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By Seth Wickersham
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What’s that, Jalen Ramsey? Gronk is overrated? Spit it out!
Contributing writer Molly Knight on why Bryce Love’s speed is no joke

At the Pac-12’s media day, I asked three head coaches of Stanford’s North Division rivals how they plan on keeping up with, and tackling, speedy running back Bryce Love this fall. “Uh, with more than one person,” Oregon coach Mario Cristobal told me. “Shoot,” Washington State coach Mike Leach said. “With as many people as possible.” Justin Wilcox, coach of Stanford’s archrival, California, shook his head and sighed. “That’s a great question,” he said on his way out of the event. “If you find out the answer, will you let me know?” MORE ON PAGE 9

Designer Alex Anderson on creating this issue’s artistic theme

Tasked with creating unique brands for some of the NFL’s biggest stars, I was inspired by the strong, timeless and bold logos of corporations from the ’60s and ’70s mixed with the players’ unique personal styles. Now more than ever in the NFL, the names on the back of the jerseys are just as important as the ones on the front. I started this project the same old-school way I start everything: with a No. 2 pencil and cheap printer paper. Sketching is a fundamental part of my process, and then it’s just a matter of going from pencils to pixels. MORE ON PAGE 38

Senior writer Mina Kimes on talking quarterbacks with Jalen Ramsey

Jalen has drawn a lot of attention—and flak—for ridiculing quarterbacks this summer, but there’s one passer he’s happy to praise: Tom Brady. While talking about the Jaguars’ loss in the AFC championship game, Jalen spent a lot of time breaking down Brady’s game, explaining why he’s able to shred defenses regardless of whether they’re playing zone or man. “He’s gonna get the right matchup—and he’s gonna go to that matchup all game,” he said. Because Brady is so clever, he added, most defenses are powerless to stop him—except for his Jaguars. MORE ON PAGE 54

In My Feelings

Senior writer Seth Wickersham on channeling Odell Beckham Jr.’s vibe:

I never listen to music when I’m writing, but I did when I wrote about OBJ. I listened to Drake, because that’s what Odell listens to. He is always dancing, even when there is no music, and his dancing has this mystical reverberation quality to it. One night in Los Angeles, after a celebrity soccer game, Odell danced on the field, and people in the stands and near him, grown men and women and kids, joined in. He has a capacity to bring a certain awe and joy that is rare for a professional athlete, especially buttoned-up football players, which made me wonder, after a tough past few years for him, how he will find the capacity for awe and joy for himself. MORE ON PAGE 38

Randall Slavin captured OBJ in all his OBJ-ness at this year’s ESPYs.
GREAT TASTE. LESS FILLING. SCORE.
The Power of Disciplined Aggression

How do you solve the puzzle of rising strikeouts? For Mookie Betts and the Red Sox, it’s all about jumping on the good stuff early.

Last November Mookie Betts rolled a 300 game in the PBA World Series of Bowling. This spring he solved a Rubik’s Cube, on television, in under two minutes. Primarily a second baseman in the minors, Betts converted to the outfield upon reaching Boston four years ago and has now saved more runs for his team since 2016 (76, through Aug. 19) than any other major league fielder.

These facts are cool. More important, they testify to Betts’ most admirable trait: his willingness to work hard at endlessly repetitive tasks, picking up patterns and fine-tuning again and again to improve the expression of his impressive natural skills.

Now Betts has turned his focus to re-engineering his approach at the plate. His latest round of adjustments is keying the Red Sox’s remarkable offensive surge—and forcing us to reconsider what analytics means for hitting.

Boston has been saturated with statheads for years, but sabermetric insights about plate discipline didn’t do the organization much good in 2017. The Red Sox ranked fourth in the American League in walks but scored just 4.85 runs per game, sixth best in the AL, largely because their 168 home runs ranked dead last in the league. Owner John Henry traced the club’s power drop to its passivity: Boston batters swung at just 62.3 percent of pitches in the strike zone last season, the lowest percentage of any MLB team, according to FanGraphs. Henry brought in a new manager, Alex Cora, and hitting coach, Tim Hyers, who promised to get the team on the attack.

Swinging more for its own sake isn’t worth anything—but neither is letting hittable pitches go by. The Red Sox understood that batters can reach a point where standing around to get on base can mean forgoing chances to drive the ball. Owner John Henry traced the club’s power drop to its passivity: Boston batters swung at just 62.3 percent of pitches in the strike zone last season, the lowest percentage of any MLB team, according to FanGraphs. Henry brought in a new manager, Alex Cora, and hitting coach, Tim Hyers, who promised to get the team on the attack.

Swinging more for its own sake isn’t worth anything—but neither is letting hittable pitches go by. The Red Sox understood that batters can reach a point where standing around to get on base can mean forgoing chances to drive the ball. So they decided, as Cora put it, “to have guys ready to do damage early in the count.” That’s not easy—ideally, you have to swing hard but only at pitches you can smack. You need disciplined aggression.

But that’s what Betts has, and players up and down the Red Sox lineup are showing it now too. The Red Sox swung at the first pitch in only 20.9 percent of their 2017 plate appearances, versus a league average of 28.1 percent, according to Baseball Reference. This season that number is up to 27.3 percent. And in plate appearances that conclude after one pitch, Xander Bogaerts’ OPS has increased by 137 points, Betts’ by 262 points and Mitch Moreland’s by 360 points! Last winter Boston signed J.D. Martinez, who, it just so happens, has a preternatural ability to crush the first ball he sees. Over his career, even including the years before he raised his launch angle, Martinez has hit .431 and slugged .815 in at-bats ending in the first pitch. This season his OPS in that situation is 1.639. Those numbers are not typos. The Red Sox knew what they were doing when they brought Martinez to town.

Overall, Boston hitters have swung at 68.4 percent of strikes this year, jumping to 11th highest in baseball, while swinging at hardly any more bad pitches and while maintaining a high contact rate (79.6 percent, second in MLB). Those are indeed the statistical tracks of disciplined aggression. And these Red Sox lead the league in hits (by a wide margin) and in runs scored.

In this era of endlessly rising strikeouts, Betts in particular has figured out how to fight back. He doesn’t swing at many pitches but makes powerful contact when he does. Now he’s advancing that combo to earlier in the count. Just 23 percent of his plate appearances this season have ended with him behind in the count, down from 31.4 percent before 2018. Betts doesn’t let pitchers get to strike three because he doesn’t let them get to strike two.

Looking ahead, I think this approach could lead teams to rethink the entire philosophy of getting opponents’ pitch counts up, especially given the rise of super-bullpens. Why try to work Lance Lynn for walks only to see him replaced by Dellin Betances, Zach Britton and Aroldis Chapman?

I also think Boston’s aggression is the kind that will serve the team well in the fall. This is speculative, but from what I can tell, it’s better to rely on your own power than opponent mistakes in the postseason—there’s not much chance to take extra bases or beat up No. 5 starters because there are no bad teams in the playoffs.

Put it this way: With Betts hitting leadoff, I wouldn’t want to miss the first pitch.
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At the Speed of Bryce

What's it like to spend a day in the shoes of Stanford's Bryce Love, the fastest running back in college football? To find out, first you have to get him to slow down.

BY MOLLY KNIGHT
At 6 a.m., I’m already in trouble. The sun is just beginning to peek through the thick trees that surround Stanford’s campus, and I’m shivering in the parking lot behind Bryce Love’s dormitory, watching Love pedal away on a black electric bicycle. Even riding shotgun in a Stanford-issue golf cart, I have no prayer of catching up. That’s when I realize this assignment—to shadow the fastest running back in college football from daybreak to lights out—will reveal Love in exactly the way most Pac-12 defenses see him. Which is to say, I’ll have an excellent view of his back. For much of the day, that back is seated on his
electric bike—not that Love, 21, needs any help getting faster; I’m fairly certain the bike actually slows him down. As a 12-year-old in Wake Forest, North Carolina, he ran the 100 meters in 11.64 seconds, the 200 in 23.37 seconds and the 400 in 50.75 seconds. (His times in the 100 and 400 still stand as national age-group records.)

Those legs made him a four-star recruit as a senior at Wake Forest High, even though he stood 5-foot-9 and weighed a smidge under 180. He chose Stanford over most of the SEC, ACC and Big Ten despite never having heard of the school until head coach David Shaw offered him a scholarship in his sophomore year. (“He might not have heard of Stanford, but I can tell you that his parents had definitely heard of Stanford,” his mother, Angela, says.)

After visiting the Northern California campus, Love fell in love with all those trees and the pink sunsets over the foothills and the nerdy football players who had interests outside of sports, just like he did.

At 6:18, Love locks his bike at the Arrillaga sports complex and descends the steps to the weight room that Stanford football shares with 35 other varsity teams. He walks to the running backs’ cubby across from the snack bar and grabs a folder with a record of all the workouts he’s ever done in his three years on The Farm. When Love arrived in 2015, the coaching staff didn’t quite know what to make of him. Stanford runs a complex, pro-style offense with an enormous, annoying playbook that challenges any teenager during the summer training camp. That complexity—plus a deep bench and an abject fear that young players will blow assignments that might result in a quarterback’s dismemberment more often than 20-something veterans do—means that Shaw doesn’t like to burn a true freshman’s redshirt unless absolutely necessary. But in one of Love’s first summer scrimmages, he got the ball on a weakside isolation play and casually sprinted 45 yards untouched into the end zone. Shaw looked wide-eyed at his then-offensive coordinator, Mike Bloomgren, saying nothing. He didn’t need to. “After that, it was over,” Shaw says now. Love would not be redshirting.

A few minutes before 7 a.m., as Love laces his cleats for field drills, I glance around the weight room at his teammates. My eyes stop on a large, shirtless kid next to 49ers guard Joshua Garnett, who is joking with Packers offensive tackle Kyle Murphy, while someone wonders aloud when Eagles tight end Zach Ertz will show up. That’s when I learn that Stanford football keeps two locker rooms: one for its players and one for its alumni who play in the NFL. The latter has nameplates and everything. The coaching staff motivates its college charges by telling them that the goal is to graduate to the big-boy locker room one day. I think about how Love passed up joining these men in the NFL last season, and I ask whether seeing them every day and knowing they’re getting paid a lot of money to lift weights at 7 a.m. might make him regret his decision. But Love insists it really wasn’t much of a choice. He rushed for more than 2,000 yards and finished second in Heisman voting, but he was too pissed off about Stanford’s disappointing 9-5 season (four of those losses by three points or fewer) to let it be his last year. “It, for lack of a better word, sucked,” he says. “I couldn’t go out like that.”

And so here he is on an early Monday morning in July: sprinting to a practice field with his teammates, crawling on hands and knees like a crab and scooting side to side like a spider on its back—cashing no paycheck, listening to grown men scream at him. From 7 to 8 a.m., the Stanford football players and their NFL friends jump and lunge and roll and crawl and plank in five-minute bursts, breaking only to do cat and cow yoga poses. The temperature hovers in the 50s, but the marine layer from the peninsula makes it feel even cooler.

By 8:12, they are back in the weight room, huddled for what I think will be hugs goodbye. Then the punter, a surfer dude from Hawaii named Jet Toner, screams for inspiration, “A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer!” It sounds random until he follows it up with “Ralph Waldo Emerson!” (yes, really). And then they all yell and begin to exercise again. The running back group is given free time for physical therapy or to retreat to the locker room to check Twitter or text their girlfriends. (No phones are allowed in the weight room.)

Love opts for the training room and some routine treatment on his recently healed right ankle.

Love finished as the nation’s second-leading rusher last fall with 2,118 yards and set an FBS single-season record with 13 (!) runs of at least 50 yards, but perhaps most impressive is that he gained most of those yards on one leg. He missed just one game after suffering a high ankle sprain in Week 7, but Shaw says that in every game for the rest of the season, Love would finish a ridiculous run, get pummeled and hobble off to the medical tent, only to re-emerge in the huddle for Stanford’s next possession. “Bryce is probably one of the toughest guys to ever play in this program,” Shaw says. “He would limp off the field and I’d say, ‘He’s done. Get him out.’ And then the training staff would retape him and come find me five minutes later and say, ‘Coach, he’s able to push off, he’s passing all our tests, he says he’s fine.’ And so I’d put him back in and he’d rip off another 50-yard run.”

At 9:30, he showers and changes into a Stanford
T-shirt and black shorts, ready to head off to class. Love's goal is to graduate after winter quarter so that he can better prepare for the NFL draft next spring—and completing a demanding premed degree in human biology a quarter early means cramming summer school into his football schedule. Love wants to be a pediatrician when his football career is over. His mother says he made the decision at 5, after he was hit with a nasty bout of pneumonia. His doctor made it better, became Love's personal superhero, and that was that.

By 10 a.m., on the way to class, Love is back on his bike and looking for an open dining hall. We trail him in our little golf cart at maximum speed, maneuvering past speed bumps, random wood posts and grad students auditing for the Tour de France. We cannot keep up.

We find him at Gerhard Casper Dining Commons picking up an omelet with vegetables and a side of fruit to go, which he'll eat back at his dorm. By 10:20, he's off to statistics class. He plops down in a third-row seat, next to teammates Trenton Irwin and Curtis Robinson, and takes notes on his MacBook Air. At 11:24 a.m., he walks out of class with Irwin and Robinson and pedals back to Jimmy V's, a burger-and-smoothie joint attached to the football complex, to grab a burrito bowl and tortilla chips. At 11:40, he returns to his dorm—temporary digs for the summer, where he rooms with starting safety Ben Edwards—to begin his statistics homework and to study for a political science midterm. Then he climbs into bed for a quick nap. At 2:40 p.m., Love is back in the weight room for an optional yoga class led by Nanci Conniff, an instructor who works with the school's athletes. When no other football players show up, Conniff and Love take their mats behind a side wall for a private session. It's Love's second time ever doing yoga, and though he's a bit overwhelmed by the up-dog, down-dog of it all, he almost does a standing split straightaway, which would put him in the top 5 percent of yogis in any class I've ever covered.

Obnoxious rap-rock from the early aughts blares through the gym's speakers, but rather than ask for quiet while the school's football star lies in shavasana at the end of his session, Conniff uses the nuisance as a teaching tool. “Life is never going to be as quiet as you want it to be, Bryce,” she says. “Especially in football. People are going to be screaming at you, and it's only going to get worse as you keep getting better.

You will have to get inside when the noise is too much. You will have to get quiet.” She lightly touches his chest. “It will have to come from in here.”

At 4:18, Love leaves yoga and heads back out to the field to catch from the Jugs machine. The temperature on the field nears 80 degrees, but he wears long sleeves and a helmet to make it hotter and more difficult to see the ball. By 4:30, his shirt is stuck to his back, and sweat slicks his hands.

By 5 p.m., he's done, and he sits next to me in the front row of Stanford's empty football auditorium. After shadowing him for 11 hours, I want to know two things, really. The first is how he does all of this exercise—not to mention class work—day after day without collapsing from exhaustion. He laughs and says football is life. “I'm never more at peace in my life than when I'm on the field in a game waiting for a hole to open up,” he says.

My next question is more serious. As it stands now, he wants to pursue two careers in direct opposition to each other: football, in which he potentially rips bodies apart, and medicine, in which he puts them back together. How does he reconcile the two? We are 60 seconds into our interview, and he is fidgeting and staring straight ahead at a whiteboard, searching for a good answer. “I haven’t really thought about that,” he says. Then, as if he remembers something important, he sits up straight and turns to look directly at me. “You kind of have to be a little mean to play football at the end of the day. But you can also have a switch. I've always been able to turn that switch on and off.”

We have to do our interview quickly, because at 5:30 he has another lifting session, probably using a new set of muscles Stanford scientists just discovered. He changes clothes again and then presses and squats and lunges and lifts and bounces and climbs and laughs with his teammates, none of whom seems grumpy to have been doing voluntary exercise stuff for literally half the day.

This lift is followed by a players-only meeting at 7 p.m., which must have been a hoot, because by 7:15 the young men sprint toward the field as mini speakers blast J. Cole. They scream-sing every word. We have made it to “Team Tech”: the best part of the day, when players scrimmage red zone packages and run whatever plays they want. Since coaches are not allowed at summer workouts, the upperclassmen are supposedly in charge, but it looks like controlled chaos. Stanford’s defense is good, but the offense is better. It scores on every play. Nobody can outjump star receiver JJ Arcega-Whiteside or body up future NFL tight end Kaden Smith. And nobody can catch Bryce Love. If the season goes the way of the scrimmage, Stanford will be a threat for the Pac-12 crown and possibly a national title.

At 8:15 p.m., Love stretches with teammates. Then they circle up around sports performance director Shannon Turley, who previews what they will work on tomorrow and the next day and the next. Love, who hangs back to talk with one of the new freshmen, is among the last to leave the field. At 8:30, he takes, conservatively, his fourth shower of the day, and by 9 p.m. he is back on his bike in search of supper. From the front seat of the golf cart, I stare at Love's back and wonder again how anyone ever catches him.
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Tough Call

After reports that Bill Belichick might leave the Patriots after this season, The Mag obtained a handwritten page from his notebook listing the pros and cons of such a move. It is presented here in its entirety. — KATY YEISER
We don’t just build trucks. We build trucks for Titans. Those who lend a hand even when their hands are full. The 2019 Nissan TITAN delivers up to 9,400 lb. towing capacity and comes with America’s Best Limited Truck Warranty.
“At first I couldn’t figure out how they planned on getting Baker off the ground. In the Heisman House commercial, I’m looking at Baker’s finances as he zooms around on drones he bought with his first paycheck because he thought they were tax-deductible. Basically the older guy looking out for the younger guy. I was like, ‘I know there’s special effects, but how’s this supposed to work?’ Then they pulled out the harness and told Baker he’d be suspended by cables. It couldn’t have been comfortable—they had to find clothes that would fit over the harness. The amount of safety that went into it was amazing. Still, I was glad to be on the ground standing on my own two feet. We talked about the sandwich he had to hold in the exact same spot for 20 minutes without eating it. It was just turkey, lettuce and bread. No mayonnaise or mustard. I like a few more condiments on my sandwich than that!”

—GINO TORRETTA, AS TOLD TO DANA LEE
Sweet Serve

WATERMELON SALAD
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James Beard Award winner Tony Mantuano is best known for his work on Bravo’s Top Chef Masters, but the chef and partner of Chicago’s renowned Spiaggia is a 10-year vet of the U.S. Open. We asked him about this inventive salad featuring watermelon, pecorino Romano, pistachios, mint and olive oil that’s on the Wine Bar Food menu during the USTA’s annual fortnight in Flushing.

This is the first time I’ve seen pecorino Romano paired with watermelon. I’m gonna pack my cheese grater for the Labor Day picnic!

Savory and sweet always works. Think melon and something salty, like prosciutto and melon. That always works. Like a well-placed drop shot.

But those candied pistachios? It’s about texture more than anything else. The dish needed a little crunch. We candied them so they’re slightly sweet, which helps bring out the flavor of the watermelon.

Helps bring out the crowds too, am I right?

We did a similar salad at Wrigley as part of their Chef Series in early summer and it was the top dish. It helped that it was super hot, which it will be in New York as well. It’s just refreshing and easy to eat. It has a little crunch, a little sharpness and a little sweet.

—DAN HAJDUCKY

Pistachios can spontaneously combust. That’s nuts! Visit ESPN.com for more on stadium recipes.
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TALOR GOOCH: I thought about alligators before the tournament, but you don’t expect to have any actual encounters.

MICHAEL DEMOCKER, TIMES-PICAYUNE PHOTOGRAPHER: I’ve shot that tournament for about 15 years, and the alligators have always been a fixture. On the first day, I got the requisite shots of the likely contender golfers, then I prayed for gator drama. I got my wish that afternoon.

GOOCH: We were on the last hole. After I hit my tee shot, I knew I had a tough lie down near the water. When I got up there, my ball was within arm’s reach of three gators. A few other golfers came over, and we were trying to figure out how to get the gators to move. Then Chesson Hadley, who was in the group ahead of us, said, “I got this.”

CHESSEON HADLEY: I just wanted to be the hero. I’m no reptile tamer, but I thought if I got one to go back in the lake, the others would follow. I grabbed a rake and went for it.

ANDREW LANDRY, GOOCH’S PLAYING PARTNER THAT DAY: He scared two of them down to the water—but they immediately turned around and got really close to the shore, like they were in attack mode.

GOOCH: My caddie, Malcolm Baker, is Australian, and he always gives me crap about how U.S. wildlife is much more tame. So I said to him, “You should be able to save me from these things, right? Isn’t that what I pay you for?”

MALCOLM BAKER: Sorry, they were very threatening. We all covered a safe distance away.

HADLEY: I hit the third one with a rake, and he just turned around. I did it again, and he started hissing at me. That’s when my adventure ended—I was happy to go 2-for-3.

GOOCH: We called over a PGA official to see if we could take a drop. I knew there was a rule where you can get relieved from dangerous animals or fire ants. He asked if we tried to get the last gator to move, and we said, “Yes, but now he’s frustrated with us.” That’s when the rules official tossed a bunker rake at the gator.

DEMOCKER: The gator promptly ate the rake, resulting in the greatest sports photo I will ever shoot. The official then threw an umbrella at the alligator, which only had the effect of showing that nothing was learned from the rake-flinging.

GOOCH: We eventually were able to take a drop about 10 yards away, but it was a new ball—I left the original with the gator. I ended up making par, and then it blew up on Twitter and Instagram. Now I just think about Happy Gilmore and what happened to Chubbs. I’m just glad I didn’t lose a hand!
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Limits are meant to be tested. It’s the only way progress is made. Some prefer to pace themselves, while others choose to floor it.
Equal Fights Movement

The optics of intergender wrestling can be shocking. But those who participate say pitting women against men in the ring is a step toward equality.

BY HALLIE GROSSMAN
n the middle of the night, at a quarter til 2, the audience fends off exhaustion and cold. The main ballroom in the Pontchartrain Center is cavernous, and as the thermostat dips into the low 60s, the men and women (mostly men) and children (two) lean forward, waiting for the show to go on. The venue seats 2,500, but just 300 tickets were sold and only about 170 fans have shown. The faction that’s here feels sparse, the event clandestine.

There’s a bald man sitting ringside in a black shirt with bold white letters that blare: “Politically Incorrect … and Damn Proud of It!!” A group of seven friends who look to be in their mid-20s sit clustered together rows up in the bleachers, a sea of vacant blue seats in front of them. The room is mostly dark, save for the ring in the center illuminated by spotlight. There are no windows to the outside world here, and even if there were, the vista beyond, to Kenner, Louisiana, wouldn’t offer much. An expanse of green fields. A smattering of shade trees in the distance. Downtown New Orleans is nearly 15 miles away, but with those fields and those trees blanketed in a velvety night, the city feels farther. This might as well be the ends of the earth.

Inside, as 2 a.m. draws near, the music picks up, a rhythmic pounding that crescendos in sync with strobing lights. It’s a neon pink and green and yellow ravelike affair, and it’s through a colorful cloud of smoke that Kimber Lee, royalty in the independent wrestling circuit, emerges. She’s here in a homecoming of sorts—returning to the indies after more than a year away in the WWE ranks—to face “Hot Sauce” Tracy Williams at Lit Up. The show, hosted by Beyond Wrestling, is the promotion’s first card featuring just women vs. men, intergender matches from Beyond Wrestling men is not new or taboo for Kimberly Frankele, who’s been in the ring with them since 2009.

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Kimber Lee runs the perimeter of the guardrails, reaching out to fans pushed up against the metal gates. She leaps over the turnbuckle and raises her arms, her sequined jacket and purple-and-black, bedazzled bikini set glinting in the spotlight. “Welcome back” chants break out. And when she squares off with Williams—a svelte 192-pound man in minuscule black trunks—the fans are unmistakably in her corner. For five minutes, they grapple and slam each other to the canvas, trade kicks and expel grunts. Then Kimber Lee climbs to the top rope, launches herself and slams her feet into the chest of a staggering Williams, sending him flying on impact. Williams retaliates, flinging Kimber Lee over his shoulder before spiking her to the ground. “Death Valley Driver!” the announcer hollers.

Seconds later, Williams clutches Kimber Lee in a headlock and the two wind up tangled, head to head, shoulder to shoulder. Kimber Lee punches Williams on his side, once, twice, a third time. After the fourth swing, a convincingly desperate blow to get him to loosen his grip, Williams stands straight, keeps Kimber Lee bent over and winds his right arm back like he’s wielding a hammer. He lets swing and his palm, wide open, collides with flesh. You hear the slap, the smack of broken skin, almost before you see it. And then you do see it. You can’t not see it. Between Kimber Lee’s shoulder blades, just below her tattoo of a rose in bloom, blooms something new: a throbbing, bright-red handprint.

PHYSICAL RUIN is part of this job description, and for the remaining weekend after Lit Up, Tracy Williams’ open palm strike—the evidence of a man physically beating up a woman as an accepting crowd looked on—will burn a deep crimson on Kimber Lee’s back. Depending on perspective, that handprint is a token of honor and, perhaps, progress—or a radioactive badge of shame, mere spectacle masked as progress.

Their match concludes after Williams locks his forearm around Kimber Lee’s neck and yanks backward to submit her via a crossface; he keeps his belt, then gets booed for his efforts. His vanquished foe staggers around the mat, raises her arms to salute the Kimberly Lee chants, then leaves the ring. Clutching her jaw, she hobbles to the thick black curtain that divides the public from backstage.

And once on the other side, she stands up straight. Kimber Lee, who goes by Kimberly Frankele outside the ring, huddles with Williams, as wrestlers do after every match. They assure each other that, yes, they’re unharmed; yes, they feel good about the match. And then Williams explains that backsip. “It was there,” he tells Frankele. Her back was exposed; he seized an opportunity. “I’m sorry.”

Frankele waves him off, assuring Williams that she’d have done the same. As performers they leave safe spots open—a chest, a back—for opponents to deliver careful strikes. “You’re going to bruise,” she says of her chosen trade. “You’re going to get hurt.”

She laughs, because, really, she has been at this...
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since 2009 and it’s just one more bruise in a decade replete with them. And besides, she knows Williams. They trained under the same mentor; they know the lines they cannot cross with each other. “He wasn’t supposed to hit me in the back like that,” Frankele says, then shrugs. “But that happens. That’s a move that’s not fake.”

Spend enough time backstage and a governance emerges. Everyone is on top of everyone, and between embraces and pleasantishments, it feels like a high school reunion than a space where they’re prepping to battle one another. In the women’s dressing room is an array of carry-on suitcases, which are spliced open. (“Pro Wrestling Is Not A Crime,” trumpets a sticker on a black bag.) The wrestlers’ makeup, costumes and snacks spill onto a faux granite counter. The men’s dressing room is just across the way. In this sterile, narrow hallway that stretches the length of the convention center, the wrestlers conduct pre-and postmortems. Before matches, they hammer out storylines and moves they agree to execute. After, they dissect how the story and moves played out—forensic analysts in Lycra and sequins.

Walk the hall in those final, harried moments before Lit Up begins and you’ll find them convening, two by two—wrestler vs. wrestler—like on Noah’s Ark. Frankele and Williams practice their steps, knowing their story is simple. Williams owns the title; Frankele wants it. “Boom!” she yells, whipping her head back. She mimics a series of punches; Williams pretends to take the blows. “Boom!” Williams says, and Frankele pretend-staggers for a few steps.

Down the corridor, about 20 feet away, another pair, Deonna Purrazzo and Matt Riddle, go through their paces. Neither has performed in an intergender match before, and they decide their action will lean into that inexperience. Purrazzo will be the early aggressor, needling Riddle to fight. Riddle, a former UFC fighter, will hesitate at first, knowing the power imbalance, until Purrazzo frustrates him so much that he swings back and outmuscles her. “Maybe it’s like this,” Riddle motions, then practices kneeling Purrazzo. She nods and pretend-lurches a few steps.

“He wasn’t supposed to hit me in the back like that,” Frankele says, then shrugs. “But that happens. That’s a move that’s not fake.”

**ASK ANY INTERGENDER** wrestler why he or she feels comfortable with the performances they put out in the world, or why they don’t balk at a man and a woman wreaking violence on each other. Women will answer with a question about the logic of training and practicing with men wrestlers but not actually facing them in a match. They’ll laud the empowerment they feel or the equality they seek to promote; the masses were on her side, so they responded in the one way that felt right. They gasped. Then booed. But what if Kimber Lee weren’t a crowd favorite, weren’t a prodigal daughter? What if the fans hadn’t been moved by that flash of violence at all? Or what if they had been moved ... but had revelled in it?

Behind the scenes, Frankele faced a fire-storm. Three years ago, she stepped into another Beyond Wrestling ring, this time in Providence, Rhode Island, against another intergender opponent. Chris Dickinson picked up a folding chair while Kimber Lee knelt in front of him. Dickinson reared back, seeking leverage, hoisted the chair over his head, then—a wrecking ball set on demolition—crashed it over her head. He swung her limp body onto his back, took off on a run—**Pazuzu Bomb**!—then threw her to the ground. She skidded toward the turnbuckle, a collection of beaten bones. And a ringside fan captured the mauling on video.

The blowback was swift and unrelenting. Angry viewers called the venue, then the city. Dickinson lost bookings and received death threats. Fellow wrestlers joined the angry mob too. “Guys that I trained with were like, ‘Oh, you’re gonna wrestle that Dickinson guy?’” Matt Riddle says. “‘Try to hurt him.’” Frankele, for her part, was floored.

“I was 100 percent fine. Neither of us had any idea it would go viral,” she says. “We got to the back and it’s, ‘Oh my gosh, that was amazing! Thank you for taking care of me,’” she remembers telling Dickinson. And the Pazuzu Bomb? She and Dickinson had asked to push the boundaries even further—a powerhouse from the **top rope**—a request Drew Cordeiro, Beyond Wrestling’s owner, immediately nixed. “Absolutely not,” he told them. “Way too dangerous.”

The chorus was unswayed. At best, it insisted, intergender wrestling normalizes domestic violence. At worst, it glorifies it.

**“The moves are real. The bruises are real. I really land on the concrete.”**

**Kimberly Frankele**
LIFE HAS RELATIONSHIPS.
SPORTS SHOW US TRUE LOVE.

ESPN
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The optics, after all, are shocking. Petite wrestlers such as Kimber Lee don’t just fly through the air; they rocket. Against Dickinson, her head appeared to ram into the ring bell—though she and Cordeiro insist it didn’t. Independent wrestling venues are small and private, and the events they house feel fringe by extension. And Beyond Wrestling’s calling card as a promotion touts an audience unrestrained by guardrails, so fans are flush against the ring.

Card as a promotion touts an audience unrestrained by extension. And Beyond Wrestling’s calling card as a promotion touts an audience unrestrained by guardrails, so fans are flush against the ring. What this moment looks like, then, is a furtive congregation of gawkers bearing witness to, perhaps even sanctioning, a man pummeling a woman.

It’s chilling. It’s also incomplete.

To label intergender wrestling and the brutality it portrays as domestic violence is to fundamentally misunderstand what domestic violence—against men or women—can look like. “It’s about a pattern of power and control,” says Erica Olsen, a deputy director at the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “It’s physical violence. It’s controlling technology and bank accounts. Ruining credit. It’s a much larger, complex picture.”

Weeks after Lit Up, Olsen watched video of Kimber Lee wrestling Williams, took in when Williams grabbed Kimber Lee by the hair and her countering with a kick to his jaw. “I have watched, unfortunately, so many videos of violent acts being committed against individuals,” she says. “Some of those have been in the context of domestic violence in a partner. Some have been stranger assaults. This felt nothing at all like that for me.” It was presented as a performance, she says, and seemingly consigned like one.

But even art can create permission structures. Why doesn’t this show of brutality open the floodgates to a more permissive, forgiving climate for violence against women? Consent, Frankele says. Not only did kids look on, still forming their worldviews. Especially when survivors of domestic violence look on, their worldviews already informed by abuse. But the root of the conflict is that violence isn’t a bug in pro wrestling’s program. It is the program.

“Research suggests that exposure to violence as a form of entertainment can desensitize us to it,” says Anastasia Powell, an associate professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, who studies policy concerning violence against women. “So there are some concerns about entertainment that normalizes men’s violence against women or displays it as not serious. But those same concerns apply to the glorification of men’s violence against men.”

So maybe the reckoning isn’t whether intergender wrestling normalizes or glorifies violence against women. Perhaps the reckoning is that pro wrestling normalizes and glorifies violence. Period.

IN THE MIDDLE of the afternoon, just a quarter after 3 o’clock, the crowd fidgets with anticipation and cold. The Mercedes-Benz Superdome is cavernous, and as the thermostat dips into the low 60s, the men and women (in roughly equal proportion) and children (thousands of them) lean forward, waiting for the show to start. Exactly 78,133 tickets were sold, and as “Rusev Day!” chants ring out from the upper decks, the assembly feels charged, raucous. It’s mostly dark, save for the towering—hundreds of feet high—fluorescent pink, orange and green Mardi Gras mask at the top of a runway. There are no windows, but if there were, they’d reveal a mass of humanity on the streets spilling into the crevices and cracks of New Orleans on its way to this mecca. WrestleMania 34 might as well be the center of the universe.

It’s three days after Lit Up, in the same city but a world away, and the WWE’s annual Super Bowl meets-papal-visit-meets-Comic-Con spectacular is in full swing. The size and scope of WrestleMania—it grossed $14.1 million this year and drew fans from every state—sheds light on a basic truth. The WWE is so ubiquitous and takes up so much oxygen in the professional wrestling kingdom that until the organization embraces intergender wrestling, intergender wrestling will stay relegated to the fringes.

There was a time when the WWE did not shrink from it. Chyna was the first woman to enter the Royal Rumble in 1999. Lita and Jacqueline and Jazz, all prominent women wrestlers in the 2000s, squared off against men. But when the WWE ushered in its “PG era” in 2008, the mandate that came with its new family-friendly TV rating was clear. No blood. Less gratuitous violence. Fewer edgy stories. Intergender wrestling? Not welcome.

“The thing that’s troubling to me,” says Beyond Wrestling’s Cordeiro, “is intergender wrestling shouldn’t be inconsistent with a PG era.”

He chose WrestleMania weekend to host the promotion’s first all-intergender card because on the biggest wrestling weekend of the year, he knew it would be a special attraction—and, by extension, an opportunity to showcase intergender wrestling with
THE NUIENCE AND ATTENTION he thinks it should be afforded. Before Lit Up, Cordeiro warned all performers: “Absolutely no sexist humor will be tolerated.” He doesn’t view intergender wrestling as taboo. He doesn’t want others to consume it that way either.

THERE ARE SIGNS that the WWE might yet come around to Cordeiro’s doctrine, that the wall dividing the WWE and intergender wrestling has cracks.

WWE hopefuls have long feared that intergender experience would be a disqualifying mark on their résumés, but Purrazzo signed with the WWE in May with an intergender match, and before her, Frankiekele, with a career of such matches, signed too.

And then there was the brief interlude, a full 60 seconds, when intergender wrestling returned to the biggest of all stages: WrestleMania in New Orleans.

Just an hour and a half into the five-hour show and 10 minutes into the night’s most gripping match, Paul “Triple H” Levesque—WWE’s sculpted, Hulk-shaped 14-time champion—throws Kurt Angle over the announcer’s table. In his American flag singlet, Angle cuts a red, white and blue flash through the air, while Triple H goes back into the ring to check on his real-life wife and mixed tag-team partner, Stephanie McMahon. She’s writhing on the mat, and as he bends over her, someone steps into the ring behind him. And the crowd loses its collective mind.

Ronda Rousey waves her hands in a taunt toward Triple H—Come here, come get me. The UFC Hall of Fame champion doesn’t want to fight Triple H’s tag partner. She wants to fight Triple H. For half a minute, Triple H puts her off. He stalks her down. He scans the audience—the 78,133 fans who, at this point, have reached a shrieking boil. He smiles, then nods. It’s an invitation. Rousey charges in a flurry of punches and strikes, a tornado that leaves Triple H cowed in the corner. After the hailstorm, she turns and beelines for the ropes to slingshot back at Triple H. She blocks his kick, throws him to the ground, then lifts him over her shoulders.

Perhaps it’s a thawing of the ice. Last November Becky Lynch took on buffoonish James Ellsworth on SmackDown; three months after WrestleMania, on July 3, SmackDown would again feature Ellsworth in an intergender match, this time pitting him against Asuka. Perhaps it’ll remain an anomaly; when discussing the state of intergender wrestling in the WWE, Levesque, the company’s executive vice president, will downplay its viability. “It’s funny, people ask me about intergender wrestling all the time, and I’m a proponent of it when it works [like] Mixed Match Challenge or WrestleMania with us,” he says. “But I don’t believe it should be the norm. The women don’t need a man in the ring with them to become a prime spot on the card. They don’t need that to be the main event [in WWE]. They just need another woman in there that’s as great as they are.”

For now, though, intergender wrestling is on the sport’s biggest stage, if only taking a supporting role. When Asuka and Ellsworth meet on July 3, then in a rematch a week later, the shows prove more farce than fierce. The first ends in a double count-out when Ellsworth flees and Asuka chases him over the barricade; the second sees Asuka make quick work of a comically overpowered Ellsworth. Much like in November vs. Lynch, the physical mismatch is presented to be as much, if not more, about Ellsworth’s lack of athleticism as about Asuka’s prowess.

Frankekele doesn’t watch on July 3, nor a week later. She was released from the WWE in March—she says the WWE didn’t provide much explanation, just told her to keep working hard—and she doesn’t keep close tabs from the outside looking in. But she catches wind of the match online, and it leaves her cold.

“Yes, it’s cool that they make the woman look like somebody that intimidating,” she says, “but for someone like me, who works places where you see full-length matches of women really given time and a chance to put in some effort? It’s a bit disappointing.

“It’s one of those things where you’re just like, ‘Oh, yay.’ Then you’re like, ‘Oh. Kind of not yay.’”

Still, intergender wrestling is the biggest fight, the biggest cause, of her career, Frankekele says. “Maybe the reason everything lined up in the universe like this is because I’m supposed to make intergender even bigger,” she says. “And then I’ll come back and be one of the people to wrestle the dudes in WWE. Never say never.”
A small lineup of kids, not yet teenagers, eye themselves in a wall-sized mirror as a trainer barks out combinations of jabs and hooks. In one of the rings behind them, two teens—one in an “I have the cheat codes to boxing” T-shirt—spar while a crowd of children stand along the apron, banging ferociously on the canvas whenever a flurry lands.

And across this warehouse-like gym, in a corner past the mirrors and rings and heavy bags, is a library demarcated by a dozen bookshelves crammed with titles ranging from a 1,200-page red volume on tort law to multiple copies of *Twilight*. Students and tutors sit, working on reading comprehension and math homework.

This is the Downtown Boxing Gym, 27,500 square feet of effort and effect on the east side of Detroit. That the gym is in a former bookbindery is more than apt considering what founder Khali Sweeney has been working toward since 2007.

Boxing is how Sweeney, 49, brings kids to the free after-school program (he has trained national champion amateur boxers and 11–0 professional welterweight Janelson Figueroa Bocachica), but education and creating a better future is the goal.

The gym’s motto, Books Before Boxing, is everywhere. Some kids box daily, others not at all. Everyone has one-on-one academic tutoring and access to a computer lab to learn coding, a music
room donated by Eminem’s producer, Jeff Bass, and a learning kitchen funded by Rachael Ray that serves a daily hot meal. If grades are poor, boxing is taken away until they improve. And Sweeney knows each kid’s story.

“He’s taken care of me,” says Bocachica, who still returns to spar. “It’s like having a second father. Or a grandpa, a little old man behind you saying, ‘Are you doing good in school? Are you doing this? Are you doing that?’”

Bocachica entered Downtown Boxing in 2007 when it wasn’t a program at all, just Sweeney trying to save the kids of Detroit, one at a time, in an abandoned car wash on St. Aubin Street. Sweeney had used boxing to encourage his own teenage son before spending all of his money to convert the space into a working gym and small educational facility. Still, after four years, despite taking no salary and living out of the 4,000-square-foot gym, Sweeney was about to shut down his operation.

Then he found a new fighter.

In 2010, Jessica Hauser, then a Michigan grad student focusing on international children’s rights, was looking for a new workout. A friend who boxed suggested Sweeney’s gym, so she showed up just as a few dozen kids were heading out. “I was like, ‘Well, there is clearly something special here—this place can’t close,’” says Hauser, now Downtown Boxing’s executive director.

She stuck around for a lesson, then stuck around for more, offering to help Sweeney. The pair filed as a nonprofit, formed a board of directors and began lining up the sponsors and donors who would eventually help them grow into their new home.

Downtown Boxing currently has 172 students and a waiting list of 850 kids. Sweeney would like to serve more but would need to expand his staff to maintain the individualized attention that is the mark of his program. Since 2007, all 276 children who reached senior year in the program graduated from high school in a public school district in which the dropout rate was roughly 10 percent in the 2016-17 academic year.

“Just to put everyone on the right path, give everyone a safe place to go,” Sweeney says of his goal. “In my old neighborhood, I’d build basketball rims and go find tables to set up chessboards. I’ve always been trying to make a community center. That’s always been my dream.”
The Small, Good Thing

The anniversary of 9/11 reminds us that in times of catastrophe, sports connect us to the remarkable and shine a light back to the routine.

By Tom Junod

On Sept. 21, 2001, 10 days after two hijacked planes turned the twin towers of the World Trade Center into effigies of ash and killed 2,753 people, Mike Piazza hit a home run for the New York Mets.

It was the 312th of a career in which he hit 427. He had hit one two days earlier, in Pittsburgh, and he would hit another four nights later, in Montreal. But this was Piazza’s first home game in the aftermath of what would become known simply as 9/11, in front of 41,235 people who had come to Shea Stadium still throbbing with grief and shock and uncertainty and fear. He came up in the eighth against Steve Karsay of the Atlanta Braves and was behind in the count 0-and-1. The Mets were behind by a run, with a runner at first. Piazza swung at a 94 mph fastball intended for the outside of the plate, and Karsay did not have to turn around to find out where it went. If he couldn’t tell by the sound of the bat, he could tell by the roar of the crowd, the choir of throats unthrottled by a sense of relief and even deliverance.

It was a hit that scored two runs and won the game for the Mets 3-2. But it was of course much more than that, because Piazza did not hit his home run in the
context of baseball but rather in the context of history—of mass murder perpetrated for global consumption and ultimately of unceasing war. He had done all a baseball player could do and hit his pitch; he had done all a human being could do and risen to his moment. He had answered, and such is the nature of sports—such is the nature of our relationship with sports—that in the 23 seconds required for him to round the bases, we claimed his answer as our own.

We love sports because they’re beautiful, because they keep us in touch with the inexplicable and the extraordinary, and because we watch them through a lens unavailable to any other form of entertainment, one that obscures the divide between spectator and participant. We do not ask athletes only to play for us; we ask them to represent us, first where we are from and finally who we are. It is a form of faith, the belief that in what they do there is something of us, and so we cannot help but place their accomplishments at the far end of human capability.

We amplify, we exaggerate, we resort to metaphors that confer upon athletic achievements a cosmic dimension, so that when we see a play that strains credibility, we say we have witnessed a miracle, and when we praise athletes whose fame rests on their ability to rise routinely to the fleeting occasion, we insist that they are immortals. We have developed a moral language to describe what sports mean to us, and so it is inevitable both that we habitually speak of a hero-fought contest as nothing less than a war and that when real war comes to us, we turn to our athletes to deliver nothing less than a heroic response.

War came to us on Sept. 11, 2001, in the guise of catastrophe, and over the past 17 years, neither war nor catastrophe has ever left. We’ve not had the luxury to stop looking for heroes, and heroes have never had the luxury to stop being heroic.

It is an astonishment of our time how often we have asked athletes to help ease our sense of helplessness in the face of disaster, and how faithfully they’ve answered the call, on the field and off. They have showed up after storms, after floods, after bombings, after shootings, after attacks on sport itself; they have won Super Bowls and World Series in the name of drowned cities, they have showed their strength when challenged to be #Strong, they have used their fervor to spearhead fundraising, they have comforted the displaced, they have become part of the national relief effort for a nation so often under duress.

Yet something has changed since Piazza hit his 312th home run, for the precise reason that nothing has changed. Seventeen years ago, it was still possible to think of catastrophe in terms of sports—to believe that we’d be able to rally, turn the tide and emerge victorious as long as we played together as a team. Today, the United States of America is such a painfully divided nation that sports themselves are cited as part of the division.

Today, we have to think of sports in terms of catastrophe so that we can learn from catastrophe what is important, what will endure and what, in the end, will unify.

The thing that distinguishes catastrophe from tragedy is scale—the public rather than the personal nature of the event, the sheer range of tragedy that can be encompassed under a single heading. Sept. 11, 2001, became 9/11 because the attacks on our country tapped into vast energies at once physical and historical, and because the acts of terror were, in fact, terrifying, to the extent that we have never quite shaken the shadow of vulnerability they introduced to our national life. It was almost unfair to ask anyone, much less a baseball player, to come up with a reply to the heaped ruin still smoking and burning in lower Manhattan, but reply Piazza did, the only way he knew how, extending his arms and lining the ball over the left-center-field wall.

It traveled just over 420 feet, a distance that, if he had hit the ball up rather than out, would have made it not quite a third of the way up the towers that now stood only among the ghosts of memory. It was a speck, an ephemera—and yet, if it was dwarfed by the scale of all that was lost, still it was not diminished.

Did the blow that Piazza struck also strike a blow against terror, as some had it? Did it send a message? Did it function as a statement of national resolve? It did none of those things and wasn’t meant to. It was remarkable, yes … remarkable in that it returned us to the routine. It changed nothing, but it added something, a proviso that disaster is not all that occurs in the blink of an eye, that belief is sometimes rewarded, that the fates do not fly on a fixed course, that a preponderance of the bad does not preclude the emergence of the good, as sudden and instantaneous as the crack of a bat.

These might be small things. But they are small, good things, sport’s true purview, and on the night of Sept. 21, 2001, they turned out to be necessary to the families who had come to Shea Stadium mourning losses that were permanent, that were forever, that could not be reversed on a single mighty swing on an 0-1 count, but who found in a single mighty swing a reason to smile, an evanescent mercy they understood to be, for a few minutes anyway, mercy enough.

Piazza’s home run was not the only time baseball offered the grace of an indelible moment in the wake of 9/11. There were other dramatic homers and other game-winning hits; there was also the pitch President George W. Bush threw in the 2001 World Series, the strike he tossed when the New York Yankees came back home down 2-0 to the Arizona Diamondbacks. But that was a different sort of gesture from Piazza’s historically resonant hit, in part because Bush practiced and prepared for it and in part because it was intended as a gesture, a demonstration of determination on the part of a commander in chief about to take his country to war. That war has not yet ended, but that pitch now seems like a long time ago, as catastrophe keeps requiring that athletes contribute to their communities in the largest and smallest of possible ways, and keeps reminding us why sports occupy such a central place in our lives:

Because they are not war.

Because we cheer for them and root for them and sometimes grieve for them as a higher form of peace.
Remember back in the day when pro football was just the games? No team celebratory dances. [Ed.’s note: Other than, you know, the ’85 Bears or the Ickey Shuffle or the Dirty Bird.] No brand-management ad campaign crap. [Hey, editor chiming in again: Mean Joe Greene, kid with a Coke, ever heard of it?] And definitely none of this protest stuff. [Yeah: Google “1965 AFL All-Star Game” and read about how 21 black players threatened to boycott it after racist harassment from fans and how several white players joined team owners in supporting them by moving the game from New Orleans to Houston.] Here’s the point: An NFL that sticks to sports hasn’t existed since August Never, 19Didn’tHappen, and it certainly won’t be that way this year, in what will likely be a season of players taking unprecedented agency and owning their identities.

So let’s embrace all of the NFL, with its celebrations and commercials and uncomfortable social statements. And let’s come together around the one thing we can all agree to hate: Nobody, these days, knows what a catch is. [And we never did! Immaculate Reception, anyone?]
Inside Odell Beckham Jr.’s quest to recapture the magic that made him the NFL’s most eye-catching talent.

And Now for His Next Act ...

By Seth Wickersham
Photographs by Randall Slavin
Nelson Stewart didn’t ask why Odell Beckham Jr. needed film. He knew. Stewart, Odell’s former coach at Isidore Newman School in New Orleans, was in his office this summer watching old plays. He’s a former teammate of Peyton Manning’s and a close friend of Eli’s, both Newman alums as well, and he keeps a grass-stained Beckham No. 3 Newman jersey in his office drawer as a reminder of his fortune to witness so much transcendent talent at such a small school. On this day, he filmed a few touchdowns off his computer screen and texted them to Odell, who replied: “lol coach i really need my high school highlights.”

It has been a difficult and uncertain offseason for Beckham, years in the making. Ever since The Catch—the twisting, levitating, horizontal, three-fingertipped, pass-interfered-with, impossible touchdown against the Cowboys in 2014—and the celebrity and scrutiny that attended it, he has lost some of his old joy. And along with it, maybe his edge. After the fights and meltdowns, the boat trip, the dog pee celebration and the sparring match with a kicking cage, not
to mention an uptick in dropped passes, he broke his ankle in October and missed most of last season. Then in March, he was sued by a man who claims he was beaten up at Beckham’s LA residence in January—in a countersuit, Beckham would deny involvement. That same man later claimed he had evidence that Beckham tried to illegally pay a woman $1,000 for sex, which Beckham denied as well. Also in March, a video of Beckham in bed in Paris with an aspiring model and what appeared to be illegal drugs went viral. Later in the month, the Giants, wary of meeting his desire to be the NFL’s highest-paid player, listened to trade offers, and owner John Mara publicly implied that it was time for the 25-year-old wideout to grow up.

Coach Stewart has known Odell since he was 9, and like most in Beckham’s inner circle, he knows the Catch spawned a mania that neither the receiver nor his crew nor the Giants knew how to handle. To him, Beckham is not OBJ but “3.” Where others see the most viral player of the viral era, Stewart sees “an old soul” who at heart is “pretty nostalgic.” So he knew what Odell needed when he asked to see old plays, and he delivered the clips: a fade for a touchdown against De La Salle; a stop-and-go for six in a scrimmage against East Jefferson; a screen that Odell took the distance against Bogalusa; and finally, a leaping one-handed snare against East Feliciana, his genius in its infancy.

“Thank u,” Beckham texted after looking back through 25 minutes of his old self—a reminder of what beauty looked like before it was broken.

**ODELL IS DRAGGING.**

He rolls out of a golf cart on a June day, the last to take the field at his own youth football camp on a high school field in New Jersey. Word is he was out late last night, but who knows. He yawns and removes the white hoodie surrounding his head—his standard TMZ disguise—and rubs his hair, curls spilling over, the hair of many kids at his camp, a factory line of OBJs. The kids are vibrating, and the camp’s emcee is screaming into a microphone, but Odell, usually bouncing as if set to his own soundtrack, isn’t quite ready for his own arrival.

“I don’t have as much energy as him,” Odell says, alluding to the host. “Let’s just have fun.”

“Everybody on your feet!” the host says. “Coach Beckham likes straight lines!”

At the moment, Coach Beckham might like more sleep. He leads everyone in jumping jacks, barely lifting his arms above his shoulders, and then slowly changes shirts, revealing a body with every muscle curved and pronounced, blanketed in tattoos to the jaw, an extravagant expression of self, not just the body of an athlete but the body of a star, designed to be unveiled and studied and celebrated. For the past year, NFL executives have privately admired the way the NBA promotes its players. If football wants a face to rally around, it could be Beckham—with his singular aerial artistry, historic productivity and signature dance moves. But there’s a gulf between his potential and the reality of his career, and even as the Giants are expected to sign him to a new contract before the season, trust will remain an issue. Nobody knows whether he will become an immortal player or merely one remembered for an immortal moment in 2014.

The stakes are high. In the spring, when the Giants were listening to trade inquiries—the Rams and 49ers were the two teams reported to be interested, but there were others—one curious club hired a private investigator to track Beckham. The Paris video had introduced drug-use rumors that teams wanted to run down, even if recreational drug use falls below his surgically repaired ankle on most teams’ list of concerns. The PI’s report set off no alarms, but despite the Giants being “50-50” on their willingness to trade him, according to a league source with knowledge of the situation, no team would meet their asking price, which was believed to be a pair of first-rounders.

So here’s Odell at his camp, learning that holding on to his trademark joy can be a grind. He was supposed to meet with reporters today, but he canceled. He limited most of his public comments this offseason to benign Instagram posts. He declined a formal interview for this story but didn’t
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to be down and down when it was supposed to be up. He raised the ante on himself; both revolutionizing and evolving his craft, first at Newman, then at LSU and then in the NFL, catching one-handed while he did handstands, competing against conventionalism as much as any defense. He imagined his own brand of immortality, and in the split seconds in which he was the only person in the world reacting the way he reacted to an arriving spiral, he could feel it. Odell Sr. had told his son, “You gotta do something strange for a piece of change.” Coming up, Odell wanted to be exotic. He wanted the extraordinary to seem routine. And on Nov. 23, 2014, when Eli Manning threw deep down the right sideline and Dallas defensive tackle Henry Melton turned to Giants offensive tackle Geoff Schwartz and said, “Oh s—,” that’s what it was: an impossible moment willed inevitable.

The Catch catapulted Odell into fast friendships with LeBron and Jordan and Drake. It also changed football, injecting an original beauty into a familiar violence, drawing in millennials to an aging fan base, showcasing a non-quarterback who could produce the spectacular. People started showing up to watch Beckham in warm-ups, as if he were Mark McGwire taking batting practice in ’98. Crowds waited for him outside of the team bus and chased him across hotel lobbies. He had just turned 22 and found himself both on the sports page and the gossip page, and the intensity with which people followed him, the extent to which they craved some next bit of magic from him, was often overwhelming. It quickly became uncontrollable. He’d sometimes escape on off-days to LA, where he could be one celebrity among hundreds. The Giants worried that he might be susceptible to peer pressure and that he wasn’t taking care of his body, and he later confessed that he didn’t always do that, even as he led the league in receiving yards per game and scored 12 touchdowns and was named Offensive Rookie of the Year. ‘Odell became a one-name celebrity, Schwartz says. “That’s the leap he made overnight.”

In that 2015 offseason, Odell became the Madden cover boy and posed nude for the Body Issue of ESPN The Magazine. But he wasn’t quite right. One March evening, he vented cryptically for three hours on Twitter: “At the end of the day I will never let another human being steal my joy in life” … “Finding me, until then the rest is almost irrelevant.” He looked exhausted and detached and disinterested at an autograph signing event that summer on Long Island, never removing his backpack. And by the time he arrived at training camp for his second season, he told the New York Post that the football field had become an “escape,” a “getaway.”

Even that feeling didn’t last long. Ben McAdoo, the Giants’ offensive coordinator at the time and later the team’s head coach, told others in the organization, “The Catch was the worst thing that happened to him.”

BECKHAM DIDN’T SLACK off, despite his comfort in celebrity circles. He pushed so hard in practice during the 2015 season that coaches described him as a team leader. He gave teammates blue Beats headphones for Christmas and often held the phone himself to ensure that fans’ selfies came out just right. Coaches sometimes caught him twirling his hair and staring off in the distance during meetings, but he recalled the material perfectly when quizzed and did killer impressions of members of the staff, particularly offensive assistant coach Ryan Roeder’s blitz speeches.

He worked hard to prove that being
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Odell—being OBJ—came easily, but something was off. That much people around him knew. He committed the cardinal sin of modern fame—he replied to tweets—and tried not to take personal insults, about his style and play, personally. But there's a huge difference between the joy of being respected for your craft and being pawed at for it, and Beckham struggled to live in the space between. During downtime at the Giants’ facility, he'd brood just enough to let on that something was bothering him, but he also seemed tired of being asked how he was doing. He groused in 2015 about the constant media attention but would sometimes FaceTime reporters just to talk. Anyone with a phone could observe his life, but nobody knew what it was like to live it. “I'm the only one who goes through what I go through,” he later said.

Beckham’s talent and temperament had made him seem vulnerable, and in the NFL, vulnerability always catches up to talent. Going back to high school, he's had a ritual of transforming himself before games. “When he’d put on his helmet,” Stewart says, “he was a completely different kid.” The routine starts slow, with his headphones on, and as Giants receiver Sterling Shepard says, “He amps his way up.” He bobs his head and wags his finger and by the time he takes the field for warm-ups, sometimes pretending to be the Joker, he’s preening as much as he’s dancing, psyching himself into a state of grace when most players psych themselves into a state of rage. It made him ripe for blowback in 2015, aimed at the heart of what he believed in and how he saw himself. Defensive coordinators and players had spent the previous offseason considering ways to defend him, and a clue arrived late in his rookie year, when the Rams hit him hard and out of bounds, igniting an all-out brawl. It was an answer as old as football.

Get inside his head.
And beat the living hell out of him.

THE MOST VILE words in the English language are routinely thrown around on NFL football fields. Players will deface any pronoun and verb, conjure any image, to get you to come undone. If it works, it’s a lot more efficient than a double-team. Defenses hit Beckham hard and often hit him late. He got trash-talked and talked trash back. He got his ass kicked and kicked some ass. But it took a toll. During an October 2015 matchup against Buffalo, Beckham punched Bills safety Duke Williams in the head after Williams hit him high and clean. He believed officials weren’t protecting him, but he declined a chance to speak to the league about it. Giants coaches sensed the pressure was building in him even as he was nearly unstoppable on the field, gaining at least 100 yards in seven of nine games in one stretch during the 2015 season. It came to a head on Dec. 20 against the Panthers and cornerback Josh Norman. The two superstars had tested each other in warm-ups. The Panthers’ secondary brought out a baseball bat, a ritual to honor an injured teammate and a warning that they were coming out swinging, and Odell later told people he saw it as a threat that crossed the line. Meanwhile, he danced balletically across the field, literally tiptoeing and spinning in defiance. Norman later said the refs were egging them on, saying, “I have a first-row seat to this!” Beckham dropped an easy touchdown early. He was mad at himself, and that was all the opening Norman needed. Throughout the game, he hit Beckham hard but mostly legally, talking the entire time. Beckham swung at Norman’s helmet, put his fingers inside his face mask and mouth, grabbed his leg, launched into Norman helmet-first and eventually drew three personal fouls. “Full-blown madness,” remembers former Panthers safety Roman Harper. An NFL executive called the officials in the middle of the game and told them to eject the two stars if it kept going. Beckham, not Norman, was served with a one-game suspension and later vented to Hall of Famer Michael Irvin, who told the New York Daily News that Beckham was a target of anti-gay insults, which the Panthers denied. “For some reason, everybody goes after him with gay slurs,” Irvin said. “He’s a different kind of dude. … I told him he can’t let stuff that people say get to you.”

Irvin’s comments set off a round of

Beckham wanted some of the Hollywood life, and he also wanted to be the greatest and best-paid player in football. But the NFL will always make you choose.
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columns, with Outsports.com writing extensively about the topic. All the while, Beckham had been rumored to be dating model and actress Amber Rose, one of the first of many celebrities to whom he’d be linked. Giants coaches told him to be himself, to dance and attempt catches that nobody else would dare—but not to lose his head. Instead, he muted himself. In the final game of the season against the Eagles, he caught only five passes for 54 yards.

The next year, the Giants promoted McAdoo to head coach, and he tried to give Beckham a support system, hiring former LSU assistant and Beckham confidant Adam Henry to coach wide receivers. It didn’t completely work. One day in the off-season, players and staffers saw Beckham sobbing hysterically in the facility. They asked what was wrong. Odell’s dog had died. Nobody knew what to do with someone who felt things so deeply and brought it all to an NFL workplace, not exactly a temple of sensitivity.

The next time Beckham faced Norman, who had by then joined the Redskins, he exploded after Manning threw a fourth-quarter interception, swung his helmet into the kicker’s net, yelled at Henry and appeared to cry on the sideline during the game’s final minutes, gifting social media a video nearly as viral as The Catch. Again, the Giants staff implored him to balance his famous joy and his infamous explosions. Again, Beckham responded with a flat performance the next week, catching three passes for 23 yards, brushing an official and drawing an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty against the Vikings. “It’s not a coincidence,” a Giants coach at the time says now, that Odell would have a bad game after being told to tone it down. “He needs the alter ego.” Beckham told coaches in private that he was having trouble sleeping, and he told reporters in public that football was no longer fun. The Giants hired a psychologist named Jonathan Fader to be a resource for the players—especially Beckham. Fader worked hard, but the players assumed he reported everything back to the coaches, even when he didn’t. He could only get so far.

Beckham dropped nine passes in 2016, including the postseason, third most in the

Beckham’s 4,122 receiving yards in his first three seasons trails only Randy Moss.

NFL. He took part in a quick boat getaway in Miami six days before the Giants’ playoff matchup against the Packers, setting off a week of headlines and drama. You can get away with a lot in New York—if you deliver when it counts. He didn’t. He caught four passes, dropped two and reportedly punched a hole in the wall after the game. A few days before training camp in 2017, he sat for a three-minute YouTube video with Uninterrupted titled “Odell Fears Falling Out of Love With Football,” in which he both declared his desire to be the NFL’s highest-paid player and said the game was “starting to slowly become my job, not just what I love to do anymore.”

Beckham’s 2017 season lasted five weeks before Chargers cornerback Casey Hayward landed on his ankle, fracturing it. At the time, he was leading the NFL with five drops. After a 3–19 season, Pat Shurmur was hired as the Giants’ new coach. Then came the Paris video in March. The Giants privately questioned Beckham’s reliability and maturity, and an NFL Network report surfaced that he would refuse to step onto a football field without a new contract. It was about to get ugly. He wanted some of the Hollywood life, with Drake, a life he feels is harmless and earned, and he also wanted to be the greatest and best-paid player in football. But the NFL will always make you choose. So after years of proving to be the exception to almost every rule, Odell did what all players eventually do: He got in line.

HE’S WAKING UP. Odell has broken a sweat at his camp and is crouched a few yards from a line of kids. They run to him and try to jive him as he tries to gently swat balls out of their hands. He smiles at each kid who reaches the front of the line.

“You look like Steph Curry,” Odell says to one.

“Thank you,” the kid says back. The kid makes a cut that catches him by surprise.


The day allows Odell to remember being a kid himself, when he attended Michael Vick’s camp and saw a vision of what he might become—an unprecedented force. You only get to be precocious once, only once feel the rush of others spotting something special in you. Eli Manning likes to tell a story from about a decade ago when he and Peyton were in New Orleans and asked Stewart if he had any high school receivers who could run routes for them. Odell did, and though his talent was raw, it was also unmistakable. Peyton whispered to Stewart, “That kid’s a little different,” and being Peyton, he rigged the reps so he always threw to Odell and stuck Eli with lesser receivers. He knew what he was looking at.

At LSU, Beckham once told coaches he feared the day when football would become a job. The NFL delivered that day, as it always does. The question now is whether Beckham has it in him to grind until his spark is rekindled and then do it again when the spark goes out again, as it will, realizing that holding on to it is a job in itself.

In April, his mom, Heather, called an old friend, Caryl Smith Gilbert, the head track coach at USC, and asked if she’d work with her son. Smith Gilbert and Trojans sprinting coach Quincy Watts ran Beckham through a series of tests, mostly different kinds of jumps. The early results were troubling. “His power in the first 10 yards wasn’t as good as his power after 10 yards,” Smith Gilbert says. They formulated a plan, filled with proprietary tests and data, and met three times a week for eight weeks. Beckham always showed up in a good mood—“cheering us up,” Smith Gilbert says—except on Wednesdays. Wednesdays were hill days in Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area. To be at the park and stretched and ready to go by 6 a.m., he had to wake up around 4:45. “We knew he’d be grouchy,” Smith Gilbert says.

Beckham had to sprint up hills, which were 75 meters long and inclined at about 65 degrees. Over six weeks, he had to complete 18 of them, three each Wednesday, with a two-minute rest in between. On Beckham’s first hill, he failed to run full speed. “Don’t count,” Watts said.

Beckham glared at him. And glared. Watts wondered what would happen. Would Odell quit? Would he quit without officially quitting, giving a good effort but not his best on the next try? Seconds passed.
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Odell relinquished his glare, walked down the hill and sprinted up. He eventually found a way to do what he used to do: make the mundane fun. Over the next few weeks, it became a standing joke that he would accuse Watts of miscounting the number of hills he’d run. “That’s nine,” Watts told him at one point.

“No, that’s 10!” he replied.

After the hills, Beckham ran routes at USC or at UCLA. Every day, crowds formed, peeking over the fence, wondering whether it was really OBJ. A few videos of him running not home run deep routes with one hand but lunch pail short ones with two hands went viral in football circles. When Stewart watched them, it reminded him of the work that produced the high school touchdowns Odell now wanted—needed—to revisit.

PAT SHURMUR SITS in his office on a June afternoon, having just presided over his first minicamp. The burden of a coach’s job is usually evident in his face, but in Shurmur’s office, the burden literally hangs over his head. The only pictures on the wall behind him are team photos of the eight Giants championship squads, four from the pre-Super Bowl era and four since. The expectations are clear. Shurmur is pleased that Beckham wasn’t traded—Odell was part of this job’s appeal—and that the Giants decided to build around Eli Manning, at least for the next year or two. Earlier in the day at practice, Odell looked like the old Odell. He seemed to explode off the line. He caught balls with two hands and with one hand. He danced between reps to the music. He caught balls with two hands and with one hand and lunch pail short ones with two hands.

“I don’t know,” he says. He looks me in the eye, and the edges of his mouth curve just as if hoping it all could last a little longer.

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” he says, “He’s out there working with Eli,” Shurmur says. “Running full-speed routes, for whatever it’s worth.”

Shurmur has the championship expectations above him and two of the most important players in realizing them below him, working long after the rest of the players have called it a day. Eli will always play bland for the media, but he’s an astute observer of talent and situation. In a weird way, he knows more about the next phase of Beckham’s life than Beckham does. He’s seen how fame rises and falls, a two-time Super Bowl MVP from an iconic football family who briefly lost game snaps last year to Geno Smith and practice reps to a rookie third-rounder named Davis Webb. Eli knows Beckham’s life is unique and isn’t, because he was on the throwing end of the David Tyree catch—the greatest catch in NFL history before Beckham’s. So it goes. There will always be a next moment, and there will always be a new guy, but there’s also a reward if you can survive the first few years of adulation and money and pain. You accumulate scars, and the joy isn’t as much innocent as it is earned, and you arrive at answers to questions you didn’t even know to ask. The moving between worlds, from football to Hollywood or Madison Avenue, becomes easier. “You get better with age in this league,” Manning says.

In his office, Shurmur watches as Beckham runs a route he’s never seen before, with more shifts and changes than seem logical before he explodes deep, a winding country road merging into a freeway. Beckham can evoke many emotions. He can make you love him, and he can make you love him a little less. But this much is clear: He can make you believe. I ask Shurmur what route Beckham just ran.

“I don’t know,” he says. He looks me in the eye, and the edges of his mouth curve just as if hoping it all could last a little longer.

CAMP IS ALMOST over, but there’s a party waiting to explode. As BlocBoy JB’s “Shoot” plays, Odell gathers hundreds of kids in a circle. The children have been jumpy and bouncy because after Odell came to life to-day, he became jumpy and bouncy, and like most people around him, when Odell danced, they dance. Friends sometimes greet him by dancing, a shared language. In July, he coached a celebrity soccer game in Hollywood, and the toddler daughter of one of his players, musician Teyana Taylor, started crying and pointing to the field. She wanted her mommy. Beckham picked her up, her lip quivering, tears on her face, and held her close and started dancing. Soon she rested her head on his chest and put her arm around his shoulder. She was happy. As any parent knows, he had pulled off a feat no less impressive than a one-handed catch.

Now Odell leans in toward the kids at camp and on cue sings along with the song: “Shhh—don’t make a sound.” The circle explodes. The kids are dancing, and he is the middle. No other current NFL player could deliver this moment. When he later tells the campers that “I’m a kid at heart, so I have the most fun when I’m out here with y’all,” it’s hard to believe he doesn’t mean it. After a while, he slides out of the circle. The emcee says he has another commitment to tend to, the life of a pro athlete, the world these kids want. The music keeps playing as Odell climbs into a golf cart. He watches the kids with dyed blond hair dance and practice one-handed catches, his creation at work, as if hoping it all could last a little longer.
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Super Bowl LII showed that Philly isn’t afraid to take risks. So when will the rest of the NFL realize being gutsy is also being smart?

Wingin’ It

By Aaron Schatz, Football Outsiders

Illustration by Florent Hauchard

4th and … They’re going for it again!
The Eagles were better on fourth-and-1 than any team with 10-plus attempts since the ’07 Pats (11-for-11), then converted all three attempts in the playoffs, including the Super Bowl’s best decision. No, not the Philly Special. Nick Foles’ 2-yard pass to TE Zach Ertz late in the fourth kept the ball from Tom Brady, saved the clinching drive and boosted the Birds’ Game Winning Chance* by 11.1 percent.

Ice in Doug’s veins
Of course, you can’t convert if you don’t roll the dice in the first place. Excluding obvious catch-up situations (trailing by 15-plus in the third, nine-plus in the fourth or any amount under five minutes), coach Doug Pederson went for it on fourth down 22 times. That’s the third-highest total since 1986, when tracking began. (At No. 5, those perfect 2007 Patriots and Bill Belichick again—more on him in a moment.)

An Eagle among chickens
To number crunchers’ chagrin, risk-taking has always spooked NFL coaches—with some exceptions. Football Outsiders’ Aggressiveness Index measures how often a coach goes for it on fourth down compared with the average coach in the same spot, excluding those catch-up situations, with a 1.0 smack in the middle. In his two seasons, Pederson trails only Mike McCarthy.

Most Qualifying Fourth-Down Go-For-It Decisions, Since 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McCarthy</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pederson</td>
<td>PHI</td>
<td>1.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>McAdoo</td>
<td>NYG</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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*Game Winning Chance research according to data science firm EdjSports, which acquired Football Outsiders in June

Eagles’ Success Rate on Fourth-and-1 in 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Success Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Del Rio</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parcells</td>
<td>NYG</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Believe it or not, according to EdjSports’ Game Winning Chance research, every NFL team hurt its chances to win last year with conservative playcalling, opting for punts and field goals instead of going for first downs and TDs—yes, that includes the risk-loving Eagles. But the Eagles cost themselves a lot less than others. And the data raise a particularly interesting question about Belichick: Is he getting more conservative with age? The Pats might have lost an entire additional game by playing it safe, according to EdjSports metrics—remarkable considering that from 2006 to 2010, Belichick averaged an Aggressiveness Index of 1.74 and led the league twice. Since 2011, though, he’s down to just 1.04 and hasn’t cracked the top five once. Maybe the Eagles’ championship will shake the caution out of the Hoodie and get him back to his old ways.

**Sneaky-good strategy**

The best—but barely used—way to move the chains on fourth-and-1? The QB sneak, with an 82.6 percent success rate since tracking began in 2011, 20 points higher than non-QB runs. The Eagles have used the QB sneak on eight of 21 fourth-and-1 situations since Pederson became coach in 2016; all eight converted. Leaguewide in that time, sneaking the signal-caller was successful a whopping 49 of 51 times.

**Knocked from their perch**

LOST GAMES DUE TO CONSERVATIVE PLAY ON FOURTH DOWN AMONG TEAMS WITH A WINNING RECORD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Eagles</td>
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4TH-AND-1 CONVERSION TRIES THAT ARE QB SNEAKS, SINCE 2011

- Patriots: 15%
- Vikings: 17%
- Eagles: 21%

SUCCESS RATE OF QB SNEAKS ON FOURTH-AND-1, SINCE 2011

- Patriots: 83%
- Vikings: 79%
- Eagles: 75%

PATRIOTS’ FOURTH-DOWN AGGRESSIVENESS INDEX, 2007-17

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<td>2017</td>
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What’s more interesting than the exquisite trash-talk of Jaguars star cornerback Jalen Ramsey? The person behind it.

The Man, the Mouth, the Legend

By Mina Kimes
Photographs by Richard Phibbs
Before he was named an All-Pro corner¬
back, before he was punched by A.J. Green,
before he was suspended for s—t-talking the
media and then proceeded to s—t-talk the
entire NFL, before he stood on the sideline
of Jacksonville’s field in a splendid shearling
coat and predicted, incorrectly, that the Jag¬
uars were going to go to the Super Bowl and
“win that bitch”—before any of those things
happened—Jalen Ramsey sat on a bench
and cried.

It was Nov. 20, 2016, and Jacksonville
was about to lose to Detroit and drop to a
dismal 2–8. With less than 30 seconds left
in the fourth quarter, the camera lingered
on the rookie cornerback for what felt like
an eternity. His eyes welled up and he stared
into the middle distance, shaking his head
like a patient who had just received a devas¬
tating prognosis. It was a raw, gutting dis¬
play of vulnerability and a rare glimpse into
an athlete’s psyche. While Ramsey is a fount
of highlight-worthy plays and oh-no-he-
didn’t quotes, the shot of him silently weep¬
ing during a meaningless game might’ve
been more revealing than anything he’s said
over the past two years.

Naturally, he was mocked on the internet.
And yet: When I ask him why he cried that
day in Detroit, he doesn’t seem embarrassed
in the slightest. “That was a low moment,”
he says flatly before taking a slurp of his
Powerade slush. It’s June, and we’re sitting
across from each other in a Sonic Drive-In
in Smyrna, Tennessee, the sleepy Nashvile
suburb where Ramsey grew up. “It was like,
Danny Amendola, aka Playoff Danny?

Sure, Jalen Ramsey thinks the newly signed Dolphin is trash, but who has the Super Bowl rings? Amendola got his alias when, after an 11-catch, 112-yard game against the Titans in the 2017 AFC divisional round, Pats teammate Rob Gronkowski said, "He's just Danny 'Playoff' Amendola." His six career playoff TDs (plus 709 yards) concur.

I realize he isn’t like most people. If legendary cornerback Darrelle Revis was an island on the field, the 23-year-old Jaguar is an island off it, a self-governing state that refuses to engage in diplomacy with the outside world. As a player, his hermetically sealed brain elevates his game to extraordinary heights. As a person, it can make things complicated.

THE FACT THAT Ramsey is famous at all is a small miracle. He’s a cornerback who plays in a tiny market; if he’s in the news, it’s usually because he’s a reliable purveyor of juicy sound bites, often batting back reporters’ queries with quotes that are perfectly tailored for aggregation and televised debate.

Since he was drafted fifth in 2016, Ramsey has talked an urban landfill’s worth of trash, the likes of which the league hasn’t seen since Steve Smith Sr. hung up his mouthguard. (As a rookie, Ramsey called the legendary wide receiver an “old man.”)

As a result, when we meet earlier in the day, at a Logan’s Roadhouse in Smyrna, I’m prepared for the second coming of Deion Sanders. But Ramsey rolls in quietly, his longtime girlfriend, Breanna Tate, in tow. I don’t know what I expected—a WWE-style entrance? A Deion-esque ensemble?—but this isn’t it: He’s dressed plainly, in sweats, and he slips wordlessly into a booth. Ramsey brushes a few peanut shells off the table and regards me suspiciously, as though we’re lined up across from each other on the field.

When I ask him if he likes doing interviews, he scrunches his nose. "As long as they’re not boring," he says.

Ramsey was prone to roughhousing as a boy; his mother, Margie, would panic when she’d pick him up from day care and notice that his arms were covered with bruises from crashing into things. I ask him when he first thought he’d play in the NFL. "Out the womb," he says, cutting into a piece of steak. I laugh. He doesn’t.

Ramsey’s 27-year-old brother, Jamal, thinks Jalen was unusually confident at a young age because he grew up tagging along with him, which forced Jalen to keep up with older boys. He was also relentlessly competitive. "He’s the biggest sore loser," says Jamal, a firefighter. "If you’d beat him at a game, he’d kick you out of his room."

Whenever Jalen was losing at Monopoly, he...

... Playoffs Danny?

"This is getting old. Don’t nobody care. Maybe I shouldn’t care too.”

But of course he continued to care. Which is why, when he looks back at the experience, he isn’t ashamed. He tried. He desperately wanted to win. So he cried, because he was devastated and felt no need to conceal his emotions, just as he’s never felt compelled to conceal any part of himself.

“I don’t really care what people think about me, to be honest," he says. "At. All.”

Such pronouncements—You can’t hurt me!--typically draw skepticism, and rightly so. No one drives through life with blackout windows; most of us are affected, in some way or another, by the love and hate we encounter in others. But the more time I spend with Jalen Ramsey, the more
says, he would jumble up the paper money and insist that it was impossible to tell who was winning. Jamal laughs. “I’m surprised he had friends.”

Few are spared. Recently, Tate tells me, Ramsey was playing basketball with his 9-year-old nephew and the kid’s friends. “He was dunking on them,” she says. Later, Ramsey’s mother stepped onto the court. He dunked on her too.

By the time Ramsey entered high school, his talent was undeniable, but he was just 5-foot-3. Surely then, I say, he didn’t think he was the best player in Tennessee. “I didn’t think—I was,” he retorts. Aside from baseball, which he says he lacks the coordination for, he’s excelled at every sport he’s ever tried. He picked up lacrosse for a season and, once he figured out how to handle the stick, ran circles around the competition. (“There’s not a lot of black people who do it,” he says, smiling.) He’s never tried skating, but if he trained for six months, he says, he could probably crack the NHL.

At first I thought Ramsey was self-mythologizing. But as he recounts his athletic exploits, it becomes clear that his unshakable confidence stems from lived experience. He’s cocky as hell because he’s never been humbled by failure. At 5, he was the strongest, fastest kid in his neighborhood. At 10, he was the best football player in the region. At 15 … You get the idea.

After knee surgery and a well-timed growth spurt, Ramsey was widely recruited, ultimately landing at Florida State. He started from day one, the first Florida State cornerback to start as a true freshman since Sanders. “I expected to, and Coach [Jeremy] Pruitt expected me to,” he says of his defensive coordinator. “Nobody else did.” The obvious omission is former head coach Jimbo Fisher, now at Texas A&M. In February, when an A&M assistant tweeted a graphic touting Fisher’s record with defensive backs, Ramsey clapped back online: “Here it is—I’ve got the video,” he says. He also saved a screenshot of the SportsCenter news alert.

FSU’s defensive coordinator that year, Charles Kelly, now works on Pruitt’s staff at Tennessee, coaching special teams and safeties. He downplays Ramsey’s ejection (“He was competing on a play—he doesn’t know but one speed”) and says Ramsey’s personality was perfect for his position. “You’ve got to be the most mentally tough person on the field,” he says. “If you make a mistake, everybody in the stands knows it.” Great cornerbacks, Kelly says, have big egos and short memories; they possess a singular ability to block out noise.

In other words: They think like Jalen Ramsey.

“Receivers are, like, naturally soft. So sensitive.”
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On the field, Ramsey seems driven purely by his id, but there’s a method to the madness he provokes. “It gets them out of their game, and it gets me into my game more. If I’m talking smack, I gotta back it up.” He claims he largely avoids personal insults (in college, he used to sift through Instagram for opposition research on receivers’ significant others), instead providing running commentary on the game—mocking poorly run routes and QB preferences, sort of like a disrespectful Cris Collinsworth. “That gets under people’s skin more than anything,” he says. “I’m not clowning—I’m talking facts. Yelling out their stats.”

How do you monitor their statistics during the game? “It’s easy to keep track of, like, one catch for 6 yards,” he says. (Later, I check the box score from the Bengals game. Green had ... one catch for 6 yards.)

When pressed, Ramsey does out praise as gamely as insults. He’s a fan of Antonio Brown—“He’s easily the best receiver in the NFL. Easily,” he says—and DeAndre Hopkins. “He’s had freaking 100 quarterback—all trash,” he says. “I could be his quarterback. I could literally be his quarterback.” When Ramsey says “literally,” his drawl seeps into the word and it expands like a sponge: “liiiiiit-er-uh-ly.” (Hopkins returns the praise, calling Ramsey one of the best defensive players in the league. He adds, smiling: “He’s probably the most talkative cornerback in the NFL.”)

In general, Ramsey continues, fans underestimate the effect that quarterback play has on wide receivers. For example, he says, look at Danny Amendola, who just signed with Miami. “Or is it Edelman?” he asks out loud. He mulls it over. No—he’s thinking of Amendola. “He just got a brand-new contract and he is terrible,” he says. “People think he’s so great. No, he’s not. Tom [Brady] made him look good. Tom could take me as a receiver and I’d be a first-team All-Pro.”

When I mention that the Patriots still have All-Pro tight end Rob Gronkowski, he makes a face. “I don’t think Gronk’s good.” Registering my involuntary blinking, he course-corrects. “Let me say—I don’t think Gronk is as great as people think he is.” Before the Patriots game, he explains, he had the Jaguars’ analytics staffers pull some numbers for him. “Any time Gronk has been matched up with a corner, he’s had a very bad game—and that corner has had a very good game.” (Gronk has performed much better when lined up in the slot than he has on the perimeter, where he’s more likely to encounter elite corners—his catch rate drops from 71 percent to 56 percent, which is lower than that of the average NFL tight end.)

I ask him what Gronk did in the AFC championship. “Literally nothing. He may have had, like, one catch,” he says. (Ramsey is correct is, though he says he loved Gronk is as great as people think he is."

NFL players spend their Sundays trying to grind their opponents’ bones into dust, but if you corner them during the week, they’re typically wary of putting those adversarial energy into the mix. The reasons for this omertà are complex. Some don’t want to risk awkward locker room encounters; every foe on the field could be a teammate next season. Others are wary of setting themselves up for public humiliation. Ramsey couldn’t care less. He throws shade because it’s what he believes; if it motivates a disgruntled quarterback to pass in his direction, well, that would be delightful! (At one point, I ask him what he’d like to improve about his game, and he tells me he can’t identify an obvious flaw. “If I had to pick one thing,” he says, “I would definitely pick, um, getting the ball more.”)

For all the hand-wringing that ensues when someone like Ramsey calls out a rival, the consequences are trivial—unless they’re provoked by friendly fire. Criticizing teammates and coaches in public is a locker room third rail, one Ramsey has touched a few times. As a rookie, he told reporters he thought Jaguars coach Gus Bradley ran an overly simplistic system. He sticks by that, though he says he loved Bradley, now the defensive coordinator with the Chargers. “We were just too young and immature for him.”

At first, Ramsey was happy to land in Jacksonville, even though he expected Dallas to take him with the No. 4 pick. (He believes that the Cowboys’ coaches wanted him but that owner Jerry Jones bigfooted them and grabbed running back Ezekiel Elliott. “I will never play for them,” he sniffs, “unless the Joneses leave.”) But for much of that 3–13 season, he was miserable. “I wasn’t expecting to come into the NFL and essentially be the best person on my team,” he says. “This is going to sound really bad, but ... I didn’t like that team. They were so used to losing. It didn’t affect them.”

That offseason, Jacksonville laid the groundwork for a turnaround. The team signed defensive lineman Calais Campbell and also snagged defensive backs A.J. Bouye and Barry Church. Ramsey was thrilled. In Bouye, he says, he finally found a counterpart; the two players spent Thursday nights together at the veteran’s house, watching football and exchanging tips. The Jaguars finished 10–6, winning their first division championship in 18 years. But Ramsey wasn’t satisfied. “We gotta get it this year—because next year, we can’t keep all those defensive linemen,” he says. He tells me he was surprised the team didn’t make more moves to bolster the offense. He also thinks the team should’ve taken a flyer on a rookie quarterback.

And there it is again: the third rail. The Jaguars, of course, already have a quarterback, the oft-disparaged Blake Bortles. (Last summer Ramsey liked an Instagram post referencing a story by SB Nation blog...
WITH CARBS TO HELP REFUEL YOUR MUSCLES AND PUSH YOUR BODY FURTHER.
he couldn’t relate to the main character. “I’m Killmonger,” he says, the movie’s villain whose charismatic performance steals the show. It’s a role he’s come to accept, because for him it isn’t a role at all. “A lot of people are gonna hate me before they like me,” he says. “I’m perfectly fine with that.”

After Ramsey finishes his milkshake, I ask him if I can meet his father. He grabs his phone and calls Lamont, who tells us we can come over as long as we leave before his clients arrive. (He’s trained a number of local stars, including Eagles pass rusher Derek Barnett.) When we pull up to the Ramseys’ brick house, the garage door is already open, revealing a small collection of weight machines. The man known as Big Lambles outside. Like Jalen, he’s tall and built. He’s also surprisingly subdued. Based on what I had heard, I expected to meet the second coming of LaVar Ball. But Lamont just seems eager to get back to work.

We sit on benches in the garage. At first, Lamont tells me, he trained only his two sons, “but they were better than everybody else, so everybody wanted to start doing things.” Jalen started working out before he began elementary school, doing pushups on his twiggy arms. By the time he was a teenager, he was training three times a week—after football practice. “Most high schoolers don’t work like that,” Lamont says.

While most of Ramsey’s coaches would probably prefer he keep his mouth shut, they tolerate his chatter because of his talent—and because of a work ethic that’s the stuff of legend among scouts. When the doctor who performed his knee surgery told him it would take a year to recover, the high school sophomore rehabbed twice a day, skipping parties so he could get back on the field in six months. “He still doesn’t go to parties,” Tate says. “He’s a dog. That’s who he is.”

Later in the summer, I ask Marrone how he views the cornerback’s candor. He says that as with any player, he wants Ramsey to learn from his mistakes—but that he doesn’t want him to conform for conformity’s sake. “I don’t like coaching that way,” he says. Marrone also notes that trash-talk is hardly a cardinal sin—and that Ramsey’s takes are often born from preparation. “Before every game, I’ll say: ‘Tell me about the receiver you’re going up against,’” he says. “He’s as thorough as anyone I’ve ever been around.”

It’s debatable whether Ramsey’s bluntness helps or hinders his team. But it’s undeniably positive for the NFL. Hollywood is littered with antiheroes, characters who are subversive, impolite and far more watchable than their bland good-guy counterparts. At one point in our conversation, Ramsey mentions that he loved Black Panther but says...
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When Ramsey meets me a few hours later at a competitive driving range (his suggestion), he has changed clothes: He’s still wearing sweats, but he’s got a diamond-encrusted Rolex on his wrist and animal print Nikes on his feet. He buys pizza and wings for the group, then grabs a club. “I’m just showing off,” he jokes, hacking at balls as they roll onto the turf. At one point he whiffs on a massive cut, then whirs around to see if anyone noticed.

Along with Ramsey’s manager, girlfriend and a couple of family friends, his mother is sitting with us. A lithe, graceful woman, Margie is as soft-spoken as her son is loud; when we chat, I have to lean in to hear her above the music. “Jalen wasn’t your typical boy,” she says while watching the cornerback perform what appears to be a Happy Gilmore impression. “He was your typical boy times 10.”

Like most of Ramsey’s loved ones, Margie is quick to point out that her son’s tough exterior belies a tender spirit. “He’s so worried about me being happy,” she whispers after he checks on us for maybe the 10th time to see if we need anything. (Ramsey’s tender spirit has its limits; later that night, he posts an Instagram story of the final score that shows him finishing in last place.) “He’s always wanted to make everybody else happy.”

Among family and friends, Margie says, Ramsey’s empathy—and sensitivity—shines through. “He’s gonna kill me, but... he’s not afraid to show emotion,” she says.

I already know this, of course. Along with millions of football fans, I’ve seen Ramsey cry. I’ve also heard him explain why he doesn’t regret those tears. At a moment when being a star means presenting a carefully manicured image to the world, Ramsey, in all of his s—t-talking, weeping, self-aggrandizing glory, allows us to see him without a filter. It’s an approach that doesn’t always make things easy for him or the people around him, but it’s served him well on the field. “I like to win my own way, and I like to lose my own way,” he says. “I believe motivation comes from within.”

For example: When I ask if he wants revenge on the Patriots after Jacksonville blew a lead in the AFC championship last season, he scoffs. Like many Jaguars fans, Ramsey believes the refs were biased (“It was clear as day they wanted them to win,” he says) and Myles Jack should have been allowed to keep running after he recovered a fumble (“He wasn’t down”). But he also thinks his team deserved to lose after softening its game plan in the second half. “People say, ‘You all should use that as motivation.’ No, we shouldn’t,” he says. “Why should we use it as motivation when we were up on a team and then we—and the refs—let them get back into the game?”

While Margie is taking a turn at the tee, Ramsey downs his second strawberry lemonade. He tells me that he likes the Jaguars organization and its owner, Shahid Khan. Last year Khan knelt alongside some of his teammates during the national anthem, hoping to call attention to racial injustice. (Throughout preseason this year, Ramsey stayed in the locker room during the anthem.) Looking back, he says, Khan, who locked arms with the standing players, treated the team with respect. “He’s the owner who’s like, ‘These are grown men. We’re gonna let them make educated decisions,’” he says.

Ramsey says he’d like to retire a Jaguar. He’s building a five-bedroom house near the marsh in Jacksonville—a home for his growing family. I ask him whether he thinks he’ll be the best father in the world, and, for once, he says no. “I’m gonna try to be,” he says. “I can just try.” He says he wants to build generational wealth so that his children can do what they love, just like their dad. He doesn’t see football as a job. “Even if I wasn’t being paid, I’d still want to do it,” he explains. “It’s my dream.”

What do you like most about the game? He sighs. “Literally everything.”

Unsurprisingly, he expects to retire as the best cornerback to ever play the game—better than Sanders, he says, even if some fans refuse to acknowledge it. “But people who know the game of football—truly know the game of football—they’ll look back and be like: This dude,” he says.

I ask him what he expects out of this season. “A Super Bowl,” he replies, before bursting into laughter. Sensing my confusion, he smiles. “You know I was gonna say that,” he says. Minutes later, his mother informs him that it’s his turn to hit, so he leaps out of his seat and grabs a club, pointing it at the group. “Regard the winner!” he tells us, his grin as incandescent as the skylights behind him. One of his friends points out that the game isn’t over. Ramsey doesn’t really care.
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Todd Gurley Is in a Happy Place

By Sam Alipour
Photographs by The1point8
The NFL's richest running back couldn't stop smiling about what the Rams plan to do this season.
“Big spoon or little spoon?” I ask Todd Gurley, the Rams’ All-Pro running back. “I’m big spoon, obviously,” he says, leaving no room for debate. I acquiesce and take the front seat in our double tube, with Gurley’s grimy aqua socks at my nose, just as we begin our rapid ride down an open-air waterslide. What’s worse, Big Spoon won’t stop screaming in my ears: “Yeeaaaaahh, boy! Woooo!”

Gurley turned 24 today, Aug. 3, an off-day from training camp, and he’s marking his arrival on earth not with a club night, as many ballers would, but with a day at Six Flags Hurricane Harbor. The water park sits 33 miles north of LA, a city that Gurley and his boys have won over after an 11–5 season and their first playoff berth since 2004, when they were St. Louis’ team.

All around this park are reminders of how far Gurley’s Rams have come since their disastrous 4–12 return-to-LA season just two years ago. Kids wearing Rams jerseys, park employees with team ball caps and flip-flopped parkgoers of all ages swarm-tackle the local celebrity to offer birthday well-wishes and congratulatory high-fives for his freshly inked four-year, $60 million contract extension, the richest-ever per-year average for a back.

Gurley is digging the adulation he’s receiving here and on social media when a scroll of his Instagram reveals an interesting factoid he hadn’t known. “Damn, it’s Tom Brady’s birthday too?” Gurley says, bemused to be sharing his special day with the guy who topped him in MVP votes last season 40–8.

Most of the following conversation takes place in the kiddie pool. “Best spot in the whole park,” Gurley says. And when it’s over, we’ll take to Gurley’s private cabana, where his beloved ones await with his favorite food ever: “It don’t get any better,” he says, “than ice cream cake.”

ESPN: You and I bonded over this when we spoke a few years ago: We love water parks.

GURLEY: Water parks are just relaxing, man. You can just have fun and get on slides without fear. It’s just water—it’s not the ocean. It’s clear. You know what’s in it. So it’s perfect for me.

I was talking to your boy Jared Goff recently, and he felt you and I would get along great because we’re both “big kids.” I think it was a compliment.

I mean, why grow up? Yeah, that’s a compliment for sure. I love kids. They’re fun and they speak their mind.

You’re known as a low-key dude. Outsiders like me don’t know a ton about you. So let’s get to know each other: What would you list as your dislikes?

Driving. Waking up early. And I hate dogs. I love cats, though. Cats are so cool. Actually, I’m probably gonna get some this year.

Sorry, you’re gonna get a bunch of cats?

Two, at least, so they can, you know, conversate or whatever. I mean, how would I feel if I was a cat and someone bought me and just left me by myself for, like, 20 years?

So you’re the Crazy Cat Lady.

Yeah, I’ll be Cat Dude.

You can probably afford all the cats. Congratulations on your new deal.

Thank you, man. It feels good to know all the hard work pays off. Going from being a little kid wanting to play in the NFL—and playing it for the love of the game—to signing the extension is one of the greatest feelings ever.

The NFL’s running backs were happy to see your deal. Are you proud to have reset the market for backs?

That’s what I do, man, I set the bar. It was not only big for me, but it was a statement for the running backs, for what we do and what we deserve to get in this league, as much as we put in.

Le’Veon Bell showed support for your deal, though. He’s motivated.

That ain’t got nothing to do with the stats. I was No. 1 last year in fantasy.
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want me for sure. If not, you can’t go wrong with AB [Antonio Brown] or DeAndre Hopkins.

When we spoke after your rookie year, you weren’t quite an NFL star yet. Today I’ve noticed you’re getting recognized a ton. Yeah, it’s happening more—probably because of the dreads. But I get confused for DeAndre Hopkins a lot. And in Cancun, someone called me Roddy White. People get excited when they think you’re somebody you’re not, so I go along with it, like, “If this make you happy, then I’m DeAndre Hopkins.”

It sure seems like you’re kicking the Chargers’ butts in terms of winning over the city.

The who?

The Chargers.

Oh yeah, I forgot. [Smiles]

You’re not the only one. I live in LA and I know two Chargers fans here. Literally, two fans.

Yeah, man, they’re from San Diego. We were the Los Angeles Rams before we were in St. Louis. And it’s hard not to support us—we got a great team. But you can’t beat being in this city, man. It’s a great sports town, and, ya know, LeBron’s coming.

You guys might’ve been the biggest story in town if it weren’t for LeBron.

[Laughs] I mean, you don’t really have a choice but to take the back seat to LeBron. But it’s cool. Him coming to LA, that’s motivation to win a Super Bowl. You know the Lakers are going to be good now with Lebron, but you want to be the talk of the town as well. He’s been in eight Finals in a row. You just want to get one Super Bowl.

What are your expectations for this team? If you don’t win the Super Bowl, you can have a good season and all, but it’s still a failed season as a team.

How do you feel about the additions? I feel good. We got some great guys on defense—Sam Shields, [Ndamukong] Suh, [Aqib] Talib, [Marcus] Peters—so I’m super excited. And we added the bow and arrow himself, Mr. Brandin Cooks—man, he’s a phenomenal worker. It’s a great locker room, a great bunch of guys.

Offense hangs with defense, defense hangs with offense. It’s a lot of fun.

Coach Sean McVay has overseen one heck of a turnaround—both the Rams and yours, following your disappointing sophomore year. What has he done for you personally?

He made me into a better player. He’s made me work harder and know the game a lot more with all his schemes. McVay, he uses his backs all around the field, in the passing game, the screen game, out wide. I went from having [327 receiving] yards, just not really getting the ball, to [788 receiving yards]. You just trust in him, because you know he’s gonna put you in a great position to be successful.

Speaking of turnarounds, how about Goff? Dude went from potential bust to Pro Bowler in one season.

For him to have the year that he had last year was amazing. The guy was a No. 1 pick for a reason. You can’t put it on the quarterback to change around the whole franchise. That’s not how it works. But he just keeps becoming a better player, better leader. I’m just happy to play with him.

Now that you have your deal squared away, what other goals have you set for yourself?

Seeing my friends play in the Super Bowl, I get super excited, then I get super mad because I just want to know what that feeling’s like. It seems like it’s one of the best feelings ever. That and to put on that gold jacket one day, to be a Hall of Famer, to say you’re one of the best in the game. If I was able to get those two things, that’d be a dream come true.

You were runner-up for MVP last year. You want that award too?

Yeah, I definitely wanted it, man, and I felt like I deserved it, but it went to the GOAT, and I can’t be mad at that. I just gotta keep working hard and do the same thing again this season, if not even better.

New contract, a birthday, Super Bowl aspirations. How good is life for Todd Gurley right now?

Life’s always been good, man. God is good all the time. But to be in my position and to share it with my family, friends, teammates, there’s no better feeling in the world. I just try to live life stress-free.

With the money you’re making now, you could conceivably start your own water park.

For real? Gurley Park. We’ll talk about it. Can I get free tickets?

Once a year.

Just once a year?

Gotta make money, man. Can’t be giving out free tickets. Aight, twice a year.

Twice a year sounds good.

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A former pro reveals the dilemma every NFL player confronts: Now that I’m here, what do I do next?

Fourth Down and Life to Go

By Domonique Foxworth
An Undefeated collaboration
Domonique Foxworth spent seven years in the NFL and two more as the NFLPA president.
It was getting close to midnight on Sept. 2, 2008, when I noticed a billboard for DeVry University’s College of Business and Management from the back seat of a town car. My Nike duffel bag, stuffed with a couple of weeks’ worth of shorts and T-shirts, rested on my lap. My hands were stacked on it, supporting my cheek as I looked out the window. I was headed from the Atlanta airport to my new home, an extended-stay hotel in Flowery Branch, Georgia.

The day before, the Monday after our final preseason game, I was sitting in the DBs meeting room to hear the Week 1 game plan when someone poked his head in: “Fox, they need you upstairs.” I had spent the first three years of my career with the Broncos. Now I was being traded to the Falcons at the start of my fourth season—my contract year, the most important season in my life.

A majority of the league will, at some point, feel that same moment of anxiety I did. Maybe not stars like Odell Beckham Jr. or Jalen Ramsey—stars whose high-pressure moments have only on-field implications. But for the rest of us, the stakes riding on every practice, every game, every meeting, are significant—and most players don’t even realize they exist until it’s too late.

To become NFL players, these men have climbed to great heights, to what they thought was the pedestal, only to find out it’s a pedestal only for stars. For everyone else, at the top waits a balance beam. I was steps away from safely completing the walk when I looked down. And I was terrified.

So rarely do we know that we are entering a new phase in our lives—that we’ve reached an inflection point that will change everything. That night in Atlanta was mine.

Former NFL linebacker D’Qwell Jackson, a friend and college teammate of mine, told me that his came before his sixth season. Jackson, a 2006 Browns second-round pick, started in his first three seasons before injuries kept him off the field for most of the last year of his deal. Under a one-year contract for his fifth season, Jackson had a chance to prove his worth, but injury caused him to miss the entire year.

He signed one more one-year deal with the Browns and began preparing for the coming season at a Florida training facility, driving distance from the struggles of his upbringing in Largo, Florida, where drug abuse and prison stints tore at the fabric of his family.

“I didn’t have a lot of money,” he remembers. “I was recently divorced, and I didn’t even have a degree.” For the first time, Jackson considered the possibility that his NFL career wasn’t going to be as long and fruitful as he had expected. “I looked at my account,” he says, and he realized he wouldn’t be able to live off it for long, and it became clear that outside of football, he didn’t have many options. “I went into a dark place.”

According to Jackson, the extended adolescence that football afforded him ended right then. “That’s when I became a man.” With the help of a psychiatrist, Jackson pulled himself out of the darkness and focused on a simple plan. Jackson had an outstanding season and signed a substantial four-year contract with the Browns.

I headed to the field early, overflowing with confidence. Then an offensive coach shouted, “New guy!” and tossed me a scout team pinny to throw over my jersey. New guy? Scout team? The fragile confidence I had spent all morning building up was wobbled with just a few words. What was left of it got decimated that day by Pro Bowl receiver Roddy White. He cooked me.

After practice, I didn’t dive into my playbook. Thinking of that DeVry sign, I went straight to the bookstore and bought a GMAT prep book. But after a couple of hours doing test problems and trying to reteach myself math I thought I’d never need again, I realized I was in trouble. I felt dumb and alone. And trapped.

To become NFL players, these men have climbed to great heights, to what they thought was the pedestal, only to find out it’s a pedestal only for stars. For everyone else, at the top waits a balance beam. I was steps away from safely completing the walk when I looked down. And I was terrified.

So rarely do we know that we are entering a new phase in our lives—that we’ve reached an inflection point that will change everything. That night in Atlanta was mine.

Former NFL linebacker D’Qwell Jackson, a friend and college teammate of mine, told me that his came before his sixth season. Jackson, a 2006 Browns second-round pick, started in his first three seasons before injuries kept him off the field for most of the last year of his deal. Under a one-year contract for his fifth season, Jackson had a chance to prove his worth, but injury caused him to miss the entire year.

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He played 11 NFL seasons before retiring in 2016.

But most stories don’t end like Jackson’s. The median NFL career lasts only about three years. Most players aren’t high draft picks. Their do-or-die moment can come as early as their first training camp. For them, the preservation of the future they’ve imagined is perilously teetering on every game, every practice and every play, from day one.

Playing pro football is the product of a series of decisions, most made well before adulthood and years before the 18- to 22-year-olds making them are capable of making well-reasoned decisions. That’s why asking a 20-something NFL player about his decision to continue to play pro football is kind of stupid. By that time, he’s spent years focusing on football—not realizing how many other doors are being closed off.

Football is a long, dangerous highway that, to make a career out of it, players get on as children. As they go further and further, there are fewer and fewer off-ramps. Professional sports is unique in that way. If your goal is to be a Supreme Court justice, the things you must learn and accomplish on that journey are valued in countless fields. Even if you never come close to the bench, the longer you stay on that highway, the more potential exit ramps there are. For a football player, the opposite is true.

While our classmates were selecting majors that set them up for a career, we picked majors that worked with our football schedules. When they were going to on-campus events, we were studying playbooks. When they were participating in résumé-building extracurriculars, we were at practice. When they were doing summer internships, we were working out.

We were chasing our dreams. Following our passions.

But for some of us—for me, at least—the pressure supersedes the passion. Football is no longer fun.

I had loved football from the time I was 6 years old, watching with my dad. I needed it. Football focused me.

But the deeper I got into this, the more I could see it for what it actually is—a transaction. Football isn’t immune from the laws of societal physics—nothing in life is without cost.

Players get plenty from football. A boost to the top of the social hierarchy, a shortcut to meeting women, a college scholarship, varying levels of celebrity, some money. At every level, players can take more and more. But the cost also gets greater and greater. The more you play, the more you take—the more you will pay.

As the death of Jordan McNair at my alma mater reminds us, football can cost players their lives. It can cost the use of limbs. And even casual fans are aware of the repercussions of CTE on players. But the opportunity cost can be debilitating too.

By the time I got to Atlanta, I felt like football was my only professional option. That terrible night with the GMAT prep book did nothing but solidify that fear.

I wasn’t playing for on-field glory—it was for the type of life I wanted going forward. I knew my performance on the field had the chance to reverberate through my bloodstream for centuries. In a world where nothing is more determinative of your outcome than where you start, I wanted to be able to send my kids to the best schools in the country, which meant they would be more likely to go to the best colleges and have the best careers. They’d get an inheritance and a substantial life insurance payout when I die. And then my kids’ kids will have access to the best schools and opportunities.

In the NFL, players have to fit what is expected—or risk having their dream stripped from them.
Matt Ryan, aka …
Little OB?

Ryan has been Matty Ice since Penn Charter School—for his cool demeanor, not out of devotion to a certain American-style light lager—but we were more intrigued by Little OB. No, Ryan isn’t a long-lost Wu-Tang Clan member; the name was bestowed on him during his Boston College tenure for a way less street-cred-worthy reason: being a doppelgänger, in stature and spirit, of then-coach Tom O’Brien.

With that at stake, it’s not hard to understand why so many players still subject themselves to the repetitive head-rattling collisions that research suggests will result in brain damage. By the time you reach the NFL, the substantial risks seem easier to ignore when you consider the possible rewards. And with so many other doors closed off, it feels like subjecting yourself to brain damage is the prudent thing—yes, as contradictory as that sounds.

THE BRAIN OF a football player is often considered only when discussing its deterioration. But in reality, the brain of a professional football player is a spectacular decision-making machine. Processing information and making decisions in fractions of a second. Constantly weighing risk versus reward throughout a game, and throughout a career.

As this season begins, many players are so close to reaping returns worthy of those decisions—of their life’s investment. But many will not. For some, it’ll be because they just aren’t good enough, or they suffered a significant injury at an inopportune time. For others, it’ll be because their production is too low to warrant keeping, even for leeway, but even they don’t stray far from the accepted archetypes. The result is that some players have to contort themselves to fit what is expected—or risk having their dream stripped from them. That effort is an added emotional tax for the closeted gay players on NFL rosters; the players who are offended by being referred to as “inmates” by the Texans’ CEO; the players suffering from mental health issues; the players who see football as their job, not their life.

That’s why it’s so no surprise to me that former stars like Hall of Famer Brian Dawkins and future Hall of Famer Steve Smith Sr. felt comfortable to speak up about mental health only years after their careers were over. Many players currently suffering won’t speak up because that’ll impact their ability to get the next deal. Of course, ironically, the drive for that next deal might be what causes some of the issues—it was for me.

I don’t know if I was depressed in Atlanta back in 2008. But for the entirety of that season, I was deeply unhappy. The gravity of football crushed everything else in my life. Simple things that used to bring me joy felt frivolous. I could not enjoy TV or movies. After a big win, my teammates took me to the famed Atlanta strip club Magic City. I made up an excuse and drove home after about 15 minutes. I was living a dream but feeling a nightmare.

It is with the perspective of that experience that I watch football now. I understand when I see players crying after suffering an injury, or snapping on coaches, teammates or fans after a game; they might be carrying a weight heavier than the final score.

Despite my unhappiness, despite my fears, despite the circumstances—I had probably the best season of my career that year in Atlanta, and I look back at that team as fondly as I do any with whom I’ve ever played. I was with them for only five months. But it was the most pivotal period in my life. And as much as we like to think that a player’s performance is solely a reflection on his ability and work ethic, it is not. For me to be a coveted free agent, I needed to be great on a good team. And despite my fears on the plane headed to Atlanta, we were.

That was in large part thanks to my teammates. I couldn’t have played well without communication from safeties Lawyer Milloy and Erik Coleman and pressure from John Abraham. We aren’t a playoff team without an outstanding season from the offensive line and running back Michael Turner. Rookie quarterback Matt Ryan’s surprisingly successful season might be the single most influential factor. (Which is why when I saw Matt before last season, I awkwardly thanked him. I’m sure it never crosses his mind, but in a weird way, Matt Ryan is the reason I could buy my parents a house, rescue family members from foreclosure and give my children access to resources I didn’t know existed when I was their age.)

We went 11–5 and made the playoffs, losing in the wild-card round to the Cardinals. Whatever disappointment I felt after that loss was drowned by the flood of relief I experienced. It was over. I had put together 11 weeks of exceptional left corner play. I was healthy. Now nothing stood between me and a new reality.

A couple of months later, I was again in the back of a town car. This time, I was in a suit and tie, again looking out of the window. In almost unbelievably poetic fashion, I rode past my elementary school and the fields where I first played Pop Warner football for the Randallstown Panthers. This time, I was headed to sign a $27.2 million contract with the Ravens. A torn ACL ended my football career in Baltimore just a few years later—sooner than I had hoped. Suddenly, I was a free agent again, this time with an account balance that would allow me to do anything—or nothing. Naturally, I went to business school.
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How soon will the NFL elite reveal themselves? Let’s get real: They already have.

Playing Favorites

By Dan Graziano
Illustrations by Whip

NFL Nation’s playoff outlook
Thirty-four writers and editors from ESPN’s NFL Nation weighed in with their predictions.

AFC
Patriots, Chargers, Jaguars, Steelers

AFC Wild Cards
Chiefs, Texans

AFC Championship
Patriots over Steelers

NFC
Eagles, Rams, Saints, Packers

NFC Wild Cards
Falcons, Vikings

NFC Championship
Vikings over Eagles

FPI projected standings
Not to be outdone, ESPN’s predictive Football Power Index metric forecast 2018—and mostly agreed!

AFC

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NFC

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FPI chances to win the Super Bowl

Patriots and everybody else? Sort of. But FPI sees a herd of NFC contenders (including the reigning champs) in the mix.

Vikings QB Kirk Cousins

NFC

EAST
EAGLES 10–6
COWBOYS 8–8
REDSKINS 7–9
GIANTS 7–9

WEST
RAMS 9–7
49ERS 8–8
SEAHAWKS 8–8
CARDINALS 6–10

SOUTH
SAINTS 9–7
FALCONS 9–7
PANTHERS 9–7
BUCCANEERS 6–10

NORTH
PACKERS 10–6
VIKINGS 9–7
LIONS 8–8
BEARS 7–9

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• Bill Barnwell’s 50 most intriguing players, coaches and front office reps
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• Weekly viewer’s guide with what you need to know about every game
In a cool, quiet hallway off the Seahawks’ practice field in early August, coach Pete Carroll cuts off my question about the challenge of balancing a win-now mindset with the need to build and maintain a roster for the future.

“I don’t have any idea what that’s all about,” Carroll says. “You go for everything you can possibly go for every single time you go, forever, until you can’t. Maybe people do this ‘Oh, maybe we’ll win next year’—I can’t imagine. It doesn’t register. I can’t even relate to the topic.”

So … yeah. Guess we know where Carroll comes down on this issue. This year, like every year, he’s going into the season thinking the Seahawks can win the Super Bowl.

He’s not alone. Every year, all 32 teams enter the season thinking, on some level, they’re going to win the Super Bowl. Even the lowly Browns, winners of one whole game over the past two seasons, have let it cross their minds: “Well, if Pittsburgh has a bad year and Tyrod Taylor breaks out and the defense comes together …”

Every year, 31 of those teams are wrong.

So what we want to do here is get real—to narrow it down a bit. Obviously, no matter how optimistic or determined the teams all are, there aren’t 32 that can win the big one. This season I’m going to say there are 12. Admittedly, 12 might even be a little generous.

Of course, the Super Bowl LIII champion might not be on this list. After all, had I listed 12 such teams this time last year, I wouldn’t have included the Eagles. So I’m fully prepared to look like a fool. But as the early 20th century Swedish statesman Dag Hammarskjöld said, “Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own convictions.” He would have been a Vikings fan, I think, had he lived long enough. Which means he’d have liked this list.

THE HEAVY FAVORITES
Eagles, Patriots, Saints, Steelers
These are the real front-runners—the teams that are going in expecting to win this season’s Super Bowl. The teams for whom not winning it would register as a Hangover Part II–level disappointment.

At this point, the Patriots might as well list the game on the magnetic schedules they give their fans at home openers. The Pats have appeared in three of the past four Super Bowls and won two of them. Their current coach/quarterback combo has won five Super Bowl titles together. They haven’t finished a regular season worse than 12–4 since 2009, and the ongoing lack of a legitimate challenger in their own division nearly guarantees them a first-round bye.

The Jags absolutely have the talent to be in this group, behind Pittsburgh, after the Jags waxed the Steelers twice last season in Pittsburgh, including in the playoffs? I hear you. If Jalen Ramsey wants to @ me, he can. I get where he’s coming from.

The Jags absolutely have the talent to be in the first group. They sit here instead because their division looks much tougher than those of the two AFC teams in the top group and because, unlike the four teams up there, they’ve never won the thing. But there’s no reason to think last year was a fluke. They got better in the run game by signing elite guard Andrew Norwell, and the run game is their jam. If QB Blake
WITH ELECTROLYTES TO HELP YOU
REHYDRATE AND HANDLE THE HEAT.
Bortles can find consistency, they’re as good as anyone. So are the Vikings, who look like monsters on both sides of the ball (assuming the offensive line injuries in training camp don’t do them in), and the Rams, whose offseason seemed like it must have been influenced by a Sean McVay conference call with Pete Carroll about whether to go for it. The Chargers might be a surprising pick, since they weren’t in last year’s playoffs—or any playoffs since 2013—but goodness, it feels as if they should have been. Their roster looks as stacked as any in the league. One of these years, Charlie Brown is going to kick that football before Lucy yanks it away.

### THE DANGEROUS WILD CARDS

Chiefs, Cowboys, Falcons, Packers

It’s been 19 months since the Super Bowl slipped through a hole in Atlanta’s back pocket, and its roster—ranked this preseason as the second best in the NFL by Pro Football Focus, behind only the Eagles—hasn’t changed all that much. A second season under offensive coordinator Steve
Sarkisian has a chance to go more smoothly than the first did, and the young Falcons defense could bounce back and play the way it did during the team’s playoff run two seasons ago.

The Packers are getting Aaron Rodgers back from injury, which … well, it helps their Super Bowl chances exponentially. They have things to figure out at wide receiver, at running back and on defense, but as long as Rodgers’ health holds up, the quarterback makes them contenders.

Dallas just went 9–7 in a “down” year with its best offensive player suspended for six games and its second-best offensive player (left tackle Tyron Smith) battling injuries. No reason the Cowboys can’t make life difficult for the Eagles in a division that hasn’t had a repeat champion in 14 years.

And the Chiefs? Andy Reid seems to have a habit of making the playoffs, and if second-year quarterback Patrick Mahomes really is as ready as Reid thinks he is, and if they can find enough answers on defense … well, go back up to the last section and read that Charlie Brown bit again. It applies to Reid too.

From left:
Jaguars RB Leonard Fournette,
Eagles QB Carson Wentz,
Falcons WR Julio Jones

Why all the NFC contenders? Last season the conference went 41–23 (a .640 winning percentage) against the AFC.

THE OTHERS RECEIVING VOTES

Yeah, Coach Pete’s Seahawks were a consideration. And if you want to count on Carroll and Russell Wilson to lift Seattle beyond the external expectations, there are worse bets you could make. But a lot of championship-caliber talent has walked out the door, so it’s fair to want to see it before believing it. Thought about the Titans here, but with so much change on the coaching staff and lingering questions at receiver, it feels like they need another year to crack that top 12. Carolina has lost a lot on the offensive line and is changing schemes on offense as well. And I gave some thought to Houston with Deshaun Watson and all those defensive studs coming back, but that division just looks too strong. Of course, look out for the Philly Special: Someone from this group (or someone not even listed here!) could jump up and make this whole exercise look foolish. It could totally happen. But I’ll stick with my Dangerous Dozen for now and bet the champion comes from that group when the confetti falls in Atlanta on Feb. 3.
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Before we talk about your childhood, take a look at these rookie Rorschach tests. Let’s Get Psyched

OK, everyone, just inhale through the nose. We know you’re excited for your team’s new first-round QB—exhale from the mouth—as are four other NFL fan bases. Try to level-set. Your rivals smell new blood, so don’t obsess over wins. Now let’s begin. We will show you a series of images. Just say what first comes to mind. There are no right or wrong responses. Tell us what you see.

**WHAT A BILLS FAN SEES**
It looks like a fancy W. And I also see a long shot paying off. Like a 60-yards-in-the-air-from-his-knees shot paying off.

**WHAT A RIVAL FAN SEES**
Why do you keep showing me pictures of people cold and crying? Please stop.

**WHAT A CARDINALS FAN SEES**
That right there is a Hall of Famer in a cold tub after winning the Super Bowl (again). Can I turn it upside down? Whoa, look, a W!

**WHAT A RIVAL FAN SEES**
Yeah, bro, that’s most definitely a bro. In a hot tub. Not giving a damn about football.

**WHAT A RAVENS FAN SEES**
Been tailgating, hard, and this looks like a crow but bigger. See, its wings make a W. And I’m not crying. I got Old Bay in my eye.

**WHAT A RIVAL FAN SEES**
This is a running QB, after getting split in half by Vontaze Burfict or Cam Heyward. Hey, am I getting paid for this study?

**WHAT A JETS FAN SEES**
It’s a face. In sunglasses. With a biker ’stache and curly hair. Oh my god! It’s Joe Namath! Huh, all of a sudden I see a W.

**WHAT A RIVAL FAN SEES**
I’m not sure what it is. Are you even a real doctor? I do know this is more scatological and suggestive than my exceedingly good taste allows.

**WHAT A BROWNS FAN SEES**
Looks like a guy about to signal touchdown! Ooh, I also see a W. At least, I think that’s a W. I actually haven’t seen one in a while.

**WHAT A RIVAL FAN SEES**
Looks like a butterfly. These always look like butterflies. This? It’s one of those Canadian butterflies, the ones that last only two years.

**WHAT A RAVENS FAN SEES**
Been tailgating, hard, and this looks like a crow but bigger. See, its wings make a W. And I’m not crying. I got Old Bay in my eye.

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