

JALEN BRUNSON

AUGUST 2026

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PHOTOGRAPH BY
CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

Sports Illustrated

“
*I had to
earn
everything.
But
anything
was
possible.*
”

How He Energized
THE KNICKS

Electrified
NEW YORK

And Became an
**INSTANT
NBA ICON**

BY CHRIS MANNIX





The Marsh sisters and their dog, Bogey



Allyson and her dog, Lacy

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**6 health essentials
in every bowl.**

BEAT TO THE PUNCH

How the USMNT would finish the World Cup was still unknown in late June, but the opening weeks were full of highlights. For example: Alex Freeman's header goal against Australia, part of a 2-0 win that guaranteed the Yanks would win their group for the first time since 2010.

LINEUP

AUGUST 2026
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**Sports
Illustrated**
KIDS

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WISCONSIN CHEESE

Jacob Misorowski has thrice set the record this season for the fastest pitch thrown by a starter in MLB history.

SCORECARD P.10
FACES IN THE CROWD P.22
POINT AFTER P.80



FEATURES

24**JALEN BRUNSON**

The overlooked 6'2" guard helped end the Knicks' title drought with a sublime Finals performance
BY CHRIS MANNIX

36**JACOB MISIOROWSKI**

Baseball has seen plenty of flamethrowers but never one quite like the Brewers righthander
BY TOM VERDUCCI

44**WORLD CUP FANS**

The first men's World Cup in the U.S. in 32 years showed the power of sports to bring communities together

54**BRENTFORD F.C.**

An analytical approach has allowed the tiny English squad to become Premier League giant slayers
BY THORE HAUGSTAD

62**HALL OF FAME SNUBS**

Our panel of voters picked the omissions who most deserve to be enshrined in Canton
BY MATT VERDERAME

70**GOUT GOUT**

At just 18, the 200-meter specialist is chasing down the marks of the GOAT, Usain Bolt
BY L. JON WERTHEIM



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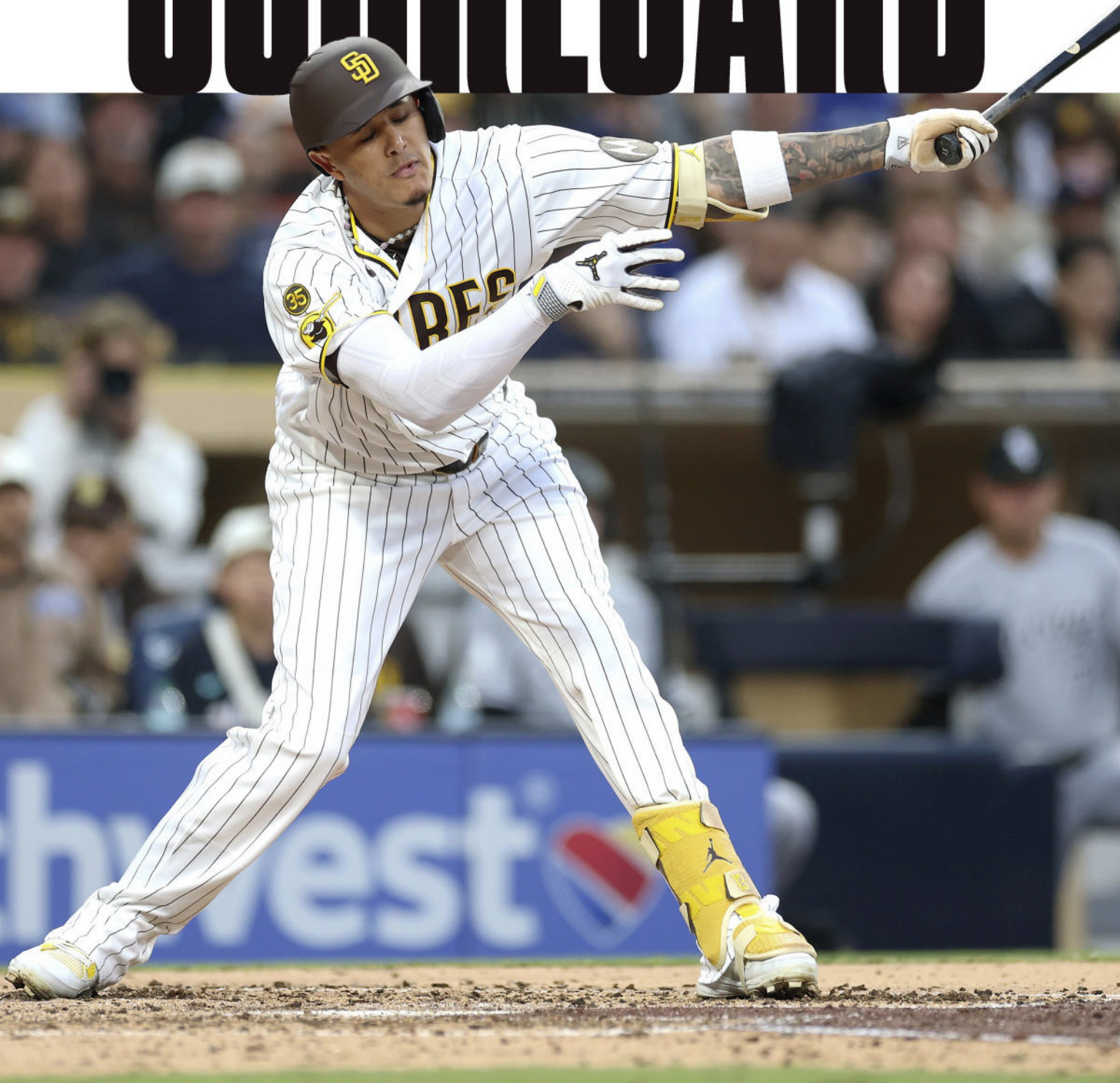
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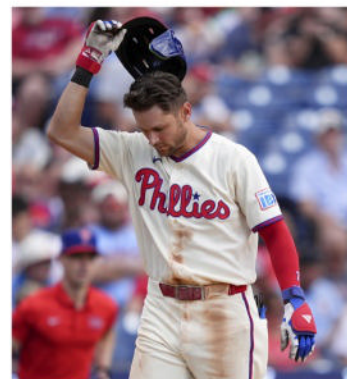


ESSAY

Dirty Thirties

HITTERS OF A CERTAIN AGE—EVEN THOSE WITH ALL-STAR PEDIGREES LIKE MANNY MACHADO—ARE STRUGGLING MIGHTILY

► BY TOM VERDUCCI



PHILLY FUNK

Shortstop Trea Turner, last year's NL batting champ, has seen his average fall from .304 to .223 in his age-33 season.

DON'T DISMISS the recent observations of a .174-hitting Manny Machado as just an anti-analytics rant. He spoke truth to an undeniable trend: This is the worst time ever to be a hitter in your 30s.

The Padres third baseman did say, "I just wish we can get analytics out of the way. I think there's too many stats out there. Too many stats, way too many numbers." Such comments drew the bulk of the attention.

The more important message is that analytics and technology have changed pitching so quickly that the older hitters are getting left behind. It used to be that players aged 31–35, who could tap into their experience of seeing thousands of pitches, were more reliable than young hitters. That's not the case anymore. Through mid-June, the youngest hitters, 25 and under, were outhitting the 31–35 group, .245 to .235.

Players aged 31–35 are finding it more difficult to get a hit than at any time in the history of the game, the Deadball Era included.

WORST BATTING AVERAGE SEASONS FOR PLAYERS 31–35

YEAR	AVERAGE	RELATIVE TO LEAGUE
2026	.233	-.008
1917	.239	-.010
1909	.240	-.004
2022	.242	-.001
2024	.243	SAME

Older hitters hit with a method called "chunking," in which they break down the huge storage of information in their heads to actionable nuggets. The shape of a pitch, the expectation of a pitch based on count and situation...all of it provides a reservoir on which to draw. By the middle of June, Machado had seen 31,429 major league pitches. That's a huge cache. The problem is that much of it is less applicable to today's patterns and types of pitches.

The more resonant quote from Machado was this: "I've noticed 15 years of a lot of fastballs. When I came up, it was 91, 92, 93 maybe. Now it's just 101. ... The game's

evolving, man. It's definitely getting harder to play. It's definitely getting more strategic."

Several teams that leaned into early 30s players have been paying the price. Among them are Machado's Padres, who have given the most plate appearances to 31–35 hitters and received a combined .204 average and .626 OPS from them. The Phillies (.222, but with decent slug), Rangers (.219) and Angels (.226) also are among the teams most invested in older hitters getting a poor return.

The game has changed too quickly for many older hitters. Let's use the arc of Machado's career to measure those changes. We can compare the pitching that he saw in 2013, his first full season, when he led the league with 51 doubles, to '26. Here is how to interpret those numbers, which help explain why this is the worst time ever for a hitter in his 30s.

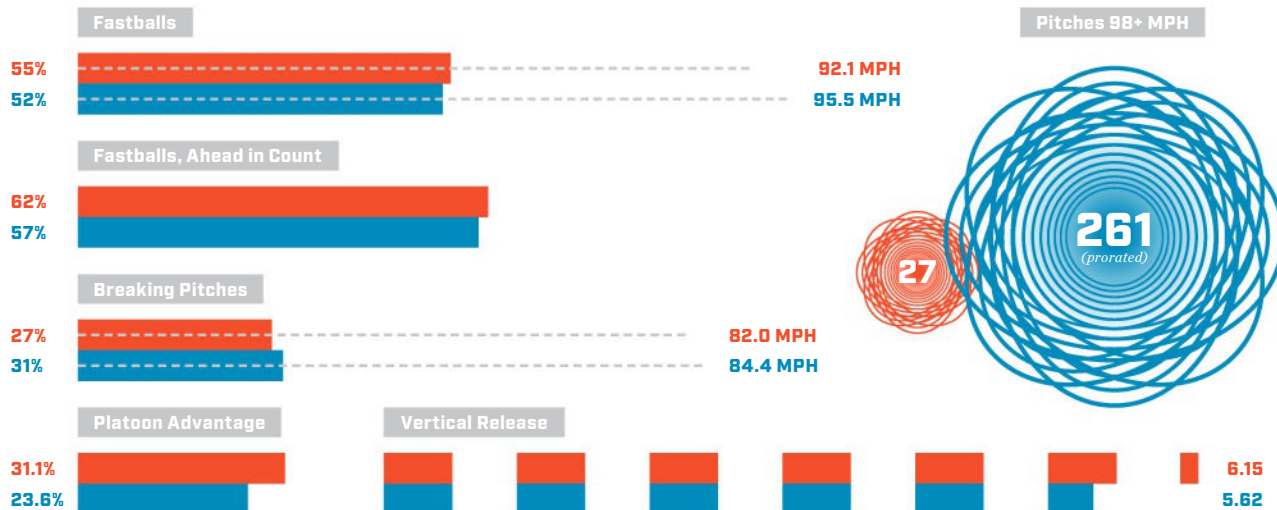
1. Fastball velocity has gone up 3.4 mph

Machado has less time to react as he is aging. The difference in velocity equates to the pitcher

2013

PITCHES SEEN BY MACHADO

2026



getting six or seven inches closer to the plate. (This does not include cutters.)

2. Elite velocity has become an everyday occurrence

In 2013 Machado saw a pitch as fast as 98 mph only once a week. Now he's seeing them 10 times more often.

3. "Fastball counts" have been decreasing

In 2013, Machado saw a fastball when ahead of the count 62% of the time. Those challenge heaters have dropped to 57%.

4. More spin

Four-seamers to Machado have dropped from 35% to 30%. That entire decline has been made up by breaking pitches, which have

increased from 27% to 32%. Those breaking pitches are nastier. They have more spin, more shapes and more velocity than before.

As much as fastball properties have changed, nothing has made hitting more difficult than the varieties and preponderance of spin. Machado has been getting devoured by spin this season. He has been hitting .129 and slugging .247 against breaking pitches, both career worsts. He has only six extra-base hits on 381 breaking pitches.

5. More pitchers

In 2013 Machado took 31% of his plate appearances against relief pitchers. This season he sees relievers 39% of the time.

In any meaningful situation, the opposing manager is going to match up his best right-handed reliever against Machado. That means a steep decline in how often Machado hits against lefthanders. His platoon advantage has shrunk from 31.1% to 23.6%.

6. More difficult attack angles

The average release point that Machado sees from pitchers has dropped from 6.15 feet to 5.62, about 6½ inches.

Finally, let's look at how the gap between younger and older hitters has widened during the course of Machado's career. In those years, plate appearances for players in their 30s has declined from 28.5% to 27%.

Hitting has grown more difficult across the board, but as Machado has unfortunately been learning, it is more challenging for the older hitter who has seen the game change quickly. □

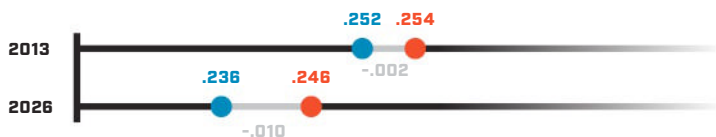
TEXAS TROUBLE

At age 32, Rangers shortstop Corey Seager is hitting a mere .186, which is nearly 100 points below his career average.



GAP BETWEEN YOUNGER AND OLDER HITTERS, THEN AND NOW

AVG. AGE 20-29
AVG. AGE 30-39





SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

STAR A-PEEL

HE NEVER MADE THE SHOW AS A PLAYER, BUT ONE BANANA WILL BE ON DWTS AS A DANCER

► BY LAUREN GREEN

T HIS IS the moment that Jackson Olson has been waiting for. The Savannah Bananas second baseman will trade in his cleats for ballroom dance shoes this fall when he competes on Season 35 of *Dancing With the Stars*.

Olson has often said that he manifested being on the show. His journey began with a social media post last September. Former *DWTS* dancer Derek Hough, who now sits on the judges panel, came to perform at a Bananas game in San Diego. Hough and Olson made a short video with captions reading “Baseball player who wants to be on *Dancing With the Stars*” and “Guy who can make that happen.”

Leveraging social media has become a must-do for the *DWTS*

competitors. It allows the dancers to show off their personalities even more and can help elevate couples in the fans’ vote when they may not be getting the highest marks from the judges. (Olson, known as the Bananas’ greatest showman, has 3.2 million followers across Instagram and TikTok.)

In February—five hours before Bananas opened their 2026 world tour—Olson, 28, found out he had been selected for the show. “Later that night the first pitch I saw, I hit a home run and so that whole day was just a whirlwind,” Olson says.

A month later Hough returned to the Bananas and handed Olson a tiny mirror ball. It’s not unusual for athletes to chase the big one given to the show’s winner. All but one of *DWTS*’s seasons have

ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Olson, who played collegiately at Hartford and Stetson, has become a fan favorite with the Bananas for his exuberance—and footwork.

featured at least one athlete, with 11 lifting the coveted trophy.

The start of the *DWTS* competition coincides with the end of the Bananas’ tour. Olson’s dance partner will travel with the team for five weeks so he can finish out the season before heading to Los Angeles full-time. Olson—who has his eyes set on the show’s Disney theme night and says he’d like to perform to music from Taylor Swift and *The Greatest Showman*—has gotten used to quickly digesting choreography as a member of the Bananas. The team learns two or three new dances per game. Olson says some of those dances have gotten more difficult as the entertainment staff has “upped the ante a little bit.”

As a Banana, Olson’s focus is on dancing, baseball and fan interaction. On *DWTS*, his concentration will be more singular. “I’m going to be able to zone in on one thing and that’s just making a really good dance,” he says. “That’s what really excites me. I’ll get to challenge myself like I’ve never been challenged before.” □

SCORECARD: GEAR

LOCAL STYLE

*A DESIGNER'S IN-DEMAND NWSL COLLECTION
DRAWS ON EACH CITY'S INDIVIDUAL VIBE*

► BY KIM CURZI

DOMINIQUE “DOMO” Wells is the creative force behind the hottest merchandise in the NWSL. The first creative director for the Washington Spirit is a DMV native. She spent a decade as a DJ and would rather talk about the origins of Go-Go music in D.C. than the history of the Capitol. She discusses marketing strategies like they’re album rollouts. But it’s her culture-first mindset that allowed her to transition from playlists in clubs to styling for the pitch. In the process, she’s become a cultural curator for professional women’s soccer.

In May, the Spirit was named the NWSL’s Club Retail MVP. (Yes, it’s an actual award, given out to recognize exceptional sales and engagement with fans.) Washington has six of the top eight best-selling jerseys in the league, with forward Trinity Rodman’s shirt leading the way. It’s worth noting the Spirit doesn’t have six of the top eight players in the league; the kits are just that good.

Wells is something of an expert on hometowns. Before being recruited by the Spirit, and during her time as a DJ, she also worked for one of the largest streaming

platforms in the world producing playlists for local markets. Traveling the country and connecting with audiences through music allowed her to experience what made the local vibe of each city special.

It cultivated a skill set that has allowed Wells to plug into regional markets with ease. “I can look at an entity and understand where the cultural gaps are,” she says. “Being part of those communities and working in the interest of them for such a long time—that’s what I know.”

Wells started the creative firm Dead Dirt in 2023 as a place to express and explore her interests in fashion. “Sports came to me,” she says. “The Washington Spirit came knocking at my door. But they were trying to do what a lot of sports teams do, which is kind of like these one-off partnerships. I knew that’s not what they needed. That’s not what I needed.”

The NWSL has been growing rapidly since its founding in 2012. It boasted record-breaking attendance during the 2026 opening weekend and has plans to expand



WASHINGTON SPIRIT

Wells likes things that are “super fem.” But, she says, “Everybody can wear the NWSL jerseys.”



DENVER SUMMIT

Towering mountain peaks nearly obscure the number 5280 [Denver’s altitude] on the back.



PORTLAND THORNS

The Rose City gets a thorny treatment. A knitted rose appears on both sides of the jersey.



to 18 teams by 2028. “[These teams] are like teenagers,” Wells says. “They’re what, 14, 15 years old? They’ve come a long way, but they’ve had to work really hard to maintain stability.”

Many NWSL teams are still working to develop fan bases, the kind of heritage that makes players household names. “At the end of the day, all of these clubs, all of these teams, no matter what they are, what sport they are, they’re a business first and they’re not typically led by [local] people,” says Wells. She believes building a successful brand and recruiting new

fans requires tapping into regional markets in an authentic way. It takes time and connectivity.

She pushed back on the Spirit’s initial offer for a single collab with Dead Dirt for a position that allowed her to roll out several capsules over time. For Wells, it was a chance to show her range. For the Spirit, it was a recipe for brand loyalty. Her first collection for the club dropped in 2024.

“[Wells] has helped us establish a look and merchandise brand that speaks to D.C. culture, not only to our hardcore fan base but also to non-sports fans in the DMV,”

SOUNDS GOOD

Wells taps into her time as a DJ to “understand what the cultural gaps are” in each market and then designs accordingly.

says Spirit director of marketing Matt Haas.

Wells is interested in clothes that reflect the heartbeat of hometowns. She designs with points of reference that she believes people can see themselves in, the kind of clothes that originate in sport but can be worn anywhere. “I think that’s something that’s been a light bulb for a lot of the teams,” she says. “Because I know fans are going to see this and engage with it because they’re paying attention. I’m really designing for people who might gravitate toward this because it’s cute or it looks good.” In this way, the Spirit—and the NWSL—see Wells’s blend of sports and fashion as an on-ramp for new fans.

Before the start of the season, the NWSL tapped Wells to design merchandise for all 16 teams. The Dead Dirt × NWSL collab features knit polos in unisex sizing with a nod toward each city as Wells sees it—a jersey that she describes as “slightly more luxe” and looks like it was made by someone who grew up in your town. Wells hopes her designs will have success, but not because they’re necessarily commercial. She’s seeking broad appeal in narrow verticals, a “if you know, you know” kind of vibe.

As of mid-June, nearly half of the collab between Wells and the NWSL had sold out, but her Cherry Blossom drop for Washington, which features casual long sleeves alongside more fashion-forward tank tops and killer outerwear, is still available. Add to cart... while you still can. □



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SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

SECOND ACT

AFTER THREE YEARS, AMERICA'S FAVORITE SOCCER COACH IS BACK—WITH A NEW GIG

► BY MARK BECHTEL



DURING THE montage that ended what was widely thought to be the series finale of *Ted Lasso*, the writers worked in a “breadcrumb” or two, in the words of co-creator Brendan Hunt. The most notable: Keeley (Juno Temple) presenting a proposal for an AFC Richmond women’s team.

After the show wrapped and all the editing and PR work was done, the writers took a while to decompress and then decided that maybe there were more stories to tell. They got together at a resort in Ojai, Calif., for two days to spitball ideas and play a little golf. (Not Hunt, though: “Didn’t much care about that, but I sure like riding the golf carts,” he says.)

By the end of the retreat, Hunt (who also plays Coach Beard in the show) says it was clear that “there’s something here. The soil remains fertile.”

Among the ideas they kicked the tires on for Season 4—which premieres on Apple TV on Aug. 5—was relocating the setting to Kansas City, where Ted (Jason Sudeikis) had moved in the finale after resigning as Richmond’s coach. “In the end, we felt like Richmond and London are too much a part of the DNA to get away from that,” says Hunt.

So they settled on the idea of focusing on the formation of a women’s team, coached by Lasso. That the show would lean into women’s sports isn’t a surprise. Sudeikis has long been a presence at women’s pro and college basketball games, and much of the cast and crew got caught up in the European Women’s Championship, with England winning while the show was shooting in that country in 2022.

And *Ted Lasso* has always featured powerful, smartly written female characters, which Hunt ascribes to two things: a writers’ room that’s nearly half female and the upbringing of the show’s four creators (Sudeikis, Hunt, Joe Kelly and Bill Lawrence). “None of us have a brother,” says Hunt. “Me and Joe and Jason all only have sisters, and Bill is an only child. So we’ve all basically grown up with strong women around. It was not like some kind of leap.”

Introducing a new team meant finding a whole bunch of new actors (though many of the regulars from the first three seasons are back). One was Tanya Reynolds, who plays one of Ted’s assistant coaches. Roberts had little soccer knowledge (aside from being caught up in the Lionesses’ Euro campaign) and hadn’t even seen

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Soccer newbie Reynolds (with Hunt and Sudeikis) wanted to get into the *Ted Lasso* universe.

the show when she auditioned. When she was cast, she binged it and was hooked. “Watching the first three seasons in such quick succession, I really felt like I just wanted to be a part of that world,” says Reynolds. “I just loved the world of it all.”

Not having a soccer background wasn’t the most imposing thing for Reynolds. That would be stepping into the cast of a show that won 13 Emmys—which turned out to be something of a team-building exercise. Says Reynolds, “We were all in the same boat, we were all the new kids on the block, and so we all felt like we were in it together and we really bonded.”

“The vibe I got from watching it was that it would be a really fun job to work on.” And it was. “Every day I was laughing so much that I felt sick,” she says.

So much change can be imposing, especially for a show that relies so heavily on the actors’ chemistry. But, says Hunt, “Once everything, you know, gets in order over the course of the first couple episodes, it should just feel like, *We’re back.*” □



Reagan received treatment at St. Jude for soft tissue cancer. Now she can think about playing princess instead of cancer.

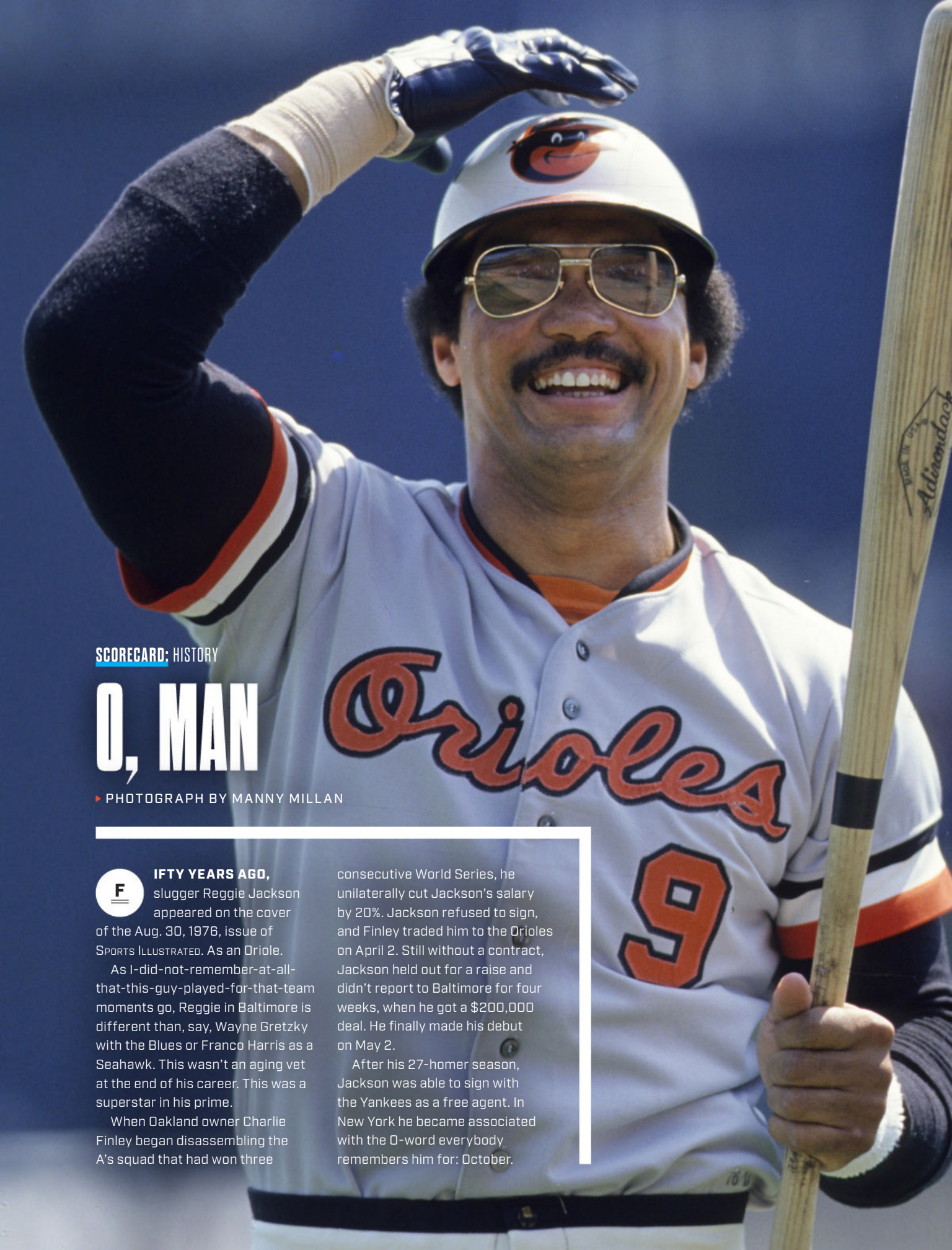
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help
more
kids
**just
be kids.**

St. Jude patient
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SCORECARD: HISTORY

O, MAN

► PHOTOGRAPH BY MANNY MILLAN

FIFTY YEARS AGO, slugger Reggie Jackson appeared on the cover of the Aug. 30, 1976, issue of *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*. As an Oriole.

As I-did-not-remember-at-all-that-this-guy-played-for-that-team moments go, Reggie in Baltimore is different than, say, Wayne Gretzky with the Blues or Franco Harris as a Seahawk. This wasn't an aging vet at the end of his career. This was a superstar in his prime.

When Oakland owner Charlie Finley began disassembling the A's squad that had won three

consecutive World Series, he unilaterally cut Jackson's salary by 20%. Jackson refused to sign, and Finley traded him to the Orioles on April 2. Still without a contract, Jackson held out for a raise and didn't report to Baltimore for four weeks, when he got a \$200,000 deal. He finally made his debut on May 2.

After his 27-homer season, Jackson was able to sign with the Yankees as a free agent. In New York he became associated with the O-word everybody remembers him for: October.

FACES IN THE CROWD

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

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MADISON TAYLOR ► Sport: Lacrosse ► Hometown: Wantagh, N.Y.

Taylor, a senior attacker at Northwestern, scored one goal and had six assists in a 14–11 victory against North Carolina, helping the Wildcats win their ninth Division I women's lacrosse title and setting the NCAA tournament record for career points (91). She is the only player in NCAA history with at least 450 career points and 200 career draw controls. Taylor reached the championship game in all four of her seasons.



TAH CHIKOMBA ► Sport: Track and Field ► Hometown: Chiredzi, Zimbabwe

Chikomba, a junior at Kansas State, leaped 27'5½" to win the long jump title at the NCAA D-I outdoor track and field championships, breaking his own school record by nearly four inches and landing the furthest jump at the event since 2018. The first-team All-American broke the Big 12 championship long jump record and had a wind-aided leap of 28'8½" (the best collegiate all-conditions jump ever) at the NCAA West prelims in May.



TALIA VESCIO ► Sport: Flag Football ► Hometown: Rosemount, Minn.

Talia, a junior quarterback at Rosemount High, completed 22 of 30 passes for 309 yards and seven touchdowns in a 45–12 mercy rule victory over Rogers High, guiding the Irish to its first state flag football title and an undefeated season. In 14 games, she threw for 2,638 yards and 62 touchdowns with only seven interceptions. She also ran for a team-high 285 yards.

SOFTBALL

Back To Back

► **DOMINANCE LOOKS** a lot like Teagan Kavan on the mound. Start with last year, when the Texas ace pitched 31 2/3 scoreless innings (a Women's College World Series record) en route to an NCAA title. Or consider this postseason, when she allowed one run in three elimination complete-game wins to reach the WCWS finals.

Even on zero days rest, it was no wonder why the Longhorns would turn to the junior righthander. Pitching the last two innings in relief, Kavan struck out five and retired six straight, leading Texas to a 4–1 victory over Texas Tech for the program's second straight national championship.

"It was the opportunity you dream about," says Kavan, the first player to be named the WCWS Most Outstanding Player twice. "After that last pitch, running to the rest of the girls will be a memory I will remember forever."

Softball legend Cat Osterman called Kavan the GOAT afterward, but she wasn't the only one to bear witness: A record 2.5 million viewers watched Texas's Game 2 WCWS finals win.

"Fans show out and we always get to play in a full stadium," says the West Des Moines, Iowa, native. "I feel extremely lucky to get to play this game at this time and be a small part in the growth of it." □



FROM TOP: NORTHWESTERN ATHLETICS; K-STATE ATHLETICS; COURTESY OF ROBIN RICE; TYLEE SCHMIDT/NCAA PHOTO/DETTI IMAGES

Just Can't Do It

Skechers Sneaks Up On Nike

in Latest YouGov Research



Nike topped next-purchase-considerations, followed closely by Skechers at no. 2, which also secured the top spot with the female cohort.



Nike emerged no. 1, netting 36.3% of respondents. Skechers trailed closely at 35.5%. Nike led males at 40.6% while Skechers topped the female list at 40.9%.

Skechers posted the largest improvement for '25 over '24, to its overall **35.5%** result.



Skechers' value perception marketing paid dividends with the no. 3 spot on "good/poor value for money" with a 35.1 value score, while Nike landed no. 9 with a 21.6.

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YouGov's Top Threads: U.S. Fashion Retail Rankings 2026 survey
March 18, 2026

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He was once overlooked, undervalued and called out by pundits. Everything is different now for Knicks guard **JALEN BRUNSON**, who gave New York the title it has craved for more than half a century with a sublime Finals performance





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MONICA ALVAREZ
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by
**CHRIS
MANNIX**

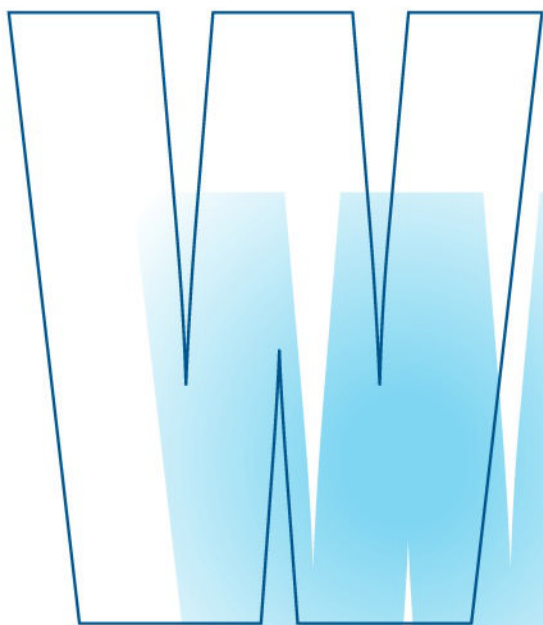
25
AUGUST 2026
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NEW YORK GROOVE

Brunson's epic postseason performance included a 45-point explosion in Game 5, the most ever scored by a Knick in a Finals game.



WINNING EXCUSES A LOT,

which for Mikal Bridges includes a tequila-fueled Instagram Live 48 hours after the NBA Finals. In a now infamous stream Bridges serenaded his dog, bleated like a goat in reverence for Jalen Brunson, needed five tries to pronounce Jeremy Sochan's name and called Knicks owner James Dolan a "savage" for suggesting the team abstain from sex during its playoff run. At one point, Brunson fired up his seldom-used X account to plead with someone to "take Mikal's phone."

Of Brunson, Bridges urged the Knicks to "build that little big-headed ass a statue." He thanked Becky Hammon, the Hall of Famer who in 2023 suggested the Knicks would never win a title being led by someone Brunson's size. "He ain't going to tell y'all," said Bridges. "He knows what she said. And it fueled him to go be great."

A few days later, Brunson was asked to confirm Bridges's agave-soaked assertion. "I said this after we won," says Brunson. "I didn't respond then, and I damn sure am not going to respond now. So you guys can take that and do what you want."

Brunson is sitting in an empty room adjacent to the suburban studio outside New York City where he records his podcast, *Roommates Show*, which he cohosts with teammate Josh Hart. Ben Stiller has just dropped by, revealing plans to produce a documentary on the Knicks' 2025–26 season. Outside a crowd grows as word of Brunson's presence spreads. A pair of police SUVs block off both ends of the street. A blue-clad fan pleads with someone entering the building to tell Brunson "that he's the f---ing man."

Championships in New York, a city with a population of nearly nine million, hit different. A Knicks championship really hits different. In other sports, two teams divide the fan base. The Yankees and Mets. The Giants and Jets. Even the Rangers have some competition from Islanders fans in the outer boroughs. The Knicks have none. They play in Manhattan but the team's tentacles reach from the Bronx to Staten Island. The incursion of the Nets into Brooklyn in 2012 barely made a dent. "They represent us," said director Spike Lee, the most famous Knicks fan. "We see ourselves in them."

For players who end 53-year title droughts with one of the most clutch Finals efforts in NBA history, the air is more rarefied. Brunson averaged 32.6 points over five games, connecting on 38.9% of his threes. Drill down and the numbers are even more impressive: He averaged 14.2 points on 39.7% shooting in the first two quarters of games in the series, with a plus-minus ratio of –6.8. In the fourth quarter, he put up 11.2 points on 51.4% shooting and was +7. In the Game 5 clincher, Brunson scored 45 of the Knicks' 94 points. "He's a heck of a player," a dejected Spurs coach Mitch Johnson said after the series. "He deserves everything he's got."

Rick Brunson has seen more of his son's clutch performances than anyone. In state championships, NCAA tournaments, NBA playoff games. Yet from his seat on the bench, even Rick, a Knicks assistant, struggled to process what he was watching. The fallaway jumpers. The finger-roll layups. The triple move he put on the 7'4" Victor Wembanyama to create the inch of space needed to get the ball on the backboard. At one point during Jalen's 15-point fourth quarter in Game 5, Rick felt himself literally on the edge of his cushioned seat. "I couldn't even comprehend it," says Rick. "I was as in awe as everybody else."

Ask Jalen what comes over him in these moments and he won't bury you in hyperbole. He credits the work. "When I'm in the gym by myself in the summertime, those are the moments I'm thinking about," says Brunson. "Where everything, every detail has to matter."

He doesn't fear failure. "I don't care about losing," says Brunson. Pausing, he corrects himself. "I do care about losing," Brunson says. "I just know how I work and I feel like if my mind is right and everything is right, then I'm not afraid to fail. I'm not afraid to lose in those situations. So it allows me just to be the best I can be and not care about the end result as long as the process is right."

In this case, the end result was a championship, one that pushed Brunson into never-ending debates. The greatest Knick of all time? Walt Frazier and Patrick Ewing have strong arguments, but Brunson has a case. On the short list—no pun intended—of the NBA's greatest small guards? Depends on your definition, but along with Tiny Archibald, Isiah Thomas and Allen Iverson, the (maybe) 6'2" Brunson is in the conversation. Brunson's rise, from second-round

pick to the Mavericks' second unit, from starter to superstar, has been among the most improbable.

In New York, it's catapulted Brunson into another tier of celebrity. Days after the Finals clincher, a mural on Manhattan's Lower East Side was updated with Brunson holding the Finals MVP trophy. Dozens of Brunson doppelgängers—or at least those who considered themselves ones—showed up at Washington Square Park for a lookalike contest. (The winner, a cornrowed 5-year-old, earned a FaceTime from Brunson, not to mention a \$5,000 prize.) An online petition to change the name of the Hudson River to Brunson River has picked up hundreds of signatures.

"Honestly, I'm just really thankful that this organization, this city, this fan base took me in and I was able to achieve a goal that we all had," says Brunson. "That comes before anything."

DURING THE FINALS, Brunson was asked how it was that a player with his accomplishments—McDonald's All-American, two-time NCAA champion, consensus college basketball player of the year—could have been so overlooked. What was it that teams, with their bottomless well of scouting resources, missed? In the middle of the question, Brunson cracks a grin, as if knowing his answer would be unsatisfying.

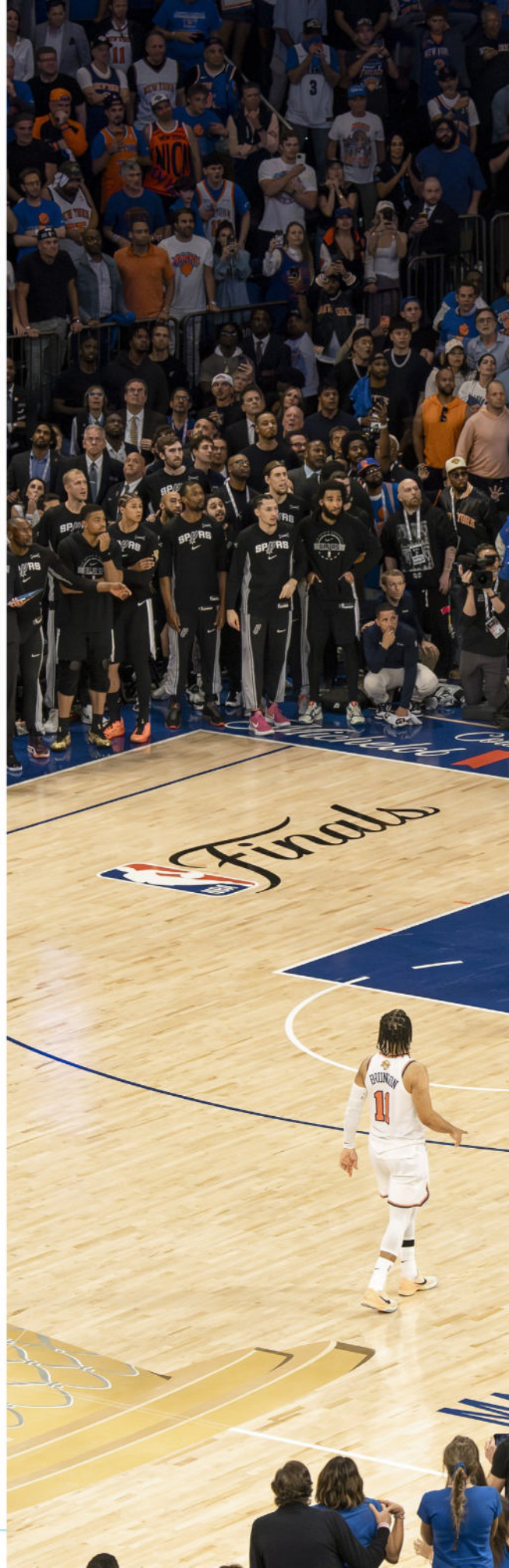
Says Brunson, "Everything."

Later, when asked to expound on that, Brunson is diplomatic. "Obviously when it comes to drafting, or drafting in the first round, drafting in the lottery, the way it's gone about is you're trying to hit the jackpot," he says. "So if you swing and miss, you swing and miss. But if you make contact, you could hit a home run."

"I feel like drafting me was kind of like hitting a single. You know what you're going to get. And maybe that wasn't worth swinging for the fences early. So if that's the thought process, that's on them. I can't control that. The only thing I can control was everything that I did. I thought I put myself in the best position possible and I still was drafted in the second round."

Rick Brunson wasn't surprised. In fact, he predicted it. "He said I was going second round, to Dallas," Jalen recalls his father telling him days before the draft. Rick had seen all the projections. Too small. Not athletic enough. A solid backup. He knew many front offices would buy into them. "You have to know Jalen, understand

*"I feel like drafting me was kind of like
HITTING A SINGLE,
Brunson says. "You know what you're
going to get. And maybe that wasn't
worth swinging for the fences early."*



ERICK W. RASCO



FOLLOW THROUGH

A miss from Brunson (bottom) at the end of Game 4 was tipped in by OG Anunoby, capping New York's remarkable 29-point comeback and putting the Spurs in a 3-1 hole.



STAR POWER

Brunson looks back at key moments leading to his crowning achievement as NBA Finals MVP.

Scan the QR code for an exclusive SI video.



Jalen,” says Rick. “And if you don’t and you just try to evaluate him from afar, you’re going to be wrong.”

Rick knew Jalen. And he knew the NBA. A sturdy playmaker during four years at Temple, Rick played for eight teams in a nine-year NBA career, including two separate stints with the Knicks. In 2006, Rick was cut by the 76ers before the start of the season. At 34, he knew it was over. “I didn’t have the desire to work as hard as I needed to,” says Rick. On a car ride home one day, he told Jalen he was retiring. In the backseat, the 10-year-old fought back tears.

For Rick, the NBA door had closed. But another one opened. To be a more present father to Jalen and his sister, Erica. And to be a coach. Not immediately. Rick knew Jalen loved the game. But he didn’t want him to live the game. Not yet, anyway. Soccer, baseball, football—he put Jalen in everything. “Kids should enjoy sports when they are little,” says Rick. “Not be forced into them.”



GARDEN PATH

Brunson has spent his life around celebrities, first at MSG as a kid during his dad’s career and now with his TV pal Hargitay.



There was another reason. With basketball, Rick could see the talent. And the success that came with it. But he wanted Jalen to experience failure. “You just can’t always be the best at something,” says Rick. “Because once failure hits, then how are you going to overcome that?” Jalen’s Pop Warner football coach was Vince Papale, the ex-Philadelphia Eagle of *Invincible* fame. Papale made every player play every position. “So no one could say they were the best at anything,” says Rick. The team went 1–11. Rick loved every minute of it.

“It was great for Jalen,” says Rick. “He learned how to be in different positions, to be a good teammate. And he learned how to lose. The feeling of losing. And how much it makes you want to win.”

Eventually, Jalen’s focus narrowed. With basketball, Rick saw the passion early. When Jalen was 8, Rick picked him up at a summer camp. Jalen was in tears. Each day, camp ended with a game of knockout, a shooting drill. That day, Jalen had been the last knocked out. Rick was puzzled. Stop being a baby, he said. A camp coach pulled Rick aside. “I was told, ‘He’s crying because he cares,’” says Rick. The moment stuck. “I just remember thinking, *Wow, it’s just a game,*” says Rick. “But it meant so much to him.”

Eventually, Rick picked up the training. At first it was light. A couple of hours a day, a couple of days a week. Sink 100 layups right-handed, then 100 left-handed. Dribble two balls around the block, then do 30 minutes of box jumps. He lowered the rim on the basket in the backyard to eight feet and banned Jalen from attempting three-pointers.

In between, Rick watched. “I needed him to do it on his own,” says Rick. “I told him, ‘I’m not always going to be around. So you have to have self-motivation.’” When Jalen missed shots, Rick accused him of not putting in the work. “It would frustrate him because I knew he was,” says Rick, “but I would just put it in his head that he wasn’t.”

In 2007, Rick took a job as basketball operations manager at Virginia. The family moved to Charlottesville. The work got harder. Pick-and-roll drills. Shooting drills. Anything Rick struggled with at the NBA level he made sure Jalen perfected. At UVA, Rick had access to a state-of-the-art facility. “I wouldn’t let him in there,” says Rick. Most days they would train outside, on the cracked asphalt of a nearby high school. “I wanted to teach mental toughness,” says Rick. “Why would we be in air conditioning? Why can’t we go out in the hot sun?”

The work was tough. Tense. Clashes could play out publicly. Once, Rick interrupted a pickup game because he thought Jalen was playing too selfishly. After a high school game Rick chewed him out for the same reason. All along, Rick told him, “If you want me to stop, I’ll stop.” Jalen never did.

“He was testing me, seeing if I was going to break,” says Jalen. “He was going to see if I was going to crack. It was mental warfare to see how I could push myself, because you can always get yourself to another gear.”

N GAME 5, as Brunson wove his way through the Spurs’ defense, Pat Ambrose felt a twinge of déjà vu. For 22 years Ambrose served as head coach at Stevenson High in Lincolnshire, Ill.

Four of those seasons were spent with Brunson, who moved to the Chicago suburb in 2010, when Rick landed an assistant coaching job with the Bulls. As a junior, Brunson scored 56 points against Whitney Young High, a team led by Jahlil Okafor, a towering future

NBA lottery pick. “Okafor wasn’t Wemby,” says Ambrose. “But he was gigantic for a high school kid. And Jalen couldn’t be stopped.”

NBA superstars have superpowers. Giannis Antetokounmpo’s explosiveness. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander’s body control. Nikola Jokić’s soft touch. Brunson has two. There’s his footwork, a balletic blend of Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Mikhail Baryshnikov. At Temple, Rick played for John Chaney, who had a saying: *The longer you stay on the floor, the longer you stay in the game*. As the game evolved to be played more above the rim, Chaney coached players to perfect playing beneath it.

Rick hammered that mindset into Jalen. He showed him tape of Michael Jordan. He had him study Kobe Bryant. How did Jordan eventually get past the Pistons in the playoffs? “Playing off two feet,” says Rick. How did Bryant take his game to a championship level? Playing off two feet. Brunson’s coach at Villanova, Jay Wright, shared a similar philosophy. Practices began and ended with footwork drills. “He knew there would be people who are more athletic than we were,” says Jalen. “But we could overcome that with footwork.”

In New York, a Knicks title hits very different.

*“They **REPRESENT US**,” said director Spike Lee, the most famous Knicks fan. “We see ourselves in them.”*





TOAST OF THE TOWN

Brunson and Hart threw out first pitches at a Yankees game, while Brown and Karl-Anthony Towns appeared with the MVP on The Tonight Show.

Brunson's other superpower is more intangible. "Persistence," is how veteran coach turned TV analyst Stan Van Gundy describes it. Mike Breen, the Knicks' longtime broadcaster, calls it "an iron will." Early in Brunson's New York tenure, Breen likened Brunson to Bryant. The remark drew criticism.

"It was blasphemy," Breen jokes. He stands by it. "Nothing affects what he wants to do, good or bad," says Breen. "We don't have stats to measure that stuff and he clearly has a mental strength and a will that's stronger than most."

Brunson's relationship with Bryant was brief but memorable. He crossed paths with him in high school, when he scored a pair of tickets to a Lakers-Bulls game. Afterward, the two shook hands. Bryant handed Brunson a pair of his red Kobe 9s. Something Bryant said stuck with Brunson: *Why work if you don't want to be the best?*

"Things weren't going to be given to me," says Brunson. "I had to earn everything. But anything was possible."

He showed flashes of excellence in Dallas, rising from reliable rookie to top sixth man to Luka Dončić's sidekick during the Mavericks' run to the conference finals in 2022. Brunson averaged 21.6 points per game during those playoffs, proving, to the Knicks, at least, that he was ready for something bigger.



The end of Brunson's time in Dallas has been well-chronicled. In 2021, he wanted a four-year, \$55 million extension. The Mavericks didn't offer it. When they did, it was too late. Dallas could have beaten the four-year, \$104 million contract New York gave Brunson in July 2022 but passed. It worked out. Brunson has earned three All-NBA nods since then and now a Finals MVP. The Knicks, Brunson says, "gave me the opportunity to seize the moment." Still, he insists if it had gone another way, he would have made it work.

"If I stayed in Dallas, I feel like that team, I would have made the best of it as much as I can," says Brunson. "I would have been a star [in] my role as best I could."

Would he have been happy playing second fiddle to Dončić?

"Absolutely," says Brunson. "Understanding the player that he is and what he brought to the table, you were going to be on TV 30, 40 times just because of the level of player he was. So there was going to be opportunity for you to grow as a player as well. Being able to play with him and understand him and just help him out. It was the opportunity that I was ready for. It was the opportunity that I enjoyed and the role that I enjoyed because of the person he is and the player he is. So, yes, absolutely."



MEMORY LANE

Relive the excitement of the Knicks' title season by ordering SI's special championship commemorative edition at si.com/issues



BEFORE GAME 3 against the Spurs, as Brunson wrapped up a practice-day press conference, a voice rose up from the back. Fat Joe, the Bronx-born rapper, had snuck into the room for a question. Minutes earlier, Joe had engaged with Knicks coach Mike Brown, getting Brown to agree to hand over an autographed pair of his signature PF Flyers. Catching Brunson's attention proved more difficult. "Hey Jalen," Joe shouted. Brunson turned. "Hey Joe," he said, and then stepped off the dais.

"Damn," Joe muttered. "I got treated like media."

That's Brunson. He isn't easily impressed. He's more Jeter than Broadway Joe. When Brunson scans celebrity row at Madison Square Garden, his eyes skip past Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld and settle on Mariska Hargitay, the star of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the long-running NBC procedural. "Love Mariska Hargitay," says Brunson. The feeling is mutual. The actor is a fixture courtside at Knicks games. (Brunson later said he would like to make a guest appearance on the show.)

"I think the amazing thing about watching Jalen play is that he has this quiet, deep knowledge that he was made for this moment," says Hargitay. "Or not that he was made, but that he built himself, piece by piece, day by day, hour by hour, for this moment. Whatever the moment may be, he knows he did the work to meet it."

Brunson isn't uncomfortable in the spotlight. But he doesn't seek it. In interviews, he routinely deflects credit to his teammates. When he earns it, he doesn't lean into it. Consider: In 2024, Brunson signed a four-year, \$156.5 million contract extension. Great money—but \$113 million less than he could have signed for a year later. That decision created the flexibility the Knicks needed to reshape the roster around him.

Pundits praised his selflessness. Brunson, though, points out it wasn't really selfless. "I signed for the most amount of money that was in front of me at that time," he says. Sure, waiting a year could have been more lucrative. But that came with risk. In some ways, Brunson is still the second-round pick looking to scratch out a 10-year career.

"People always say, 'Yeah, you can bet on yourself,' but if things go wrong, it can quickly go away," says Brunson. "So being able to play with a free mind knowing that I had secured a good amount of money, it allowed me to play free as well. Besides, no matter how much money I would sign for, I don't think my life changes that much day-to-day."

That trophy will change things for a franchise that had been steeped in frustration. In one series, Brunson has erased the ghosts of '94 and the disappointment of '99. He has papered over the sub-20-win seasons, the countless coaching changes and more than two decades of failing to escape the second round. He has erased the memory of John Starks's blocked three, Patrick Ewing's torn Achilles and Carmelo Anthony's failed return.

And he did it, to paraphrase another adopted New Yorker, his way. At City Hall, the last stop of the Knicks' victory parade, Brunson offered a rare public rebuttal to his critics. "There are people who have a lot of opinions out there, negative things," he said. "But when you're proving them wrong, you really don't have to say s--- to them."

Many interpreted that as a response to Hammon.

Maybe. For sure, Brunson will never tell. □



STIFLED TOWER

After a dominant season, the loss in the NBA Finals showed Victor Wembanyama that he still has room to grow



ELDON JOHNSON'S

22-acre ranch sits in Texas Hill Country, 35 miles northwest of

San Antonio. Inside the wrought-iron gates of Longhorn Ranch, Johnson raises a collection of animals: about 20 miniature goats, some Highland cows, a couple of horses. Last fall, Johnson made headlines when he declared that he would use his six-figure prize money from the NBA Cup to buy a llama. The work is real, Johnson says. Early morning wakeups, feeding the animals, cleaning. Friends and family take over when he is on the road. Asked which of his teammates would struggle with ranch life, Johnson pauses. "Carter Bryant," he says. "Not really an outside type of person." Asked who would adapt quickly, Johnson doesn't hesitate before blurting out the most unlikely cowboy: Victor Wembanyama.

Figuring out the ranch, Johnson reasoned, would be like figuring things out on the court. Which Wembanyama has proven to be pretty good at: He averaged 25.0 points on 51.2% shooting this past season, including 34.9% from three. He was the NBA's first unanimous Defensive Player of the Year and finished third in the voting for MVP.

In previous years, teams got away with defending Wembanyama with smaller, sturdier defenders. "A guy

that could get up underneath him was a problem,” says Spurs coach Mitch Johnson. The combination of improved shooting and adding beef to his 7’4” frame has made that strategy far less effective. Consider: Oklahoma City went small on Wembanyama in Game 1 of the Western Conference finals, at times putting 6’5” Alex Caruso on him. Wemby torched the Thunder for a series-high 41 points and 24 rebounds.

The NBA Finals exposed a crack. New York didn’t play small, opting instead to force him to wrestle with Karl-Anthony Towns and Mitchell Robinson. “You’ve got to throw different people, different coverages

at him,” said Knicks coach Mike Brown. The game plan was simple: Hit him early, hit him often. At the free throw line. In transition. Crossing half court. “Mike ordered the Code Red,” observed a rival assistant. Everywhere Wembanyama went there was a 7-foot(ish) big there to bump him.

The next counter is on Wembanyama. Some of it will be organic: Wembanyama has reportedly packed on more than 30 pounds since his rookie season, a body that, at 22, will continue to grow. And while it’s thrilling to see a skyscraper shooting 28-footers, Wembanyama needs to play more in the paint. Privately, Spurs

officials insist Wembanyama has a deep bag of moves he works on in practice—turnarounds, jump hooks, half hooks— that he’s not completely comfortable turning to in games. Eventually, he will be.

The NBA is a copycat league, so expect the trend of defending Wembanyama with size to continue. “If I’m other teams, I’m looking at the Knicks and I’m going, ‘You know what? We need to be able to throw 48 minutes of physicality at him,’” says former NBA head coach Stan Van Gundy, now an Amazon Prime analyst. Contenders will make investments in frontcourt muscle, seeking their version of Robinson or Oklahoma City’s Isaiah Hartenstein.

What’s certain is Wemby will have fewer people outside of San Antonio pulling for him. Wembanyama has officially entered his villain phase: He spent the final weeks of the regular season lobbying for MVP, has fostered a feud with Chet Holmgren and racked up a pair of flagrant fouls in the playoffs.

His swagger has clearly rubbed some the wrong way. Trail Blazers forward Deni Avdija, with whom Wembanyama jousted in the first round, said he was glad New York won. At the Knicks’ parade, fans waved fatheads of Wembanyama’s crying face. During the series Wemby joked that he had not reached Trae Young’s level of animosity in New York. League-wide, he’s getting there.

Perhaps that will fuel him. With the sounds of the Knicks’ celebration ringing in the background, Wembanyama vowed to use the failure of the experience to get better. “This is the biggest lesson of my life, the biggest learning moment,” he said. “I can’t tell you exactly what the lesson is, but we’re learning from that, for sure. I’m learning more than any other time in my life before.” —C.M.

CONFERENCE CALL

Wemby asserted himself against Holmgren in the West finals but struggled against beefier foes.



THE TAO OF THE

by **TOM
VERDUCCI**

photographs by
ERICK W. RASCO

SPORTS
ILLUSTRATED
36





*Baseball has seen plenty of flamethrowers but never one quite like **JACOB MISIOROWSKI**, who is bending the physics of the game with an approach to pitching that finds beauty—and brutal effectiveness—in simplicity*

THE WISCO KID

Misiorowski had plenty to celebrate after his masterpiece against the Phillies: 15 strikeouts, one hit allowed and the minimum number of batters faced in a complete game, one of the most dominant starts in history.





THE SHAPE of water. The swirl of an artist's paintbrush. The finely woven tapestry of words in a poem. The 104 mph fastball from Jacob Misorowski.

The purest form of power comes not from exertion but the seeming absence of it.

No starting pitcher in the 133 years since the distance between the pitching rubber and the tip of home plate was set at 60 feet, six inches has shortened that distance more than Misorowski, the 24-year-old spaghetti strand of a pitcher for the Milwaukee Brewers. At a lanky 6'7", with a long stride and a low release point, Misorowski lets go of the baseball 7½ feet in front of the rubber at 2,611 rpms (faster spin than all but one other starting pitcher this season and about the same as your car engine as you exceed the highway speed limit) and at velocities never seen from a starter in recorded history. Distance is time, and hitters have never had less of it to react than they do when Misorowski is pitching. He is a da Vinci flying machine, the embodiment of the physics of propulsion as nearly perfect as has been measured on a baseball field.

"It's like he was built in a lab," says fellow Brewers starter Brandon Woodruff.

Only Misorowski knows what it feels like to have a baseball come out of your hand at 104.5 mph 7½ feet in front of the rubber. To hear him describe the sensation is to hear the echoes of ancient Taoist philosophers who spoke of *wu wei*, the concept that roughly translates literally into "not doing" and philosophically into

"effortless action." The baseball slips from his hand like water over river rocks.

"The best way to describe it is easy," Misorowski says. "I think it's just plain and simple. It's just...it feels easy. And it feels like everything is just lining up and just kind of coming out.

"I mean, I don't really throw max effort. Every pitch is like 85, 90%. Like, there's always a little bit more I can grab. It just feels effortless. It's just trying to keep that same thought of staying whippy and just put it where I want."

And where is that?

"Throw it down the middle and pray," he says. "I'm literally just thinking about throwing every pitch down the middle. If they hit it, they hit it. There's not much to figure out. That's my thing. That's what I'm doing."

The performance of The Miz is as singular as the physics. Starting May 1, Misorowski posted the greatest eight-start span in baseball history (openers excluded) as measured by ERA,

which was adopted in 1912: one earned run over 54⅓ innings for a 0.17 ERA. The eighth of those outings was one of the most dominant games ever pitched. On June 12 in Milwaukee against the Phillies, he became the first pitcher to face the minimum 27 batters in a complete game with 15 strikeouts and one hit allowed. He did it with just 95 pitches, 69 of which were fastballs. The Phillies were 0 for 17 against his fastball, missing it 23 of the 40 times they tried to hit it.

Their only hit was a single by Kyle Schwarber on a low slider. The next day Schwarber sought out Brewers hitting coach Daniel Vogelbach. "Tell Miz," Schwarber said, "thanks for throwing me the breaking ball." In the ninth inning, Misorowski averaged 102.6 mph with his fastball, including a 103.1 mph Bell X-1 of a rocket past Justin Crawford for the last out. No starting pitcher in recorded history ever had a higher average velocity in the ninth inning.

That night, Phillies pitcher Aaron Nola texted Woodruff.

"Miz is going to wind up getting us in trouble," Nola wrote. "He'll have them move the mound back."

Woodruff had enjoyed the night as much as anyone. Like Misorowski, he is a fastball-first, country-hardball pitcher. As the only veteran in the Milwaukee rotation, he has become his mentor and close friend. "I'm seeing this all unfold and it's like a proud uncle or father moment," says Woodruff, 33, "because I see the work in between and just see him go out and attack."

But Nola's text gave Woodruff a moment of pause. *You know what? I never thought about that. You're exactly right. He could be the reason the mound gets moved back.*

Says Woodruff, "He truly could because his extension is out of this world. I'm still trying to hang on here for however long I'm going to throw, and I don't need him to ruin it."

It's too soon to know if Misorowski could change the very dimensions of the game the way George Mikan and Wilt Chamberlain did the NBA lane or Tiger Woods did to golf course yardages. That Nola, a 12-year veteran, would be so moved by his dominance to even suggest it is astonishing—but not as astonishing as The Miz himself.

The pitcher who is bending the once-immutable physics of baseball is a late bloomer who was passed in the draft by every team at least twice, is built like Ichabod Crane, has the impish charm of Tom Sawyer, presents such naivete that his manager calls him Forrest Gump, recently got engaged to his longtime girlfriend, and spends much of his free time collecting Pokémon and baseball cards.

"He's an interesting cat, man," Woodruff says. "He's a beautiful person. He's happy all the time. When he shows up at the yard you don't see a guy who's stressing about his next outing. You see a guy who's over there watching Pokémon videos and then he just goes out and destroys you with 104.

"I remind him every day: 'Dude, you've got an absolute superpower.' We're starting to see that. And it's wildly impressive."

WELCOMED SOUTHERLY winds pushed the late winter temperature in Manhattan toward 40° on March 7, 1893, as National League owners, players and managers in their suits and starched white collar shirts made their way to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, a posh five-story monument to luxury resplendent with its imported white marble facade and featuring the first passenger hotel elevator in America, or "vertical screw railway" as Otis Tufts called his creation. It was here previously that colleges codified their rules for football, the U.S. Tennis Association was established and Republicans in smoke-filled rooms blessed deals (or not) with such frequency one wing was known as Amen Corner.

On this day the baseball men piled into Parlor F to hear a recommendation from the Rules Committee, comprised of John Brush of Cincinnati, the chairman with the beak-like nose; Charlie Byrne of Brooklyn, giving away nothing behind his push-broom mustache; and Harry Von der Horst, the Baltimore beer baron in the Van Dyke. The men called for the pitching distance to be moved back for the third time in 12 years. It went from 45 to 50 feet in 1881, to 55 feet, six inches in 1887 and now, they recommended, it should move to 60 feet, six inches. The rule change passed because owners feared pitching had become too good.

In an editorial that echoed prevailing sentiment, the *New York Sun* opined: "The evolution of the pitcher, who after inconceivable delays, tortures, circumspections, witchcraft, and damphoolery multitudinous, finally 'delivered' a ball seen principally by an umpire, has destroyed the gaiety of the [fans].

"In baseball, people want motion, not rest. If setting the pitcher back will contribute to the poetry of the motion, back let him go. He can't go too far back. The pitcher has asserted himself too much."

Sixty feet, six inches is not a sacred founding principle of baseball. It only seems that way because it has remained unchanged since that Tuesday afternoon in Parlor F in 1893. The independent Atlantic League, under a partnership with MLB, did experiment in 2021 with moving the mound back one foot. It was dropped the next year, the same year the Brewers sweated through 62 picks before

FAST IMPRESSIONS

Through his first 15 starts this season, Jacob Misorowski averaged 100.2 mph with his four-seam fastball. As fast as that sounds, it *feels* faster. MLB Statcast's perceived velocity metric takes into account speed and the distance a pitch travels from a pitcher's release point to gauge hitters' reaction time. By that measure, Misorowski's 100.2 mph this year is more like 102.5 mph, tops in the majors. His career perceived velocity is the highest since Statcast launched in 2008.

PITCHER *	PERCEIVED VELOCITY (MPH)
Jacob Misorowski 2025-26	102.1
Mason Miller 2023-26	101.0
Jhoan Duran 2022-26	100.9
Aroldis Chapman 2010-26	100.0
Daniel Palencia 2023-26	100.0

*Minimum career 1,000 fastballs thrown

they drafted a hard-throwing, if scattershot, beanpole from Crowder College in Missouri who struck out 16 batters every nine innings but also walked five per nine.

"I think we were holding our breath with the hope that he would get there," says Milwaukee president of baseball operations Matt Arnold. "I heard there were teams right behind us that were on him. But there were a lot of people who thought he was a reliever. There were some risks in his profile, but our guys really stuck their necks out on this one."

Drew Anderson, an area scouting supervisor, and Randy Bandelow, an area scout, had seen Misorowski



improve over the years and knew more was in store. As a 165-pound Grain Valley (Mo.) High pitcher who threw 91–95 mph and, by his own admission, might hit “six or seven batters” in a game, Misorowski went undrafted before enrolling at Crowder. By the fall of 2020 he was 190 pounds and hitting 98 mph. At the 2022 Junior College World Series, he hit 100 mph for the first time.

“The scoreboard in the outfield doesn’t have triple digits,” he says. “It just popped up ‘00.’ You questioned if it was just an error. And then the whole dugout is freaking out because they heard from the scouts in the stands that it was 100. So, it was fun.”

Hey, I need to hit corners,” he says. “I got bounced around for that month, two months, whatever it was. And I kind of realized, I need to stop overthinking. That was when I was just like, *Let’s simplify it.* Let’s make everything simple, not big thoughts.”

Says Woodruff, “I was trying to kick into his brain last year, ‘Dude, you don’t realize what a superpower you have. And it’s effortless for you. If you want to look at somebody as a role model, go watch Jacob deGrom.’ When he was in his 100–102 range, he throws it to one spot. And he throws just two pitches.

“I said, ‘If you can get to the point where you can command your heater, the world is absolutely yours. You can do whatever you want. I swear to you, buddy, if I had your stuff I might use less than 5% breaking balls. Make these guys beat you, and never, ever let up.

As a junior college pitcher who had trouble throwing strikes, and with a commitment to LSU, where he would have joined Paul Skenes on the roster, Misorowski was seen by some clubs as a draft risk. Finally, midway through the second round, a team called his agent and indicated it was prepared to take him. “All of a sudden, that fell through,” says Misorowski, who declined to name the team.

The Brewers called next. A handful of picks remained before their turn. A Milwaukee official told Misorowski, “Hey, don’t pick up the phone if anybody else calls.”

He lasted until the Brewers’ pick. To keep him from going to LSU, Milwaukee signed him for \$2.35 million, \$1,218,500 above slot. To afford such an overpay, the team signed its first-rounder and its next seven picks after Misorowski all under slot.

Two years later, while pitching for Triple A Nashville, Misorowski was in Norfolk, tired and wet from a rain-soaked trip, when his phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number and he declined to answer it. The phone buzzed again. Same number. He declined again. Upon the third call, he saw the caller left a voicemail. He hit play. “This is Rick Sweet,” the caller said. It was his manager. “Pick up the damn phone!”

“I was like, *Oh, s---,*” Misorowski says. “And so I called him back.”

Sweet told him he was going to the big leagues. In his first calendar year there, covering 29 games and 28 starts, Misorowski struck out 218 batters in 153 innings. His rate of 12.8 strikeouts per nine innings is the greatest in history through 29 games for a full-time starting pitcher, eclipsing the 12.3 rate of Kerry Wood.

Misorowski’s growth in velocity, command and body control continues. Last season, for instance, he endured a five-start stretch with a 7.71 ERA. “Coming up last year I was thinking,

Your extension, your spin, your velocity...all this stuff you've got going for you is too overpowering.'"

Misiorowski went home after the season and hit the gym. He added nearly 30 pounds, almost all of it in his lower half. "Being lanky," Woodruff says, "that was kind of his fault in the past: He ran out of gas. That was what he worked on his offseason, getting his legs in shape. All credit to him."

Says Brewers manager Pat Murphy, "He's got great strength in his lower half now, which stabilized him for his delivery. And he can self-correct his delivery now if he loses focus."

On June 6 at Colorado, for instance, Misiorowski lost focus with a 5-1 lead with one out in the seventh inning. He walked one batter and gave up a hit to the next. Murphy stared daggers at him, ready to take him out. Misiorowski stared back and mouthed, "No!"

Murphy yelled back, "Then f---ing kick it in!"

Misiorowski punched out the next two batters on seven pitches.

ONE DAY in June Misiorowski was throwing a bullpen session when he stopped to ask one of the Brewers' analysts, "How many pitches have I thrown?"

The analyst, armed with pitch metrics on a tablet, began giving him spin rates and spin axis data. Misiorowski cut him off. "I don't give a s--- about the metrics," The Miz said. "I just want to know how many pitches."

Woodruff, who was standing nearby, says, "A tear almost dropped down from my face when I heard him say that. Because analytics are a big part of our game now and there are a lot of decisions being made off it. But man, when you get between the lines, when you hear the pitch called, it's all about executing the pitch. And I think that is what he is mainly focused on."

It is the beautiful irony of The Miz. He is an analytics darling, with his extension, spin rate and velocity. He is the science of throwing elevated to its highest form. And yet he wants none of the modern information that turns many young pitchers into lab clinicians who talk more about "process" than competing.

"Zero," he says. "None of it. I hate it."

Why?

"I don't want any information."

Why?

"My brain moves so quick. And if I have that stuff moving around in it, I'm overthinking. *Oh, that pitch wasn't XYZ.* I'm only worried about what the hitter's reaction to my pitch is. All that information is for someone else to help me later down the road."

"I want absolutely none of that information. I want to go out there and throw."

No one has ever thrown a baseball like Misiorowski. With his length and flexibility, he moves through the air like Michael Phelps through water. The numbers prove it. The most telling of the measurements is perceived velocity, which accounts not just for raw velocity but also the distance the pitch travels. The less distance the ball travels, the faster it appears to the hitter. Because Misiorowski lets the ball go 13 inches closer to the plate than the average pitcher, his average fastball velocity of 100.2 mph translates to an unprecedented perceived velocity of 102.5. Since pitch tracking began in 2008, no



other starting pitcher has averaged a perceived velocity greater than the 100.3 mph by deGrom in 2021. The Miz shortens time and distance like nothing ever seen. It is simple beauty. There is no dampfoolery.

"I don't think I ever have seen anything like it," says Phillies manager Don Mattingly. "I don't know who I'd compare him to. [Larry] Bowa was talking about J.R. Richard in his time and Nolan [Ryan] when he was young. I think Randy Johnson is probably in that category when he was in the middle of his extreme dominance with his fastball."

Says Murphy, "You see the reaction of Schwarber [in the June 12 game] and one from Vlad [Guerrero Jr.] earlier [this season]. Their eyes get big and it's like, 'You gotta be [kidding] me. How am I gonna hit that?'"

By mid-June Misiorowski had hit 103 mph or higher

MIZTERIOUS WAYS

Teammates marvel at Misorowski's easy approach, which puts him in a flow state on the mound and a seemingly stress-free zone off of it.



sporting translation of such a state, appropriately, is called “flow.” Misorowski may achieve this state most obviously when, with ease of body and mind, he sends a baseball and its seams ripping violently through the air at 104 mph.

He is, however, also in this state of “effortless action” even when the baseball is not in his hands. He surfs hobby shops to complement his shadowless Charizard or first-edition Neo Genesis Lugia (“I could buy a pretty good truck with it,” he says of its value) or the four first-edition color printing plates from his Bowman rookie card or the baseball cards of superstars he sends over to the visiting clubhouse manager at American Family Field in Milwaukee to get autographed.

Innocence. Naivete. Even, Woodruff says, gullibility.

“I don’t want this to sound bad,” Woodruff says. “It’s not that he doesn’t care about baseball. He cares about what he does. But off the field, he does a good job not thinking about baseball, if that makes sense. He’s still a kid. He’s happy all the time, he comes to the field, goes in and foam rolls and comes out and throws 104. It’s a really cool thing.”

Murphy calls him Forrest Gump in part because Misorowski loves to run each day, the way old-school pitchers did. But the name fits mostly, the manager says, because of his “ability to break through and be brilliant, to do it his way. There is some naivete in there. It’s

*“I hate it,” The Miz says of advanced data. “I want **ABSOLUTELY NONE** of that information. I want to go out there and throw.”*

49 times this year. The rest of baseball had combined to do it 11 times. He struck out Schwarber on a fastball clocked at 104.5 mph, the fastest pitch ever recorded from a starting pitcher. And yet, The Miz says, there is more in him.

“Yeah, of course,” he says. “There’s always the thought of how far could I push this? But I’m happy with where I’m at and the fact that it’s working.”

Says Woodruff, “He keeps saying he’s got more in the tank. I’ve seen him with his shirt off and I’m like, *I don’t know how much more you’ve got in there... but maybe you do.*”

The traditional symbol of *wu wei* is water. It has no fixed natural shape and can be considered submissive and weak, but with ease of movement it is powerful enough to gouge canyons out of rock. The traditional

just his...joy. It’s simple. A great person who knows his place. There’s no sales in him. No sales at all.”

On the night Misorowski blew away the Phillies, Murphy watched as the kid left the ballpark. It was late that night in the service tunnel outside the Brewers’ clubhouse. Misorowski left hand in hand with his fiancé, Elle, accompanied by her parents and his mother, Crystal, who sees many of his games and who that morning, on a whim, drove eight hours from the Kansas City area to catch this historic one. His father, Tom, was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson’s disease when Jacob was a boy.

“They’re all very close,” Murphy says. “To see every day he leaves with his whole family, it’s just a beautiful thing.”

It is the wonderful paradox of trying not to try. The state of flow. It is found not just in the ease of throwing a baseball wickedly fast. But here, hand in hand, surrounded by love. This, too, is the Tao of The Miz. □

PLAID TO THE BONE

No one had more fun in the early days of the tournament than the members of Scotland's Tartan Army, which took over Boston—and nearly drank the city dry—as their team played a pair of games in nearby Foxborough, Mass.



The men's World Cup returned to North America for the first time in 32 years, and yet another reminder that few things can bring communities together like a team to was captivating. The same goes for the spirit and passion of the fan gatherings



this summer of soccer has been
root for. The action on the pitch
that sprang up from coast to coast

G R O U P *S T A G E S*

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ADAM
GLANZMAN



DOGGED SUPPORT

Egypt supporters (top left) gathered in Astoria, N.Y., for their team's first game, against Belgium, while Mexico fans (and pets) in Brooklyn hoped a victory was in store [it was] when El Tri took on South Africa in the tournament's opening match.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ERICK W. RASCO







SHOWER OF POWER

The USMNT's first goal of the tournament, at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif., sent fans into a frenzy at a watch party up the freeway at the L.A. Coliseum.

MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES







WORLD PARTY

Clockwise from top left: For an afternoon, a restaurant in Everett, Mass., felt like Morocco; they were dancing in the streets for Cabo Verde in Dorchester, Mass.; Colombia faithful gathered in Brooklyn; and Argentina fans in Kansas City hoped the Hand of God would once again guide their team's World Cup fortunes.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
ADAM GLANZMAN; BILLIE WEISS;
ABBY NICOLAS; STEPH CHAMBERS/
FIFA/GETTY IMAGES



BEAUTIFUL GAMERS

When Brazil scored in its opener against Morocco, supporters roared and for a moment, Brooklyn felt like Rio.

VICTOR J. BLUE/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES





BUZZ

An analytics-based approach has allowed traditionally tiny Brentford to climb from the lower rungs of English soccer to become Premier League giant slayers.

Now the trick for **THE BEES** is to figure out how to move forward





by **THORE HAUGSTAD**

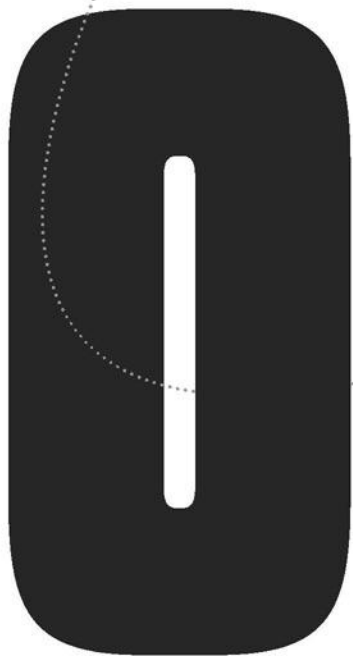
KEERAN MARQUIS/SPP/SIPA USA/AP

Z KILLERS

TOUGH TICKET

The Bees' Gtech Community Stadium holds just 17,250 fans, a capacity that ranks 41st out of 44 home venues in England's top two tiers.





ON A SUMMER DAY LAST YEAR,

Billy Grant was sitting by his computer, typing up a fan's season preview for *The Guardian*. He filled out the sections about key players, signings and the kit. At the end, he had to say where he thought Brentford would end up in the table. The team had just finished 10th. Grant put his club 14th.

Grant was one of the optimists.

The newspaper itself put Brentford 18th. Relegation. For four years this tiny West London club had climbed to mid-table spots with one of the smallest wage bills in the Premier League. But over the summer, Brentford had lost its longtime coach (Thomas Frank), its captain (Christian Nørgaard), its goalkeeper (Mark Flekken) and its star forward (Bryan Mbeumo). One of its top scorers (Yoane Wissa) was on strike, forcing a move away. It's normal for teams to sell a player or two. Brentford had essentially been looted.

Few of the newcomers set the pulse racing. *The Guardian* had the "star signing" down as Jordan Henderson, the 35-year-old ex-Liverpool captain who was signed on a free transfer. With Wissa heading to Newcastle, the entire attack hinged on the fragile knee of Igor Thiago, the balding 24-year-old Brazilian who had missed almost his entire debut season at the club with a meniscus injury, and whose given names seem to have been inspired by Dr. Frankenstein's assistant as well as a Copacabana beach football star.

Worse, Brentford had replaced the popular Frank with its set piece coach, Keith Andrews. Who puts a set piece coach in charge of a team?

And yet when Brentford lined up at Nottingham Forest on opening



RED MENACE

Igor Thiago's penalty wrapped up all three points against Liverpool in October, putting the rest of the Premier League on notice.

day, Grant trusted his club to get it right once more. Then Forest scored after four minutes. And then Forest scored again, and again.

"They literally wiped the floor with us," says Grant, who hosts the Brentford podcast *Beesotted*. "The fans were really concerned. We were rubbish. Thiago was terrible. Forest tore us to pieces."

When Forest had sealed the 3-1 win, Grant was worried. "They are going to laugh at us. This is terrible."



NINE MONTHS LATER, Brentford ran out at Anfield on the final day of the season chasing a ticket to the Europa League.

They would have grabbed it and finished seventh had Dango Ouattara scored a close-range header nine minutes into stoppage time at 1–1. Instead Brentford came in ninth, outside the European spots on goal difference. Only two teams conceded fewer goals from set pieces, and though Brentford converted just 10, only two teams had a more expected goals (xG) than the Bees' 18.96. The pundits must have known they had been wrong when Brentford beat Liverpool 3–2 at home in October, outmuscling the champions with a long throw, a quick break and an Igor Thiago penalty.

For the rest of the campaign, Brentford's rivals trembled every time the ball rolled across the sideline, and the bruising center backs lumbered into the box, and the fans began shouting and clapping, and the ground shook, and the right back Michael Kayode picked up the ball, backed up a few steps and tossed it 150 feet into the box. It was havoc. It was lethal. By May, Kayode was so famous for this routine that he felt compelled to deny he was playing just because of his throws.

Beyond the results there appeared to be no major turning point after the Forest defeat. Brentford lost even more players: By the end of November, ACL injuries had struck down new midfielder Antoni Milambo and young forward Fábio Carvalho. Yet by late May Igor Thiago had scored 22 league goals, second only in the Premier League to Erling Haaland, and Andrews had been nominated for manager of the season.

Nothing was more Brentford than the appointment of Andrews. Outside the club, it made no sense. The only hint of logic was that during the previous season Brentford had scored within a minute of kickoff in three straight league games, so Andrews clearly knew his set pieces. But what about the rest of the game? He had only been with the team for a year and was best known as an ex-Ireland midfielder who'd done a couple of TV gigs. "They expected us to get a big name," says Grant.

Yet over the summer, owner Matthew Benham and his directors had each gone their own way to think about who to hire. When they reunited, all four had Andrews on the list. He was the set piece coach only because no other job had opened up. He understood the club. The players liked him. "A no-brainer," technical director Lee Dykes would tell *The Observer*.

"I think they see a football club as a machine," says Tim Keech, cofounder of MRKT Insights, which advises a series of European teams on recruitment strategy. "They have a very clear vision of what the machine should do, and then they're just changing individual parts of it."

The designer of the machine is the 58-year-old Benham, an Oxford physics graduate who founded Smartodds, a company arming pro gamblers with stats to beat the house. Since taking full control of Brentford in 2012, Benham has used data to sign players and gone big on set pieces. When once asked whether the team would get promoted, he replied, "There's a 42.3% chance." (Yes, the number was based on actual calculations.) The director of football, Phil Giles, was a quantitative analyst at Smartodds. The chairman, Cliff Crown, was the Smartodds CFO. The technical director, Dykes, has been at Brentford for seven years. These guys decide the playing style and transfers, leaving the coach to handle tactics and training.

Which is why they get so many calls right, says Keech. "Other clubs give full control to one or two individuals, and when they leave, nobody really knows what they're supposed to be doing. There's no organizational structure. Brentford has an incredible organizational structure. They have incredible continuity in the back office."

When Frank left, the Brentford directors didn't need a genius, or even someone with a new idea. They had the idea. They just needed someone to execute it. Keech says it's like running a restaurant. "You have to open your doors and serve meals whether you're ready or not. So if you have a consistent process and you're like, 'We're going to serve Spanish food and this is the menu,' then it's easy to train someone to make those dishes. But if you're like, 'Oh, we've hired an amazing chef and we're going to let him create every night,' then you're very reliant on that chef's genius to succeed. And if that chef leaves, what are you?"



*"They see a football club as
A MACHINE," says
Keech. "They have a very
clear vision of what the
machine should do, and
then they're just changing
individual parts of it."*

BRENTFORD HAD HIRED big-time chefs before. It was just another struggling English club when Benham granted an interest-free loan back in 2006 and invested \$640,000. The fans were rattling buckets outside the stadium, begging for money to keep the lights on, and in 2007–08 the team slid to the bottom half of the fourth tier. According to *The Observer*, the players were training in sweatshirts made by Fruit of the Loom, and kitman Dave Carter doubled up as the chef, cooking sausage, eggs and beans in the canteen next to the gym.

By the time Benham had become majority owner in 2012–13, Brentford was one kick away from automatic promotion to the third tier. On the final day, they got a penalty in stoppage time at home to Doncaster. Trusted captain Kevin O'Connor stepped up, only



for Marcello Trotta, a young Italian on loan from Fulham, to grab the ball and smash it into the crossbar. Seconds later, Doncaster scored. Brentford ended up in the playoffs and lost to Yeovil Town in the final. “Devastating,” said Benham.

Another club would have kicked Trotta out on the spot, but Brentford couldn’t afford a better striker and extended his loan. A year later, Trotta scored 13 goals and the Bees were promoted.

Around that time, Grant met Benham, who talked about when Brentford would get to the Premier League. Grant thought it was a joke. Benham just looked at him. “He knew exactly what the journey would be,” says Grant.

After Brentford was promoted to the second tier, Benham began to assemble his machine. He made

HEAVIN’ HELP US

Andrews (opposite) was elevated after being in charge of Brentford’s set plays—such as the long throws of Kayode (below), which are one of the team’s biggest weapons.

Giles codirector of football alongside Rasmus Ankersen, a Dane who had written a book about elite performance, and the two were put in charge of using stats to recruit players. The plan went down badly with Mark Warburton, the financial trader turned head coach, who had delivered the recent promotion. Even with Brentford just outside the playoff spots, Benham and Warburton parted ways.

The next coach, Marinus Dijkhuizen, lasted nine games. “A disaster,” says Grant.

Finally, in 2015, the Bees hired Dean Smith, who understood





*Frank would tell players while they might win with bigger clubs, “I can guarantee that you will look back at your time at Brentford as one of the **HAPPIEST MOMENTS** of your career.”*

their values and culture, and then they pressed on with their ideas. Benham had watched the NFL and was baffled by how rarely soccer teams trained set pieces when they led to so many goals. He knew he was right because in the summer of 2014, he had bought the Danish club FC Midtjylland, made Ankersen chairman and told him to focus on corners and free kicks. Midtjylland immediately won its first league title.

Brentford hired a series of specialists, many so good they would be snapped up by richer clubs. Gianni Vio would take his reported 4,830 set piece routines to Tottenham. Nicolas Jover was the guru behind Arsenal’s Premier League–best 18 corner goals last season. Set piece coach Bernardo Cueva was allowed to leave for Chelsea, where he holds the same position, for a reported \$1 million. Thomas Grønnemark, the throw-in coach, would get a call from Jürgen Klopp at Liverpool. Brentford also worked with a sleep coach and a sports psychologist. One of the club doctors, Matthew Stride, was doing routine blood screenings and measuring fatigue markers, trying to anticipate injuries. “It was a complete reset,” says Stride.

The ecosystem was so unusual that when Smith left for Aston Villa in 2018, Brentford had already decided to promote his assistant. Frank had shadowed Smith so closely that, at one point, they’d lived together for weeks. And then Frank lost eight of his first 10 games.

Most clubs would have fired him, but Brentford was an early developer of xG, the model that quantifies the probability of an attempt finding the net. The directors realized that the team was actually playing well, that its luck was rotten, and that Frank’s plan would come together. “That desire to understand why things work or not is very rare,” says Keech. “At most clubs, someone needs to be blamed.”

Three years later, Frank led Brentford to the Premier League, the club’s first appearance in the top tier since 1947.

Benham found Grant and said, “I’m sorry.”

What for?

“It took us longer than I thought.”

MANY RIVALS WONDER how Brentford keeps finding so many bargains. Four forwards—Ollie Watkins, Ivan Toney, Mbeumo and Wissa—were bought for a total of about \$34 million, according to Transfermarkt. They were sold for \$245 million. Dykes says they have data on 85,500 players. If the English transfer market is like Wall Street, with big-shot traders shooting from the hip, Brentford is the Michael Burry in the room, the quiet nerd with the numbers and formulas, detached enough to spot the bargains that others are missing.

Yet to Keech, the key is how clearly they define their needs. Every Brentford striker is big and strong. The wingers are fast and direct. If the back office is like a machine, the same might be true for how they see the team. “You almost mathematically break down what the outputs for each part of the team need to be,” says Keech. “And then you find the players who can do those things well.

“So we’re losing our left-sided attacker. Great. Here’s the nearest, best-available replica of that player who we’ve already scouted. We know everything about him. And we know this piece can slot in and replace this piece.”

When Brentford lost Wissa, Benham believed the chances of relegation went from 10% to 20%. In March, he told the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference that he had been “a little bit concerned, but not as concerned as other people were.” “Nothing seems to faze them,” says Grant, who sat down with Andrews for his podcast near the end of last season. Grant asked if he wasn’t worried as he drove home





from the Forest game. Andrews said he'd gotten over it by the third service station.

And yet the *Moneyball* part might be overplayed. In 2015, Benham and Giles wrote up a blueprint and named it Dogme 95, after the radical Danish film movement. Recently, Giles told Benham that he had found the document and realized that most of it was quite embarrassing. "A lot of the success has just been running things efficiently," Benham said at Sloan. "Good management, everyone being on the same page, and especially culture."

When Benham made an early visit to Midtjylland, he was struck by how respectful the players were. He told Frank to bring that culture to Brentford. Stride, who worked at the club from 2008 to '18 and is now a consultant at the Isokinetic medical group, says Brentford always put personality first when hiring people. "Frank would tell the players, 'Look, you may well go on to play and win things with bigger clubs, but I can guarantee that you will look back at your time at Brentford as one of the happiest moments of your career.'"

Frank must have thought the same last season when Tottenham fired him after eight months. In 2024, he told *The Athletic*, "I'm very aware that the grass is not greener in the garden next door, even if it looks like it."

GONE GUNNERS

Raya and Nørdgaard (opposite) left for Arsenal's greener pastures, but with Kayode and Igor Thiago, the Bees have much to celebrate.



FROM LEFT: SERGIO RUÍZ/PRESSIN/IMAGO; SEBASTIAN FREY/MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

THE QUESTION IS how Brentford stays ahead. Last season the number of goals from corners and long throws in the Premier League went through the roof. Manchester United finished in third place in part by fixing their set piece setup. Tottenham might have been relegated had they not scored 19 set piece goals—tied for the second in the league—thanks to Andreas Georgsson, who worked for Frank at Brentford. Giles told *The Telegraph* it's getting harder to find value in the market now that everyone has a data department and is looking at the same players. It's a law of football nature that results and salaries are linked, and not even Brentford can defy it forever. If everyone does the same, the rich guys win.

Nobody has borrowed more than Arsenal, who won the title with an ex-Brentford goalkeeper (David Raya), an ex-Brentford midfielder (Nørdgaard), an ex-Brentford goalkeeping coach (Iñaki Caña) and an ex-Brentford set piece coach (Jover). They did long throws, smashed the ball upfield from kickoff and set the Premier League record for goals from corners. Brentford didn't just see another team win the league with its ideas, but with its staff too.

The hope is that not all clubs do what Arsenal did, and that there are more marginal gains to find. "The ownership wants to learn and improve," says Stride, who remains in close contact with the hierarchy. "I don't think you get that sometimes at the bigger clubs." Benham told the Sloan audience that the key was to stay "super open-minded," and added, "You have to accept that everything you're doing is inefficient."

What gives Brentford a chance is the rare alignment between the ownership and the staff, says Keech, who notes that while many clubs have good data, not all of them use it. "I know people who have been in bigger Premier League clubs who are really smart guys and really get it," he says. "And they're just not listened to, because the ownership wants to sign a glamorous player from a shaded sunglass guy on a yacht somewhere in Monaco for three times the market value."

So all rich clubs won't copy Brentford? "I don't think so," Keech says. "Because a lot of the time that's not the nature of football ownership."

Which is a nice way of saying that football can still be completely nuts.

Keech fears that if Benham leaves, the Bees will become another small-budget team that falls back down the ladder. He doubts Brentford has the size and finances to turn into Champions League regulars. "What they can be is a consistently profitable Premier League club, which is amazing for the size of the club historically. It's almost like a startup succeeding against blue chip companies."

Grant says the fans have stopped listening to rivals laughing at their unconventional ways. "They keep on giving you all these rules and tell you how things should operate," he says. "But we don't operate like that. We just do what we do."

Ahead of this season, the pundits have made their predictions again. Benham has probably calculated the chances of another top-half finish, written out as a percentage with decimals, hoping that, this season, like most seasons, his crew of nerds will outsmart the loud and the rich. □

BUS



As a new Belichick-less class of inductees receives their gold jackets and sees their bronzed heads enshrined in Canton, let's spare a moment for the **BIGGEST HALL OF FAME SNUBS**, a group—picked by voters—that is led by a two elite coaches and a pair of big-game receivers

by **MATT VERDERAME**

SPORTS
ILLUSTRATED 82

illustration by
MADISON KETCHAM

TED!





LEROY BUTLER CAN STILL REMEMBER THE FEELING.

He can still see the scene in his mind.

After losing the 1995 NFC championship game to the Cowboys—the Packers’ third consecutive postseason exit at the hands of Dallas in Texas Stadium—Butler and the Green Bay traveling party stewed in silence, buckled in, waiting for the engines to fire.

Well, all but one.

Mike Holmgren, the 6'5" coach who was assuredly as devastated as the players in their undersized seats, didn't show it. As the plane took off, Holmgren remained on his feet until the aircraft hit 10,000 feet. He had more important things on his mind.

“He had a big smile on his face,” says Butler, the team’s Hall of Fame safety from 1990 to 2001. “You know what he said? ‘Next year, we’re going to win it.’ He stopped at every row. ‘Next year, we’re going

to win it. Next year, we’re going to win it.’ I thought he was going to throw us off the damn plane. We lost to the Cowboys again. But that’s the therapy thing. He didn’t want that to sink in our minds, carrying it over to next year. He was giving us a clean slate.”

The coach turned therapist was prescient. Green Bay roared to a 13–3 record the following year and won it all, beating the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXI to give Titletown its first championship since the 1967 season. For Holmgren, it was the first of three Super Bowl appearances, including the next year with the Packers and then in 2006 with the Seahawks.

Now 78 years old, Holmgren wasn’t just a great tactician who learned the West Coast offense under 49ers legend Bill Walsh. He was also the man who showed up at his players’ kids’ recitals and who joked that any new family arrivals should be synced with the offseason. For Butler, he was an influence well beyond football.

“As a kid who grew up in the inner city, in a single-parent home, I love teachers,” Butler says. “I absolutely love teachers. I grew up without a father. Holmgren is a father-therapist. Let’s say grandfather because a grandfather doesn’t have a filter.

“He’d just say, ‘I’m not losing to San Francisco.’ I’d say, ‘Coach, wait. We’re playing, you’re just coaching.’ Uh-uh. ‘No, we’re in this thing together.’ He was a mentor.”

For Holmgren and everyone else associated with the NFL, the ultimate personal validation is a gold jacket and a bust in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Thus far, that honor has eluded him. Holmgren and Bill Belichick are the only coaches to have at least three Super Bowl appearances and a championship not to have been inducted. This summer, with the notable omission of Belichick—the former Patriots coach who led the team to six Super Bowl titles and also won two as a Giants’ assistant—looming over the inductions in Canton, Ohio, on Aug. 8, it seemed an appropriate time to take stock of who else hasn’t yet received the call despite having worthy credentials.

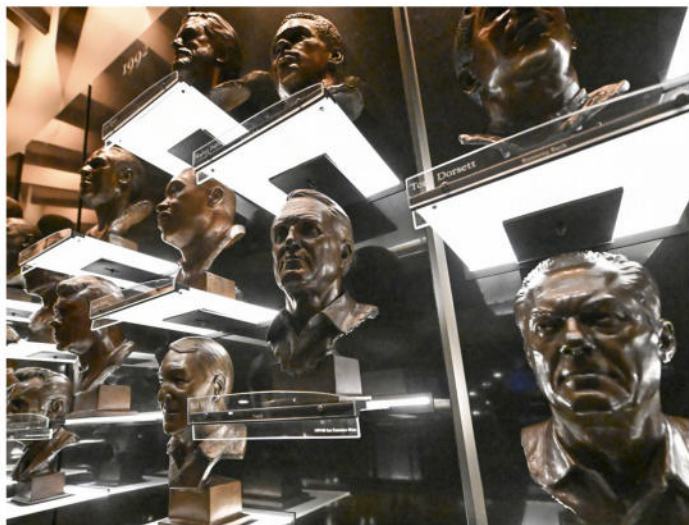
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED reached out to eight current voters and asked them to list the 10 biggest Hall of Fame omissions. The top choice was worth 10 points, the final choice one. The ground rules were simple:

- Anyone could be included provided they have been eligible for at least five voting cycles. In the cases of coaches, who have a one-year waiting period, they needed to have been retired for at least five years. (So no Belichick or Eli Manning, who first became eligible in 2025.)

- Each omission had to be active in at least one Super Bowl-era year.

All told, 50 names earned at least one vote from our anonymous panelists. Of them, 45 were players, three were coaches and two were owners.

Here are the top five.





TORRY HOLT is part of the abundance of receiving talent on the ballot. For this year's class, three wideouts were among the 15 modern-era finalists, with only the Cardinals' Larry Fitzgerald earning the 80% of votes necessary for enshrinement. In Holt's case, he's been agonizingly close, a finalist in each of the last seven voting cycles.

When Holt entered the league in 1999, only a few teams were throwing the ball as frequently as we see today. And while Holt benefitted from playing on the Greatest Show on Turf with QB Kurt Warner, he was outshining his contemporaries. From 2000 to '09, Holt led the NFL with 868 catches and 12,594 yards, outpacing others with gold jackets, including Randy Moss and Terrell Owens.

"He was ready to be an All-Pro when he showed up," says Hall of Famer Dick Vermeil, who coached Holt as a rookie with the Super Bowl-champion Rams. "Our offensive players and staff did a great job with him. When you see what

he produced from then on, here's a guy with two seasons of 1,600-plus yards, six seasons over 1,300 yards and eight seasons of 1,100 yards or more. My God, he was spectacular."

Holt played on the same offense as three Hall of Famers: running back Marshall Faulk, wide receiver Isaac Bruce and Warner. Even so, Holt—whose career numbers are comparable to Bruce's—twice led the league in yards receiving and once in receptions, snagging 117 passes in 2003 to earn All-Pro honors.

"Every time he looked around, he saw a positive influence, somebody doing something right," says Vermeil. "He came in after we spent two years investing in building that team from the bottom up. Hell, they had lost more games in the 1990s than any team in football. We did it the old-fashioned way. He stepped in when everything else was ready to go."

All told, Holt ranks 17th all-time with 13,382 yards receiving, with all but seven of the names above him retiring after his career ended.



5

TORRY HOLT

WR (24 points) × **CAREER** Rams (1999–2008), Jaguars (2009)



4 | MAXIE BAUGHAN

LB (25 points) × **CAREER** Eagles (1960–65), Rams (1966–70), Washington (1974)



FOR SOME, the wait is long. For some, the quest to reach football immortality stretches beyond their human mortality. Maxie Baughan, who

died in 2023 at 85, won't be around to see if he finally gets the ultimate honor. For 11 seasons, the Georgia Tech product was a machine in the middle of his team's

defense. From 1964 to '69, Baughan was a six-time All-Pro, including first-team honors once. He totaled 24½ sacks (sacks weren't an official stat until '82) and 18 interceptions.

Still, Baughan never earned serious consideration from the Hall of Fame until 2025, when he was named a finalist for the first time. Now in the senior pool, Baughan is competing with scores of candidates dating back to the league's founding in 1920.

"He wasn't the biggest guy in the world, but he had a big heart and played very well," says Dave Robinson, a Hall of Fame linebacker with Green Bay and Washington who was Baughan's teammate in 1974. "He had a good mind. He was a very educated player and he didn't make many mistakes. If you were going to run a play, you had to definitely figure out [where he was]. I watched him and some of the things he did, I tried to emulate."



After his playing days, Baughan stayed around the game as a coach, including stints as a defensive coordinator for the Colts (1975–79) and Lions (1980–82). Following a six-season run as Cornell’s head coach, which included an Ivy League title, Baughan served as linebackers coach with the Vikings (1990–91), Buccaneers (1992–95) and Ravens (1996–98), teaching the likes of Hall of Famers Derrick Brooks and Ray Lewis in their formative years.

BILL FRANKS

REGGIE WAYNE

WR (25 points) ✦ CAREER Colts (2001–14)



MUCH LIKE Holt, Reggie Wayne has found himself overshadowed by his Hall of Fame teammates. With quarterback Peyton Manning and fellow wideout Marvin Harrison already in Canton, Wayne has been on the outside looking in, reaching the finalist stage each of the last seven years.

For Wayne, the numbers are there. He ranks 10th all-time with 14,345 yards receiving and 11th with 1,070 receptions. Only longtime Panthers receiver Steve Smith Sr. has more yardage and isn’t in the Hall of Fame. The three-time All-Pro also won Super Bowl XLI with the Colts.

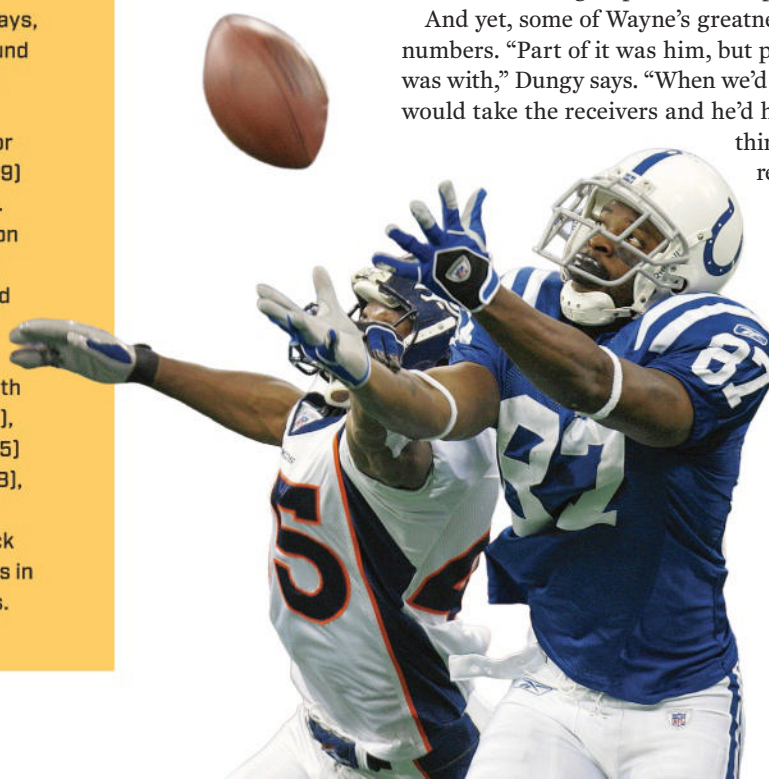
“He just had a classic frame, he’s a big receiver, but still had the quickness and the athleticism,” says Tony Dungy, who coached the 6-foot, 203-pound Wayne from 2002 to ’08. “He wasn’t a burner, wasn’t a 4.3 guy, but he had speed and outstanding quickness in and out of the break. He had those great hands; he could catch it all kinds of ways. He had no fear, so throwing in traffic wasn’t a problem. He just felt like every ball was his.”

Still, Wayne has been locked out of the Hall largely due to the voting rules, which see him splitting votes with the likes of Holt and Smith. Then there’s the issue of how many players should come from a single team, something that has hampered the cases of Steelers defensive end L.C. Greenwood, Cowboys safety Darren Woodson and Holt. The Colts of the mid-2000s have defensive end Dwight Freeney, Manning and Harrison, along with Dungy and former GM Bill Polian already enshrined. For a group with one Super Bowl win, that’s a lot.

And yet, some of Wayne’s greatness came from that strength in numbers. “Part of it was him, but part of it was the group that he was with,” Dungy says. “When we’d be in defensive periods, Peyton would take the receivers and he’d have Reggie and Marvin doing things when they were supposed to rest. [Reggie] was practicing more than any receiver I can imagine.

“I remember he told me, ‘I’ve got to get Peyton’s trust. I’ve got to let him know that he can believe in me, do everything to show him I’m going to be his favorite receiver.’ Of course, you had Marvin there doing the same thing, so Reggie had to put in more time.”

Time is on Wayne’s side: He’s eligible for 13 more years. But each year lost adds to the agony of being so close, yet so far, from the ultimate honor.





MIKE HOLMGREN

COACH (32 points) ✖ **CAREER** Packers (1992–98), Seahawks (1999–2008)

2 ✖ **AS PREVIOUSLY** noted, reaching three Super Bowls with at least one victory and not getting into the Hall of Fame is almost unheard of. Mike Holmgren also won 161 regular-season games, ranking 21st all-time. And he wasn't a one-trick pony: Holmgren won 75 games in Green Bay and another 86 in Seattle, making six postseason trips with each team. (Only seven coaches in NFL history have reached the playoffs more often. Three—Paul Brown, Tom Landry and Don Shula—are in the Hall of Fame. The other four are Belichick, Andy Reid, Marty Schottenheimer and Mike Tomlin.) In both of his head coaching stops, Holmgren took over flailing franchises and turned them into winners. Holmgren's greatness extends to his days as an assistant in San Francisco. He spent 1986–91 as quarterbacks coach to Joe Montana and Steve Young, while serving as the offensive coordinator as well the final three years. Those Niners won two championships,

never missing a beat as they changed hands from Bill Walsh to defensive coordinator George Seifert following Walsh's retirement after the '88 season.

"Great teacher, great human," says Brent Jones, the team's tight end from 1987 to '97. "He took Bill Walsh's offense and stepped on the gas a little bit. I think a lot of that had to do with some of the talent that we had. When your backs and your tight end can catch the ball and be weapons, as well as all of your receiving positions, it gives you multiple options. He started blending some stuff probably from the BYU days [where Holmgren was an assistant from 1982 to '85], where they threw the heck out of the ball. He would implement a few things. In terms of the West Coast offense, he took it to a new level. I just remember being so depressed when he got the Packers job."

Holmgren began to cultivate his football identity as a quarterback at USC, where he largely played a backup role before being drafted by the Cardinals in 1970—despite throwing just 27 passes for the Trojans. Although he never played an NFL down, he knew what it was to be a player, and he learned the value of a coach beyond the chalkboard.

"He understood the relational side of things very deeply," Jones says. "He was super connected to his guys. I know those personal relationships that he had as a head coach in Green Bay. I've talked to multiple players over the years, and they said he might have been a little bit tougher, but behind the scenes he still kind of was that big teddy bear."

Holmgren was a finalist in 2020 and '25 but has yet to receive the call. It's one that Butler, someone who waited 16 years in his own right to get, is desperate to see for his coach. Harkening back to that plane ride home from Dallas, Butler says that while Holmgren was a master tactician, he was an even better molder of men. "*How do I get 50 guys from age 21 to 31 and 34 to think the same thing?*" Butler says. "*That's what we're missing.* He mended that gap. He closed the daylight."

ALSO RECEIVING VOTES, DISS DIVISION

✖ ✓ ✖ ✖ ✖ ✓ ✖

(TOTAL POINTS IN PARENTHESES)

Albert Lewis **[22]**
Ken Anderson **[17]**
Robert Kraft **[16]**
George Kunz **[16]**
Otis Taylor **[16]**

JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

MIKE SHANAHAN

COACH [36 points] * **CAREER** Raiders [1988–89], Broncos [1995–2008], Washington [2010–13]



X

MIKE SHANAHAN is the most confounding situation currently facing the Hall of Fame. The voters will assuredly put Belichick in as part of the Class of 2027. For Shanahan, there's no end in sight; he's never even reached the finalist stage.

It's perplexing. Since Shanahan retired 13 years ago, 10 coaches have been finalists and six (Jimmy Johnson, Bill Cowher, Tom Flores, Don Coryell, Vermeil and Dungy) were enshrined. Of those, only Johnson and Flores have two

titles, and they won a combined 177 games. Shanahan, also a victor in two Super Bowls, won 170 by himself.

Much like Holmgren, Shanahan's secret sauce was his ability to connect with players. It's a trait that began during his days in the 1980s as QB coach and offensive coordinator with the Broncos, when Denver went to two Super Bowls. Then, in San Francisco, Shanahan replaced Holmgren as offensive coordinator in 1992. In his third season, Shanahan oversaw the league's top-scoring offense on the 49ers' way to a 49–26 rout of the Chargers in Super Bowl XXIX.

"Our team understood that everybody wanted the ball, but we put the team and winning first," says Jones. "When Mike came in, he did something different. He spent time with each skill position player in the starting unit. And what he told me specifically was, 'Brent, you might have a few less catches, but I guarantee you, you're going to have more touchdowns, and this is the way we're going to do the offense. There might be some times where I'm going to keep you in the block for max protection because we've got some things going on, and that's going to give us the greatest chance for success.'

"Of course, as a player, you want more catches and more opportunities, but you want to win a Super Bowl. I respected the fact he said that, and he was dead on."

In 1995, Shanahan took over the Broncos and helped revolutionize the sport with his zone-blocking scheme, something that remains prevalent across the league today. Behind Hall of Famer Terrell Davis, Denver's offense took off. In 1998, Davis rushed for 2,008 yards, leading the Broncos to their second straight title, making Shanahan the fifth coach to win back-to-back Super Bowls.

Despite it all, Shanahan hasn't sniffed the Hall of Fame, even with our panel suggesting he's the most glaring omission of them all.

Del Shofner [14]
Tom Coughlin [13]
L.C. Greenwood [13]
Bud Adams [10]
Lester Hayes [10]
Jim Marshall [10]
Steve Tasker [10]
Jim Tyrer [10]
Eddie Meador [9]
Doug Williams [9]

Steve Wisniewski [9]
Ed Budde [8]
Willie Anderson [7]
Darren Woodson [7]
Brian Mitchell [6]
Jake Scott [6]
Tom Sestak [6]
Bob Kuechenberg [5]
Clay Matthews Jr. [5]
Art Modell [5]

Everson Walls [5]
Steve Smith Sr. [4]
Rodney Harrison [3]
Ed White [3]
Cornell Green [2]
Henry Ellard [2]
Hines Ward [2]
Harvey Martin [1]
Steve McNair [1]
Richmond Webb [1]





SO FAST, SO YOUNG

AT JUST 18, AUSTRALIAN SPRINTER
GOUT GOUT SHATTERED THE UNDER-20
WORLD RECORD FOR 200 METERS,
A MARK SET BY ONE USAIN BOLT.

photographs
by

ERICK W.
RASCO

NOW THE SLENDER
YOUNGSTER IS AIMING TO RUN DOWN
THE GOAT'S ALL-TIME BESTS

by L. JON WERTHEIM



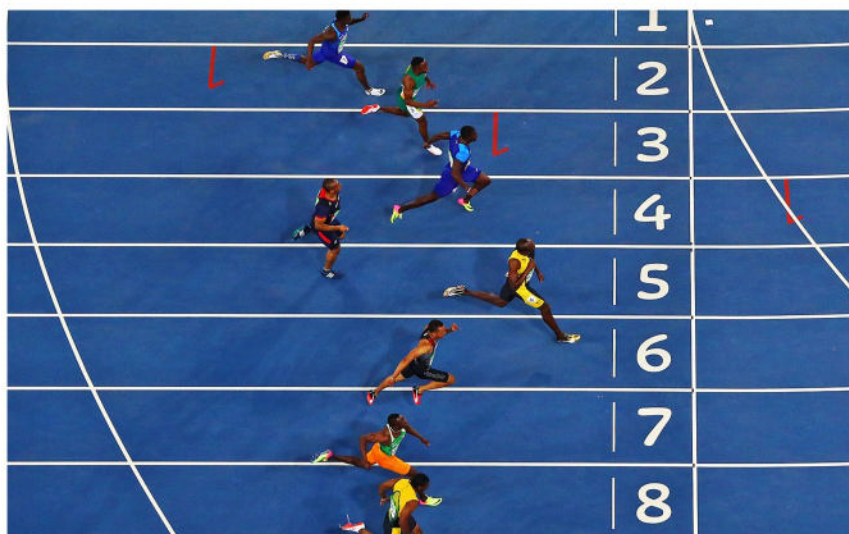
THE CHASE IS ON

Gout's Australian record 200 in April (above) set the track world buzzing that the marks of Bolt (right, Lane 6) could well be in reach.

HE IRONY is that the noise was beginning to die down. Instead whispers were amplifying that Gout Gout, at all of 18 years old, might be hitting a plateau. Yes, as a 17-year-old, he had already set the Australian record for the 200-meter sprint, his choice event, beating a mark that had stood since the 1968 Olympics. And yes, Gout's times were faster than Usain Bolt's at the same age. So much so that the sprinting GOAT noted, "[Gout] looks like young me."

But then came a few *meh* races. In Tokyo last September, Gout made his much-anticipated senior world championships debut. He was trailed and tailed by fans and media, this in a sport desperate for a breakout star. He wasn't a disappointment, per se. But he did fail to get out of his semifinal heat, suggesting that maybe all this "Next Bolt" talk was a bit overheated.

But then came the Australian Athletics Championships in Sydney over the second weekend of April. Even with his recent stumbles, Gout was expected to win every heat handily. And as always, he had



the unswerving support of his coach—the one who, for years, has been firmly declaring him a future champion. She reminded Gout that he was competing more against himself and his abilities than against the other, older runners in the surrounding lanes.

Gout crouched into the starting blocks, twisting his slender frame into something resembling a question mark. He gave himself a version of the same pep talk he does before every race: *Just relax and do your best.*

The gun went off. So did Gout.

Though he can struggle out of the blocks, this time he came out clean. He blazed around the curve going

into drive phase, then transitioned into full acceleration, hitting a top speed of more than 25 mph and holding it.

Watch a clip of the race on YouTube—you'll need less time than the 20-second ad that precedes it—and soon, some of the other runners leave the frame. One envisions a motorcycle amid a fleet of bikes. Gout crossed the finish line, smiled and raised his slim arms. Then he looked at the clock. And finally, he was stopped in his tracks.

Gout's time of 19.68 destroyed the 20.04 national record he had set 16 months earlier. It seemed to sneer at his previous personal best of 20.02. That 19.68? It would have won him the gold medal at the 2016 Rio Games. It would have beaten the bronze medal time of 19.70 at the 2024 Paris Olympics, run by *Noah freakin' Lyles*.

The celebration was interrupted by a bit of commotion and huddling of officials. Was there a clock malfunction? Was this dash wind-aided and therefore unofficial? Had there been a problem or some disqualifying irregularity with the track's surface?

Finally, a resolution. And a new winning time was posted on the board.

Gout had, in fact, won the race with a *faster* time of 19.67.

And like that, Gout—at 18—was back to being the hottest prospect in track and field, an international sensation. Add a dash of extreme likability and charm to all that speed, and the Adidas deal that pays him

a reported \$500,000 a year looked like a bet already paying off. Meet promoters suddenly knew that if they wanted Gout, it would cost them.

Gout will be an attraction at the 2028 Games in L.A. Then the ultimate home game: The 2032 Olympics will be in Brisbane, just a short sprint from Ipswich, where Gout grew up. He will be 24, right in the prime years when sprinters tend to truly hit their stride.

Those 19.67 seconds? In some ways they were life-changing for Gout. In some ways, not at all. His is a story of record-setting and Next Big Thing energy. His is also a story of old-timey values, of a kid with a double name but singular talent, singular backstory, and Lord knows, a singular coach.



.K., LET'S get "the name thing," as he calls it, out of the way. In 2005, Bona and Monica Guot (pronounced *Gwot*) sought to leave war-ravaged South Sudan. They put in applications to embark for Egypt and somehow their name was transcribed as G-o-u-t. From Egypt, the family planned to go to Canada, but the Australian government acted faster, offering sanctuary. A few months after their arrival in Brisbane, Monica gave birth to a son. In keeping with Sudanese tradition, the family named him Guot Guot. Because of the earlier paperwork error, he was christened Gout Gout.

Gout attended Ipswich Grammar, a private school in Brisbane's leafy suburbs, not far from the family's modest home. One day, as a seventh-grader, Gout was racing a classmate across a field. The

school's track coach was watching. When she saw Gout run, she recalls, her jaw dropped, her eyes popped and she summoned him over. "I thought I was in trouble or something," he says.

His nervousness was understandable. Di Sheppard had quite a reputation at Ipswich. In the early 2000s, she was the mother of an Ipswich student who had a bit of speed. Recently divorced and looking to make a change in her life, she inquired about coaching track at the school. Told that only school employees could be coaches, she quit her job at Woolworths and took a position at Ipswich handing out uniforms to kids. It was neither glamorous nor remunerative. But it provided eligibility to be a track coach.

She had little experience in the field. And with a set of knees even crankier than she is, it wasn't as though she could sprint alongside the kids. But she had a coach's sixth sense for relating to young athletes. She read every book she could and asked lots of questions, and, in time, built a mini dynasty. All without making concessions.

Helicopter parents were quickly grounded. Before it was the title of a movie, *One Battle After Another* could have described her relationship with school administrators. In a sport predicated on time, she had her own sense of it. *If you're early, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late. If you're actually late, you don't run.*

Plenty of teenagers—and their pampering parents—have bristled at her discipline, her hard-assedness. Gout relished it. His parents, strict in their own right, were busy raising seven kids and working their jobs, Bona as an Uber driver, Monica as a cleaner. They were happy that this unbending, silver-haired woman had taken such an interest in their son.

Sheppard also nourished in him a love of running. Competing for Ipswich, he'd have teammates, but he was in control of his destiny. And while sprinting seems so simple, Gout came to appreciate the nuances and mechanics and subtle hacks.

Above all, there was the irreplicable joy of speed, of treading on air, of challenging the frontier of human performance. "Running just feeds that inner child in me that wants to kind of feel free and feel one with myself," he says. "Running makes me feel like myself, for sure... This is what I was pretty much put onto this earth to do, and that's what I'm doing."

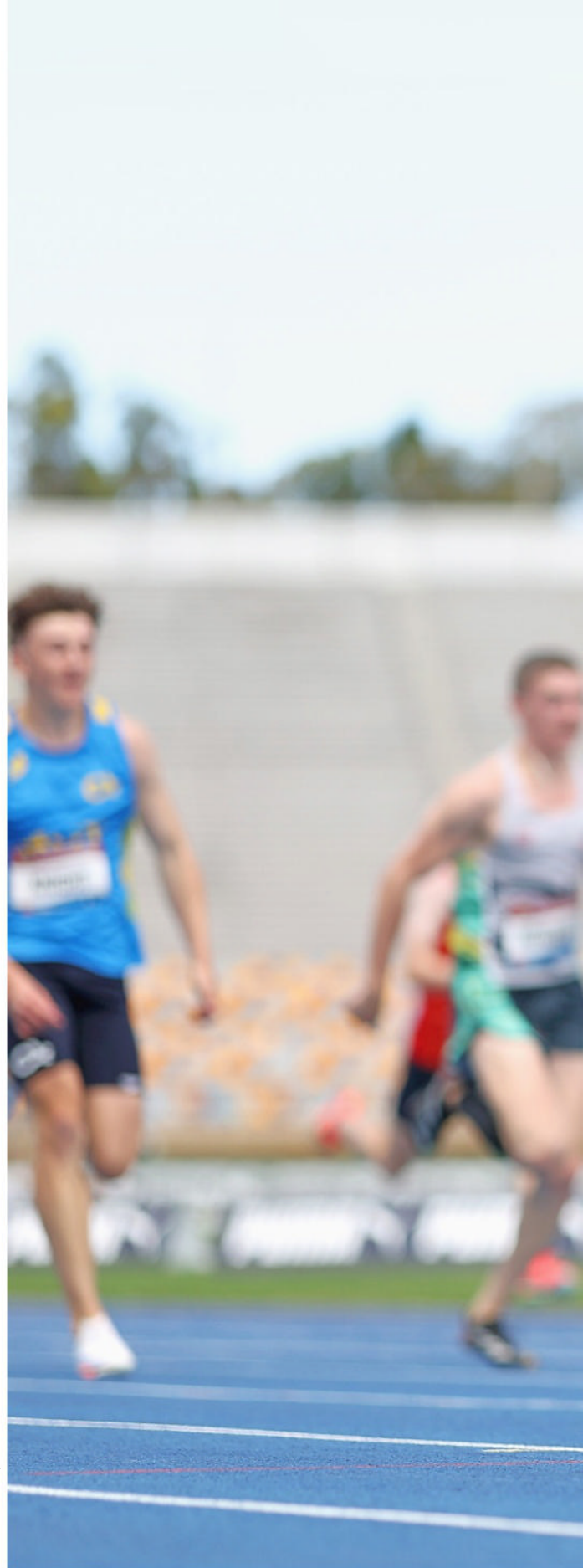
Predictably, Gout's precocious performances drew brands eager to get in on the futures market. He signed with an agent, James Templeton, whose clients include 800-meter world record holder David Rudisha of Kenya. Adidas signed Gout to a contract that, with bonuses, could reportedly pay up to \$6 million over eight years. According to Templeton, Adidas asked whether his young client was in the right coaching situation. Here, after all, was a blazing prospect, a global star, under the tutelage of...his high school track coach.

The answer was unequivocal: *We're all good here.*

Athlete and coach are quick to acknowledge their unlikely pairing. "It's a pretty crazy dynamic when you think about it," Gout says. "The old white lady and a young Black kid, you know? But turns out it works perfectly, and I wouldn't have it any other way." The 61-year-old

TAKING OFF

At 16, Gout flew through 200 meters in 20.04, a national record and .09 faster than Bolt ran at the same age.

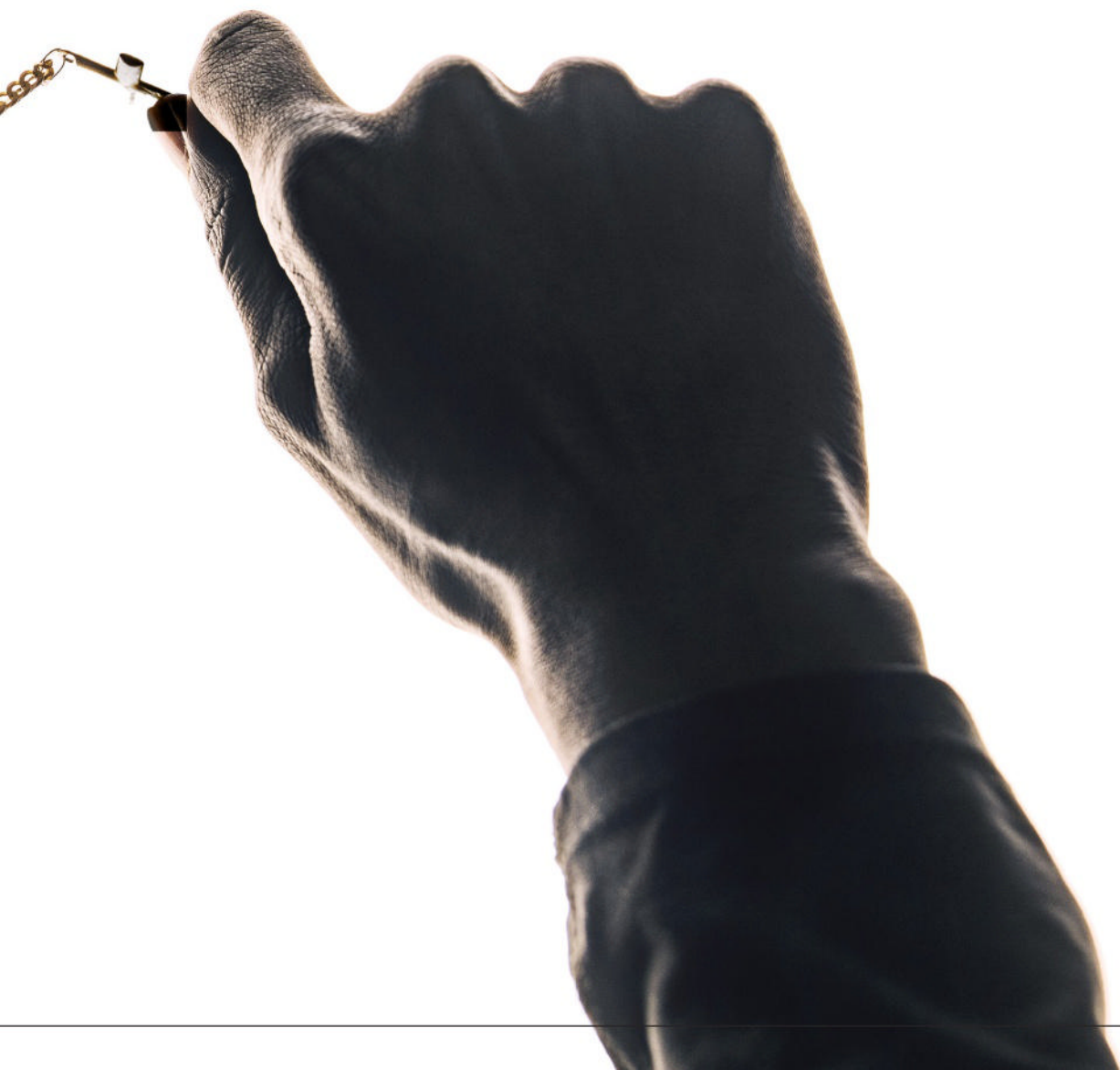




*Gout's is a story
of record-setting
and Next Big
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His is also a
story of old-timey
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singular talent.*



"Running just feeds that inner child in me that wants to kind of feel free and feel one with myself," Gout says. "Running makes me feel like myself, for sure. This is what I was pretty much put on this earth to do, and that's what I'm doing."



Sheppard calls them “the new Odd Couple,” and notes that for all their differences—not least, age—they are kindred spirits.

One day Sheppard volunteers that she’s “always been the odd one out.” As the daughter of an Aussie naval officer, she moved around frequently as a kid, then as an adult found that few share her exacting standards. That’s O.K., Gout responds. As the son of immigrants, a Black kid in a country 90% white, an introvert as happy watching anime or taking photos alone as hanging out with friends, he could relate. “I’m the odd one out, too,” he says.

As Gout’s profile continues to go up, and as his times go down, more and more opportunities materialize. He and Sheppard spent a week in Florida with Lyles, a training stint arranged by Adidas, their mutual sponsor. Gout’s been using the workout facilities of the Brisbane Lions, the local Aussie Rules football team. Then there are media requests, invitations to meet and greet, and celebrity dinners.

In the summer of 2025, they set up a base in Tübingen, Germany, where Gout could train in isolation and where they were a short flight from European races. At the prestigious Ostrava Golden Spike in Czechia, he shaved two hundredths of a second off his 200.

After this triumph, Gout remarked: “We did good, didn’t we?”

Sheppard’s response: “Yeah, we really did. But we don’t act like it, do we?”

“No,” he said. “We just keep movin’ forward the way we’re movin’ forward.”

“Right,” she said. “Because it’s the big bikkies. It’s the Olympics.”

That goal is still a ways away. Both chronologically: two years (L.A.) and six years (Brisbane), but also in track times. Gout might be the fastest 16- and 17-year-old in history. But he needs to get still faster, a reality made obvious at the 2025 worlds, where Gout finished fourth in his semifinal. This summer he opened his season with a sluggish sixth-place at the Bislett Games in Oslo on June 10. But six days later in Ostrava, Gout finished a close—and closing—third behind Lyles’s world record in the rarely run 150 meters, a promising sign for Gout’s next 200.

While it’s easy to get excited over Gout’s trajectory, it’s harder to gauge his future. Whereas Bolt is 6’ 5” and ran at 207 pounds, Gout has a body more associated with a distance runner, 5’ 11” and less than 150 pounds, all tendons and ropey muscle. But because of his explosiveness with each step, Gout covers the 200 in 83 strides, roughly the same number as Bolt (80) did. Gout’s biggest issue: slow starts. Dylan Hicks is an expert in sports biomechanics and a



SHARING THE FUN

Whether in competition or in training, Gout’s enthusiasm is infectious. Just ask Lyles (above) or Sheppard (right).



HEAD OF THE CLASS

Still just a high schooler, U.S. 800-meter sensation COOPER LUTKENHAUS is already racing against—and beating—the best in the world

EQUALLY PRECOCIOUS and ferocious, Cooper Lutkenhaus, a 17-year-old Texan, was already tearing up the track, leaving most of the field to stare at the back of his shirt and the undersides of his Nikes. But at the end of the 800-meter race at the Bislett Games on June 10, Lutkenhaus really ascended. Diving at the finish line—“Superman in spikes,” the track website letsrun.com called him—Lutkenhaus held off reigning world and Olympic champion Emmanuel Wanyonyi of Kenya by one hundredth of a second, to win in 1:42.08 [right]. That was a new age-group world record and the fastest time of the season for all competitors.

Yes, if the category is *teenagers making their mark in track and field*, well, Gout Gout isn’t the only answer

movement scientist at Flinders University in Adelaide. He published an academic paper on sprinting, based on his country's new star. "He's keeping pace with the four fastest people in 200-meter history. And we're talking Bolt [who holds the world record of 19.19], Yohan Blake, Michael Johnson, Noah Lyles. They've all run sub-9.3 for the final 100 of the two, and [Gout's] run that as well," says Hicks. "But in the first section [of races] he's still running sort of at 10.4, 10.5 on the curve. And so once you start to reduce that, you add the times up and now you're pushing down into those 19.7s, 19.6s—what's gonna get him on the podium and winning medals."

Having graduated from Ipswich Grammar back in

December (with straight A's), Gout declined offers to train all over the world. Instead, he returned to Brisbane, working with Sheppard to refine technique, add some bulk, improve his reaction time to the starting gun, and, mostly, clear his head. Gout still lives at home—though he bought the family a new house, meaning he no longer has to share a bedroom with a brother. He's thinking about "going to uni" (i.e., attending college locally) in the fall.

"[Top runners] are pretty much in their primes at age 25, 26 and I'm six years from there," he says. "You don't want to overload too much as a teenager because that messes up the rest of your career. Make the development great [and] when you're at your peak, you're unstoppable."

Which is to say, one of the planet's fastest humans is taking things ... slow. □

the salon will accept. Lutkenhaus, who doesn't turn 18 until Dec. 19, is, with blinding speed, positioning himself not only as a star-on-the-make, but also as a medal contender at the L.A. Games in 2028. Said Wanyonyi after the race, "Can you believe that as an Olympic champion, you are trying to knock down a 17-year-old boy?"

But here we are.

Lutkenhaus comes by it all honestly. His parents were both college runners and his father, George, coached high school track and cross-country. His brother, Andrew, runs for the University of Tulsa. But nurture is right there alongside nature. Lutkenhaus grew up—is growing up—in middle-class Texas. No deprivation, but no luxury either. "I'm not from Beverly Hills, that's for sure. I come from a place where everyone likes to work hard and a family that likes to work hard," Cooper recently told *The Guardian*. "That makes it really easy to love what I do. It's second nature to me."

A sports omnivore as a kid, Cooper ran, wrestled and played football and basketball. He enjoyed the competition and the different vibe and pacing of team sports. He also learned about the importance of technique; the value of routine; the necessity of pushing

through pain and discomfort. At 14, he funneled everything into track, realizing, somewhat wistfully, that if he were going to honor his full talent, he would have to pick one sport.

As a 15-year-old freshman at Northwest High in Justin, Texas, outside of Fort Worth, he ran the 800 in 1:49.84, closing the last 200 meters in 24.6 seconds, the kind of time that augurs success as a strong college runner. A year later, he ran 1:42.27, the kind of time that augurs success as an Olympian. The family concluded that it was fair neither to Cooper nor to other overmatched young runners to post these times and keep running in high school meets. So, Nike deal in hand, he turned pro at 16. Last year, he became the youngest American

ever to compete at the outdoor world championships. And in March he became the youngest indoor world champion in any event in track and field history when he won the 800 in Toroun, Poland, in 1:44.24.

The decision to turn pro has been validated again and again. Accompanied by various family members and a growing team, he travels the world. In his downtime he sparks up YouTube and watches clips of the great 800-meter races. His win in Oslo will no doubt one day make that compendium.

Lutkenhaus said that the scrapes—the legacy of that dive to the finish—stung in the shower. But he reckoned it was well worth it. And on this rare occasion, he sounded like a teenager. —L.J.W.



POINT AFTER

STAR GAZING

THE LASTING image of the 2026 World Cup will of course be the trophy moment, which was still weeks away as this issue went to press. But the group stage guaranteed that, regardless of which country wins, this tournament will be remembered for mesmerizing performances by global soccer's biggest names. Lionel Messi (*right*) became the leading scorer in World Cup history by netting all five of Argentina's goals in its first two matches. Kylian Mbappé of France scored four times in his first two games, putting him just two goals behind Messi on the all-time list. Norway's Erling Haaland also had four in his first two matches, and 41-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal made history by scoring in his sixth World Cup. Iconic names dazzling on the world's biggest stage: It's what the beautiful game is made for.



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