year to consider **Donald Trump's** impact on the sports world, [si.com's](http://si.com) Charles Pierce examines the state of athlete activism and where it will go from here; Tim Layden reflects on the things that unite and divide us, and how the country's politics have played out in often stark terms on our basketball courts and football fields.

GREG NELSON (SMITH); TOWNS; DREW ANGERER (GETTY IMAGES) (TRUMP)



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MAKE HISTORY®



INBOX

FOR OCT. 30, 2017

What a great article on **Kahuku High** and the traditions of Hawaiian football (*The Boulder and Da Rock*). But while the state may have the “most interesting [and] exotic” program in America, the best ones are in California, where three of *USA Today’s* top 10 teams reside.

T. C. Richardson, HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIF.



With all the heated debates about the NFL and protests during the national anthem, perhaps players *should* take a cue from **Jim McMahon**, whom Robert Klemko mentioned in his column on individuality (SCORECARD). They could sew a Black Lives Matter patch on their jerseys and pay a \$5,000 fine for altering their uniforms. It would take the focus away from the anthem and put it back onto Roger Goodell’s desk.
Richard Rizza
WALTHAM, MASS.



If each of the 1,700 NFL players were to follow Eagles defensive end **Chris Long’s** example and donate his earnings from even one game this season (SCORECARD), there would be millions of dollars to help correct the conditions that are at the heart of the injustices players have been protesting.
Brian Lane
PUEBLO WEST, COLO.



COVER

Hats off to the major league baseball gurus, who have just now deduced that breaking balls are harder to hit than fastballs (*Welcome to the Spin Zone*). Women’s fastpitch coaches figured that out 40 years ago—without the benefit of computers or a Ph.D. analyst.
Barry Reed
SPRINGBORO, OHIO



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POINT AFTER

Alabama is crushing opponents this year, as **Michael Rosenberg** writes, but its biggest wins are over teams in the SEC, which doesn’t have the depth of other conferences. In the past four years the mighty **Crimson Tide** are 3-3 in postseason games—not exactly unbeatable.
David Iacobucci
FLOWERMOUND, TEXAS

CONTACT
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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1
of
3

Leading
Off

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GOLD DIGGER

Notre Dame sophomore running back Deon McIntosh weathered hits by Wake Forest defenders, including redshirt freshman linebacker Ja'Cquez Williams, to rush for 63 yards and a touchdown last Saturday in a 48-37 victory over the Demon Deacons in South Bend. The 8-1 Irish travel to Miami this week to face the undefeated Hurricanes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO





+



2
of
3

Leading Off

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PIC OF THE LITTER

Under cloudy skies and a drizzle, more than 50,000 runners competed in the 47th New York City Marathon on Sunday. The race, won by Geoffrey Kamworor of Kenya and Shalane Flanagan of the U.S. (*page 17*), touched all five boroughs, including Brooklyn, where participants rehydrated and clean-up crews recycled.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO





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3
of
3

Leading
Off

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EAGLES STOUT

Rookie running back Corey Clement scored on a 15-yard reception as the Eagles trounced the Broncos 51-23 on Sunday in Philadelphia. Clement had three scores on the day, and quarterback Carson Wentz threw for four as the 8-1 Eagles polished the best record in the league.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROB TRINGALI

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CATEGORY. BUT NONE IN ITS LEAGUE.**

Everything about the all-new Equinox puts it in a league by itself. Inside, you and your passengers are treated to a refined interior that's roomy, flexible and, above all, comfortable. New available features like a hands-free gesture liftgate, Rear Seat Reminder¹ that can help remind you of your sports gear in the back seat, Low Speed Forward Automatic Braking and Surround Vision, with its virtual bird's-eye view, can help bring convenience and safety to every trip. And its stunning new design looks great from every angle. The all-new 2018 Chevrolet Equinox. It's the ultimate way to win on the road.

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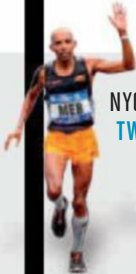
2 0 **SPORTSPERSON**
1 7 *of the* **YEAR**

IT IS NOT FOR THE
VICTORY
ALONE THAT THEY ARE
HONORED,
IT IS FOR THE QUALITY OF THEIR
EFFORT
AND THE MANNER OF THEIR STRIVING.

WHO WILL BE NEXT?

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE WITH





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SCORECARD

Edited by ALBERT CHEN + SARAH KWAK



WORLDWIDE LEADER

[What Roger Federer \(and tennis\) can teach the world about globalization](#)

BY L. JON WERTHEIM AND ARYEH B. BOURKOFF

■ **THIS WEEK MARKS** the last tennis tournament of 2017, the ATP Tour's World Tour Final. It's fitting that this capstone event takes place in London, voted, as it's been, the World's Most Powerful Global City six years running. In London the eight players in the field hail from eight different countries. Scan the top 25 players in the ATP rankings and, save Antarctica, you'll find representatives from every continent.

As presidents, prime ministers, chancellors and CEOs around the globe confront a towering challenge of our time—how do you transition safely, let alone thrive, in a global economy—tennis provides a source of guidance and optimism. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find a sector that's made a more successful transformation from parochial to panglobal.

If soccer has always promoted itself as the "world's game," tennis had no such pretensions or ambitions. For most of the sport's history, a few entrenched powers dominated. But that power structure is as obsolete as the wood racket. Australian men won 32 of the 40 majors held during the 1960s. They've won zero since 2002. From 1974–99, 16 of the 26 year-end No. 1 players were American. Today there is one American in the top 10. The women's game is comparably diverse. In 2017 the four major events were won by an African-American titan (Serena Williams), a Latvian (Jelena Ostapenko), a Spaniard (Garbiñe Muguruza) and another African-American (Sloane Stephens).

As tennis spread beyond the usual strongholds, recent champs have come from Belgium and Belgrade, from Wuhan and Minsk. As more countries have become home to elite players, the tournaments have followed. In 1997 there were 29 tournaments held in the U.S. Today there are 14. Good-bye Hilton Head, Scottsdale and Chicago. Hello, Chennai, Istanbul and Tianjin.

This mirrors macroeconomic trends. In 1960, U.S. GDP represented 40% of global GDP. By 2014 the U.S.'s economic contribution was half that. The free movement of capital, people and goods across the world has seen an unprecedented push-back recently, headlined first by Brexit and then by the U.S. presidential election.

At first tennis, too, tried to resist these forces. There were isolationist and nativist proposals, such as dividing the circuit into "regional tours." This way, as a U.S. tournament promoter puts it, "I would have players I could sell and not a field filled full of *-ovas* and *-enkas*." Thankfully that idea failed.

For all the tensions and missteps, globalized tennis has been a success, an exercise in free trade, in open society, in meritocracy distilled to its essence. The sport has penetrated new markets and availed itself to new consumers. Unlike other sports, tennis has the flexibility to move tournaments to emerging regions. When tennis wants a beachhead in Shanghai, it sanctions a new tournament

and the quality of the product can largely stay the same.

This planet-spanning has helped the core product. The heightened competition, the deepening talent pool, have made everyone better. It's also fostered innovation. If tennis players once left home in search of tax shelters, they now do it to seek out new training conditions and better instruction. In 2012, Serena Williams took on a French coach in part because she wanted "to see how the competition is working and thinking."

This all comes, of course, with an assist from technology. It's never been easier for fans to follow their favorite players. It's never been easier for players to become global brands. Rafael Nadal may play only three tournaments all year in the United States and two in Asia. But he can use social media to "scale," to connect with fans year-round and worldwide. The ATP Tour has 1.3 million Twitter followers; Nadal is closing in on 15 million. Likewise the social media reach of Roger Federer exceeds that of the ATP Tour, Tennis Channel and four majors combined.

In fact Federer is the encapsulation of a global sport. He's from Switzerland, keeps a residence in Dubai and has a charitable foundation focused on Africa. His coach is Croatian, his trainer Swiss, his agent American. Fluent in multiple languages, he doesn't limit himself to officially sanctioned events, having his own (wildly successful)

personal exhibition tour in South America and, this fall, founding the Laver Cup, a weekend event recalling golf's Ryder Cup that pits European players against their counterparts from the rest of the world.

The idea that a superstar—or any player—can ply their trade in any country, not only benefiting their own brand but also that of the entire sport and industry? That's a point that shouldn't be lost in today's climate. It all highlights a stubborn tennis irony: So often considered stodgy and transition-bound, a redoubt of the establishment, the sport has long possessed a mean progressive streak. Long before it was vogueish, Martina Navratilova and Arthur Ashe were among the first athletes to use their platforms for social and political activism. Thanks to Billie Jean King and the push for gender equity, tennis, alone among major sports, pays equal wages to women and men. And now tennis—first by accident and then by design—is again on the vanguard, this time for global trade and competitiveness.

This highlights another tennis irony: In a sport predicated on precise boundaries and lines, borders have never meant less or been more fungible. For our world's economies, the same should be true. □

Aryeh B. Bourkoff is the founder and CEO of LionTree LLC, a global investment and merchant bank, focused on media, technology and telecommunications.

GO
FIGURE

6

Straight wins by the Saints, after a 30-10 victory over the Bucs on Sunday. They are the third team since 1970 to win six in a row after an 0-2 start. The others—the 2007 Giants and the 1993 Cowboys—went on to Super Bowl titles.

119

Seconds Avalanche center Matt Duchene was on the ice during a game against the Islanders on Sunday before learning that he was part of a three-team trade that sent him to Ottawa.

\$10 M

Estimated amount Jim (Mattress Mack) McIngvale owes his customers, after promising a full refund to anyone who spent \$3,000 or more on a mattress at his Gallery Furniture store if the Astros won the World Series.





the world to me. Today I thought, Just be like Meb.”

And so, just days after a terrorist attack struck downtown Manhattan, it was Flanagan (left) who outpaced a tough women’s field, including three-time defending champion Mary Keitany of Kenya. Flanagan, a 36-year-old former track star who had battled a back injury for much of the past year, ran away with the victory, finishing with a time of 2:26:53 to become the first U.S. woman to

+ NYC MARATHON

STRIKING DISTANCE

Two U.S. legends leave their marks in New York

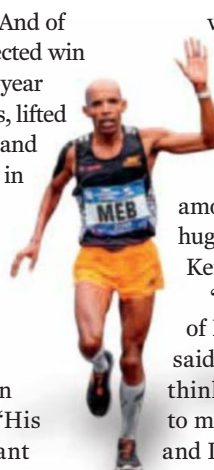
■ **ON SUNDAY, MEB KEFLEZIGHI** ran the last competitive marathon of his life. And though he crossed the finish line in Central Park in 11th place, with a time of 2:15:29, the 42-year-old distance

running star capped a remarkable career, 15 years after his first New York City Marathon.

Keflezighi (right), the only runner—male or female—to have won the New York City and Boston marathons as well as an Olympic marathon medal, has been at the center of many watershed moments in American running history. His silver medal in Athens in 2004 was the first Olympic medal won by a U.S. man in the marathon since Frank Shorter’s silver in 1976, and

he won New York in 2009, just a year after he broke his hip during trials for the Beijing Olympics. And of course, his unexpected win in Boston in ’14, a year after the bombings, lifted up an entire city—and one fellow runner, in particular.

“He was a part of healing Boston, and that’s my hometown,” Shalane Flanagan said on Sunday. “His performance meant



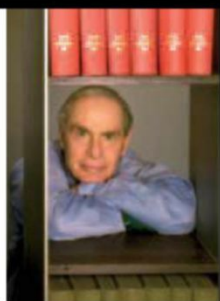
win the New York City Marathon since Miki Gorman in 1977. After Flanagan crossed the finish line, among the first people she hugged were members of Keflezighi’s family.

“I was thinking of Meb,” Flanagan said afterward. “I was thinking of how I wanted to make him proud today, and I think I did.”

TRIBUTE

GIL ROGIN (1929–2017)

■ The list of people who have edited *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, written dozens of stories for *SI* and *The New Yorker*, published two well-regarded novels, elicited praise from an illustrious contemporary (his stories are “ruthlessly exact and amazingly surreal and utterly convincing,” said John Updike) and been hailed by one eminent subject (“World’s greatest spatswritah!” said Muhammad Ali) is a short one. It’s one name deep.



Gil Rogin, who died last week at 87, started at *SI* as a copy boy in 1955 and was managing editor from ’79 to ’84. He retired in ’93 as corporate editor of Time Inc., having also edited *DISCOVER* and launched *Vibe*, with Quincy Jones.

In 2010, upon the reissue of Rogin’s novels, *What Happens Next?* and *Preparations for the Ascent*, longtime *SI* scribe Franz Lidz wrote, “He has been called wry, introspective, visionary, meddlesome, persnickety, generous, crazy, curious, capricious, restless, passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and perpetually bewildered—in short, an editor.”

A man of many words, Rogin needed only one to strike fear in writers: “Ugh!” scribbled in red pencil in the margin of their copy. Mentor to many writers, tormentor to a few, Rogin was both to most.

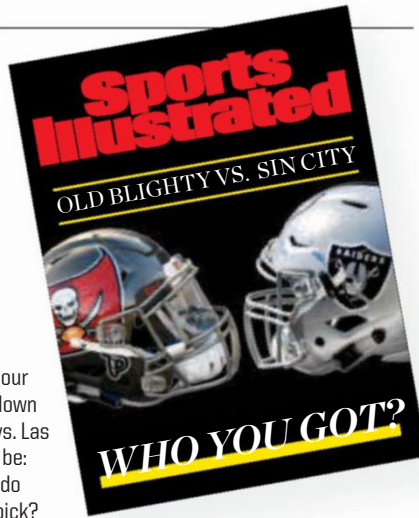
A bird-watcher and swimmer (a mile every single day), he was open to stories about any sport. As an editor, he would travel to the city hosting the Super Bowl but watch the game on his hotel-room television because that was how readers viewed the event. As a writer he connected with boxing best. His profiles of Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson and Sugar Ray Robinson are masterpieces.

“I’ve had a pretty good life,” said Rogin a few years ago. “In many ways, an extraordinary life.”

His ninth comeback culminates in Woods's fifth Masters title. The cover takes on an unintended second meaning, however, when Woods has to undergo surgery again after slipping a disk getting into the green jacket.



» Admittedly, a much safer prediction than our Super Bowl LIV showdown (London Buccaneers vs. Las Vegas Raiders) would be: What will the Browns do with the first overall pick?

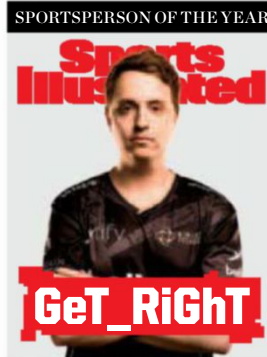


2020 VISION

You may have heard: SI can totally predict the future. Emboldened by our prescient 2014 call on the Astros, we've gone back to the crystal ball to bring you the headlines that may seem shocking now but won't seem crazy in three years' time. Trust us.



« The pro- vs. anti-protester debate reaches its natural conclusion as presidential voters are asked to choose between Papa John (slogan: Better ingredients. Better pizza. Better country) and Gregg Popovich (slogan: *icy stare*)?



» The gamer memorably shares his secret to success and happiness: *Up-up-down-down-left-right-left-right-A-B-B-A-start*

THEY SAID IT

“APOLOGIES, WE ACTUALLY RAN OUT OF FIREWORKS.”



@Eagles

Philadelphia's official Twitter account, explaining the absence of pyrotechnics after the team's seventh touchdown in a 51-23 win over the Broncos.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Goalkeeper Max Crocombe of Salford City, in England's sixth-tier league, was shown a red card for urinating near the stands in the 86th minute of a match.

Knicks

They actually climbed above .500 (5-4) after 7' 3" Kristaps Porzingis dropped 40 on the Pacers on Sunday, his seventh game of 30 or more.



Giants

They have their worst midseason record in 37 years (1-7) after their worst home loss in 19 (51-17 on Sunday to the Rams).

DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (WOODS); TOM WALTON/CON SPORTS/SWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BUCCANEERS HELMET); FREDERICK BREEDON/GETTY IMAGES (RAIDERS HELMET); BETTMAN/GETTY IMAGES (ASTROS); GETTY IMAGES (POP-DOCH); DENISE TRUSCELLI/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (PAPA JOHN); ROB TRINGALI/EALES; TWITTER (CROCOCOMBE)



Life gets plain if you don't add flavor.
Life's tasty. Crunch on.





IMPRESSIVE LINEAGE

■ **FORGIVE NATALIE CHOU** for having a fangirl moment. The 6' 1" sophomore Baylor guard gets positively giddy at the mention of the Nets' Jeremy Lin—even more so when she thinks about the possibility of meeting him. “I would say, ‘I’m a huge fan, you’re amazing, you’re doing great,’” Chou, 19, says with a giggle.

Lin isn’t just some player Chou looks up to. Like him, she is changing the perception of Asian-American basketball players. Chou was born in Texas, but her mom, Quanli Li, grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and was a member of Beijing’s best girls’ team, which led to Quanli being moved away from her family to train with the national team when she was 13. By 18 she was playing professionally in China.

One thing Quanli had was basketball, and so she became her daughter’s coach. “We got into a lot of fights,” Chou says. “We wouldn’t talk. It was hard; usually with coaches, you just see them in practice, but then you can go home. With my mom, I was with her 24/7.” (Natalie did get a break from Mom when Natalie played for NBA veteran Jason Terry on his Lady Jets AAU team from sixth through ninth grades.)

All those grueling

Asian-Americans made up just 2.4% of collegiate female athletes in the latest study by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports.

Ultimately she moved to Texas in the mid-1990s with her husband, Joseph, who was studying at Lamar University in Beaumont. Three years later Natalie was born. “They didn’t really have anything, they didn’t know anyone, they didn’t speak English that well,” Chou says.

workouts paid off. At Plano West High, Chou was a McDonald’s All-American in 2016. Even with that success, though, she didn’t always command the respect of her opponents. “In middle school,” Chou says, “[defenders] were like, *Oh, O.K., I got her.* They thought [guarding me]

would be easy—but that fueled my fire. I wanted to show them, *You don’t know what you’re talking about.*”

As a freshman last season Chou averaged 4.7 points off the bench, and she led Baylor in three-point

percentage (42.3). She hopes that by playing for a top D-I program, she can inspire more Asian-Americans to get involved in college athletics. According to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, Asian-Americans made up just 2.4% of female athletes across all three collegiate divisions in 2015–16, the most recent year for which data is available. In men’s sports, the number was even lower: 1.8%. “My Asian-American friends, they love basketball, but their main focus is academics,” says Chou. “Branching out culturally and excelling in both would be a great opportunity.”

Chou is expected to play a bigger role this year for the No. 3-ranked Bears, and she should get a lot of open looks with 6’ 7” Kalani Brown and 6’ 4” Lauren Cox in the frontcourt. And when she gets it: “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” she says. “You don’t see a lot of us. But once we’re out there, you better watch out.”

—Jeremy Fuchs





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PIE AND MIGHTY

The best sweetener for your NFL Thanksgiving viewing

■ **FOR MILLIONS, THANKSGIVING DAY** is defined by two treats: NFL football and delicious pie. To honor these great fall customs we asked one pie shop from each of the three cities hosting NFL games this Thanksgiving to provide us a sample for a pie-tasting contest. From the Detroit area, Achatz Handmade Pie Co. sent its pumpkin praline; Livin' the Pie Life in Arlington, Va., offered its *Southern* pumpkin praline; and Emporium Pies in Dallas submitted its Drunken Nut (a bourbon pecan). The winner: Heather Sheire at Livin' the Pie Life. Her confection is well-balanced with a sweet, crunchy topping and a smooth filling. Follow the recipe and it will make any game better—especially if it includes the unpalatable 49ers.

1 PREHEAT the oven to 400° F.

2 PLACE the ingredients for the praline topping in a food processor and process until the mixture is the

consistency of coarse sand. Refrigerate until ready to use.

3 WHISK together pumpkin purée, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup brown sugar and 3 large eggs in a medium bowl until

smooth. Next, whisk in the cream, vanilla, rum, cinnamon, ginger, cloves and salt.

4 POUR the pumpkin filling into an unbaked pie shell.

5 SPRINKLE the praline topping over the pumpkin filling.

5 BAKE for 15 minutes at 400°. Then, turn the oven down to 375° and continue to bake for 35 to 45 more minutes. The pie is done when the center is puffy and the praline topping is browned.

Recipe courtesy of Livin' the Pie Life in Arlington, Va. For their homemade pie crust recipe, along with recipes from Achatz in Michigan and Dallas's Emporium Pies, visit SI.com/eats.



INGREDIENTS

SOUTHERN PUMPKIN PRALINE PIE (SERVES 8)

PRALINE TOPPING

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup packed light-brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 Tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch cubes
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pecans, coarsely chopped

PUMPKIN FILLING

- 1 small can (15 oz.) pumpkin puree
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup light brown sugar, packed
- 3 large eggs
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream or whipping cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 Tablespoons quality amber or dark rum
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ginger
- small pinch of cloves
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt

EASIER THAN EXPLAINING
SOCIAL MEDIA TO
GRANDMA.



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Stop*

THE STUFF
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TRIBUTE

FRED BECKEY (1923–2017)

■ **A climber** and a writer, a mountaineer and a chronicler, Fred Beckey had the bravery to ascend the world's highest peaks and the eloquence to capture their beauty in words. In his history with *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, he was both author and subject. In 1956 he wrote about two climbers in the French and Swiss Alps. Seven years later he appeared in *FACES IN THE CROWD* for making the first ascent of the north wall of Mount Slesse in British Columbia. Beckey would write multiple books on mountaineering, and as a climber he had summited Denali, Mount Kilimanjaro and Monte Rosa, among others. Beckey died in Seattle of congestive heart failure. He was 94.

—J.F.



Adanna Rollins | *Carrollton, Texas* | *Volleyball*

Adanna, a senior at Hebron High, had 19 kills and 12 digs in a five-set victory that snapped No. 2 Southlake Carroll's 18-match winning streak. Through 42 matches she has 507 digs and 477 kills. Last year Adanna had 443 kills and 227 digs and led the Hawks to their second straight Class 6A title. She was named tournament MVP.



Aidan Apodaca | *Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.* | *Soccer*

Apodaca, a senior at Division II California Baptist, netted a school-record five goals in a 5–0 win over Northwest Nazarene. Two weeks earlier he scored four times in a 7–0 win over Cal State–San Marcos. Through 16 games Apodaca has 26 goals and 55 points. Last season six of his nine goals were game-winners, eighth best in D-II.



Davis Lawley | *Fargo, N.D.* | *Tennis*

Davis, a senior at Fargo South High, defeated Michael Janes of Bismarck Legacy 6–1, 6–0 to win the state championship. Davis finished the season 23–0, losing only four games out of 280, and led the Bruins to their second title in three years. As a sophomore he also won the singles championship, the first in 20 years at the school.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by JEREMY FUCHS



Carissa Gehman | *Holtwood, Pa.* | *Field Hockey*

Gehman, a senior forward at Division III Messiah College, had her third hat trick this season in a 4–0 win over Division II defending champ Shippensburg. Four days earlier she scored a school-record five goals in a 5–1 defeat of Stevenson. Last year Carissa's 28 goals ranked second in the division and she was named D-III tournament MVP.



Heath Williams | *Clarksville, Tenn.* | *Football*

Heath, a junior quarterback at Northeast High, threw for 364 yards and seven touchdowns in a 46–19 win over West Creek. He had four TD passes in a 57–35 victory over Dyer County the previous week. Through 10 games Heath has completed 63.5% of his throws, for 2,100 yards and 25 scores. His mother is R&B singer Shae Williams.



Summer Yates | *Pasco, Wash.* | *Soccer*

Summer, a senior forward at Chiawana High, had four goals in the first half of an 8–2 win over Kennewick. Through 13 games she has 28 goals and seven assists, after racking up 30 goals and 10 assists last season. A Washington commit and member of the U-19 national team, Summer played 20 minutes in the U.S.'s 5–0 final win over Iran.

Nominate Now ▼

To submit a candidate for *Faces in the Crowd*, email faces@si.com.
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.

The Case for ...

THE GREEK FREAK

BY ANDREW SHARP

■ **IF YOU** think of superstar athletes like stock, there was a time when Giannis Inc. could've been purchased at a reasonable price. He of course had potential, but there were early questions about his jumper, his hoops IQ and his supporting cast in Milwaukee. His peers had more pedigree. Even as Antetokounmpo established himself, deciding whether you'd invest in Karl-Anthony Towns or Giannis, or Anthony Davis or Giannis, were difficult decisions. Toward the end of last year, Giannis stock was expensive, but nobody really considered him the future of the economy. Now that's over.

Giannis is Google. Giannis is Amazon. Take his numbers so far: 31.0 points per game, 9.9 rebounds, 5.0 assists, 1.7 steals, 1.4 blocks, 58.3% shooting.

The Bucks have slowed down after a 3-1 start, including a sobering 19-point loss to Russell Westbrook and the Thunder on Halloween. But even in the worst Milwaukee performance of the year, Antetokounmpo finished with 28 points on 9-of-14 shooting from the field. Every Bucks game, he's played like LeBron at the end of the 2007 Pistons playoff series.

It raises the question: If this is what Giannis has become in the regular season, what will Playoff Giannis look like?

It is probably premature, but after roughly three weeks, the most important development

of the 2017-18 season is that it's now clear: Giannis Antetokounmpo will be the most unstoppable player in basketball within three years. He's like a hybrid of LeBron James and Kevin Garnett, floating somewhere between point guard and center, and making everyone else look kind of hopeless.

He doesn't have the unlimited shooting range of his peers, like

the Knicks' Kristaps Porzingis or the Brow, but he's more mobile and has a better handle. People wonder how big men will adapt in this small-ball era—what would Hakeem Olajuwon look like today? Shaq? Kareem?—and Giannis is the most convincing answer we've seen so far. He's using length instead of strength, gliding to the rim and using an 88-inch wingspan to finish over anyone put in front of him.

Of course, there are dozens of Giannis questions to consider next, but they all assume his ascendancy. Among them: Is Jason Kidd the right coach for him? How much can Giannis really win with a team that's still counting on Tony Snell, Malcolm Brogdon and Matthew Dellavedova as key members?

On a larger scale: What kind of cultural impact will there be if the best player in basketball is a Greek immigrant of Nigerian descent? And in the modern NBA, where shooting is by far the most important skill, how will the league respond to a player who averages 35 per game while rarely straying outside of eight feet?

For now, it's acceptable to be too delirious to think rationally. The only lucid Giannis take I have after three weeks is that I hope he never develops a reliable jump shot.

Watching him do Kevin Durant-like things would be great, sure, but it wouldn't be as entertaining to watch him dominate in familiar, less-surreal ways. Somehow Antetokounmpo doesn't need to conform to the rest of the sport to command it, and that's part of the spectacle. In the shadow of the superteams launching threes all over the league, Giannis isn't following. He's working with a blueprint we've never seen before. □



BY THE NUMBERS

×

31.0

Points per game, through Sunday.

5

Double doubles through the Bucks' first nine games this season.

82.6

Field goal percentage at the rim.

H-TOWN

THE ASTROS' FIRST TITLE WAS 55 YEARS IN THE MAKING, BUT IT CAME TOGETHER JUST THE WAY THE FRONT OFFICE TURNED BASEBALL'S LOSS LEADERS INTO CHAMPIONS IS STILL ONLY BEGINNING TO





HEROES

ICE (AND SI) EXPECTED. AND THE MASTER PLAN THAT, THROUGH DEFT DRAFTS AND DEALS AND DATA MINING, TAKE SHAPE. BRACE YOURSELF—THIS TEAM IS JUST GETTING STARTED | *by BEN REITER*

WORK YOUR CORE

Still just 27 and under team control through 2019, presumptive AL MVP Altuve is one of Houston's potent top-of-the-order building blocks.

Photograph by **Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle/AP**



hasn't stopped. He was named the World Series MVP moments after the Astros' 5-1 thrashing of the Dodgers in Game 7, and there was no other choice. He had eight extra base hits, a World Series record. He accumulated 29 total bases, another record. He hit five home runs, tying a record. He became the only player to homer in four straight games of a Series—the last four. Everything ran through him. “A crazy journey,” Springer said amid the cigar smoke and champagne fumes in the Dodger Stadium clubhouse, four hours after he had chased Yu Darvish with a two-run, second-inning blast. “A wild ride. The organization has come so far in three years.”

IT ALL SPRANG from Springer. Anyone with the Astros will tell you that. ♪ When Jeff Luhnow and his crew of rebuilders arrived in Houston before the 2012 season, wielding both sledgehammers and X-Acto knives, George Springer was already on site. Not in Houston; he was still two years from reaching the big leagues, playing centerfield for the High A Lancaster (Calif.) JetHawks after Ed Wade's ousted regime had drafted him 11th in June '11, Spinger was the shiny copper piping that anyone would know to salvage from even the most dilapidated structure before the wrecking ball hits.

Second baseman José Altuve and lefthander Dallas Keuchel were there too, and the new leadership was smart enough not to dispense with them either—even though back then they looked like little more than a slap hitter and a soft tosser. But Springer, who had battled through a childhood stutter to become a polished prospect at Connecticut, was a five-tool phenom. If the members of the front office allowed themselves to dream of a championship, he was the person they imagined raising the trophy.

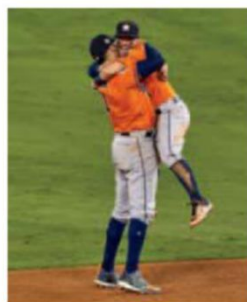
When *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* predicted four Junes ago that the event would occur this autumn, Springer graced the cover, not only because his swing was so photogenic—especially in the Astros' throwback, rainbow-striped uniforms—but also because he was the most likely player to make the moment happen. And he did.

Springer, 28, scuffled badly through a victory over the Yankees in the ALCS, and that continued through Game 1 of the World Series against the Dodgers. In those eight games he had just three singles in 30 at bats, with four walks against 11 strikeouts. But manager A.J. Hinch continued to believe in Springer—the Astros once sold T-shirts in their gift shops that read simply *PROCESS*—and kept him at the top of the lineup. “George Springer has way more good days than bad days,” Hinch said before Game 2 in Los Angeles, “and way more good stretches than bad stretches.”

Then a good stretch began for Springer, one that still

THE DISTURBING part, for the rest of baseball, is that the Astros' road to success was not designed to end now. In 2014, Springer's rookie season, they lost 92 games—a welcome development after a historically appalling run in which they had dropped 106, then 107, then 111. (“Through the lean years,” Keuchel says, “I wouldn't have even wanted to come as a fan.”) But if their 162-324 record between '11 and '13 represented the nadir, then '17 alone was never meant to represent the summit, but the first peak in a dense range.

It's harder than ever to win back-to-back titles, in a wild-card era with an exhausting and randomizing playoff structure.



THREE'S COMPANY

The Astros built around Springer, who tied a Series record with five homers; Altuve (above right), who hit .310 in October; and Correa (1), who slugged .562.

The Yankees won three in a row, from 1998 through 2000, but they stand alone since Bud Selig expanded the post-season to three rounds in 1994, then four in 2012. If any team is built to repeat, though, it's Houston.

Start with the offense, MLB's highest-scoring, which came close to accomplishing the rare feat of finishing first in homers (the Astros trailed the Yankees by three) and last in strikeouts (which they were), in an era in which most teams must accept the tradeoff of whiffs for power. Their first four batters—Springer, third baseman Alex Bregman,

AL THELMANS (SPRINGER); ROBERT BECK (CORREA AND ALTUVE)



SPRINGER
4





“YOU LOOK AT *every position*,” SAID BELTRÁN, “YOU SEE GUYS THAT CAN BE IMPACT PLAYERS FOR A LONG TIME.”

Altuve and shortstop Carlos Correa—are all 28 or younger. Bregman, who already has an extra-innings World Series walk-off, and Correa, whose own storybook month ended with a televised on-field proposal to his girlfriend after Game 7, are just 23. Altuve—the likely AL MVP—won’t reach free agency until 2020, Springer until ’21, Correa until ’22 and Bregman until ’23, so far off that the World Series might then be between cyborgs.

In fact, Houston’s only free-agent hitters are outfielder Cameron Maybin, a late-season addition to the bench, and the 40-year-old Carlos Beltrán, who for \$16 million this year provided more in the way of wisdom and discipline than production—though his wisdom and discipline were invaluable—and who departs, perhaps for retirement, with the ring he’s sought for so long. “It only took 20 years

to get to this position,” Beltrán said on the field after Game 7, a championship cap on his head and his young son, who kept playing with his father’s ear, in his arms. “It’s a great future here. You look at the ball club, you look at every position, you see guys that can be impact players for a long time.”

With a payroll that, at just under \$150 million, ranked 16th in baseball—the Dodgers’, at \$265 million, was 77% higher—the Astros have the wherewithal to add a major free agent, someone with Beltrán’s savvy but a livelier bat. In the short term, Hinch can get increased use out of multitool outfielder Derek Fisher, 24; in the slightly longer term he’ll have 20-year-old Kyle Tucker, a top 10 prospect. Both bat from the left side, which is important, as the core four at the top of the order all swing from the

TIM BRADBURY/GETTY IMAGES (CELEBRATION); ROBERT BECK (VERLANDER)



NEWSTARS ARE BORN

In case the world champs didn't have enough young talent on their roster, more help is on the way from a farm system ranked in the top 10.



KYLE TUCKER
OF, 20

More well-rounded than his older brother, Astros minor leaguer Preston, Tucker could arrive in the majors as soon as next year.



FORREST WHITLEY
RHP, 20

The 6' 7", 240-pound starter has a power curve, a mid-80s slider, a solid change and a fastball that already hits 97 mph.



FRANCIS MARTES
RHP, 21

He struggled in 32 MLB games, but his mid-90s fastball and power curve should play well once his command improves.



YORDAN ÁLVAREZ
OF/1B, 21

A 6' 5", 225-pound lefty with power and a great grasp of the strike zone, he hit .351 in Cuba's top league—as a 17-year-old.



DEREK FISHER
OF, 24

Before scoring the winning run in Game 5 as a pinch runner, the speedy slugger destroyed Triple A pitching last season.



HORSE TRADE

With the pricey pickup of Verlander (near left) just before the trade deadline, the Astros had an ace they could ride to the finish line.

Houston acquired from the Tigers with two seconds to spare before the Aug. 31 deadline. A lot was made of the contract the Astros were assuming: \$28 million in each of the next two seasons for a pitcher who turns 35 in February. (The Tigers are picking up \$8 million per year.) But here's Houston's way of looking at it: If Verlander, who went 9–1 with a 1.66 ERA for Houston in the regular season and playoffs, were a free agent this winter, they couldn't possibly sign him, nor anyone like him, for just two seasons. Even accounting for the three talented prospects the Astros had to give up, it was a good deal.

After Game 7, Luhnow and Verlander—who was then just three days from marrying the supermodel Kate Upton in Italy—walked together off the field and into a clubhouse that had the air quality not of Tuscany in autumn but of a Beijing bar in July, not content to celebrate just one title. “Two more

to go,” the GM told his still new ace.

And then: the bullpen. Something's got to be done about the bullpen. A weakness during the season—the relievers' ERA of 4.27 ERA ranked 17th in baseball—it was an outright liability during the playoffs, when its ERA spiked to 5.40. Still, Ken Giles almost certainly won't continue to be the Ken Giles of October, during which he yielded 10 runs in 7½ innings and coughed up his closer's role. Collin McHugh and Brad Peacock could relinquish their spots in the rotation and excel in the pen. Joe Musgrove, awful during the playoffs (8.10 ERA) but a shutdown reliever during the second half (1.44), should continue to develop; he's only 24. The Astros could certainly use a lefty, maybe two, to replace Francisco Liriano and Tony Sipp. The Rockies' Jake McGee, the Royals' Mike Minor and Tony Watson—who

right. That's no coincidence. Everything is by design.

So consider the rotation covered, too. Keuchel and Charlie Morton—the previously unremarkable 33-year-old righty who began the season by signing a two-year, \$14 million free-agent contract that astonished observers, and ended it by throwing four relief innings of one-run, two-hit ball in Game 7—are both on board for next year. All-Star Lance McCullers Jr., 24, the curveballing Game 7 starter, is under control until 2022. Behind them is a pair of quickly rising prospects: 20-year-old Forrest Whitley, a 6' 7" righty who struck out nearly 14 batters per nine in the minors this year; and righty Francis Martes, 21, who pitched mostly in relief for the big club this summer after being deemed the game's 15th-best prospect by Baseball America last winter.

The key, in the near term, is Justin Verlander, whom

BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (TUCKER); CLIFF WELCH/ICM SPORTS/WIREIMAGE.COM (WHITLEY); JUAN DELMONTE/CONTOURSPORTS/WIREIMAGE.COM (MARTES); BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (ÁLVAREZ); MIKE JAMES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (FISHER)



THE BLUE HORIZON

The Dodgers came within one win of ending a 29-year title drought. Their current minor leaguers might spell a different ending next time



WALKER BUEHLER
RHP, 23

After Tommy John surgery in 2015, he bounced back to hit 99 mph on his fastball, with strong breaking pitches.



ALEX VERDUGO
OF, 21

An advanced lefty hitter for his age, Verdugo batted .314 at Triple A and, with Buehler, could be in L.A. next season.



YADIER ÁLVAREZ
RHP, 21

The 6' 3", 175-pound Cuban defector is inconsistent—but he can already reach triple digits and has a wipeout slider.



JEREN KENDALL
OF, 21

L.A.'s first-round pick in 2017 is a speedy lefthanded hitter with great tools and a compact (though whiff-prone) swing.



YUSNIEL DÍAZ
OF, 21

The Dodgers spent \$31 million in 2015 on the Cuban prospect, a patient line-drive hitter who has speed and range in the field.

watched Game 7 from L.A.'s bullpen—are the cream of the free-agent crop; their representatives ought to answer calls from a Houston area code on the first ring this winter.

The Astros have something else, too, and that's the approach they promoted when they had nothing else going for them: their Process. Call it Astrobball. Yes, it relies heavily on metrics and probabilistic modeling, but it was never as soulless as its critics—and there were many—believed.

THE FRONT OFFICES'S stroke of genius was that it realized that hard data meant a lot, and it concocted all sorts of new ways to harness it. But a reliance on data as an answer, as opposed to a tool, has led all kinds of organizations astray in recent years. What the Astros' scouts saw and processed mattered just as

much as spin rates and launch angles. That's why Houston ended up with players like Bregman and Correa, who are never afraid, despite their youth. When the team chose Correa No. 1 in 2012—such a shock that their own public relations staff didn't have a bio prepared for him—it was because scouting staff like Mike Elias pushed for him. Giving Beltrán \$16 million dollars not just for his bat, but also for the mathematically unquantifiable ways his leadership and experience would seep into the clubhouse, was another such move.

Luhnow, now assistant GM Elias, special assistants Kevin Goldstein (the scouting guru) and Sig Mejdal (the data guru)—not to mention an analytics department, self-nicknamed the Nerd Cave, which has now swelled to nine members from four just three years ago—will remain. The only way any of them is likely to leave now

MIKE JAMES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (BUEHLER); RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (VERDUGO); LARRY GOREN/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (ÁLVAREZ); DÍAZ); ZACHARY LUCY/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (KENDALL)



PARADE GROUNDS

With Bregman (2, whose single won Game 5, left), the double-play combo of Altuve and Correa, and Morton (below near left, who locked down Game 7), fans in Houston may have more to celebrate.



as they pile up losses: the Padres, Phillies, White Sox.

But for now, the Astros are the kings, led by Springer, the young man whom they always thought could pull the sword from the stone. In the delirious clubhouse, Luhnow—that modern Merlin, wearing not a pointed hat but ski goggles—stood feet away from the Series MVP, who was surrounded by reporters.

“When Springer arrived in the big leagues, in ’14 . . . well, there’s a *Seinfeld* episode, “The Summer of George,” the GM said—although Springer would spend the dog days doing the precise opposite of the torpid George Costanza. “He infused such great energy into our team that from that point I knew it’d be up, not down.”

Someone passed Springer the Commissioner’s Trophy, 30 pounds of sterling silver with 30 gold-plated flags, one of which rises higher than the rest. He hoisted it over his head and shouted to his teammates, “Here it is!” They all roared back. □

is if they’re offered the top job elsewhere, as Luhnow’s former top assistant David Stearns was by the Brewers. That, of course, is a greater likelihood now than it was even a week ago.

The path forward will become more treacherous in other ways. With no more 100-loss seasons, the Astros won’t pick near the top of any draft—where they grabbed Correa and Bregman (No. 2 in 2015)—anytime soon. The Cubs, who seemed poised to take multiple titles after winning last year (not unlike Houston now), remain potent. The Dodgers, with their mature talent, astute front office and seemingly limitless spending power, will be back in October soon. The Yankees, one win short of a World Series appearance in a season in which they weren’t even planning to make the playoffs, are coming. And so in a few years will be those teams that are playing Astrobball, stockpiling talent



To buy SI’s special Astros World Series commemorative issue, go to backissues.si.com

EZRA SHAW/BETTY IMAGES (TOP); ROBERT BECK (BREGMAN, ALTUVE AND CORREA); AL TIELEMANS (MORTON); KAREN WARREN/HOUSTON CHRONICLE/AP (PARADE)



WITH GREAT POW

...comes something **JULIUS PEPPERS** has never been comfortable with: attention. But the



ER . . .



BY JONATHAN JONES

Photographs by
Simon Bruty

→ **FIRST JULIUS PEPPERS** thrust his left hand into 338-pound Donovan Smith's chest and drove the Buccaneers' offensive tackle backward. As Jameis Winston stepped up in the pocket, Peppers swiped his blocker aside and lunged for the quarterback, simultaneously wrapping his victim around the waist and using his right hand to tip the ball away for a strip-sack. It should have been a moment of absolute joy for the 37-year-old veteran of 16 years. The takedown, his 151st, moved the Panthers' defensive end to No. 4 on the all-time list, past Chris Doleman, with only Kevin Greene (160), Reggie White (198) and Bruce Smith (200) ahead of him.

But that highlight from Week 8, on Oct. 29, also put him in an uncomfortable position: After the game, Carolina coach Ron Rivera awarded Peppers the game ball in that humid visitors' locker room, and that meant that, per custom, he would have to give a speech. And that's a problem.

"I get bashful in the spotlight," says Peppers. "Even at home or at a birthday party, I hate that stuff. I don't want no surprise birthday parties—everybody who knows me well knows [that]."

Setting aside his self-consciousness, Peppers's Week 8 address was pretty standard postvictory fare. *Stick with each other. Believe. Keep working. Let's do this the rest of the year.* In the end, even with a stumble and a little hesitation in the delivery, the team was engaged with his remarks. His work on the field had put him in this position before.

Just as the descriptors "monster" or "freak" have often been used for the 6' 7", 295-pound nine-time Pro Bowler, so too have "quiet" and "guarded." This is how a guy can wreck the NFL for nearly two decades—Winston was eight when Peppers bagged his first pro QB—and still fly under the radar everywhere but on the scouting report. Peppers has at least seven sacks in 15 of his 16 seasons; he's the most feared pass rusher this century. And yet there's a good chance you've never heard the guy say a word.

Early on, "people mistook his quietness for maybe not being

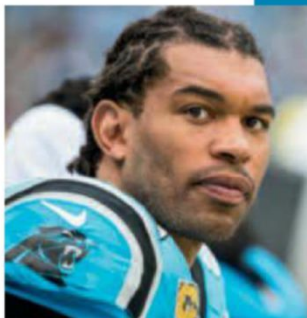
Panthers' QB-hungry future Hall of Famer has no problem with responsibility

that smart—and that was not the case at all,” says Brian Foster, 50, who has known the D-end since Peppers was in middle school in Bailey, N.C. “He knew exactly what he was doing and did a real good job listening. I think that’s why he still keeps a small circle of friends.”

Foster, who would later be Peppers’s high school defensive coordinator (his wife, Kim, was also Julius’s art teacher), thought the teenager needed toughening up, so he would pick him up on Sunday afternoons for games of one-on-one basketball and needle him on defense, until one day Peppers landed an elbow that floored his elder. “I deserved every bit of it,” Foster says.

“I’d been here for forever,” Peppers says of his first stint in Carolina. “And there was a lot of attention. IT JUST WASN’T WHAT I WANTED.”

The Legend of Julius Peppers grew at Southern Nash High, where he ran the anchor leg of the state-champion 4 × 400 relay team and placed second in the triple jump . . . when he weighed 240 pounds. He tore up O-lines on defense and moonlighted at tailback, rushing for 46 touchdowns over four years. Later, at North Carolina, he ran sprints with the Tar Heels’ defensive backs, and won. In his first NFL stop, with the Panthers, teammates would rewind and gush over tape of him taking a cut block, spinning 360° in the air and landing on his feet, only to continue his pursuit. As a Bear, one teammate remembers him tossing a lineman five yards sideways during a one-on-one drill. Linebacker Luke Kuechly, when he first saw Peppers upon his return to Carolina this offseason, remarked simply, “Man, *that’s Julius Peppers.*”



C HARLOTTE, as a pro sports city, was just a teenager when Peppers first arrived; fans hadn’t yet figured out exactly how to react to a superstar athlete when in 2002 the Panthers, the only professional team in town, selected the Tar Heels’ junior with the No. 2 pick in the draft.

Peppers won Rookie of the Year and helped Carolina to its first (and his only) Super Bowl the following season. The native son was delivering, and teammates were reaping the benefits. “I don’t know if I’ve ever told him this,” says Mike Rucker, who spent six years rushing passers opposite Peppers (and who previously held the Panthers’ sack record), “but to turn on the film after a game and to see him get double-teamed [while] I had a one-on-one—I felt guilty if I didn’t get a sack or didn’t get pressure. That made me dig even deeper.”

Peppers got to the quarterback 53½ times in his first five seasons, and yet Panthers owner Jerry Richardson, a self-made man who accumulated his wealth as the CEO of a fast-food group, must have figured his star needed a public kick in the rear. This was a misread.

“Julius, your time is now,” Richardson told Peppers at the 2007 re-

irement ceremony for safety Mike Minter. “This is your time to step up and show leadership. I’m not talking about sacks. I’m talking about *leadership.*”

Immediately coach John Fox tried to downplay the comments. Peppers, after a week of media silence, followed his coach’s lead; he didn’t make much of Richardson’s words, but suddenly he was being asked to be someone he wasn’t.

There are a number of theories about why Peppers left Carolina as a free agent following the 2009 season. He didn’t like his position coach. He and the Panthers were off by a few million bucks on an extension. He didn’t want to play under the franchise tag. But the one Peppers will cop to is that he just needed to get the hell out of the Tar Heel State. He’d grown tired of all the Jet Skis slowing down in front of his 8,810-square-foot Lake Norman mansion, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

“Yeah, it did [wear on me],” he says, “because I’d been here for forever. And there was a lot of attention. Not that I wasn’t ready to deal with it—it just wasn’t what I wanted.”

In Chicago, in 2010, he became the highest-paid defensive player in NFL history, but he was far from the most popular. The Bears had Brian Urlacher and Lance Briggs and Charles Tillman in a locker room where “they only let certain people—good people, real men [like Julius]—come in,” says Lovie Smith, Chicago’s coach during those years.

Peppers led with his actions rather than his words for four years until the Bears decided to go younger and cheaper. He then did the same for the Packers for three seasons, until management in Green Bay made the same decision Chicago had. (Note: After ranking in the top 10 in sacks each year with Peppers, Green Bay is 29th in 2017.) In both stops, at two storied franchises, Peppers found he wasn’t *the guy*, and that suited him just fine.

What didn’t suit him was the cold weather, and so he took up a permanent offseason residence near Miami, in Coral Gables. “You’d go out there and see [then Heat guard] Ray Allen at the

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COMPETITION

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LIVE
THE GAME



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grocery store,” Peppers says. “You’d see Dwyane Wade driving down the street, LeBron James over there. It’s not a big deal for someone to see me or know who I am. It’s a cool thing.”

Julius Peppers moved to South Florida to blend in.

VON MILLER is selling you body wash. Clay Matthews is asking you to purchase shampoo. J.J. Watt is hawk-ing an energy drink. Defensive players may be more marketable today than when Peppers broke into the league, but he has had his share of business opportunities too. Soft drink purveyors, grocery store chains and credit card companies all vied to make him their pitchman. Memorabilia groups sought his time for autograph sessions. He always declined.

“There were times I was scratching my head at the money he turned down to do things that would take a couple hours,” says Carl Carey, Peppers’s longtime friend and agent. “He felt he was compensated well for his work on the field, and so he focused on that.”

With 3½ more sacks this season—after returning to Carolina as a free agent this summer he has 7½ through nine games for the 6–3 Panthers, tied for eighth in the NFL—a salary bump will kick in, pushing Peppers’s career earnings beyond \$160 million. He’s never really needed endorsement cash, but it would have been easy. *Forbes* has estimated that Watt brought in \$7 million in 2015 alone from his various deals.

“I didn’t want to do media or appearances,” Peppers says. “You’ve got to do this and that, fly here to film something. I didn’t want to cut into my time for that. You can’t pay for your peace of mind and your sanity.”

Israel Idonije, a former defensive linemate with the Bears, remembers seeing Peppers turn down an offer of a free car from a high-end Chicago dealership in exchange for a handful of appearances. No one becomes fast friends with Peppers, but over three years of sharing a locker room, the two grew to trust one another. They caught up in late October, when the Panthers visited Chicago (Idonije retired in 2014 but keeps a residence in the area), and huddled over a joint commercial real estate venture, which Peppers got into after attending a symposium at the University of Michigan. They also talked about another of Idonije’s projects, a free coding and computer engineering camp for kids from underserved Chicago communities, which Peppers wants to replicate in Charlotte.

Peppers has always been a thinker. Rucker describes him as well read; Idonije and Carey use him as a sounding board on social issues. But he didn’t tell anyone he’d protest during the national anthem in Week 3, two days after President Trump referred to anyone who “disrespected” the American flag as a “son of a bitch.”

In a way, Peppers was the loneliest protestor of all that Sunday. On some teams, handfuls of players took knees or raised fists; in other places, entire squads waited until after the anthem to take the field. But in Charlotte, Peppers alone stayed in the Panthers’ locker room during the anthem, even though it had been made clear that Richardson would frown upon any protest.

After the game, Peppers stood near his locker, sweat beading on his forehead and a slight tremble in his voice. He explained that his protest was “about me making a decision as a man on my own two feet.”

Here was a guy who shuns the spotlight, having to accept it to take a

RELISHING PEPPERS

When it comes to attacking the QB, it helps to have Julius Peppers (90, with Idonije) coming from the other side. Added together, the 113 sacks over the past 16 years by these guys, each of whom played opposite Peppers at D-end or outside linebacker, would make for one awesome teammate: That guy would rank 22nd on the all-time sacks list.

YEAR	TEAMMATE	TEAM	SACKS
2002	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	10
2003	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	12
2004	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	3½
2005	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	7½
2006	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	5
2007	MIKE RUCKER	CAR	3
2008	CHARLES JOHNSON	CAR	6
2009	TYLER BRAYTON	CAR	5
2010	ISRAEL IDONIJE	CHI	8
2011	ISRAEL IDONIJE	CHI	5
2012	ISRAEL IDONIJE	CHI	7½
2013	COREY WOOTTON	CHI	3
2014	CLAY MATTHEWS	GB	11
2015	MIKE NEAL	GB	4
2016	NICK PERRY	GB	11
2017	MARIO ADDISON	CAR	11½*

*PROJECTED SEASON TOTAL, BASED ON NINE GAMES



If you are a current or former owner or lessee of certain Honda and Nissan vehicles, you could get cash and other benefits from a class action settlement.

Si desea recibir esta notificación en español, llámenos o visite nuestra página web.

Settlements have been reached in a class action lawsuit alleging that consumers sustained economic losses because they purchased or leased vehicles from various auto companies that manufactured, distributed, or sold vehicles containing allegedly defective airbags manufactured by Takata Corporation and its affiliates. The Settlements include certain vehicles made by Honda and Nissan (the "Subject Vehicles"). Honda and Nissan deny any and all allegations of wrongdoing and the Court has not decided who is right.

If you have already received a separate recall notice for your Honda or Nissan vehicle and have not yet had your Takata airbag repaired, you should do so as soon as possible. When recalled Takata airbags deploy, they may spray metal debris toward vehicle occupants and may cause serious injury. Please see your original recall notices and www.AirBagRecall.com for further details.

Am I included in the proposed Settlements? The Settlements include the following persons and entities:

- Owners or lessees, as of September 19, 2017, of a Subject Vehicle that was distributed for sale or lease in the United States or any of its territories or possessions, and
- Former owners or lessees of a Honda Subject Vehicle that was distributed for sale or lease in the United States or any of its territories or possessions, who, between November 11, 2008 and September 19, 2017, sold or returned pursuant to a lease, a Subject Vehicle that was recalled before September 19, 2017, or
- Former owners or lessees of a Nissan Subject Vehicle that was distributed for sale or lease in the United States or any of its territories or possessions, who, between April 11, 2013 and September 19, 2017, sold or returned pursuant to a lease, a Subject Vehicle that was recalled before September 19, 2017.

A full list of the Honda and Nissan Subject Vehicles can be found at www.AutoAirbagSettlement.com. The Settlements do not involve claims of personal injury.

What do the Settlements provide? Honda and Nissan have agreed to Settlements with a combined value of approximately \$703 million, including a 10% credit for the Nissan Rental Car/Loaner Program and a 20% credit for the Honda Enhanced Rental Car/Loaner Program. The Settlement Funds will be used to pay for Settlement benefits and cover the costs of the Settlements over an approximately four-year period.

The Settlements offer several benefits for Class Members, including (1) payments for certain out-of-pocket expenses incurred related to a Takata airbag recall of a Subject Vehicle, (2) a Rental Car/Loaner Program while certain Subject Vehicles are awaiting repair, (3) an Outreach Program to maximize completion of the recall remedy, (4) additional cash payments to Class Members from residual settlement funds, if any remain, and (5) a Customer Support Program to help with repairs associated with affected Takata airbag inflators and their replacements. The Settlement website explains each of these benefits in detail.

How can I get a Payment? You must file a claim to receive a payment during the first four years of the Settlements. If you still own or lease a Subject Vehicle, you must also bring it to an authorized dealership for the recall remedy, as directed by a recall notice, if you have not already done so. Visit the website and file a claim online or download one and file by mail. The deadline to file a claim will be at least one year from the date the Settlements are finalized and will be posted on the website when it's known.

What are my other options? If you do not want to be legally bound by the Settlements, you must exclude yourself by **January 8, 2018**. If you do not exclude yourself, you will release any claims you may have against Honda and Nissan, in exchange for certain settlement benefits. The potential available benefits are more fully described in the Settlements, available at the settlement website. You may object to the Settlements by **January 8, 2018**. You cannot both exclude yourself from, and object to, the Settlements. The Long Form Notices for each Settlement available on the website listed below explain how to exclude yourself or object. The Court will hold a fairness hearing on **February 7, 2018** to consider whether to finally approve the Settlements and a request for attorneys' fees of up to 30% of the total Settlement Amount and incentive awards of \$5,000 for each of the Class Representatives. You may appear at the fairness hearing, either by yourself or through an attorney hired by you, but you don't have to. For more information, including the relief, eligibility and release of claims, in English or Spanish, call or visit the website below.

1-888-735-5596 • www.AutoAirbagSettlement.com

stand. "Sometimes you've got to do things you don't want to do," he says. "Doing the right thing is not always comfortable; it doesn't always feel good. I just felt like I needed to do it. That was something I had to deal with."

I DON'T REALLY know if it's all that impressive, to be honest with you," Peppers says of his accomplishments this season, becoming a rotational lineman—getting only 28 snaps per game, mostly on passing downs—and tearing down QBs at a clip of roughly one per game. *At 37*. "It's been done before. All the ones who are at the top did it."

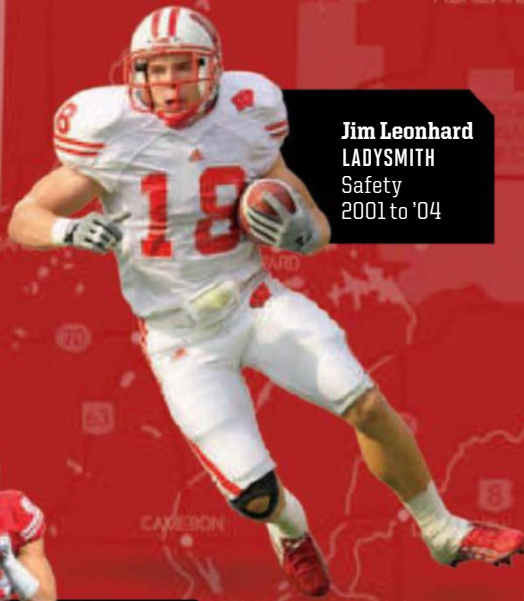
Yes: Greene, White and Smith all had double-digit sacks when they were 37. What impresses Peppers's peers about him is his quiet modesty. "Here's a prime example of him being a leader," says Rucker. "This dude's a Hall of Famer, and he's not necessarily starting. That doesn't happen in today's world. This is a *me* world. *I'm a Hall of Famer. I need to be starting. My name needs to be called.* He's not making a bunch of noise. From Day One he's never sought the cameras; he's worked in the shadows."

Says Carolina tight end Greg Olsen: "It's so refreshing to have a guy who doesn't want to hear everyone else tell him how good he is."

In October 2016, when Peppers was still in Green Bay, the Packers hosted the Bears on a Thursday night, giving him a weekend off. Rather than jetting back to Miami, he headed to Wilmington, N.C. Foster, his old mentor, had been by the side of his wife and younger son, Zack, for the past week after the two were in a car crash. Each underwent five surgeries and was facing months of rehab.

Peppers had gotten word of the accident and went quietly with his girlfriend, Claudia Sampedro, and mother, Bessie Faye. Kim remembers the visit, but Zack was a little hazy when the future Hall of Famer came by.

Peppers stayed in Zack's room for a while to chat. Brian still wonders what they could have talked about for all that time. □



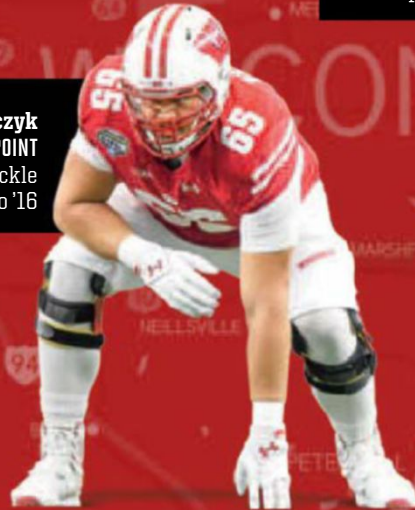
Jim Leonhard
LADYSMITH
Safety
2001 to '04



Tyler Biadasz
AMHERST
Center
2016 to present



Jack Cichy
SOMERSET
Linebacker
2013 to present



Ryan Ramczyk
STEVENS POINT
Tackle
2015 to '16



Zander Neuville
WAUPACA
Tight end
2015 to present



Paul Chryst
PLATTEVILLE
TE/QB
1984 to '88

IOWA

A CROSSE

MADISON

Wisconsin is at it again, piling up victories in an undefeated season. The secret to the Badgers' success over the last three decades? No program is better at mining and developing the talent in its state

BY JOAN NIESEN

BACKYARD BALL

THE AIRPORT WAS EMPTY.



Chris Haering dropped his rental-car keys at an unmanned counter, breezed through a security checkpoint staffed by a single TSA agent and searched in vain for an open food vendor. He was the only one at his gate as a solo airline employee announced his evening flight from Duluth, Minn., to Madison, Wis. About 10 minutes before takeoff, two other passengers sauntered onto the plane, his only companions. They knew better than he did about the need to board early for a flight from the northern tip of the country in the dead of winter.

When he joined Wisconsin's staff in 2015, Haering was a Pennsylvania man through and through. After 17 years coaching high school ball in Pittsburgh, he caught on with Paul Chryst's staff at Pitt in '12 and made the move to Madison when Chryst took over the Badgers after the '14 season. In addition to his role as special teams coordinator, Haering became the lead in-state recruiter—which is how, on his first trip to this part of Wisconsin, he'd found himself driving north from Madison to Eau Claire, then north another two hours to Superior, tucked between the lake bearing its name and Duluth, across the Minnesota border. "This was in mid-January, so it was iced-in," Haering recalls. "A coach up there said you bring blankets and sweatshirts to a youth baseball game in July, because you just never know what's going to blow in off the lake. I'm going, Wow, this is a little bit different."

It didn't take long for Haering to see the importance of trips to the state's remotest reaches. Milwaukee, Wisconsin's biggest metro area, has a population of 1.5 million; Madison, the next-biggest city, sits at 252,551. The state's other 3.7 million residents live in towns beyond the interstate and on farms along the country roads—hamlets which yield the talent that fuels



J.J. Watt
PEWAUKEE
Defensive end
2008 to '10

Joe Thomas
BROOKFIELD
Tackle
2003 to '06



WISCONSIN

one of the country's most consistently successful programs.

Since 2014, only three schools have won more games than Wisconsin: Alabama, Ohio State and Clemson. The Badgers are 9–0, ranked No. 6 and near champs already of the Big Ten's West Division. While they are led by freshman running back Jonathan Taylor, a Heisman candidate from Salem, N.J., and sophomore quarterback Alex Hornibrook (West Chester, Pa.), exactly half of their players grew up in-state.

In 1990, when Barry Alvarez took charge of the program, he resolved to “build a wall around this state.” A string of three coaches has kept that barrier intact, building loyalty, cultivating walk-ons, piling up victories and indoctrinating two generations of natives in the Wisconsin Way.

H **AERING IS** an outlier on a staff full of Badgers. Chryst, 51, is the son of a revered coach at D-III Wisconsin-Platteville. He went to high school in Platteville and was a Badger from 1984 through '88, first as a tight end and then the backup quarterback. Defensive coordinator Jim Leonhard is a native of Tony (pop. 113) who played safety under Alvarez from 2001 through '04. And offensive coordinator Joe Rudolph, while not a Wisconsin native, was a Badgers O-lineman from 1992 through '94. No other school that's been ranked in the Top 25 this season has a trio of alumni as its coach and coordinators.

Rudolph started on the '93 Badgers' team that won its first Big Ten title in three decades in Alvarez's third season. The coach had arrived after two seasons as Notre Dame's defensive coordinator to find a state full of recruits wearing Michigan and Michigan State T-shirts. He told them he was the guy to turn the program around, and many began to believe. Most important, Alvarez mined the football talent in the state's small towns, which was critical given Wisconsin's geography: Of the states north of the Mason-Dixon line, only 10 are more rural, and of those, only Iowa has a Power 5 football program.

“You go down to Florida, and you stop, and you get 15 D-I kids [at one school],” says Leonhard, who played a decade in the NFL. “When you [recruit Wisconsin players], you might have to go 300 miles between them. It's just kind of a [lack of] bang for your buck, as far as recruiting goes.”

The Badgers' success with walk-ons gives recruiters even greater clout: Since 1990, 19 from Wisconsin have reached the NFL. Often these players didn't play much football, but UW coaches spotted their talents at track meets and basketball games. “Sometimes when you turn on the high school tape, you see kids that maybe aren't as developed in football skills yet,” Haering says. “You have to maybe see through some of those layers and project a little bit.”

Haering says the program's commitment to walk-ons necessitates two recruiting cycles: one in which he and the rest of the staff pitch kids with multiple offers, then another, later, when they push for less developed talent. Coaches aren't neglecting coveted players—of the 16 four- and five-star re-

THE GREAT WALL

As an alum Chryst (below) knows the importance of keeping O-line talents like Biadasz (61) and Ramczyk (bottom) inside the borders.



cruits raised in Wisconsin over the last decade, 13 enrolled at Madison—but it's no surprise then that underrecruited players in the state are willing to forgo better opportunities at lesser football programs for a shot with the Badgers. When senior linebacker Jack Cichy of Somerset (pop. 2,635) was decid-

ing between an Ivy League offer or walking on at Madison in 2013, he could look at the team's QB, Joel Stave of Greenfield (pop. 36,720), and leading receiver, Jared Abbrederis of Wautoma (pop. 2,218), neither of whom started out with a scholarship. While schools like Texas and Florida snap up five-star in-state recruits, Wisconsin gets players who seem to come out of nowhere. Consider Texans star J.J. Watt, who walked on as a transfer in 2008. Or Ryan Ramczyk, the offensive tackle who was a first-round draft pick in 2017, four years after he'd been enrolled in technical school and pondered a career as a welder.

Walk-on or not, players have a deep respect for Wisconsin's traditions. When some began complaining about the rigors of camp one recent summer, strength coach Ross Kolodziej handed out one of his camp schedules from the 1990s, when the Badgers sometimes practiced three times a day. That quieted his players. “One thing we benefit from is not having a bunch of five-star guys that think they're going to go straight to the league,” Kolodziej says. “You have guys who were underrecruited and have a chip on their shoulders.”

T **HEROAD** to Madison—really, any road to Madison—runs through dairyland, green in the summer, blanketed with snow in the winter. Traffic is sparse, and the tallest structures are crop irrigation machines and gas stations. Out of that landscape, a stereotype of a Wisconsin football player has arisen: the massive, cheese-

PREVIOUS SPREAD: CLOAK/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; JEFF HANES; MICHAEL HECK/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN BIEBER; DAN SANGER/ICON SPORTS/REX/GETTY IMAGES; ALBERT PENAL/CSM/SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN ATHLETICS; JEFF HANISCH/USA TODAY SPORTS; HEV DARLIN/GETTY IMAGES (MAP)



fed behemoth. He's blond, raised on a farm and he's playing lineman. But the Badgers of 2017 say that's not who they are. Tyler Biadasz, of Amherst (pop. 1,035), is 6' 3", weighs 315 and plays center. He's blond and bearded, but he would like you to know that he did not grow up on a dairy farm. He grew up across the street from one.

Still, the linemen on both sides of the ball this season are largely in-state guys. Eight of 12 D-linemen are natives; so are 12 of 17 O-linemen. But to assume the Badgers simply find the biggest teens in the state and let the rest fall into place is simplistic. No longer does Wisconsin win by outmuscling others. Taylor has put up big numbers, but the offense is balanced, with Hornibrook—who ranks ninth among Power 5 quarterbacks in pass efficiency—at the helm. This year, 29 of the 58 in-staters play at skill positions or special teams.

No matter the position, players share a burning loyalty to the Badgers. Cichy has had a stuffed Bucky Badger for as long as he can remember. Kolodziej recalls crowding with family and friends around a radio at his parents' home in rural Portage County in 1995, the middle of a stretch during which Wisconsin made the Rose Bowl three times in seven seasons. With no other FBS program in the state, kids want to play for the Badgers, period. "You grow up watching it and going to games at Camp Randall," says former Badger T.J. Watt, J.J.'s younger brother, now a Steelers linebacker. "Once you get in the stadium, you realize you don't want to be anywhere else."

Soon after Chryst and his staff took over at Pitt, in early 2012, the coach identified a Wisconsin kid he thought they might be able to get. Chryst was still recruiting the way he'd learned to as a longtime Badgers coordinator, which is how he found Ramczyk, who before he became a first-round pick at

tackle was built more like a tight end. Pitt offered to fly him out and Ramczyk politely declined. He wasn't interested in getting on a plane. Eventually he made his way to Wisconsin after a stint at Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and when he went No. 32 in last spring's NFL draft to the Saints, he was one of three UW players taken that weekend. All grew up in-state. In 2016, both Badgers picked had the same distinction, and over the past six drafts, 14 of 21 Badgers were Wisconsinites. Five of them had been walk-ons.

Three rounds after Ramczyk went off the board last spring, another Badger's name was called: Vince Biegel to

the Packers. Biegel, raised on a cranberry marsh in Wisconsin Rapids (pop. 18,367), was living every Wisconsin kid's dream. A former four-star recruit, he had offers from across the country and narrowed his list to Wisconsin and BYU, where his father, Rocky, had played and his grandfather had been an assistant coach. Growing up, the outside linebacker had cheered for both teams, but he felt the Badgers were on an upward trajectory. Rocky had been a top in-state recruit in 1988, just before Alvarez took over. Though he had an offer from the Badgers, Rocky chose BYU, but he returned to Wisconsin once his career concluded. Over the years, as his son grew into one of the state's best football products, Rocky developed a relationship with Alvarez, who started a running joke, Biegel says. The retired coach, now Wisconsin's athletics director, would tell Rocky that had he recruited him, he'd have been a Badger. Rocky's answer: "I probably would have."

Which is how, in 2011, more than two decades after his father got away, Vince was in Alvarez's office hearing his recruiting pitch. The younger Biegel, who had grown up cheering for Alvarez's teams, was swept up in the history of it all. "Let's make it happen," Biegel told Alvarez.

Biegel's path couldn't have been any different from Ramczyk's, but the two share that pride. Part of the reason Ram-

czyk quit football after high school was his lack of an offer from Wisconsin. Haering sees recruits with that mindset on nearly all of his trips. A three-star recruit, Biadasz had offers from Northern Illinois, Illinois State and South Dakota State. Despite not wanting to travel far from home for school, he had options. But on the day in 2015 when Haering showed up, Biadasz had to quiet his nerves. This wasn't just another visit. It was Wisconsin. □



*THE CLIPPERS
ARE ALL IN ON*

BLAKE GRIFFIN

BURGLARS ON the west side of Los Angeles are versed in NBA schedules, not injury protocols, so the masked intruders who broke into Blake Griffin's three-story traditional in Pacific Palisades at 3 a.m. a year and a half ago did not expect to see the 6' 10" power forward asleep in his upstairs bedroom. The Clippers were on the road, but Griffin was at home, rehabbing from arthroscopic surgery on his left quadriceps. His two-year-old son, Ford, dozed in a room down the hall. When the three-man crew spotted Griffin under the covers, they cleared out faster than the Suns' front line, rushing through the kitchen and out the back door, setting off motion-detector lights as they went. They paused only to snag Griffin's wallet from a small table. Video cameras showed them scampering in hoodies and sweats past the pool and the sport court.

Two months later Griffin adopted Rook, a black German shepherd trained by instructors in body suits at an abandoned warehouse in Westlake Village. Rook patrols the Griffin residence, responding to 30 commands in his native tongue. *Sitz!*, Griffin says, when he wants Rook to sit. *Fuss!*, when he wants him to heel. *Bleib!*, when he wants him to stay. But there is one word Griffin cannot say out loud, at least not with a guest present, because there is a decent chance Rook will drag the stranger across Sunset Boulevard by the inner thigh. "If we're just sitting here like this, and I say the word, he won't attack you," Griffin reassures, lounging on a living room sofa, Rook at his side chewing a deflated soccer ball. "I don't think."

*BY LEE
JENKINS*

Photographs by
John W. McDonough

CP3 is in Houston. Lob City is a thing of dunker and wry comic whose new weapon



the past. L.A.'s fate now rests solely in the hands of a reluctant
A LETHAL J*— is no laughing matter for the rest of the league*

Recently, a couple of Griffin's childhood friends from Oklahoma City visited L.A., and one pretended to record him surreptitiously with a cellphone. Rook bodied up the wannabe paparazzo like Patrick Beverley on Lonzo Ball, retreating only at the sound of his master's laughter. "He is reading me at all times," Griffin says. The 28-year-old is a fascinating study, a stoic consumed with comedy, a pitchman wary of exposure, a flier reluctant to dunk. He is a far better player than the spring-loaded prodigy who once hurdled that silver Kia, a gospel choir providing the soundtrack, yet his profile has diminished as his skill set has grown. No one in the NBA takes more extreme measures to fortify his body, and no one suffers more untimely ailments.

Griffin's career to this point can be divided into two parts: The first, when he transformed basketball's most futile franchise into its most endearing upstart, and the second, when Lob City's skyscraping trajectory turned flat. The Clippers experienced the full life cycle of a would-be contender—excitement, expectation, disappointment, dissolution—in six years. "You felt a heaviness at the end," Griffin says. "There was so much negativity outside, everybody saying, 'You can't do this, you can't do that.' It weighs you down. It wore on all of us." Griffin's stony facial expressions can be hard to interpret—"I

rooms. Griffin grabbed a twin bed, ceding the master to homesick first-year Serbian guard Miloš Teodosić. By day the Clippers practiced at the University of San Diego, and by night they hung out on a deck, a peekaboo view of the Pacific Ocean in the distance. "It felt like we were taking all our bulls---, putting it in a trash can and dumping it in the water," recalls guard Austin Rivers. "The dynamic with Blake and Chris was weird. I don't know why. It was just strange. No one knew who the leader was, and if you had something to say, it would turn into an argument. I think people were sometimes scared to say something to Blake, because you didn't know how he'd react. [Now] he's a whole different person, more approachable, and I think it's because we've embraced him. We know who our leader is. We're all in with Blake Griffin."

*Rivers says teammates used to be scared to talk to Griffin: "He's a whole different person, more approachable, and I think it's because we've embraced him. We know who **OUR LEADER** is."*

feel like people believe I'm thinking a different thing than I am, because I have this look about me"—but the game appeared a grind. "I think I looked like I wasn't enjoying myself as much, and maybe I wasn't enjoying myself as much," he says.

Part 3 is under way, with point guard Chris Paul departed to Houston, and it's too early to call the Clips a factor (they started 5–4) or restore Griffin to the MVP conversation (he was averaging 23.7 points, 8.4 rebounds and 4.3 assists per game). But he is again levitating over centers and dangling from rims while now running the offense and spacing the floor. He is not cracking jokes on the court—he saves those for unannounced appearances with improv troupes at Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre—but he acknowledges that some lightness has returned. "I used to play with a lot of passion, good and bad, and I tried to work on that," Griffin says. "I thought, If I just stay very even, my emotions won't range and I won't ever get pissed or yell. But I'm realizing I can't play contained like that. It drains the fun. It drains the joy. I have to relax and be myself. It's O.K. to laugh and smile and enjoy these awesome moments."

Before training camp Griffin rented a house in San Diego on Airbnb and invited the team to join him. Rookies doubled up in

THE LOB CITY ERA was disastrous for the Clippers only if judging it without any historical perspective whatsoever. A franchise that never won 50 games broke that threshold in five straight seasons. They earned more playoff berths than in the previous three decades combined. They sold out 280 consecutive home dates. They employed real stars and birthed actual fans, not just Lakers contrarians. A generation of Angelenos has no memory of a time when the Clippers were a joke.

The run ended, appropriately, in a hospital room in Salt Lake City. The Clippers were facing the Jazz in the first round, and Griffin was undergoing tests for an injured plantar plate in his right big toe, the latest in a series of maladies that could fill a small medical journal. "I broke down," Griffin recalls. "I've never broken down after an injury before. But



overcompensation in other areas, and he tailors workouts as a result. He does not eat gluten during the season and avoids microwaves.

“He reminds me of Jerry Rice,” says Clippers head athletic trainer Jasen Powell, who once worked with the 49ers. “He likes to know.” In Griffin’s home office he simultaneously watches Synergy cut-ups on his desktop computer and four games on his 90-inch TV, so he can monitor the Clippers’ upcoming opponents. Before he takes the floor, he lies down on a training table in the locker room and visualizes sets he believes will be most effective: *Right block attack, left block attack, pick-and-pop.*

Comedy is an outlet, but he’s typically serious about that as well. Growing up, Griffin watched *I Love Lucy*, *The Cosby Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. His parents listened to Brian Regan in the car. In high school he graduated to Chris Rock, Martin Lawrence and Richard Pryor, burning their acts onto CDs.

Once he moved to L.A., he befriended Neal Brennan, cocreator of *Chappelle’s Show*, who taught him how to construct jokes. Brennan would email Griffin a rough draft of a bit—the first one involved Jon Hamm and *Sesame Street*—with instructions to “punch it up.” Griffin would sit over the computer at his home in Manhattan Beach, as hopeless as Brennan in the low post.

Griffin is not funny in the slapstick way that translates to press conferences or even locker rooms. His humor is dry and observational. During games Clippers center DeAndre Jordan plays off Griffin, and afterward, the opposite. Jordan will jabber for five minutes about his abiding affection for his hometown

Houston Astros, to which Griffin will quietly reply, “I’ve literally never heard him talk about the Houston Astros until right now.” Griffin keeps a notes folder in his phone with jokes he is incessantly polishing. His line of work provides plenty of material. Take, for instance, the tweeted trade request of Suns guard Eric Bledsoe: *I Dont wanna be here.* “What was funnier, to me, was his follow-up tweet,” Griffin says. “*Good morning.* That’s like getting in a huge argument with someone, yelling ‘F--- you!’ and then coming back in the room and saying, ‘Good night.’”

He initially did not want to write about basketball, until he listened to an interview with Seth Rogen, who started on the stand-up circuit as a kid. “He was doing all these adult jokes, and one of the comedians was like, ‘How old are you?’” Griffin recounts. “Rogen told him, ‘I’m 13.’ The comedian said, ‘Write about being 13.’” So when Griffin did stand-up for five nights last summer at Just for Laughs in Montreal, he introduced himself as “a big dumb stupid athlete” who “can’t talk good” and cracked up the crowd with tales of trades, sideline interviews and duffel bags of \$1 bills at strip clubs. “I had this line, ‘I’m not very good at going to strip clubs, and I always blame my mom for giving me too much attention as a child,’” Griffin remembers. “I sent it to Neal, and he told me to rework it. ‘What makes it funny?’ The line ended up being, ‘I always blame my dad

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Griffin—who is averaging more points per 36 minutes (24.8) this year than in any of his seven previous seasons—reached out to fellow big man Duncan (below) for pointers on leadership.



this one was different. I said to the doctor, ‘I’m doing everything I possibly can.’”

Body assessments, sleep studies, food sensitivity tests. He owns a hyperbaric chamber at home, which he avoids on game days because it makes him drowsy, along with a hot and cold tub for contrast therapy. (“Three minutes hot, one minute cold, three minutes hot, one minute cold, three minutes hot, one minute cold.”) A pre-health and exercise science major in his two years at Oklahoma, Griffin peppers his speech with words like “modalities” and “loads,” and he can offer a dissertation on the difference between Firefly and Marc Pro, two devices he uses to stimulate circulation in his legs. He is waiting on a BioMat, an infrared heating pad, which a hockey player told him can reduce inflammation. He has discovered that his IT bands and hip flexors are unusually tight, making him prone to

for showing my mom too much respect.' I think that was better."

For Griffin, comedy and basketball are equally painstaking crafts, though he approaches them much differently. "His presence on the stage," says Griffin's older brother, Taylor, "is more in tune with his personality than his presence on the court." He plays with a fury simmering just below the surface, fueled in part by past misfortunes. Those close to Griffin say he changes when he is hurt, growing somber or irritable, and he doesn't disagree. In January 2016, Griffin expected to return from a partially torn quadriceps on an East Coast road swing, but he re-aggravated the injury the day before the Clippers left. In New York City, trainers ruled him out for the trip and Griffin asked if he could fly back to L.A. to rehab at the practice facility. But a snowstorm was approaching, and officials feared Griffin would get stranded, so he accompanied the team to Toronto.

The next day he broke his right hand in a fight outside a restaurant with Matias Testi, a friend who was the club's assistant equipment manager. "I never want to make excuses about that because it was my fault 100%," Griffin says. "I think about it all the time, and I still feel really, really bad, for a lot of reasons. I let so many people down. But I'm not going to lie. I wasn't in the best place mentally. It took a very unique certain set of circumstances for that to happen, and part of it was not being able to play. That set wheels in motion." After the quad, he was angry, and after the toe, he was melancholy. He underwent surgery in Charlotte and waited for the best team the Clippers had ever known to disintegrate.

BY THE second week of June the front office knew Paul was gone, spiking the stakes for their summit with Griffin. He too was an unrestricted free agent, and if he followed Paul out the Playa Vista door, it was back to the days of Loy Vaught and Charles Smith. For nine months Lawrence Frank prepared what he'd say to Griffin. Frank had experience as a coach, but he was a rookie general manager, and he quizzed contacts in the entertainment and business world for ideas. Frank understands that all players—heck, all people—are living out a story, and most carry a vision of how they want it to unfold. "What's Blake's story?" Frank asked, over and over. "What's his North Star?"

As Griffin entered the Staples Center concourse on the afternoon of June 30, he stepped into a visual depiction of that story: pictures from childhood, when he worked in his family's trophy business and built most of the hardware he won; from high school, when he played for his dad and alongside his brother; and from college, when he revived a local program leveled by NCAA sanctions. After going back in time, he

DYNAMIC DUO

Beverly has teamed with Griffin to form the Clippers' second-most-effective two-man lineup (+12.9 points per 100 possessions with the pair on the floor).



was taken forward, led into the darkened bowl where the public-address announcer bellowed, "Tonight, we're honoring a lifelong Clipper!" It was 2029, according to the P.A. guy, and Griffin was attending his own jersey-retirement ceremony. "So you're much, much older," Griffin explained to Ford, now four, and obviously confused. "You might be grounded."

Sarcastic and self-deprecating, Griffin probably didn't need to see number 32 lifted to the rafters or hear Andra Davis sing "Rise Up"



with a choir that recalled the dunk contest. But he savored the sound of "lifelong Clipper," a phrase that hasn't been uttered much over the past few decades. "That was the sell," Griffin says. "This is where you've been. This is your home. You've been here for 17 wins and you've been here for 50. It made me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself. I couldn't be the guy who was like, 'Well, everything that went wrong here is the team's fault, so I'll just leave.' I wanted to take ownership."

When Griffin committed to Oklahoma, he was casually watching a NBA game on TV with Jeff Capel in the Sooners coach's office and blurted out, "I don't want to go anywhere else." He canceled his other recruiting visits. When he agreed to a \$173 million extension

with the Clippers, he did the same, calling off meetings in Phoenix and Denver so he could recruit small forward Danilo Gallinari over lunch at Doc Rivers's house. The Clips had found Griffin's North Star. A clue happens to be tattooed in small block letters on his left wrist: STAY.

The tattoo is a nod to his parents, Gail and Tommy, who seemed to put that verb in front of every sentence: *Stay focused. Stay hungry. Stay humble.* When Gail and Tommy



arrived in Los Angeles after the 2009 draft, they knew only one thing about the Clippers. "The curse," Gail laughs. "You kept hearing that word."

Then their son suffered a stress fracture in his left knee before his first game, an injury that cost him the entire 2009–10 season. While Griffin fretted over comparisons to injury-riddled center Greg Oden, picked first by the Blazers two years before, new GM Neil Olshey treated the prized rookie more like Tim Duncan, consulting him about personnel moves and facility upgrades. Olshey purged the roster of everybody except Jordan, Griffin's closest friend on the team apart from the video intern who lived with him. Olshey believed Griffin was the uncommon Clipper who

could single-handedly reverse perception of the franchise, and he did, using Timofey Mozgov as his first prop and a Kia Optima as his second.

"My plan for the dunk contest was to jump over a convertible with four teammates inside," Griffin says. "The NBA kind of messed up that plan. They wanted me to jump over a Kia, because it's a league sponsor, but the Optima is a huge car. I could only do the hood, so it didn't look as cool." No one at Staples Center in February 2011 was disappointed, and shortly thereafter Kia signed him to an endorsement contract. "People thought I did the dunk to get the deal. I was bummed about that." Griffin insisted on creative input and agreed to ads only where he could make fun of himself. "I can't be driving to the arena with some voice-over going"—he lowers his voice to a melodramatic baritone—"The game doesn't drive me. I drive the game."

Kia and Griffin filmed hit commercials, featuring jean shorts, track suits and bricked free throws, but the experience left him conflicted about his marketability—as well as his vertical. "I wanted to be a complete player, and I felt like the dunks started to overshadow other parts of my game," Griffin says. "I felt like that's all that was being showcased. That's why I shied away from it a little over the years. I kind of had a love-hate with it." The high-wire act made him famous but left him unfulfilled, too many facials being delivered during defeats. Opposing big men tried anything to ground him, from wrestling matches with Zach Randolph to groin strikes from Serge Ibaka. One vet told him, "You're too light-skinned to be tough." *What a whack thing to say*, Griffin thought, as he trudged silently upcourt.

He paid for the posters, but without that glossy evidence of progress, the Clippers might not have lured Paul from New Orleans or enticed Doc from Boston or moved Steve Ballmer from Microsoft to pay Donald Sterling \$2 billion for the team. The change in perception led to change in everything else.

“YOU CAN'T be a dunker your whole life,” Rivers told Griffin in their first meeting, in 2013. The coach braced for resistance, but Griffin was way ahead of him, already retreating to a corner of the practice gym every day with a notebook-wielding, Diet Coke—guzzling shot doctor named Bob Thate.

There, Griffin filled his daily prescription of 500 shots, which only counted if Thate deemed them “mechanically correct.” That meant Griffin had to jump straight up and down (instead of back and to the left), lift his right arm toward the sky (instead of the rim), position the ball even with his forehead (instead of over his head) and release it at the apex of his jump (instead of the descent).

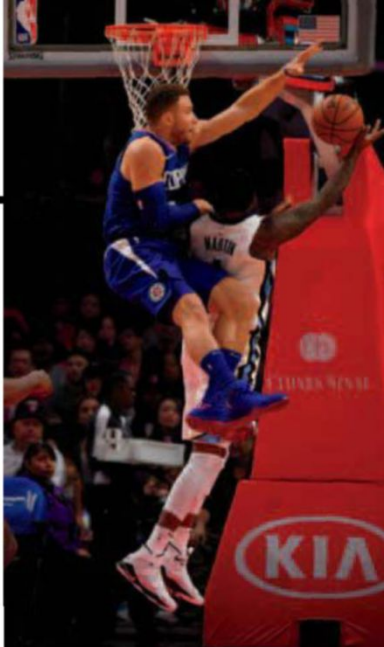
For Griffin, who was barely a 50% free throw shooter and rarely hoisted a three when he started with Thate, “mechanically correct” was a mystery. “He wanted everything done in a day,” Thate laughs. It took four years and 325,000 mechanically correct shots, plus another 75,000 flawed ones, as Thate supplied commentary: *No, that's too far*

back. No, that's too low. Butt's not out far enough, shoulder isn't on the chin. Keep your hands up, freeze your arm.

One summer they shot for 17 straight weeks at Mira Costa High School, including days when Griffin fumed and Thate fretted. "You have to let me be frustrated," Griffin explained. He yearned to see the ball drop through the net, but Thate rarely even looked at the basket. He brought bags of M&Ms to remind Griffin: *Mechanics, not Makes*. "I know, I know, I'm in a hurry too, Pops," Thate would tell Griffin, quoting Red Pollard in *Seabiscuit*. "But you know what Hadrian said about Rome. Brick by brick, my citizens. Brick by brick." Thate stood in the tunnel during games, and if Griffin missed a couple jumpers, he'd holler, "What do you got? What do you see?" If Thate pointed at his head, Griffin needed to shoot higher. If Thate clasped his hands and pulled them apart, Griffin needed to release sooner. If Thate formed a "V" with his thumb and index finger, balance was the problem. "Castle of jump shots, brick by brick," became their mantra. One day in the gym, with Griffin's free throw percentage all the way up near 75%, he told Thate, "You know what a great feeling is? Not being afraid to get fouled anymore." But Thate looked beyond the stripe. "Someday you'll be the best shooter on this team, and then one of the best shooters in the league." The full results of their labor would not be evident for years.

Last February, on the bus to the arena in Toronto, Rivers texted Griffin, "I want you to start spacing the three." Griffin was giddy. No one had ever told him that before. He is now shooting 5.0 threes per game—before last season his career high was 0.6 attempts—and hitting them at a 42.2% clip. Over lunch at Baltaire Restaurant in Brentwood, he pantomimes his form. "Butt out . . . chest forward . . . arm up," he says, between bites of salmon and sips of black tea. Griffin is no Dirk Nowitzki, but his newfound marksmanship draws out defenders, opening driving and passing lanes he's never seen before. Guards report that they're enjoying more uncontested layups because helpers don't want to leave Griffin.

With six seconds left at Portland on Oct. 26 and the Clippers trailing by a point, Austin Rivers drove for a game-winner. Referees called a blocking foul—Rivers dislocated his right pinkie finger on the play—before changing it to a charge. The Blazers' C.J. McCollum sank one of two free throws on the other end. "It was one of those situations our team used to get so f----- riled up about," Austin says. In the last timeout Doc drew up a pin-down for Griffin. "Before, Chris never knew if he should give it to Blake, or Blake should give it to Chris, and if one missed the other guy was like, 'Maybe I



BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME

Thanks in part to Griffin's work inside, the Clippers held five of their first seven opponents to fewer than 100 points and rank ninth in points allowed.

should have shot it," Austin recalls. "Things were so complicated. This was simple: We're going through Blake." Doc's plan was for a two-point shot, but Griffin could not duck inside, so he dribbled to the left wing and drilled the buzzer-beating three.

Of course there will be plenty of similar situations when the Clippers wish they could clear out for Paul. Without him, they are no longer a threat to the West elite, though it can be debated if they ever really were. "We were front-runners," Griffin says. "When things were going great, the ball was hopping around. But when we felt resistance in games, we splintered. I just want to make sure, even when we have down moments, we don't splinter." Sure enough, after Portland, the Clippers were toppled by the Pistons and decimated by the Warriors.

Three years ago, when Griffin felt mute in Paul's commanding presence, he called Tim Duncan for counsel. "He said, 'The leader isn't the guy yelling the loudest or talking the most,'" Griffin recounts. "It's the guy everybody looks at in the end and knows, 'I'm following him.'" Griffin mimics Duncan in ways big and small, like how he gently taps opposing post players after they jostle, to let them know there is nothing personal about the battle. He is proud that some referees have told him his body language has improved.

Griffin has one other tattoo, a quote from high school teammate Wilson Holloway inked on his side. When Holloway was a junior in college, he needed a new computer and Griffin sent him one. Holloway wrote him a thank-you note that included the advice: "Just keep smiling." A couple weeks later, three days before the dunk contest, Holloway died of Hodgkin's lymphoma. Griffin thinks about him often. He does smile—when he's reviewing scripts for the production company he cofounded, Mortal Media; or pounding his drum set, which he's played since elementary school; or swimming with his kids, Ford and one-year-old daughter Finley, who split time with Griffin and his ex-fiancée in Manhattan Beach.

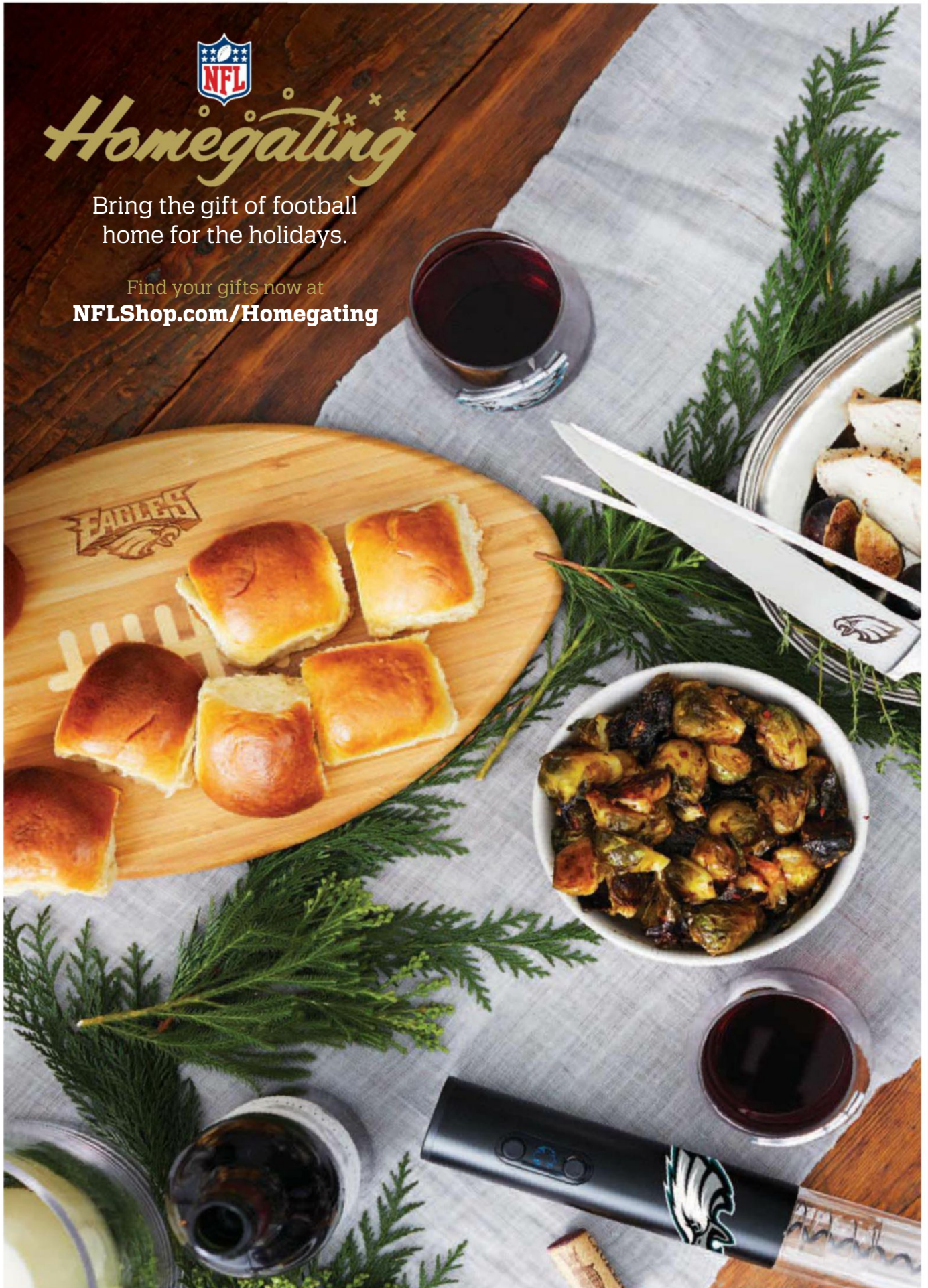
Griffin may be loosening a bit on the court as well, but make no mistake, Staples Center is not the Laugh Factory and basketball is brick-by-brick work. Building trophies and breaking hexes takes strength and science, the domain of a renowned rook and an uncommon Clipper, trained to stay. □



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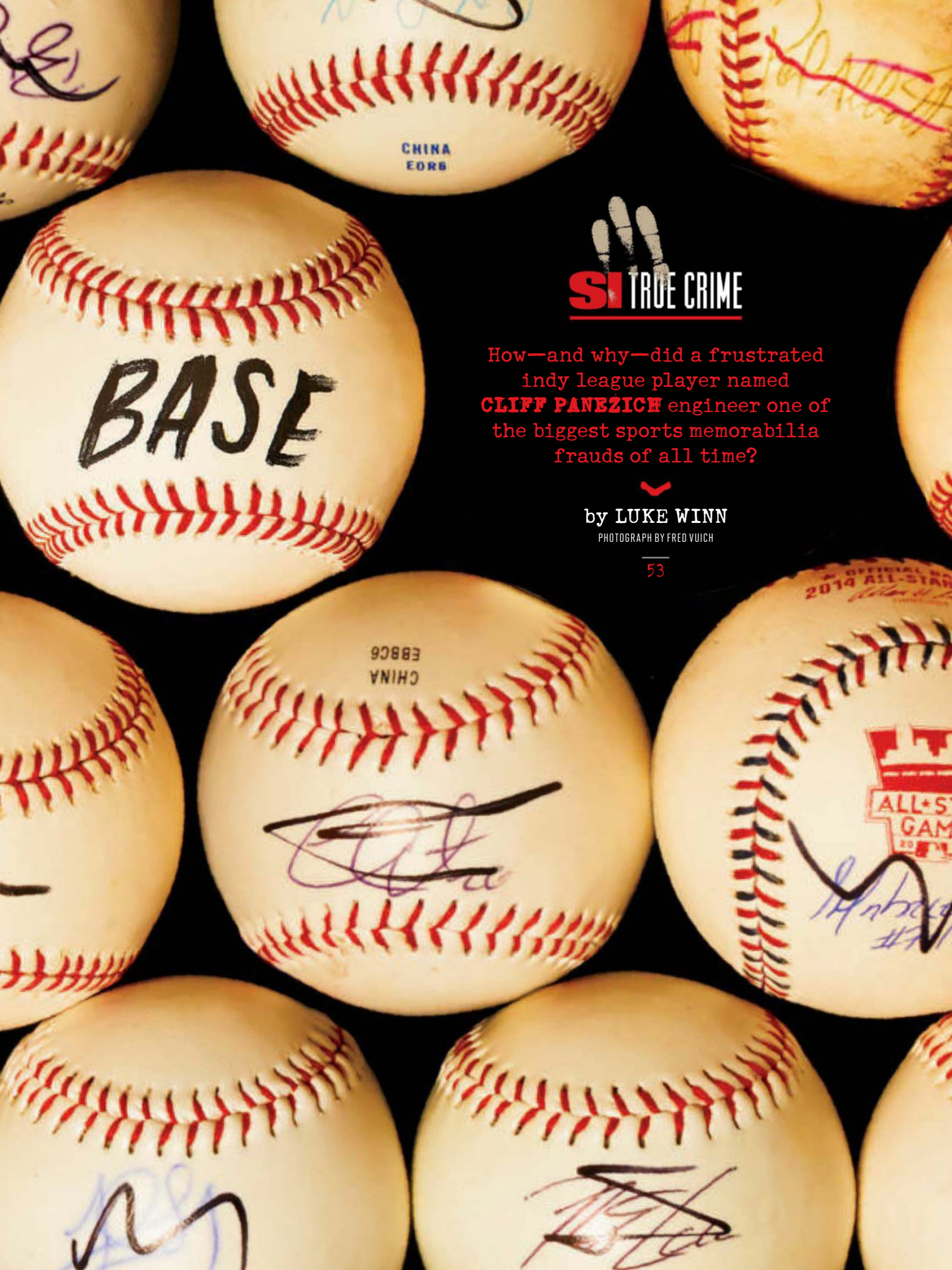
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 **TRUE CRIME**

How—and why—did a frustrated indy league player named **CLIFF PANEZICH** engineer one of the biggest sports memorabilia frauds of all time?

by **LUKE WINN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED VUICH

You do not need to go far in professional baseball to experience a stranger asking for your autograph.

In the summer of 2008 it happens to Cliff Panezich on fireworks nights, which draw less meager crowds than usual for the Sussex Skyhawks of the independent Canadian American Association. Between the final out and the start of the pyrotechnics, kids line up, pens in hand, in the front row just past the first base dugout at Skylands Stadium in Augusta, N.J.

It is imperative to sign quickly. The clubhouse spread disappears fast, and the savvy veterans will book it toward the grub, leaving the rookies to oblige the kids. As a backup catcher trying to get by on \$1,000 a month, Panezich—who grew up in a blue-collar family near Youngstown, Ohio, and who has just been passed over in the June MLB draft following his senior season at NAIA Martin Methodist in Pulaski, Tenn.—can't afford to miss any kind of free meal. He has big league aspirations, but his closest brush with affiliated ball so far is a workout in May with the Pirates. (Panezich did make an impression on one of the Bucs' scouts, at least. "He was ballsy, a guy who controlled his environment," says Dave Rettig. "And he had a sense of entitlement to be a catcher.")

Here in the Can-Am League, Panezich is just some 22-year-old with a cortisone-injected right arm that is killing him and a name that he assumes the local kids don't even know. That they still want his autograph is fascinating to him. He views autographs solely as commodities—things to be obtained and sold. And he is well aware that right now, the demand for a Panezich-signed ball is nonexistent.

THE CALL that wakes Det. Brian McGivern in the early hours of Oct. 11, 2013, seems, at face value, to be another instance of small-town criminal mundanity. Two addicts have been pulled over at around 1:15 a.m. in a gold Chevy Impala; a crack pipe is found in their armrest, and they fit the description of suspects in a string of property thefts from cars around the area. McGivern, at 38 a buzz-cutted and chipper 13-year veteran of the force, is one of just two detectives in the police department in Canfield, Ohio (pop. 7,284), a speck of a

suburb eight miles southwest of Youngstown.

He is pretty sure that he already knows how this one will end: with the recovery of a slew of credit cards, Apple products and power tools. What he *doesn't* know is that he's pulling at the first thread in unraveling the biggest white-collar case of his life.

The gift cards will be the trail. Nineteen of them turn up in the addicts' car and wallets, and then a search warrant for their motel room yields even more—cards for Walmart and Home Depot and the like, purchased with stolen credit cards. McGivern's investigation finds that the addicts have been unloading the gift cards to a Craigslist buyer in exchange for cash. Typical, addiction-fueled behavior.

But then McGivern works with detectives from three nearby towns, tracking surveillance footage of the purchases eventually made with those gift cards, and a not-at-all-typical pattern reveals itself. Why did two different gift-card users—the Craigslist

In the Can-Am League, Panezich is just That the local kids



buyer, Steven Durkin, and another unidentified white male—each exit a Walmart store with a shopping cart full of footballs and baseballs? And why was a third man, Anthony Sattarelle, stopped outside a separate Walmart, right around the same time, for stealing a cart full of baseballs?

McGivern wonders, *What is going on here?*

Sattarelle eventually tells investigators that he was given \$120 to steal the Walmart balls by C.J. McCormick, an associate of Durkin's. McCormick, Sattarelle explains, is involved in some kind of sports memorabilia business.

McGivern is neither a sports fan nor a memorabilia expert. The lone autographed item in his Canfield office is a poster for a minor league hockey team that once held a fund-raiser for a fallen police officer. He asks around in other departments, inquiring whether anyone knows anything about a memorabilia ring in the area. Then, in January 2014, he gets a call from the FBI's Boardman, Ohio, office. "There's an agent up here who says he's working on a sports memorabilia case," the man says.



TRUE CRIME



and stadiums across Cleveland, had agreed to split the costs of an expedition to Alabama, where the No. 1-ranked Crimson Tide football team was preparing to play in the BCS National Championship Game against Texas. Panezich's sole source of income at the time was a legit autograph business on eBay that he called Athletic Connections Sports Memorabilia, and he knew that Tide items were in high demand.

It was Panezich's first year as an adult that he wasn't playing baseball. He'd fared well enough in his 2008 Can-Am League debut with Sussex—his OPS was .944—to earn an invite to a minor league free-agent workout with the Phillies. But an exam of his throwing arm at the Cleveland Clinic later revealed two partial tears in his rotator cuff and one in the labrum. After a failed attempt to rehab and play in the independent Continental League in Texas, Panezich opted for surgery that was expected to sideline him for two years.

TEAMWORK
McGivern (blue tie) and Sano toiled for more than a year to build their case against former farm leaguer Panezich (opposite).

some 22-year-old with a cortisone-injected right arm. **WANT HIS AUTOGRAPH** is fascinating to him.

“Are you still doing something with that?”

McGivern finds himself on the line with veteran FBI agent Anthony Sano. “We’re starting to I.D. some low-level guys,” McGivern tells Sano, “but we have this [surveillance] picture of a guy at a Walmart, and we have no idea who he is.” Sano sends an image to McGivern’s phone to see if they have a match. On McGivern’s end, a head shot of a twentysomething white male, pulled from Ohio’s Bureau of Motor Vehicles database, pops up on his screen. “That’s the guy,” he says.

“That’s the target of our investigation,” says Sano, who at this point is working off of a vague tip: Someone is selling fake signed sporting goods out of Austintown, Ohio—and that someone played farm league ball.

The photo is of one Clifton J. Panezich.

IT ALL STARTED, Panezich will eventually say, with a working road trip: a 12-hour drive from Ohio to Tuscaloosa, Ala., in December 2009. Panezich and Adam Bollinger, a Chick-Fil-A truck driver whom Panezich met while chasing autographs outside of hotels

“It was depressing for Cliff,” says his mother, Rose, who believes it was even harder on her husband, Frank, a former steel mill electrician whose own pro ball aspirations were derailed first by a knee injury and then by his 1965 enlistment in Vietnam, shortly after high school. “[Frank] thought he might live his baseball dream through Cliff. Then he had to give up on that too.”

Bollinger recalls his partner being resigned to the fact that his baseball career was effectively over. “When that was your plan in life and it rapidly turns on you,” he says, “you’re like, *What do I do now?*”

Panezich and Bollinger arrived in Tuscaloosa during winter break, when the football team wasn’t practicing, so finding players required improvisation. The first member of the Crimson Tide they say they encountered—and asked to sign, outside of a dorm—was cornerback Marquis Johnson. The two collectors had 40-odd white-paneled footballs, each emblazoned with Alabama’s logo, laid out in the rear bed of their SUV, and “[Johnson] signed a few,” Panezich says. “[He] talked about getting paid to do the rest. . . . We paid him up front and . . . he recruited everybody else to come and sign. He’d go into the dorm, grab a couple guys—\$20, \$30, \$40, depending on who the player was—and they’d all come sign 40 team items.”

Panezich says Johnson was paid roughly \$200, but “not everyone took money. [Defensive tackle] Terrence Cody was probably the biggest. He got paid to sign all the team stuff—and then we heard he was interested in making some *more* money. So he came out and signed a bunch of mini helmets that he inscribed, like 2X ALL-AMERICAN, or 2 BLOCKED FGS

FRED VUICH

AGAINST TENNESSEE, very specific stuff.” Panezich recalls that they paid Cody around \$400 total. (SI obtained cellphone video from Panezich that shows Johnson, fellow cornerback Rod Woodson and tight end Colin Peek autographing items; Panezich says that Peek, as well as running back Ali Sharrief and QB Greg McElroy, signed but declined compensation in order to comply with NCAA rules. Cody, through his agent, declined to comment. Says Johnson: “I never got paid. I don’t know [Panezich].” Woodson could not be reached for comment. When asked if the school had knowledge of the signings, an Alabama spokesman said, “As part of our comprehensive compliance and education program, we routinely review all situations of potential concern and address matters such as these with all of our student-athletes.”

Altogether it took Panezich and Bollinger nearly a week to gather the signatures they wanted, and Panezich says they shelled out more than \$1,000 to players—but he figured the investment was worth it. He’d seen a team-signed Bama ball sell on eBay for roughly \$800 earlier that month. Even if his own fetched just \$500 apiece, “we were in pretty good shape,” he says. But once Panezich made it back to Ohio and listed the items on eBay, he says he found a marketplace newly flooded with what he believed to be forgeries—most selling for less than \$150.

“It rubbed me the wrong way,” says Panezich, who hadn’t seen any other graphers on Alabama’s campus. “Not only the money—it was also my time. I spent a week away from family and friends during Christmastime, and I barely made a profit.”

Here, he will later say, was the impetus for a business-driven pivot to forgeries. Panezich will tell the FBI that Bollinger is the one who first inked extra Alabama balls in December 2009; Bollinger (who will go uncharged in the case) will tell SI he never, in fact, forged autographs at all.

Either way, by February 2010, Panezich was passably signing and selling his own items. His first forged signatures mimicked players from the 2009–10 Kentucky basketball team. Panezich had once been kicked off UK’s campus while hunting (free) John Wall autographs; now Panezich could print as many 8-by-10s of Wall as he wanted, sign them, and sell them on eBay for at least \$50 apiece. He was, effectively, printing money.

In 2012, when Panezich moved to Houston to resurrect his baseball career in the independent Pecos Spring League, he brought along three associates from Ohio—McCormick (whom he met playing poker), Jason Moore and Joey Cummings—and they shared an apartment. The forgery business was doing enough volume that it could support assistants who managed the printing, eBay listings and shipping.

Panezich would come home after Pecos league games, and his room-

HAPPIER TIMES
Frank (below with young Cliff) shared his son’s love of baseball. He died earlier this year, before Cliff was sentenced for his crimes.



mates would have a stack of items waiting for him to sign with names like Mike Trout and Bryce Harper—twentysomethings whose playing careers were on a starkly different trajectory. Panezich, meanwhile, was paying for his Pecos roster spot in hopes of getting seen by scouts. He told people he was getting by as an eBay entrepreneur. The forging part, he hoped, would remain a secret.

OPERATION STOLEN BASE—that’s what Sano named it—is in full gear by January 2014, as a collaboration between the FBI and several Ohio police departments. Sources are starting to emerge.

One of McCormick’s ex-girlfriends (who will not be implicated in the case) details for investigators how Panezich recruited McCormick into the business. She says she has witnessed Panezich forging items, calls him an “expert” and says that together the two men have sold

By November 2014, investigators have in eBay sales to 16,000-plus potential

items through scores of eBay accounts they created using the names of friends, relatives and acquaintances. An aunt of Panezich’s (who hasn’t been implicated) also calls police: eBay has mailed to her a tax form that references \$64,000 in profit she says she knows nothing about. In February she provides investigators with a ball, inscribed with what appears to be Mike Trout’s autograph, that a buyer mailed to her, intended as a return.

But it isn’t until investigators subpoena eBay for access to any account whose profits flow to Panezich, McCormick or Jason Lenzi (a former high school acquaintance of Panezich’s who works for Huntington Bank, where 26 PayPal-funded accounts have been opened in either Cliff’s or Rose’s name) that the magnitude of things takes shape. By November 2014 investigators have discovered more than \$1 million in eBay sales to 16,000-plus potential victims across the U.S., Mexico and Canada—and they believe there’s plenty left to find.

From his Canfield office, McGivern monitors Panezich’s increasingly audacious social

media activity. Since October 2013, Panezich has been living outside of Las Vegas—where he has also helped relocate his mother, father and nonagenarian grandmother—and he’s enjoying the lifestyle upgrade from down-trodden Youngstown. In one Facebook post Panezich throws a fistful of cash into the air—“making it rain,” as McGivern will later describe it. In another, Panezich captures the neon-lit interior of a vast automobile, writing, “Escalade limo for 3. Sure!”

What Panezich doesn’t know is that McGivern and Sano have been ordering trash pulls from outside of Cliff’s and Rose’s Nevada homes. And what investigators turn up in the garbage—fake certificates of authenticity matching those used in recent eBay autograph auctions, plus scratch paper on which someone has been practicing forged autographs—allows them to make their final move.

ing a T-shirt and shorts. He is immediately handed a warrant. McGivern introduces himself: “I didn’t fly across the country to ask you a couple of questions. I already know everything you’re involved in.”

What investigators find inside is part bachelor pad—neon MILLER LITE sign, pool table, golf clubs; hats and mail scattered about—and part memorabilia warehouse. Autographed items are littered everywhere, covering even the floor of Panezich’s master bedroom: blue Tim Tebow Florida jerseys signed on the white numbers; Spalding NBA basketballs bearing Kobe Bryant’s and LeBron James’s forged signatures; a Wilson NCAA basketball with Wall’s graph. McGivern’s crew finds a stack of certificates of authenticity from Worldwide Authentics Memorabilia (ITEM DESCRIPTION: BARRACK [sic] OBAMA OFFICIAL MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL) and, in a plastic bucket, a ball with a signature that resembles the 44th President’s.

Panezich insists that some of the autographs are real—he says he’s purchased a collection of authentic items from one of his houseguests, James Beltrame, who’s visiting from Wisconsin. But investigators believe the vast majority of items have been signed by Panezich.

On the desk in his bedroom police find metallic-ink pens and Sharpie markers in clear plastic cups. They turn up texts on Panezich’s iPhone explicitly discussing forgery. They seize additional stacks of certificates of

authenticity—with phony business names like Gameday Sports Authentics—that are being printed in-house, plus more than 30 burner cellphones with names written on their cheap, black casings in yellow or purple ink. (One of Panezich’s assistant-roommates in Henderson, Stephen Mulichak, tells police that eBay requires its accounts to be linked to a phone number. When anyone calls a phone attached to a male name, Panezich answers; when anyone calls a female-named phone, Rose—who also helps with shipping—answers.)

What McGivern’s search team does *not* find is much in the way of money. (Authorities do seize \$18,200 rubber-banded inside a zippered envelope under a guest-room mattress, but Beltrame claims that belongs to him.) This is surprising given the volume of eBay transactions and the fact that Operation Stolen Base has turned up two Nevada bank accounts under Rose’s name that received

\$174,531.97 in PayPal profits before being cashed out.

Investigators do know, though, that Panezich is prone to heavy cycles of gambling, both on sports and on poker. Among the items they photograph in his bedroom are frequent-player cards for an assortment of Vegas casinos. One of his former roommates in Henderson, Daniel Marino, will later tell investigators about a time Panezich responded to a five-figure losing streak by “locking himself in his room and signing hundreds of balls to make up for it.”

Altogether it takes the search team nearly 16 hours (over two days) to log and wrap and load all the evidence at the Sandhill Sage house onto eight pallets. Afterward, McGivern and a few officers grab dinner at a nearby restaurant that’s playing *Monday Night Football* on TV. McGivern is so exhausted that he passes out in his hotel bed by 8 p.m., never having made it to the Vegas strip to press his luck.

discovered **MORE THAN \$1 MILLION** victims.

JUST BEFORE 8 a.m. on Dec. 1, 2014, one FBI agent, two police officers from Canfield and 11 from the Henderson, Nev., P.D. surround a Spanish-tile roof rental home in a Henderson subdivision. There is little expectation of danger, but McGivern’s anxiety level is off the charts. If the search warrants that the investigative team are about to serve—at this two-story house on Sandhill Sage Road, as well as Panezich’s parents’ house nearby, plus Lenzi’s and two McCormick addresses in Ohio—are dead ends, McGivern knows he’ll never live it down.

A Henderson lieutenant peers into a street-facing garage window and starts to laugh. “Kid,” he says to McGivern, “wait till you see this.” Inside are towers of assembled USPS Priority Mail boxes, stacks of ink-jet photo paper and heaps of NFL and college football jerseys.

The cops knock on the front door of 832 Sandhill Sage, and Panezich opens it wear-





THE MOST surreal autograph session of Panezich's life takes place a month later in a conference room in the FBI's office in Boardman. He wasn't arrested during the raid, but he's since agreed to be interviewed under proffered protection in hopes of improving any future plea deal. The FBI and the Mahoning County prosecutor's office have decided to pursue the case under Ohio's version of the RICO Act—rather than bring federal charges—because of the number of potential defendants at the local level. (More than 20 other people, mostly in Ohio, are suspected of being involved in selling the forged items.) This makes Martin Desmond, a Mahoning County assistant D.A., one of the lead interviewers.

"I'm curious," Desmond tells Panezich from across a conference table. "I want to see how good you are."

Panezich shoots a look at his lawyer, Robert Duffrin—*Is this really happening?*—and is reminded that he's under protection. He grabs a pen and a legal pad and asks Desmond to name an athlete.

"LeBron," Desmond says, assuming Panezich will then ask to look at an example.

"Number or no number?" Panezich replies.

"Number."

"Six or 23?"

"Do both."

Panezich signs two variations—one the way James signed it during his first stint with the Cavs, the other the way he did it in his Heat years. One of the Ohio policemen at the table fires up his iPad and finds a real LeBron, and they all compare it with Panezich's work.

To the investigators' untrained eyes, it's difficult to tell the autographs apart.

I GUESS YOU could call it a talent," Panezich says of his forging skill. "But maybe *curse* is a better word for it."

He says this at a table in O'Charley's restaurant in Boardman while he eats chipotle chicken fingers and french fries. This is April 10, 2017, the night before his sentencing hearing in Youngstown. He flew in from Las Vegas a few hours ago.

Panezich says that forging required practice at first—maybe 10 to 20 tries before he put a name to a ball—but that he became so proficient at it that eventually he could do 100-plus signatures from memory. And while it was once like a party trick, where he could be talked into signing someone's Andrew McCutchen jersey in a Youngstown bar, it eventually felt like a job.

"There were so many people who relied on [me]," he says, trying to argue that his extended operation was less a criminal enterprise than it was freelancers who sold his forgeries and kept 60% of the profit, often to sustain opiate or gambling addictions. "Every day I woke up to streams of text messages, like, *I need this many items*. I didn't really want to be doing it."

By now Panezich has pleaded guilty to one first-degree, three second-degree and four third-degree felonies, ranging from telecommunications fraud to money laundering, and he's agreed to a sentencing recommendation of three to seven years. Over dinner Panezich tries to explain how his mother got involved. Initially, he says, Rose was out of work

in Ohio, caring for Frank, as well as her own mother, "and that's when I was like, 'Just do this [shipping work] for me, and whatever bills need paying I'll pay.' I can't put an exact time on when she knew what was going on, because it was never really spoken about. She just helped, and it evolved."

Panezich says they never had a conversation about the morality of forging. They never talked about it with his grandmother, who passed away in 2015, and they definitely never talked about it with Frank, who exhibited symptoms of Alzheimer's . . . and who would never learn his son's fate. In December 2016 Frank checked into a Las Vegas hospital for a routine colon procedure, had an allergic reaction to medication—and died three months later.

By now Panezich has a new lawyer, Percy Squire, who represented former Ohio State running back Maurice Clarett in multiple cases, and Squire is hopeful that his client

"I guess you could call it a talent skills. "But maybe CURSE IS A

HAUL OF FAME
Thousands of balls and jerseys collected from Panezich's Vegas pad were expected to be donated to local kids.

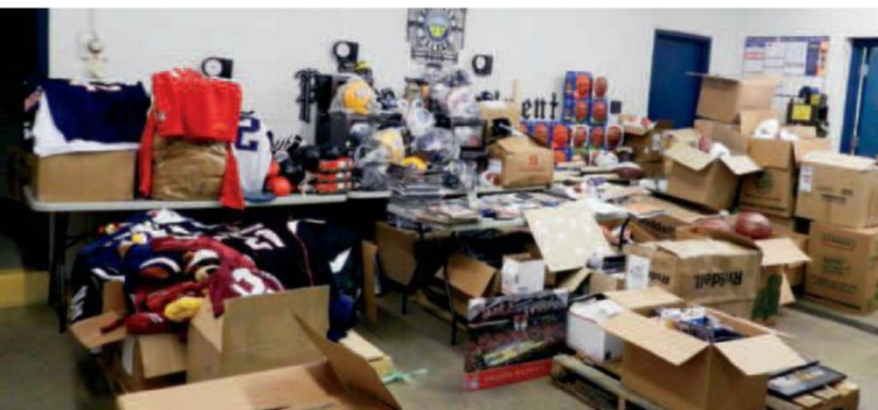
might receive a delayed sentence so he can help settle affairs in the wake of Frank's death. Panezich even believes there's a chance he could get probation rather than jail time.

The latter seems unlikely. One coconspirator, Jason Moore, has already accepted a three-year sentence, and he did little more than sell items that Panezich or McCormick signed. (Moore tried his hand at forging in Youngstown too, but Panezich says the signatures were so sloppy that "they looked like a child did them." Panezich worried that the substandard work would draw heat, so whenever he saw Moore's shoddy graphs on eBay he'd bid to win the auctions and then refuse to pay.)

All Panezich has with him is a black duffel bag containing one black dress shirt and a pair of black dress pants, three white T-shirts, two white thermal undershirts, three pairs of white boxers and four pairs of white socks; one full sweatsuit, headphones, a phone charger, a prepaid phone card and some legal paperwork.

The dress clothes are for court, but Panezich plans to wear all of the whites underneath, in layers. "When you go [to jail],"

he says, “they let you keep the whites you have on.” The sweatshirt he’s carrying in case of a miracle—if somehow he isn’t sentenced to jail time he’ll have a change of clothes. And, he says, “I’m getting back on a plane as soon as possible, because I hate this place.”



lent,” Panezich says of his forging **BETTER WORD FOR IT.”**

THE SENTENCING hearing opens in the dark-wood-paneled, mostly empty, fourth-floor courtroom of Judge Maureen Sweeney just before 11 a.m. on April 11, 2017. Mahoning County Assistant D.A. Ralph Rivera, who’s at the prosecutor’s table alongside McGivern, sets up an easel and poster boards that spell out the scope of Operation Stolen Base: more than 27,000 eBay items sold and more than \$2 million in sales, which the state says makes this one of the largest eBay fraud cases in domestic history. The prosecution attributes \$1.4 million of the sales to Panezich, and the bulk of the rest to McCormick, who branched out on his own as a forger in Youngstown. On Rivera’s organizational chart of mug shots, Cliff and Rose sit at the top. “It all starts and ends with Mr. Panezich,” Rivera tells the judge.

When Panezich—in his black dress clothes with the whites underneath—stands to give his allocution, he’s a catcher trying to regain control of the game. “Your honor,” he begins, “I just want to say, I think I was misrepresented in the court.” He offers an apology and an explana-

tion: “It started as a legitimate business, and it snowballed into what you see before you. . . .” But he has also written a sentencing memorandum that argues the prosecution has only proved he’s responsible for \$600,000 in eBay sales and that forgers in similar—albeit federal—cases received six months in jail, not the three-to-seven years he’s facing. He tries to present himself as a small player in an industry that’s widely plagued by forgeries, rather than someone who has personally defrauded thousands of naive buyers.

Sweeney is unmoved. She sentences Panezich to six years, with his earliest release in five. He briefly closes his eyes, processing his fate. The bailiff cuffs his left hand first, behind his back, and then his right, before leading him out the door. The whole hearing takes just 20 minutes and 28 seconds. (Panezich will eventually appeal the sentence.)

There is little to divvy up in the aftermath. Investigators have yet to uncover a stash of money. Panezich says that between rent, bills and Vegas clubbing and gambling, there’s not much left, and McGivern believes him, saying, “I think [he] just blew all of it.”

McCormick, who later receives a three-year sentence, has no money either; in his hearing he states that he’s struggled with addictions to pills and gambling.

The most successful party, in the end, appears to be eBay, which would have earned more than \$300,000 on auction and PayPal fees on \$2.4 million in sales. Although eBay cooperated in the case, a company spokesman declined to answer SI’s questions about whether it had contacted potential victims or returned any of the fees.

The \$18,200 in rubber-banded cash (plus another \$155.33 in other currency) that was seized from the Sandhill Sage house will get split up between the Can-



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field P.D. and the Mahoning County prosecutor’s office. On May 12, Canfield police announce a plan to donate the sporting goods in evidence to charities. All of the autographs—the Trouts, the LeBrons, even the Obama—have been scribbled over with a marker.

Rose, meanwhile, continues to live in Henderson and receive regular collect phone calls from Cliff, who’s in Richland Correctional Institution in Mansfield, Ohio. “I’m O.K.,” she tells her son during one conversation. “I mean, I’ll be all right—I’m a survivor—but of course I’m not O.K. My husband’s dead, you’re in jail, and I’m alone.”

She’s still in the process of recovering items that were taken into evidence during the raid of her house. She’d like to reclaim her son’s jerseys from the various teams he played on and a Lucite cube containing a collegiate baseball with the inscription, TO GRANDMA, HOME RUN #9, 3-13-08. Investigators did not need that one, in the end. It was the lone ball with an autograph that they were certain was authentic: #18. CLIFF PANEZICH. □



MASTERS CLASS

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

OKSANA MASTERS DOES not take no for an answer. She also does not take yes for an answer. Who do you think you are, giving her the answers?

Surely, you're no better than the doctors who told her, in 2013, that her Paralympic rowing career was over. Masters, now 28, had won a bronze medal in the trunk-and-arms mixed double skulls at the 2012 Paralympics, and she wanted to win gold in '16. Now she was told she had spondylolisthesis. One of her vertebra kept sliding forward, rubbing against the one below when she moved from side to side.

So that was it, the doctors said: She could not row anymore. She didn't believe them. "I'm just stupid and too headstrong," she says.

Masters wanted to stay in shape for the rowing career that was supposedly over, so she took up skiing. For the first three days, "I was horrible. I could not stay upright past 100 meters," she says. A year later she won silver and bronze in cross-country skiing at the 2014 Paralympics in Sochi. Well, that's one way to stay in shape.

Masters then went home to Louisville to see if she could resume her rowing career. Doctors replied: Duh. They had been through this already. Her body could not make the motions necessary to row with spondylolisthesis.

So rowing was out, *again*. But, hey, Masters was a skier now. And how do skiers stay in shape? They start cycling, of course. Masters quickly found that this was actually not the best idea: "You use your core in such a different way," she says. "It's insane going from skiing to cycling. Even though you are in prime shape, you feel like you have never worked out a day in your life."

But Masters enjoyed cycling, and she got so good at it that she made the 2016 Paralympics in Rio, where she might have won bronze in the hand-pedaling road race if her left hand had not gotten caught in a rival's spokes. She missed a medal by half a wheel length.

Masters came home and retired. No, wait, that's not right. She started focusing on the '18 Paralympics in PyeongChang, where she is a medal threat in both Nordic skiing and

When Masters had to give up rowing, she discovered that what she loved, even more than rowing, was a challenge.



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biathlon. She was fourth in the 6K biathlon in Sochi and eighth in the 10K.

At her age, Masters says she still has time to pick up basketball, powerlifting and fencing. In the meantime, she is writing one of the great life stories in sports.

It started when her birth parents had been the first people to tell her no. Masters was born with six toes on each foot, five webbed fingers on each hand and no thumbs, all because of radiation poisoning from Chernobyl. She spent her childhood in orphanages in Ukraine, where she was mistreated. An American woman named Gay Masters adopted her when Oksana was seven. It is a testament to Oksana's charisma and charm that if you spend 10 minutes with her, you will forget everything you've just read in this paragraph.

Masters did not set out to be a one-woman Paralympic superpower. When she was 13 and somebody suggested adaptive rowing, she winced at *adaptive*: "As a 13-year-old girl, I didn't want to do something different," she says. But when she finally got in a boat, she loved it. When she had to give it up, she discovered that what she loved, even more than rowing, was a challenge.

Paralympic athletes face obstacles that go beyond the physical. It can be difficult to find the right equipment, and good luck finding a coach. Says Masters, "When you're not on a national team, you're completely on your own."

It takes an incredible will to make the Paralympics in three different sports. Winning medals in two of those sports, with a narrow miss in the third, is extraordinary. Masters has a different description of her career: "Not good enough yet. I don't see myself as successful because I don't have that gold medal yet." She is crazy to view her career that way. But I will not be the one to tell her. □



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