

2018-19 NBA & NCAA PREVIEWS



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R.J. BARRETT

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EXCERPT

#SLAMTOP50





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In the Paint

#218

NOV/DEC 2018

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JOHN KEALEY

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The Sixth Man

As I write this, it's late September, and we're staring head-on at the beginning of the NBA preseason. The NBA regular season will start a couple weeks later. And the NCAA regular season isn't far away, either. It's all happening.

Which is to say that, Wow, OK, yeah: Summer is over. That's hard to imagine, not because I feel like we need a few more sunny weeks (that'd be cool, tho), but because the whole thing just flew by. It feels like only a few days ago we were stressing over the weather as we were prepping to host the SLAM Showdown at Dyckman Park—in which we brought six high school studs to play in the park's HS league during six amazing summer nights—and only hours ago that we were running around the city with 20 of the best HS prospects in the country during the SLAM Summer Classic weekend. It was so much fun, and as happens with all fun stuff, it came and went so fast.

But October is here, and with that, so is a new NBA season. And once I take a deep breath, get a semi-full night's sleep (even like five or six hours would be v dope), and allow myself a minute or two to process the coming season, the rush of storylines is a little intoxicating. The Warriors + Boogie. The Rockets running it back. LeBron in L.A. (LEBRON IN L.A.!!!) Giannis (maybe, hopefully) going *full* Giannis. AD hungry for more. The Blazers' backcourt getting a shot at redemption. And sooo many more.

One of my favorites, though, is the

emergence of a 20-year-old Walking Bucket who plays in Boston. The Celtics were supposed to cover out of the Playoffs last spring after Kyrie went down, but instead Jayson Tatum (pictured above on our new cover) carried them all the way to Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Finals. And now the fully healthy C's are, well...fully healthy. And absurdly talented. I don't know if they can actually challenge the Warriors, but if anyone can, it's them.

Meanwhile, a few weeks after NBA action tips off, the NCAA men's basketball season will do the same. College ball's best storyline this year is taking place in Durham, NC, featuring a team led by Canadian R.J. Barrett (pictured above on our other new cover), the single most decorated high school athlete since LeBron James in 2003. (Shouts to @TheYear2003.) The Dukies are truly stacked—it's possible they have the three best freshmen/NBA prospects in the country—and they'll be must-see TV each and every time they play.

Which is going to happen very soon. I still can't believe it. But Lord knows I'm ready for it.

Peace,

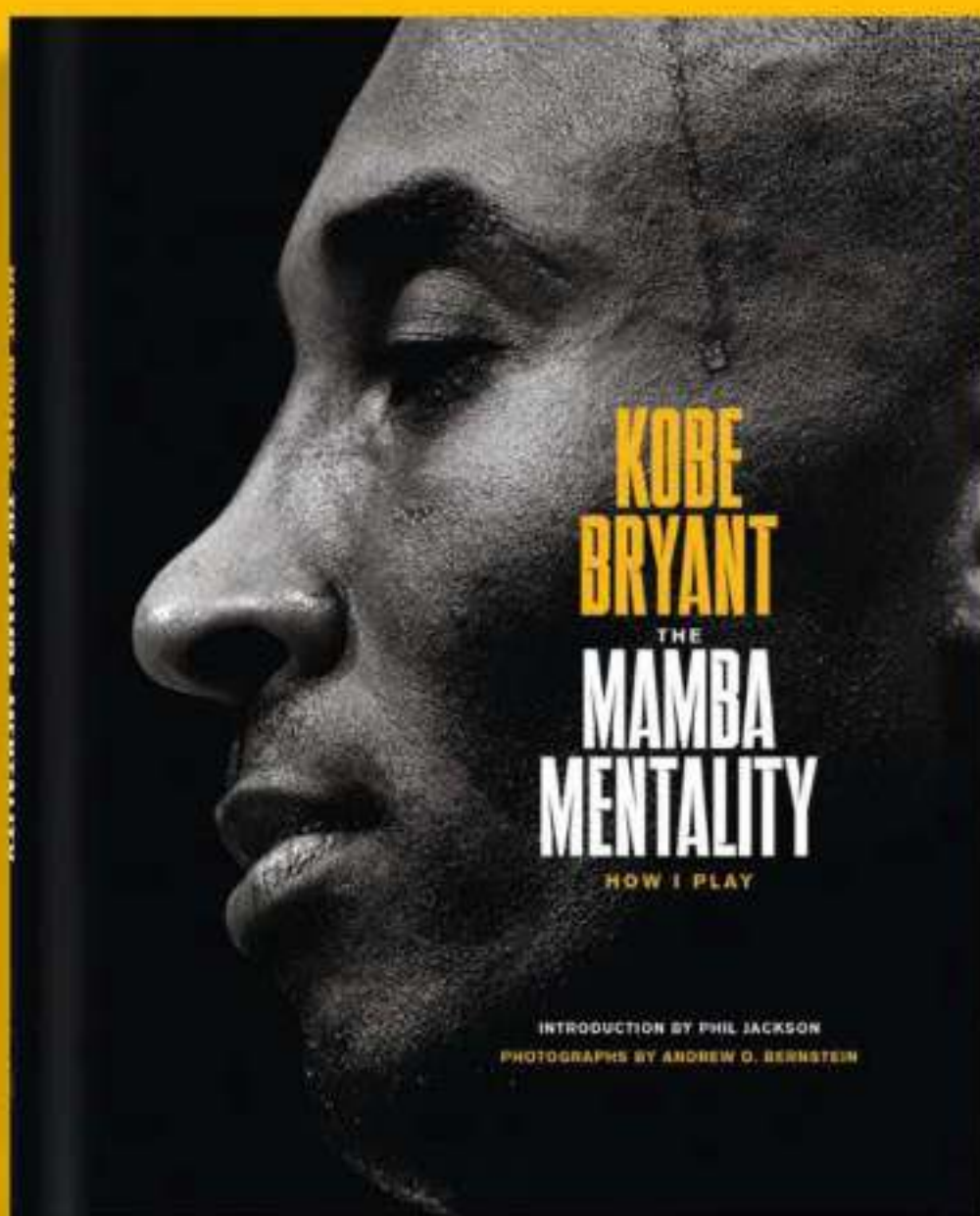
Adam Figman

OFF THE BENCH

Arvind Pitchai, one of SLAM's social media managers, was born in Philly and raised in Cincinnati, OH. He moved to NYC to work for the NBA in 2015 and doesn't plan on leaving. While trying to consume all things hoops, he tries his best to live for the week, not the weekend. He also spends more time watching random things on YouTube than he'll ever admit.



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Trash Talk



SLAM 217 has got to be the biggest, baddest KD cover yet, anything else would be uncivilized. This is the same guy with the fall-back jumper tatt from the 212 issue. I'm fresh on a 2-year subscription to this very Basketball Bible (Shout out to my Aunt Cindy, love you!). I can't wait for more fire issues.

Darcell Brown aka D Toxx, Woodville, TX

Hope the full Warriors group shot that wound up on 217 sufficed... —Ed.

Got damn guys! Enough with the f*cking Warriors on the cover!

Griffith Davis via email

I'm so excited about this season, hopefully a breakout year for the Kings. If Bagley and Fox develop chemistry and speed up the pace, they could be explosive and tear it up on offensive boards. From what I'm hearing, Giles should be the missing piece that brings them to the playoffs. I am 13. I've only been a Kings fan for three years, but it feels like an eternity since they've had a winning season. I think the team needs a strong shooting guard, an All-Star guard to help Fox and Bogdon spread the court. I'd also like to see some new jerseys like the Statement Edition.

Trent Herbert via email

"I am 13. I've only been a Kings fan for three years, but it feels like an eternity..." Uhhhh... imagine how the older than 13-year-old fans feel. Hang in there, kid.—Ed.

I'm reasonably new to this magazine and have only been down since Ish 208, so you can tell I'm not here to brag about how

long I've been down—instead I'm writing about improvements that hopefully are more original than Deolu Akingblade's letter in Ish 209 (he was 8, so no disrespect).

I recently bought 50 SLAMs and noticed one of my favorite sections—Old School—has faded. It's by far the most anticipated section for me, so I ask you to bring back the one-on-one questioning.

The other suggestion is a section called "Basketball Oddities" (Rick Telander would be perfect). He could inform us of weird things that have happened since Naismith invented the best sport there is. Even if you don't like my ideas make my day and put me in Trash Talk.

Callum Keys, 14, Ireland

We still do "Old School"-ish stories, but they tend to be reported out features instead of 1-on-1s. We'll mix it up in the future for sure. Thanks for paying attention.—Ed.

I am writing to say thank you for so many reasons. I have been doing these 20 years with you guys by my side. I just got my latest issue with the great Maya Moore. I am from South Boston and have played ball

all over the state: Roxbury, Mattapan, Fall River, Springfield. A woman taught me how to shoot the rock and another woman taught me how to pat the rock (thank you, Sandy and Clara). I have been following Maya from her first day at UConn.

My son is not a big fan like his pops nor is my oldest niece Peanut nor my nephew Cam, but hold up, I now have hope SLAM! My niece Kenni just finished her first basketball camp! I have been talking to her about Maya for a long time and how I want her to go to UConn and break Maya's records (sorry, Maya). As much as I hate to do it, I'm going to tear out this article of Maya and send it to Kenni. She's 9 and I truly believe Maya is a role model. I have until next October, then I touch down and can become the dad and uncle I am supposed to be. Catch me and Kenni at the Suns and Lynx game in 2020.

SLAM, thanks for being there, and Maya, keep doing what you're doing and don't ever change. And last but not least, it's time we as men stand up with these women and fight with them for equal pay.

Jason C. Graybill, Sr. aka Uncle Jason, Winston-Salem, NC

P.S. Celtics win it all this year!

I'm mystified why an all-time all-ABA top 50 list hasn't been considered. COME ON. GET AT ME. WE'VE BEEN WAITING TOO LONG.

Kevin Smith via email

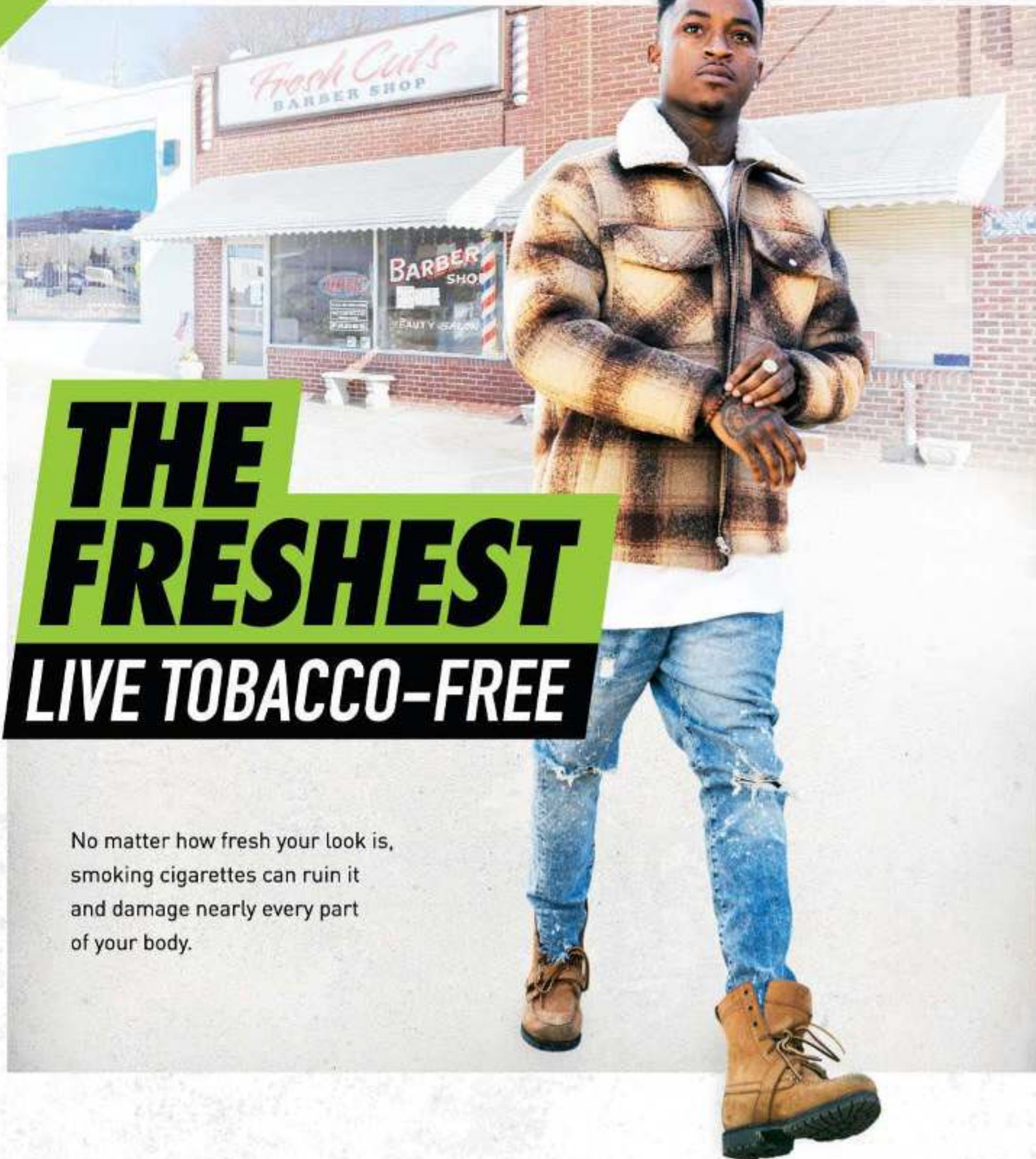
Mystified? Really?—Ed.

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HYPE



THE OPENING TIP

ALWAYS BY RICK TELANDER

THREE TITLES IN four years. That's good enough that you have to consider the Golden State Warriors, who won NBA championships in 2015, 2017 and 2018, a budding dynasty. If they win the crown this year—and most analysts see them as the favorites once again—the Warriors will be on track to be up there with the Michael Jordan-led 1990s Bulls, the 1960s Celtics and even the 1949-1954 Minneapolis Lakers, who won five out of six in that period.

CLYDE COURT DISRUPT

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PUMA
BASKETBALL





NOYZ» First off, a huge thanks to everyone who helped make the SLAM Summer Classic a massive success: Chad and Kyle Babel and the amazing MADE Hoops team, Kenny Stevens and the entire Dyckman Basketball family, Jason Aron and his full team, Bobby C and G Stacks, all of our amazing partners (Facebook, Spalding, BODYARMOR), our friends at Life Time Gym...

With four possible Hall of Famers in Kevin Durant, Stephen Curry, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson, the Warriors have changed the game into a frenzied three-point shooting contest with any spot on this side of half court being a valid launch site. Durant, Curry, Green and Thompson were All-Stars together for the last two seasons, the first time any team has had that happen in NBA history.

As loaded with talent as that may sound, consider that the team recently signed center DeMarcus Cousins, who also was an All-Star last year (for the Pelicans, before tearing his Achilles tendon in late January). His addition could give the Warriors a stunning five All-Stars on the floor at the same time this season. Of course, that's assuming Cousins, who was on a Hall of Fame career arc despite toiling for lousy teams like the Kings and Pelicans, can make it back to

his old form. He's only 28, but Achilles injuries are about the toughest to return from post-surgery without losing some quickness and hops.

Maybe it doesn't even matter if Cousins contributes much this year. The

teams, Kerr listened to head coach Phil Jackson when he spoke of Zen calmness and living in the moment and mindfulness as ways to overcome fear and distraction.

Kerr never forgot that advice. Or the

THE ADDITION OF DEMARCUS COUSINS COULD GIVE THE WARRIORS FIVE ALL-STARS ON THE FLOOR AT THE SAME TIME.

Warriors are fully loaded without him, and coach Steve Kerr is just the right guy to keep the players loose, active and unafraid of all those other teams gunning for them. Back when he was a Bull winning titles on those Jordan

success it helped create. And it's possible the Warriors' journey—leaving foes, including the new LeBron James-led Lakers, eating dust—is far from over. It's what dynasties do, after all—just keep on keeping on.

PICTURE ME BALLIN'



KITIJA LAKSA, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Whether overseas or in the States, Kitija Laksa gets buckets. After competing for the Latvian national teams as a teenager, Laksa brought her talents to USF, where she made an immediate impact, unanimously winning Freshman of the Year in the American Athletic Conference. Starting every game last season as a junior, she averaged 21.1 points per game, second in the conference, while also earning a spot on the American Athletic Conference First Team and the Scholar Athlete of the Year award. In the conference tournament last March, she poured in 20 or more points each game, including 26 points in the championship game against powerhouse UConn. Although the Bulls fell short in the first round of last year's Big Dance, they have a lot to look forward to this season with Laksa as the lone traditional senior pushing them forward.



JUSTIN JAMES, WYOMING

Averaging a conference-second-best 18.9 points per game (20.8 in conference play), Wyoming Guard Justin James delivered a plethora of noteworthy performances last season. He was named to the First Team All-Mountain West conference and was also named All-District 17 by the National Association of Basketball Coaches. Highlights included scoring a career-high 33 points in back-to-back games in January, surpassing the 1,000-point mark and placing himself 19th in career scoring at Wyoming with 1,355 points. He has improved statistically in several categories each year including scoring, rebounding, assists and FG percentage; in his senior season, he'll continue guiding the Pokes as one of the most versatile players to ever suit up for Wyoming. —Max Nagle

WE BALL

DON SEASON

To celebrate the year basketball was invented, **SPALDING** has teamed with the great **DON C** to create a ball that throws it all the way back.

IT BEGAN NEARLY 125 years ago, when Dr. James Naismith called upon A.G. Spalding to create the very first basketball in 1894.

From then to now, as the sport has grown on a global scale, the ways in which people want to interact with it have evolved significantly.

Spalding's 94 Series, named after the year of that original ball, is a response to these changes—a new, innovative way for the historic company to engage with their consumers.

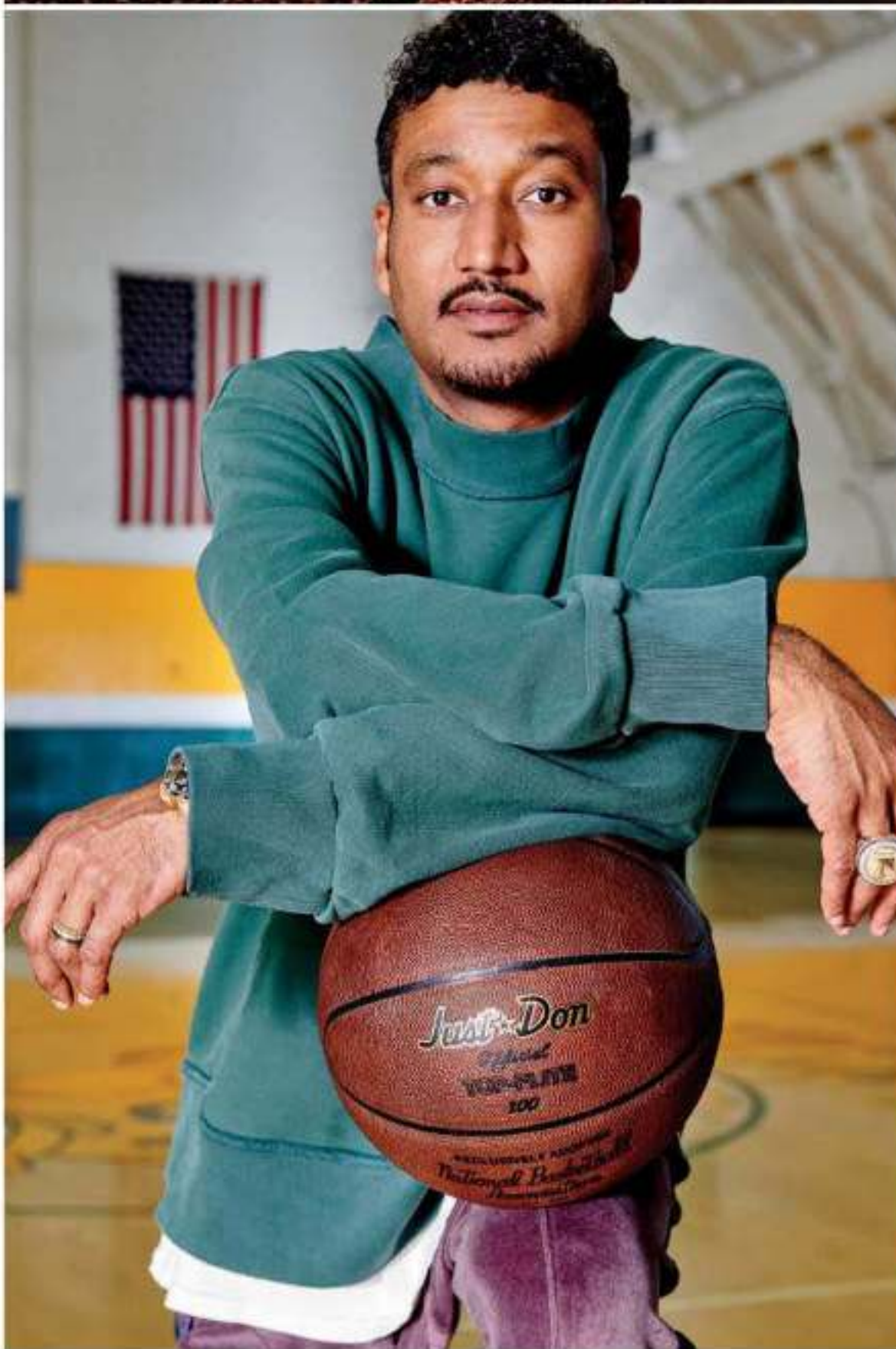
Partnering with designers and artists, Spalding is releasing a collection of limited-edition basketballs that will celebrate their upcoming 125th anniversary. While these products can be played with, they are also intended to exist in the lifestyle space off the court.

The first of the collaborations was with Don Crawley aka Don C, founder of the luxury streetwear and sneaker brand Just Don.

"When you look at somebody within fashion, I don't think there's anybody that really speaks sport better than him, specifically basketball," Chris Martin, Spalding's Marketing and Promotions Manager, says.

Don helped create the blueprint for what Martin describes as "the first ever retro basketball." It is made of dark Horween leather and consists of past and present NBA logos. Only 250 were created and are available for purchase now.

Spalding has plans to add several more items to the 94 Series over the course of 2018 and 2019, as they continue to honor and enhance the culture of hoops. —Alex Squadron



NO Y Z » [SSC thanks, cont.] Jon Lopez, Sean Malcolm, TJ Porter, Wayno, Jay Critch, Star Jones, D'Angelo Russell + his team at CAA, Lance Stephenson, the Nike Basketball team, Sarah Houseknecht, all of the parents and kids who agreed to be involved and came to NYC for the event and so many others we're forgetting. The whole thing was EPIC...Next year's gonna be even better, tho!...



RISE & GRIND

OVER AND OVER

How **DR. DISH** is revolutionizing basketball training, one rep after another.

ONCE UPON A TIME, younger siblings were the de facto solution for fetching rebounds, feeding chest passes and counting shot makes and misses. There's now a machine that does all of that, and more. Meet Dr. Dish.

In the early 2000s, Iowa native Doug Campbell launched Airborne Athletics and pioneered the AirCat Volleyball Training Machine to serve up precise throws for hitting, digging, setting, tipping and blocking drills.

What Campbell served up next, however, forever changed how basketball players and programs would get better. Recognizing the need for a more versatile and innovative product in the hoops market, Campbell prototyped Dr. Dish with a tech-enabled vision to build the "complete player."

By 2014, all Dr. Dish machines were re-designed into today's revolutionary SMART models that include an industry-first phone

app and Training Management System to keep up with the analytics age.

"One of our favorite sayings is, 'Shooters are made, not born,' Campbell, Founder and CEO at Airborne Athletics says. "It should be no secret that countless, purposeful reps are necessary to build a great shooter and there aren't any shortcuts to get there."

Nature or nurture aside, the genius of Dr. Dish is where efficiency and effectiveness meet.

"Our machines can pass out 1,500 reps per hour, but we're more interested in providing workouts that simulate game scenarios and translate into game situations," Campbell adds. "Through our innovations and 100-plus provided game-like workouts, including ballhandling and conditioning drills, we feel we're accomplishing this on another level."

Another level may be an understatement. Dr. Dish customers include thousands

of high schools, top-notch trainers (Drew Hanlen, DJ Sackmann, Jordan Lawley), blue-chip college programs (Duke, North Carolina, Florida, Texas A&M), NBA teams (Miami Heat and Philadelphia 76ers) and players (Zach LaVine, Mike Conley Jr, Langston Galloway).

As Dr. Dish continues to build out its user base, the aim is to provide more comprehensive leaderboards, challenges and competitions to increase player engagement. For example, a player in Australia can now compete with a player in Florida within the same workout and actually have verified results.

"We're most excited about the comprehensive training analytics our machine and app provide, as well as a library of world-class trainers that we've partnered with to provide the best instruction at your fingertips," says Jefferson Mason, Dr. Dish Marketing Lead. "You can now literally watch trainers like Drew Hanlen break down a pro-level move and then execute it in a complete workout using the Dr. Dish."

And Dr. Dish is just getting started.

"While we remain very proud of the products we've created and the brand and community we've built," Mason says, "we also know we have a ton more work to do and look forward to the journey."

—Peter Robert Casey

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EMPOWER THE FUTURE

A Minnesota-based athletic company is producing a sports hijab that's breathable, lightweight and cool.

A **AMERICAN MUSLIMS ARE** more visible than ever in our current United States, which is quite ironic in the midst of a political climate trying to erase their existence and contributions in the Land of the Free.

In recent years, we've seen comedian Hasan Minhaj rise to fame, Ibtihaj Muhammad on the Olympic stage and Ilhan Omar elected as the first Somali-American Muslim female legislator. These are only a few names making national headlines—zoom into the map, and it's hard to ignore contributions of Muslims in their respective communities.

Take Fatimah Hussein, a Somali-American woman also hailing from Omar's state of Minnesota. Hussein noticed an absence of Muslim girls in sports due to discomfort resulting from mixing rigorous activity with modest wear.

With help from contacts at the University of Minnesota, Hussein and the girls in her community gym debuted a line of modest basketball uniforms at a fashion show in 2015.

"We were not thinking about business—we were just trying to solve a problem we had within our community," Hussein says.

In 2016, however, Hussein embarked on a business venture with Jamie Glover, a University of Minnesota student who was looking to take her marketing career in a more impact-driven direction.

"I heard about this project, and I loved it. I absolutely saw the benefits of leadership, confidence and teamwork that came from playing sports," Glover says. "That's the kind of work I want to do, something where I can help more girls have that opportunity."



The pair founded Asiya, a modest activewear company. After its successful Kickstarter campaign in November 2016, the company officially launched with its sports hijab in March the following year.

Creating the perfect product was no easy task. The Asiya team tested over 80 fabrics to get the coveted combination of sweat-wicking, breathable, lightweight and cool.

"We've struck that balance, and I really credit the team of Muslim girls in Fatimah's gym for that because it came from them," Glover says. "That's why I think we got it right."

The Asiya team originally took the

hijab prototypes to the girls for test runs on the court.

"They said, 'No, I cannot wear this—this is too hot!'" Hussein says. "We went back and redesigned it with a whole new look and a whole new material."

Today, three styles of hijabs are available on asiyasport.com. Soon, the brand plans to debut core team colors to pair with uniforms and a swim hijab.

"If [Muslim girls] are wearing [hijab] and they want to play sports, let's enable that," Glover says. "We a hundred percent don't believe in the oppression of women—it's the exact opposite. We believe in empowering women." —*Habeeba Husain*

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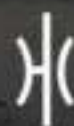
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THROWBACK

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KOBE BRYANT's solid '08-09 campaign led to his first Finals MVP, his first Shaq-less championship and his fourth ring. And with that, the Mamba officially ran L.A.

BY MANY MEASURES, the 2008-09 season might rank as a fairly ordinary one for Kobe Bryant. His 26.8 ppg scoring average that season stands as just the 10th-best of his 20-year career. His per-game rebound and assist numbers—5.2 and 4.9 respectively—both rank in the lower half of his career averages.

Same with his playing time: At 36.1 mpg that season, Kobe was on the court less in '08-09 than in any other season during his lengthy prime.

But numbers are just numbers, and Kobe (and his fans) know better than anyone that his legacy can never be defined by stats alone. Beyond the numbers, the '08-09 campaign remains one of the

most memorable of Kobe's career. And the success he enjoyed that year has its roots in the bitter disappointment of the season before.

Kobe and the Lakers—*his* Lakers, by this point, of that there was no doubt—came into the '08-09 season fresh off the misery of a Finals loss to the hated Celtics. It was a pain they could only erase with a title, and they played with obvious motivation: Their 65-17 regular-season record was 11 wins better than anyone else in the West, and Kobe played all 82 games for just the second time in his career. It seemed inevitable that they'd get that coveted rematch with the Celtics, or a marquee battle with LeBron and the 66-win Cavs.

The Lake Show did its part, at least, dispatching Utah in five games, Houston in seven and Denver in six. Kobe averaged 28.4 ppg in that run through the Western Conference playoffs, and he got ample help from a balanced supporting cast headlined by Pau Gasol, Lamar Odom and Trevor Ariza. But neither Boston nor Cleveland could figure out the upstart Orlando Magic, who rolled through the East behind Dwight Howard and a gang of shooters. It wasn't the Finals matchup most expected, but it was one the Lakers embraced. And none more than the dude wearing No. 24.

The shame of it was that he only got five games to show off how much it mattered. Kobe opened the series with a statement of intent, dropping 40 points on the overmatched Magic in a 25-point Laker blowout. The next three games were closer, including a 4-point Game 3 loss in Orlando, but Kobe was Kobe throughout. That was as true as ever in Game 5, when he erased any thought of waiting to close out the series at home with a 30-point exclamation point on the series. With five-game averages of 32.4 points, 5.6 rebounds and 7.4 assists, there was little doubt about the Finals MVP.

It was his first, of course—not coincidentally—without Shaquille O'Neal to dominate the stat sheet and the podium. A year later, he would earn his second Finals MVP award and grab his fifth ring, cementing his place in the G.O.A.T. debate for all time. —*Ryan Jones*



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NOYZ » We need our guy TJ Porter's music to hit Spotify ASAP...@SLAM_HS is on fire...We saw a few tweets from wanna-be basketball media members trashing the #SLAMTop50. Nothing from anyone with a real career, tho...@JAH_SLAM is a young legend...That pink SLAM hoodie is ELITE elite...Layne Murdoch...Tyler Honeycutt...Frank Ramsay...Oluwadurotimi "Timi" Oyebola...

THE OUTLET

THE UPSIDE DOWN

THE LAKERS have a roster that doesn't just border on absurd—it is truly, incredibly strange. But we can't wait to watch them, and maybe, just maybe, they can really compete with the NBA's best.

ALWAYS BY BEN COLLINS

A FEW DAYS before I started writing this, the Clippers hired Lee Jenkins, the vaunted *Sports Illustrated* writer, to become Executive Director of Research and Identity. The Clippers have, by last count, somewhere between 43 and 112 rotation-quality players and a faint hope of making the playoffs.

Across the hall, the Lakers have spent their summer making bewildering on-paper decisions, adding rotational players on one-year contracts left and right, and somehow alienating nerdy Lakers fans despite signing the best player in the world to a four-year contract.

For more thoughts on team president Magic Johnson's team building experiment, let's head over to the true voice of America: NBA Reddit.

"Magic," a user named Mordecai wrote shortly after signing Michael Beasley, is "building a suicide squad."

It ain't a sexy identity, but Bill Oram has been covering the Lakers for a half-decade now, and he hasn't seen a team with this sort of singular focus since the Kobe years. Even if the singular focus is, "Huh, this is weird as hell, but we better fight like hell to not piss off LeBron."

"One thing about this team: they have an identity," Oram told me. "There are 20-something teams that are desperate for an identity, but you know what these vets are gonna do when they put these guys on the floor. They're gonna get after people and mix it up, and they're gonna get people upset."



Rob Pelinka, the other, non-Magic Johnson running the Lakers, keeps saying it to Oram and in press conferences: "Every great dynasty has that headcase player."

For the Jordan-era Bulls, it was Dennis Rodman. For those mid-2000s Spurs, it was Bruce Bowen. The late-2000s Lakers had Metta World Peace.

"I don't know who you would say is that person on this team because they have several good candidates," said Oram.

The Los Angeles Lakers have Rajon Rondo, JaVale McGee, Lance Stephenson and Michael Beasley. They are a sort of full-lobotomy Bad Boy Pistons, built to wreak havoc with psychological warfare that only some of them are doing on purpose.

"It's really, really strange. I can't put it any differently. Adding one of these guys would've been strange. All four of them, it felt like we were all getting trolled," said Oram.

This team is, in fact, a real-life nightmare for analytics people, some of whom watch a little basketball but read a lot of box scores. It is all gut and no brain, a

swift kick in the soft parts of a basketball team, and something only a person who is a little dumb but very secure in his job would try to pull off.

It's also a roster built on the premise that nobody's beating the Warriors unless something dramatic and unscrupulous happens to their players.

And that's not dumb at all.

Can't you see it? LeBron going for 50. Twenty of them come from Rondo and Lonzo Ball throwing ill-advised outlet passes. Then there's Lance Stephenson dribbling the ball off his foot here and there but still limiting Klay Thompson to 9 points. Mike Beasley waving off LeBron, who wants to go for a 2-for-1, before draining a fadeaway 19-footer from behind the backboard.

This is not a strategy you write down. It's an idea, a concept car for gooning your way to a championship over the best basketball team in history. It's something you fall into, and pray that the ugly thing still drives by May. It's ludicrous, and it might be stupid.

But do you have any better ideas?



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SLAM ADAMON

AUGUST 18, 2018 // DYCKMAN PARK, NYC

PORTRAITS JON LOPEZ



CLIFF OMORUYI



NOAH FARRAKHAN



JAHMIUS RAMSEY



CASSIUS STANLEY

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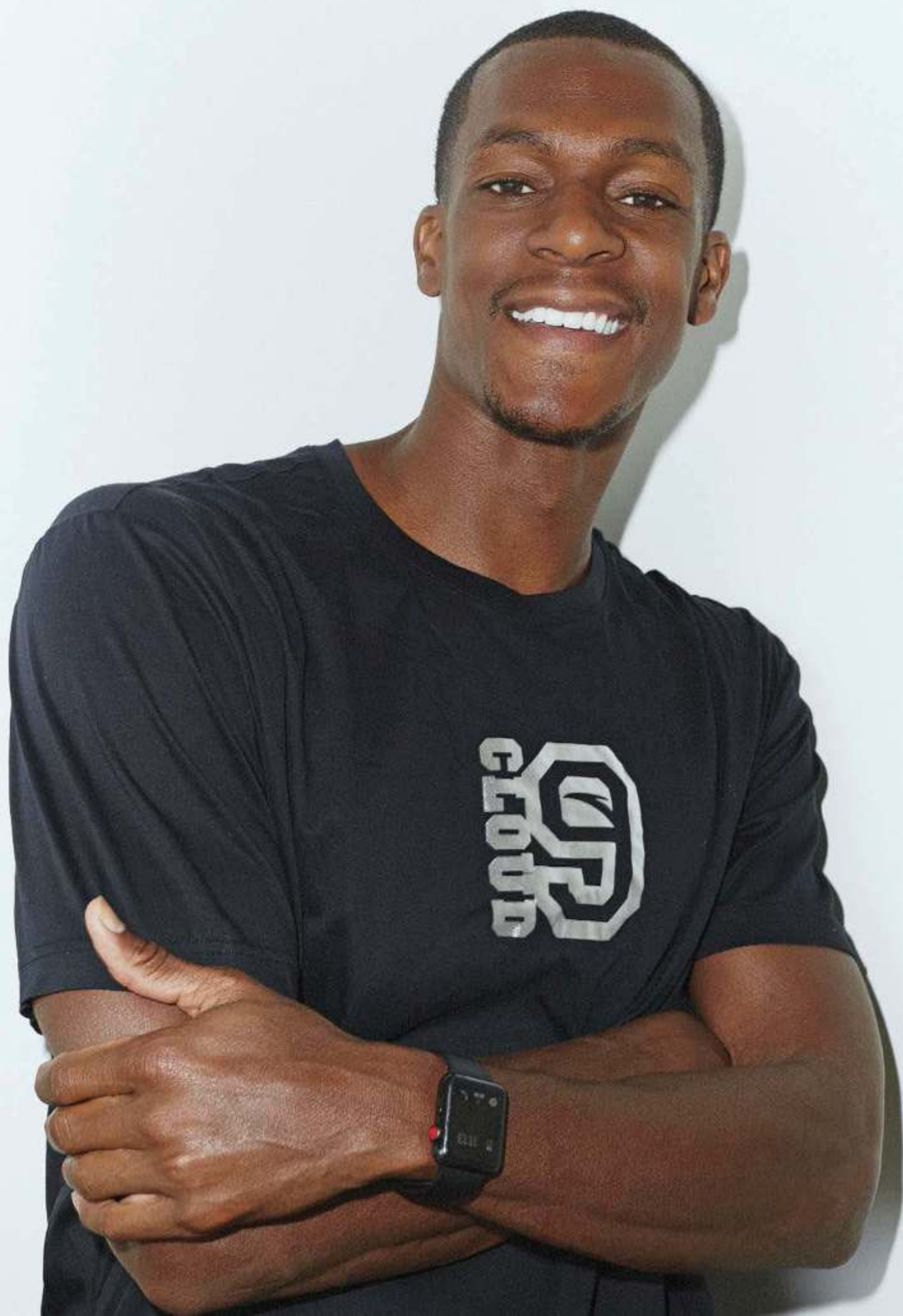
It is 11 a.m. on Saturday, August 18. A long line has already formed outside the legendary Dyckman Park in Upper Manhattan. Fans peak through the surrounding fence as members of the SLAM staff work to dry the blacktop. The rain has stopped and the ominous clouds are beginning to part.

Tip-off comes a few hours later. There's a contagious energy at this place that is impossible to explain without being there. It just grows and grows, never hitting a ceiling. When the best HS players in the nation take the court for the

inaugural SLAM Summer Classic, you can tell the adrenaline is pumping. How could it not be? Spectators are banging on the barriers along the sidelines. Cha-Ching is on the mic, hyping up every move like it's the NBA Finals. Phones are out, cameras are flashing. So the young hoopers are feeling a little extra bouncy.

Jalen Green, Cassius Stanley, Jahmius Ramsey, Noah Farrakhan, Cliff Omoruyi and the rest of the guys proceed to put on an unforgettable show. Here's your evidence.

—Alex Squadron



MY KRAZY LIFE

ENIGMATIC. DIFFICULT. GENIUS. MERCURIAL. STRANGE. ALL WORDS THAT HAVE BEEN USED TO DEFINE **RAJON RONDO**. BUT NOW THAT THE FOUR-TIME ALL-STAR IS BASED IN LOS ANGELES AND GETTING READY TO SUIT UP FOR THE LEBRON JAMES-LED LAKERS, ONLY ONE WORD PROPERLY DESCRIBES HIM: EXCITED. REALLY, REALLY EXCITED.

WORDS TZVI TWERSKY PORTRAITS NATE HOFFMAN

SLAM #218 // PAGE 27

"I O. NO."
Rajon Rondo is adamant. It's a late August morning, and as Rondo settles his lanky frame into a swanky armchair in his rental home in Manhattan Beach, his voice rises.

"We have the most pressure of any sports team," he says.

Both local NFL teams, especially the Rams, are supposed to be superb this season. Fans expect a lot, Rondo's told. Meanwhile, the Warriors, he's reminded, have won back-to-back Chips and added All-Star DeMarcus Cousins.

"No," he says, swatting the idea away with his oversized hands. "They can still fall back and say, Oh, we've won three out of four [Championships]. But when you have LeBron on your team, it's all or nothing."

If you google "the LeBron Effect," over 18,000,000 results pop up in just under .5 seconds. Some of the links, at a hoops level, deal with Championship odds; others, taking a more fiscal approach, address James' impact on local economies. Rajon Rondo has his own specific definition, though.

"We will take everybody's best shot," he explains. "Every game we're playing, the energy is going to be there, guys are going to be locked in. There won't be too many guys partying the night before they play us in L.A."

Three thousand miles, 10 years and five teams ago, Rondo experienced a similar phenomenon with the Celtics. Every game, back then, teams brought their best to Boston, hoping to dethrone, if only for a night, the reigning champs. The veteran Celtics, fully aware of the dancing red dot trained on their chest, began the season 8-2 before reeling off 19 straight wins.

"We put that to bed right away," laughs Rondo. Then, turning toward the Lakers again, he adds: "We have the two smartest players in the game on the same team. It'll take some time—but we'll figure it out, too."

"I'VE BEEN WRITTEN off for five, six years already."

Rajon Rondo is not scared to speak his mind.

In the course of an hour-long conversation, his words write numerous headlines and viral tweets.

He speaks his mind in earnest, though, and he speaks it with purpose. He speaks because he knows he can't control the narrative, and he speaks because he no longer cares to.

And when he speaks, he speaks the truth.

SLAM: What do you want your legacy to be?

RR: That's a good question. I want to be one of the best teammates ever. A guy that guys want as their point guard when they're going to war. A guy who fights hard for his guys, and a guy who is a winner. I'm all about winning, all about team.

SLAM: I saw recently that one of Coach Walton's assistants called you a coach on the court.

RR: That can be intimidating for coaches, and that's probably where things have gotten twisted a little bit in my career. I'm always trying to help, and I do feel that way. I feel like I am an assistant coach. I'm an extension of the coach on the floor, with me being a point guard. So he and I have to be on the same page at all times.

The work I put to that end, I think,



speaks for itself. I break down film for two-and-a-half hours every night. Not just breaking down, but dissecting film. I can come in the next day and break it down for the team. I pride myself on that, so I'm interested and anxious to see how LeBron does it and to learn from him.

SLAM: You mentioned how it can be intimidating to people. Have you tried adjusting your approach at all?

RR: No. I did try it, but that's what makes me who I am. It worked for eight, nine years in Boston. KG once told me, "It's OK to be an asshole." That's what makes me, me. That's what makes me great. Not the mindset of going against what people are saying, but the mindset of needing to understand things, because if it doesn't make sense in my head, then I can't execute for you on the floor. It's all about communication.

I do think my delivery, the older I've gotten, has gotten better. I come in and write notes. Sometimes I might give you a piece of paper and say, "These are my thoughts." They can roll it, tear it up, whatever. It's just my suggestions.

SLAM: There's an old thought that special players don't make great coaches because they see the game differently.

RR: I had a problem with that early. We'd be going through scouting reports and, I'd be like, *I know this and we all should know this*. But I've learned that guys learn differently. Some guys are visual learners, some guys need to physically walk

through it, so I had to learn to be patient.

SLAM: How do you stay engaged, then, over a long season?

RR: I try to give myself new challenges, and now I'm more of a teacher. After a coach is done explaining something, I might go over and make sure a certain guy understands it. I try to keep guys focused.

SLAM: Do you think back to Boston and say, if I could take my 2018 mindset to '08, '09, '10, we would've been ____ better?

RR: We might've won three or four more [laughs]. We were pretty good. If we didn't have some of those injuries, we could've been even better, but that's part of the game. I really don't know how many more games we would've won, but as far as the mindset then versus now, I was just playing hard as shit and listening to my vets. We just needed to believe in one another.

I remember before Game 6 of the 2008 Finals, Danny Ainge came and asked me what the most important stat was going to be that night. I said assists or rebounds. He said, "No, FGAs." He told me to get my shots up. I took 21 shots and we won by almost 30. He is a great basketball mind and he understood what we needed that game, and we had a lot of people around like that.

SLAM: Now you have Magic Johnson with you. I feel like you're too young to remember him, but have you studied him at all?

RR: I do have an appreciation. I didn't study a lot of his film, but I've watched him play. He was unbelievable, on and off the court—he

had a blueprint. LeBron has a blueprint. I can't wait to rub elbows and soak up knowledge from both of those guys, along with the young guys. I'm not too old to learn from Lonzo Ball and Kuz.

SLAM: You see this year in L.A., in the spotlight, as a chance to polish your image?

RR: No. I still think people will say what they want to say. They wrote a couple of nice articles about me last year, but people still think what they want. Things will shake out how they shake out.

I saw somewhere Juwan Howard had 264 teammates. I'm probably around 187. Out of, let's say 187, 180 have loved playing with me. That's what I pride myself on.

RAJON RONDO IS STILL sorta surprised that he's a Laker.

There's an old, fortuitous Champs commercial. In it, a young Rondo touches a pair of Kobe Bryant's signature sneakers. Upon doing so, his clothes

turn purple and gold and an L.A. fitted appears on his head. Instinctively, Rondo throws the sneaker to the floor and, as his green polo and jeans reappear, he wipes his hands free of the Lakers filthy colors.

"I never thought I'd be a Laker," says Rondo. "It's funny—what difference a year makes, what difference 10 years makes."

The path from Boston to L.A. has been more arduous than just catching a sneaker and changing clothes. It has involved down-and-up pit stops in Dallas, Sacramento, Chicago and New Orleans. It has involved DNP-CDs and media bashings, triple-doubles and Playoff highlights. Along the way it has also involved dinners with Kobe Bryant.

"Yes," says Bryant, when asked if he ever wanted to suit up with Rondo. When asked why, he says "his toughness and intelligence." Sadly, that pairing lives on only in what-if conversations.

When Rondo, a three-time All-Star sizes up his free agent options, he focuses on two items in particular: coaching staffs and roster. He wants to make sure that personalities won't clash and that the seeds of chemistry are there. This past summer, when the 32-year-old looked at L.A. with his agent Bill Duffy, he saw a situation that fit all of those specifications.

"Now," says Rondo, "I'm envisioning winning one with the Celtics and winning one with the Lakers." §



GRANT HILL HALL OF FAME





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SHOW

BECOMING AN NBA SUPERSTAR
WASN'T **JAYSON TATUM'S** BIGGEST
GOAL WHEN HE WAS A KID GROWING
UP IN ST. LOUIS—IT WAS HIS ONLY
GOAL. AND NOW, HAVING LED AN
UNDERMANNED BOSTON CELTICS
TEAM TO THE 2018 EASTERN
CONFERENCE FINALS IN ONLY HIS
ROOKIE SEASON, IT'S OFFICIALLY
A FULL-BLOWN REALITY.

WORDS ALEX SQUADRON

PORTRAITS DREW ANTHONY SMITH

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WALKING THROUGH the tunnels of the storied TD Garden with his son, photos snapping and media swarming, it suddenly hits. *This is real. This is actually happening.* "This shit is crazy."

It's Game 2 of the Eastern Conference Finals. Justin Tatum is at the arena early, now staring at his son as he goes through warm-ups, allowing the moment to sink in, feeling the weight of all of it.

For the past few weeks, Jayson Tatum has been at the forefront of a remarkable Celtics playoff run. He's still a rookie. He's merely 20 years old.

To stroll the packed hallways and watch as the seats fill up with fans, many of whom are wearing a jersey with the name Tatum on it, is an experience Justin describes as "surreal."

"But, I mean, I guess I knew I was going to do it one day," the father adds. "Because Jayson told me I would."

"T **HERE WERE** veterinarians, doctors, teachers, nurses, dentists." Jayson is reminiscing on an assignment from the second grade, one that sticks out vividly in his memory. Write a paragraph on what you want to be as an adult and share it with the class.

"I was like, *I want to be in the NBA*, and everybody kind of laughed at me," he says.

Even the teacher encouraged him to choose something else, suggesting the goal was unattainable.

It was a dream born before Jayson could even talk, when he used to tag along to his father's games at Saint Louis University as a toddler. Justin played a key role on a Billikens team that won the conference championship in 2000 and went on to pursue a brief career overseas.

Jayson actually lived with his mom, Brandy Cole, in a small, two-bedroom house in University City, a suburb of St. Louis. She was a college freshman when she had him, working toward her undergraduate degree at Missouri-St. Louis and taking up various jobs to make ends meet. Food was sometimes scarce. Utilities would sometimes be cut off. They learned to adapt to the circumstances, sharing small meals and cuddling up near a little

space heater whenever the gas went out.

Though not together, Brandy and Justin did whatever they could to support their son's passion for basketball—a passion that dates back to his very first taste of competition in a YMCA league at age 3.

"We would cause quite a stir because he just wanted to play so bad," Brandy says of the early days. "We might play with one team in the morning out west in the county, then drive 45 minutes and maybe cross over into Illinois to play with another team in the afternoon or evening. I probably have 50 different jerseys from when he was young. We would just switch 'em out and go play with another team. He just loved it so much."

Once Justin returned to St. Louis from overseas, he landed a coaching job at Soldan High School. By the time Jayson was 9 or 10, he was coming to practice and running with the varsity squad.

Beal had been working out with Drew and was then preparing for his rookie season with the Washington Wizards.

"Can you vouch for him?" she pled.

Beal's message to Hanlen was brief, yet convincing: *My little brother Jayson is going to be special.*

So Drew consented. He would give the kid a chance, but the initial session would be a test. And surely Jayson wouldn't last.

"I absolutely destroyed him," Drew recalls. "I almost tried to make him pass out. Like he was literally on the floor, almost dying."

The second it was over and Jayson was comfortably slouched in his aunt's car, he called his mom. *I wanted to die, but I wasn't going to quit*, he told her. *I would've passed out and fainted before I quit.*

"That's when I knew he had the mentality," Hanlen says. A mentality inspired by his parents' fortitude and bolstered by

"I have this thought inside my head when I step on the floor—I feel good about myself."

"I just remember he would do things that you couldn't teach," Brandy says. "You would hear the *oohs* and *aahs*. He would do things that would even blow Justin and me away. And we'd be like, *Where did he learn that from?*"

B **RANDY HAD** half-expected to be denied when she sent the text to trainer Drew Hanlen asking if her 13-year-old boy could begin sessions with him. Hanlen's client base consisted of pros or elite players with NBA potential—not skinny, unproven eighth graders.

The answer was no. He was too young. Not ready. Couldn't tackle the advanced concepts or endure the physical strain.

But Brandy wouldn't quit. She called Bradley Beal, a friend of the family who grew up a few blocks away from them.

his basketball idol, Kobe Bryant.

Jayson's unwavering love for the game cannot be detached from the Mamba. He rocked Kobe's shoes and apparel, knew entire stat lines by heart, would study his YouTube clips like they were textbooks and tried to emulate moves as young as the fourth grade. It was an obsession.

"How bad he wanted to be the best and how hard he worked at it really inspired me," Tatum says.

He repeatedly told Brandy: *I want to be Kobe.*

You mean you want to be an NBA player?

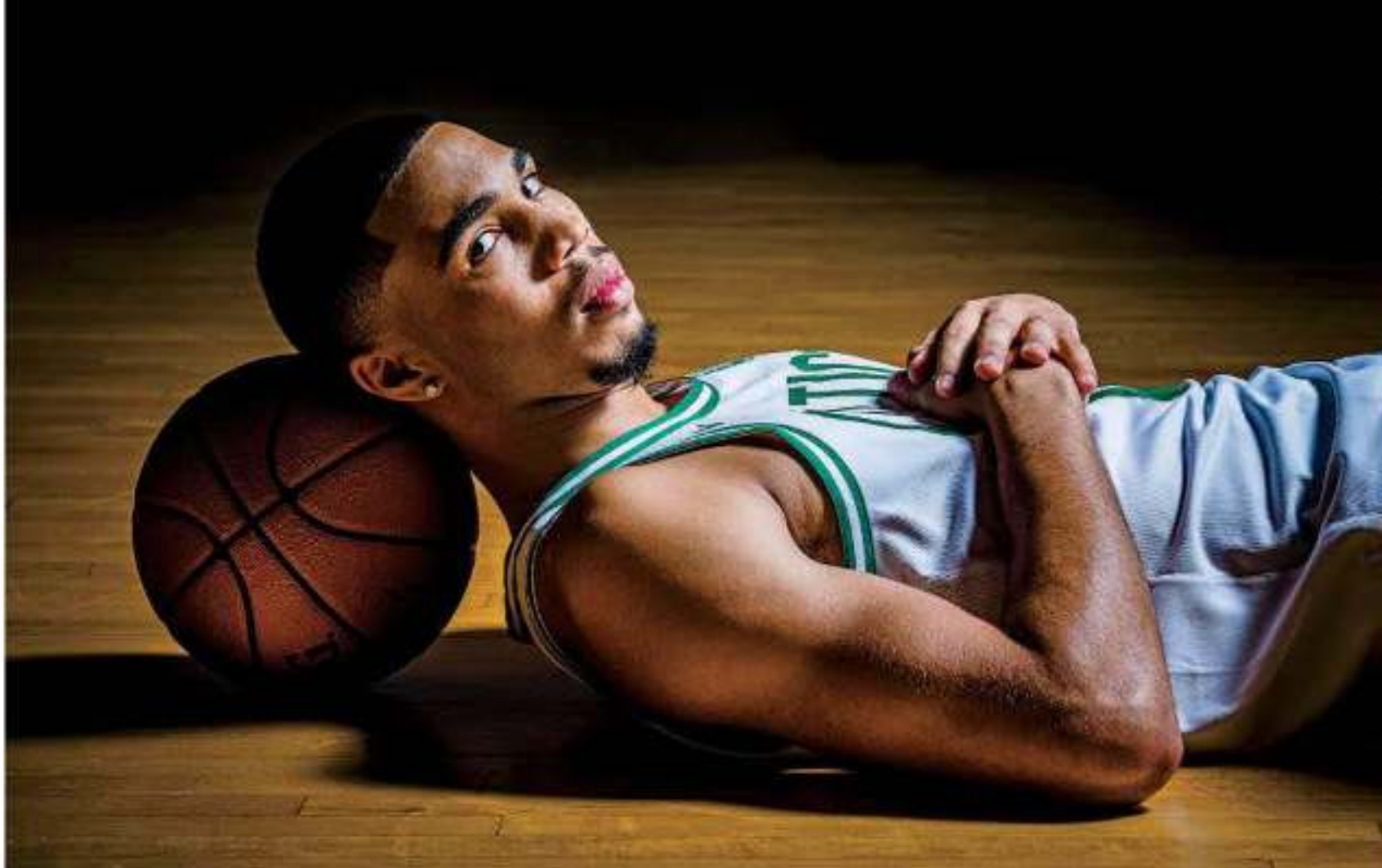
No, I want to be Kobe.

Well, you can't be Kobe. Kobe is Kobe. Why don't you be better than Kobe?

And Jayson would look at Brandy like she had lost her mind.

To be anything like Kobe, Tatum had to focus on the nuances. He and Drew dedicated an entire week to breaking down





Bryant's jab step. Workouts over that time didn't involve a single shot. They arrived at the gym, examined the footage and replicated the motion again and again, honing in on every minute detail until it was seamless.

That was a start.

Jayson did the same thing with several of his other role models, analyzing and applying their effective moves to his own game. Paul George's skill on the perimeter. Carmelo Anthony's ability in the mid-post. The list goes on. Those tools were constantly refined as Hanlen threw him in the mix with the rest of his clients.

"Before he even had his permit, he was playing against pro guys," Drew tells us. "There were some days when he took a beating and other days when he hung tough, but the thing that we saw was year after year, he kept improving, kept hanging around longer and all my guys knew he was going to be special just because of the work that he put in."

He was going to be special. It's the same sense that seemingly all who crossed paths with Jayson got.

"If this kid keeps working, he's definitely going to get to the League," Will Gladson, Tatum's friend and former high school teammate, remembers thinking. "And he's definitely going to keep working."

Will would pull up to Chaminade Prep early, before class, to get shots up, only to find that Jayson was already finishing his morning drills.

Tatum was at the gym around 5:30 a.m. every day. He had his own key and would

"After last season, instead of just making it to the NBA, I feel like I can do some special things while I'm in the League."

be the one to turn the lights on. During his four years at Chaminade, head coach Frank Bennett insists he took just two days off—the two days following their state championship victory his senior season.

Nobody ever pushed Tatum to pursue basketball so intensely. There were instances, rather, when Brandy worried that her son was doing too much. At 14, he started to develop tendinitis in his knee.

"We went and got it looked at and everything, and it was just normal overuse," Brandy says. "So I told him, *You need to rest your body.*"

She encouraged Jayson to scale back a bit, recognizing it to be a futile effort. After like 48 hours, he began to go crazy.

"You would've thought that he was in solitary confinement or something. He was acting like he was going to lose it," Brandy says.

It all makes sense once you understand that in Jayson's eyes, making it

to the NBA wasn't just the best-case scenario. It was the only scenario.

"I forget where, but Kobe was talking and he was saying that his whole life, he put all his eggs in one basket. If you have that mindset, that there's no plan B, there's no backup plan, then you'll do anything to make that first plan work," Jayson says. "I took that to heart. I made a promise to myself that I was going to make it work."

Combine that mindset with his ferocious work ethic and you get this: a National Gatorade POY award, the most points and rebounds in Chaminade history and a scholarship to Duke.

There was a time when Jayson would attend recruiting camps and the other guys would tease him about his hometown. *Y'all play basketball in St. Louis?* With each accomplishment, Tatum took pride in helping to put his city on the map, following in the footsteps of

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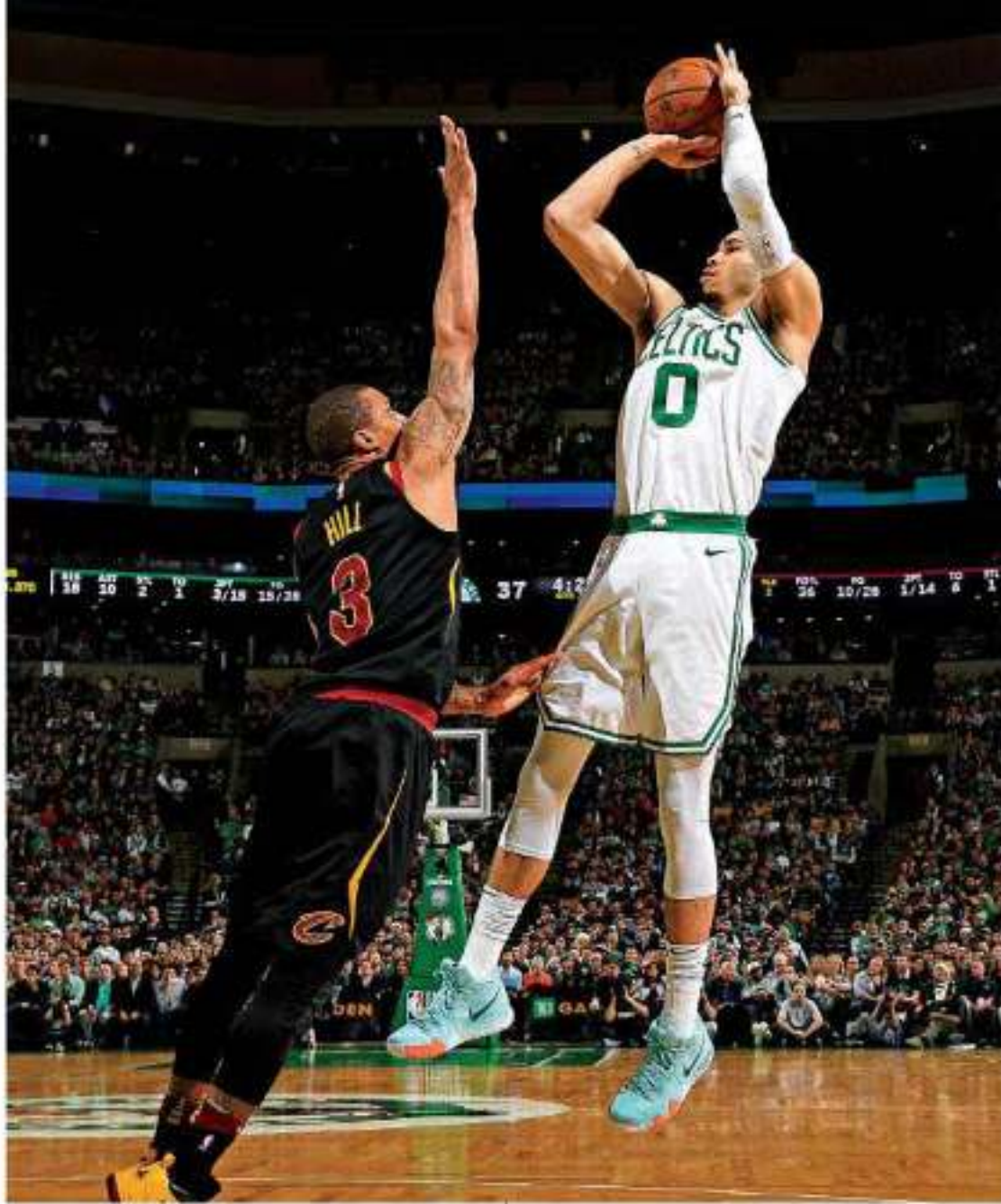


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his mentor, Bradley Beal.

When Beal was a senior at Chaminade, he used to drop Jayson off at the middle school on a daily basis. The two would hang out during the NBA offseason once Beal joined the Wizards, cruising around the neighborhood and making frequent visits to Imo's, a St. Louis staple that serves Tatum's favorite pizza in the world.

Beal always pushed Jayson to be the best player to come out of the city, even if that meant surpassing him.

"He accomplished a lot," Tatum says. "I felt like if I wanted to be the best, I'd have to do everything he did *and some*."

OFF THE COURT, Jayson is laid back, even-keeled and a little quiet. Some of those attributes carry over to the floor. He never gets too high or too low. The adrenaline never derails him, nor do the mistakes. He stays relaxed and level-headed. Always focused on the next possession.

Yet there is a switch—one that renders the on-court Tatum distinct.

"I am very arrogant. I have this thought inside my head when I step on the floor," Tatum pauses for a second and smiles. "I

feel good about myself."

"There's a competitiveness in him that I don't understand where it came from," his father says. "I know it's my passion for coaching and his mom's drive and what she does and the structure she gives. I don't know if all that combined in him, but he doesn't care who you are or what stage it is or where you're at. He doesn't care if he has flip-flops on—he's going to go at you. He doesn't care if it's in front of 20,000 people or if it's the NBA Finals."

Tatum made the stage at one of the most historic college programs in the country look small, averaging 16.8 points and 7.3 rebounds in his sole season with the Blue Devils. He's doing the same thing now on one of the most historic NBA franchises.

After the Celtics selected him with the No. 3 pick in the 2017 draft, Tatum posted 13.9 points and 5.0 rebounds on 48 percent shooting from the field and 44 percent from deep in his first year. He took it to another level in the playoffs, dropping a team-high 18.5 points per game to lead Boston just shy of the Finals.

As a rookie. As a 20-year-old.

When he plays, you can clearly spot signs of the work he's put in. There's that jab step and blow by, shades of Kobe. A

crossover and quick trigger three-pointer, shades of PG. A turnaround jumper on the mid-post, shades of Melo. For someone his age, Tatum is as polished a scorer as you'll see. And it is not a coincidence.

"He gave it his all and very few people do that in life," Bennett says. "He's one of them that did and as a result is getting rewarded."

Rewards that are only going to increase over time.

"After last season, instead of just making it to the NBA, I feel like I can do some special things while I'm in the League," Tatum says.

Of course, he has to keep working. But to even consider that he wouldn't is to ignore everything there is to grasp about Jayson Tatum.

LEANED UP AGAINST a small stage in the Pan Pacific rec gym in Los Angeles, wearing his clean white Celtics uniform, Jayson flips through the latest KICKS issue. His barber from St. Louis is here, the same one he's had for the last 11 years, lounging in a nearby chair. Jayson samples some of the pizza we ordered. It's alright. Nothing like Imo's, though.

Throughout the afternoon shoot, we ask him to throw on a band-aid as a tribute to St. Louis legend Nelly, and he happily obliges. We ask him to re-create a picture of Kobe, and he doesn't hesitate. After all, these are nods to what brought him here, to this very moment.

Stacked up in the basement of the Tatum household are old issues of SLAM Magazine. Iconic covers piled one on top of another serve as reminders of the forces that inspired Jayson to realize his own dream.

To be an NBA player. To be on his own cover.

"Man, it means everything," Tatum says. "I'm not one to ever take anything for granted. It's one thing to say you want to be on the cover of SLAM one day, but it's a different feeling when it actually happens."

That feeling may be surreal—to finally hold the magazine in his hands and flip through these glossy pages—yet anyone who has ever known Jayson can't say it's a huge surprise.

He was bound to be here. There was no other option. **\$**

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WORDS RYNE NELSON

WEARING HIS blue plaid draft day jacket, palms sweating and visibly nervous, Jonathan Isaac walks to the podium to give his first sermon.

"This season is the best season of my life, but I'm not playing right now," the 20-year-old Magic rookie tells the audience on a Sunday morning in mid-January.

Isaac injured his right ankle just three weeks into the season and hasn't been fully healthy since. To say his rookie year hasn't gone according to plan would be an understatement.

"There's insecurities, and there's doubt in my mind," he continues. "Like, what are people thinking about me? Are people calling me a bust behind my back? Are my teammates, like, *When is Jonathan going to play?*"

"And I'm in the best season of my life because I'm growing [spiritually]," he says as the church erupts in applause.

The jitters quickly melt away, and Isaac delivers a message—quite naturally and authentically—about receiving God's blessings in 2018.

The sermon, streamed on YouTube, would later headline the NBA news cycle. Viewers commented, saying they were confused—what was this? And why?

Not playing and now misunderstood, on

this mid-January morning, Jonathan Isaac is the most content he's been in his life.

UNTIL THE AGE of 10, Isaac grew up in the streets of The Bronx, NY. When his parents separated, Isaac and his siblings moved with his mother to Golden Gate, FL, a neighborhood outside the wealthy city of Naples. No longer living in the inner city, Isaac began to meet kids from much different backgrounds.

"School was a big thing for me to get used to," Isaac says. "Just being around different kids. Being around a lot of white kids. I was super aggressive as a kid. Got in trouble a whole bunch of times from being too aggressive."

But Isaac quickly made friends through sports, helping him adjust to a new way of life. "Sports in general, every single one of them, is a uniter," he says.

By the time Isaac was a freshman at Barron Collier High School, he had grown to 6-1 and was comfortable handling the ball and playing on the wing.

During his first stint on varsity as a sophomore, Isaac got a reality check. He averaged just 4.8 points while coming off the bench. The rough year stung, but he didn't have expectations of playing basketball beyond high school.

"I never thought there was college basketball or NBA. It was just right there and then," he says. "Of course, not having a great season was tough. But basketball was just something I loved to do, and I played it. And I kind of just got through it."

For his junior season, Isaac traveled to the other side of the peninsula to play for the International School of Broward. Gradually growing to a lanky 6-9, Isaac says he finished his senior year with just two offers and some interest from Florida State.

Weighing in at a scrawny 174 pounds, he took an honest look at the path ahead. While most high school seniors took their talents to the collegiate level, Isaac knew he likely would have to redshirt to focus on his body. He took the road less traveled and committed to IMG Academy for a post-grad year. That summer during EYBL play, Isaac took his recruiting to another stratosphere.

"That was really the time when I was like, *Wow, I can do this. I can play college basketball. I can start to develop some of these dreams,*" he says.

With offers from top programs coming virtually every day, Isaac decided to remain loyal to the school that showed the most interest from the jump: Florida State.

Able to focus nearly full-time on his body and game while at IMG, Isaac finished his post-grad season as a consensus top-10 player in the Class of



2016. He considered the opportunity to enter the 2016 NBA Draft directly out of prep school (a path that IMG's Anfernee Simons chose this year), but once again, Isaac kept it 100 with himself.

"It just came down to...honestly...the

same decision that I made going to post-grad. Like, man, I'm not ready to play professional basketball."

The decision proved to be the correct one. Isaac fit in perfectly alongside Dwayne Bacon and Xavier Rathan-Mayes

as the Seminoles finished the season with a 26-9 record. A positionless hybrid with an analytics-friendly game, Isaac finished top-10 in the ACC in blocks, rebounds, PER and true shooting percentage—making him a surefire lottery pick. That



is, if he actually decided to go pro.

"It was [a decision] I actually didn't want to make," he explains. "I actually wanted to come back to Florida State after my first year and the coaches weren't having it."

Three short months later, Isaac was walking across the stage in Brooklyn, shaking Adam Silver's hand as the sixth overall pick in the 2017 Draft. The highest Florida State draft pick in 47 years, Isaac had money and fame. He had made it.

"I was focused on basketball. I was focused on women. I was focused on chasing the perfect night," he would say during his sermon in January. But it was at chapel before one game early in the season that Isaac was faced with a spiritual fork in the road.

He came across Luke 6:46: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

The message hit home for Isaac, who had professed to be a Christian but, admittedly, wasn't living like one.

"That verse just punched me in the stomach," he says. "I wrestled with that, and I came to a place of saying, I don't know what to choose: me or Him. And I

said, You know what? I'm going to seek, and if I don't find, then I'm just going to drop the whole Christian thing and just be me."

He began to wake up early in the morning for 5:30 a.m. prayer. He made a conscious effort to study the Bible and pray more often, and he grew quickly in his faith at just the right time. On November 11, Isaac suffered a right ankle sprain in Denver, causing him to miss the next 17 games. In December, during just his second game back, he re-aggravated the injury in Chicago. He wouldn't fully recover until March.

In a way, the situation was a blessing. Isaac gained invaluable perspective and resolve during the 55 games he missed last season. "My faith was something that allowed me to stay focused and know that, perspective-wise, it's not the biggest deal in the world," he says. "I'm going to have more seasons. I'm going to get back on the court."

One Tuesday in early January, he felt compelled to give a sermon at his church. He contacted the pastor at JUMP Ministries Global Church in Orlando, Dr. Durone Hepburn, and pitched the idea.

"Done," Hepburn replied immediately.

That following Sunday, Isaac not only delivered the sermon; he crushed it. While at the podium, Isaac appeared to be anything but out of place. He spoke with ease and understanding. For nearly 30 minutes, he captured the attention of the room. Orlando Magic player development coordinator Kevin Tiller was in the building and couldn't have been prouder.

"That was him being as courageous and as vulnerable as you can be because he knew it would be in the media, he knew it would be on Twitter, he knew it would be everywhere," Tiller says.

Isaac understands that some put him in a box because of his beliefs. But those people are mistaken. Finally healthy this offseason, Isaac dedicated his summer to staying in Orlando and working with the Magic's new coaching staff. He was Orlando's best player in Summer League, showing consistent flashes of being an elite two-way player. In just over 27 minutes per game, Isaac averaged 14.3 points, 7.3 free-throw attempts, 7.0 boards, 2.7 blocks and just 0.7 turnovers. His performance in Vegas was encouraging, but Isaac acknowledges he still has more work to do in order to reach his potential.

"I can look at myself and say I need time. I need time to grow and to continue to develop. And I do believe that I have tons of potential—some of it tapped and a lot of it untapped," he says.

WITH THE CHURCH crowd rapt on his every word, Jonathan Isaac explains how changing his mindset helped him turn things around during a season of turmoil.

"When I was a kid, when I was in high school and even in college, if you would have asked me, *Jonathan, what do you want to be when you grow up?* I was so ashamed to say NBA, I swear. When I first started meeting Doc [Dr. Hepburn], he said, *You're going to be great.* I was like, *Man, miss me with that great stuff.* And I'm at a point where I'm like, *Doc, you ain't even got to tell me no more.*"

Isaac smiles from ear to ear. Today, he may be a misunderstood rookie on a young team slowly gaining its footing. But soon enough, the world will see that Jonathan Isaac is on the rise. **\$**

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#SLAM TOP 50



THE ONLY NBA PLAYER RANKINGS THAT MATTER.

WORDS RYNE NELSON AND ALEX SQUADRON



1. LEBRON JAMES

It is Year 16 and there is no question that The King still reigns. LeBron James' first season out in Los Angeles is about to be a movie. So grab your popcorn.



2. KEVIN DURANT

During last year's Finals, Kevin Durant again reminded the world how dominant he can be. Hate all you want, but you can't deny the greatness. We are watching one of the best pure scorers of all time.



3. ANTHONY DAVIS

When DeMarcus Cousins went down last season, Anthony Davis took his game to an otherworldly level. We anticipate more of those video game numbers this year.



4. JAMES HARDEN

The reigning MVP is perhaps the best overall playmaker in the NBA. Houston is still a threat to Golden State's supremacy—and James Harden is the major reason why.



5. STEPHEN CURRY

When he's healthy, there's simply no slowing down Stephen Curry. Can't wait to see what the Chef cooks up this season, but you can bank on a plethora of threes, crossovers and dimes.



6. GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

At just 23, Giannis Antetokounmpo is unstoppable. Any improvement from last year will almost certainly put The Greek Freak in the MVP conversation. And there's no reason to expect otherwise.



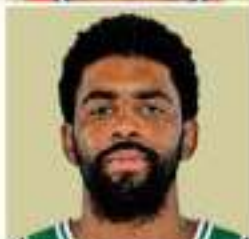
7. RUSSELL WESTBROOK

For two consecutive seasons, Russell Westbrook has averaged a TRIPLE-DOUBLE. It seems absurd to believe he could do it again. But as The Brodie always asks, Why not?!



8. KAWHI LEONARD

In case you forgot, Kawhi Leonard is a two-time All-Star, two-time DPOY and the 2014 Finals MVP. He's about to remind you just how good he is, only now in a Raptors uniform.



9. KYRIE IRVING

Heading into a new season, superstar Kyrie Irving says he feels completely healthy and is ready to re-take the driver's seat on an absurdly talented Celtics squad. That's scary.



10. JOEL EMBIID

He's told us multiple times throughout the summer: Big man Joel Embiid feels like he's going to have an MVP season. We don't doubt it. We've all learned to trust The Process.

TOP FROM LEFT: TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES, NOAH GRAHAM, ATIBA JEFFERSON, JONATHAN BACHMAN, NOAH GRAHAM/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 1. ATIBA JEFFERSON; 2. JACK ARENT; 3. JONATHAN BACHMAN; 4. JEFF FITLOW; 5. NOAH GRAHAM; 6. GARY DINEEN; 7. ALEX NAHORNIK-SVENSKEI; 8. RON TURENNE; 9. BRIAN BABINEAU; 10. JESSE D. GARRABRANT/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

11. CAMERON BROWNE; 12. ALEX NAHORNIK-SVENSKI; 13. DAVID SHERMAN/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 14. TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES; 15. DAVID SHERMAN; 16. STEPHEN GOSLING; 17. MARK SOBANI; 18. JESSE D. GARRABANT; 19. JACK ARENT; 20. RON HOSKINS; 21. BARRY GOSSAGE/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 22. DANIEL GLUSKOTER/ICON SPORTS/WIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 23. MELISSA MAJCHRAK; 24. GARRETT W. ELLWOOD; 25. CAMERON BROWNE; 26. STEPHEN GOSLING; 27. MARK SOBANI; 28. MICHELLE FARSI; 29. BRIAN BABINEAU; 30. KEITH JOHNSON/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES



11. DAMIAN LILLARD

No more workout videos. You know what time it is. Damian Lillard has proven to be one of the best go-to scorers in the NBA. The Blazers will once again follow his lead.



12. PAUL GEORGE

When Paul George re-signed with the Thunder this summer, he said there was unfinished business to attend to. We are very much looking forward to seeing how he handles that business.



13. KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS

After signing a new, super-max contract, Minnesota's Karl-Anthony Towns is ready to get to work. The big man is a walking double-double capable of taking over at any moment.



14. CHRIS PAUL

If he hadn't injured his hamstring in last year's Western Conference Finals, Houston very well could have upset the Warriors. Now Chris Paul is back and hungry as ever. Y'all are in trouble.



15. JIMMY BUTLER

As of presstime, Jimmy Butler is still in Minnesota, though that could definitely change. Wherever he ends up, the do-it-all wing will continue to be one of the best two-way players in the NBA.



16. JOHN WALL

The Wizards will go as John Wall goes—and the All-Star point guard should be in for a big season. With center Dwight Howard now in the fold, rest assured there are a lot of lobs coming.



17. DEMAR DEROZAN

New city, new squad, same DeMar DeRozan. You better believe that buckets are on their way to the AT&T Center. DeMar is fresh off one of the best seasons of his career and shows no signs of slowing down.



18. BEN SIMMONS

Year 2? Year 3? Doesn't matter what you call it, Ben Simmons is going to be a problem. The young point guard is running the show out in Philly, and it should be a good one.



19. KLAY THOMPSON

Forget for a second that Klay Thompson is one of the world's best shooters and perimeter defenders. The Warriors star is also just the coolest MFer in the NBA. We rest our case.



20. VICTOR OLADIPO

The reigning Most Improved POY, Victor Oladipo put the League on notice last season, averaging career highs across the board. When he balls out again in 2018-19, it won't be a surprise.



21. DEVIN BOOKER

Devin Booker is a certified bucket. Entering his fourth season alongside 2018 No. 1 overall pick Deandre Ayton, Book is primed for another big leap. See the shots that I took...



22. DRAYMOND GREEN

Draymond Green is the epitome of the modern big man—athletic, versatile and a major contributor on both ends of the court. And if he gets under your skin, good. That's the goal.



23. DONOVAN MITCHELL

Year One was special. Year Two is about to be even better. As the young leader of a dangerous Utah Jazz squad, Donovan Mitchell is poised to show out.



24. NIKOLA JOKIC

He drops dimes like a point guard, rains threes like a shooting guard and battles in the paint like a center. There's really nothing Nikola Jokic can't do.



25. CJ MCCOLLUM

As half of Portland's lethal backcourt, CJ McCollum will continue to give defenses trouble with his knockdown shooting, crafty handles and polished footwork. Good luck stopping him, @NBA.



26. BRADLEY BEAL

Bradley Beal isn't just one of the most efficient shooters in the game, he's one of the deadliest scorers. In December, the All-Star went off for a career-high 51 points.



27. LAMARCUS ALDRIDGE

After demanding a trade and reconciling with Gregg Popovich, Aldridge single-handedly willed the Spurs to the Playoffs last season. Even at 33, Aldridge is still one of the most dominant big men in the game.



28. KRISTAPS PORZINGIS

It's unclear when—or if—Kristaps Porzingis will play this season. When healthy, KP boasts a combination of size, agility and skill that makes him virtually unguardable.



29. JAYSON TATUM

A star in the making, Tatum gained experience on the big stage last season. He averaged 18.5 ppg in the playoffs and got more assertive as the stakes got higher. There's no ceiling for the 20-year-old.



30. RUDY GOBERT

Several knee issues limited Rudy Gobert to just 56 games last season, but he still came away with the DPOY. That's how valuable Gobert is on the defensive end for the Jazz.



31. BLAKE GRIFFIN

Injuries have undoubtedly taken a toll on his athleticism, but Griffin is far from finished. Coming off his first fully healthy offseason in years, the 29-year-old will be Detroit's go-to guy this season.



32. KEMBA WALKER

The Hornets' all-time leading scorer, Kemba Walker could solidify his case for greatest to don a Buzz City uniform this year. Will he remain in Charlotte beyond this season? That still remains to be seen.



33. KEVIN LOVE

Fresh off signing a \$120 million extension after a decade in the League, Kevin Love is poised to have a strong season as the leader of the Cavaliers.



34. DEMARCUS COUSINS

The track record for players returning from ruptured Achilles tendons isn't great, but Boogie Cousins is young enough and skilled enough to be dominant once he returns this season.



35. ANDRE DRUMMOND

Incredibly, Drummond has averaged over 13 boards for five straight seasons. He even shot over 60 percent from the free-throw line last season. Now he has the green light to shoot threes? Look out.



36. AL HORFORD

Boston leaned heavily on Horford to be their fulcrum last season, and he didn't disappoint. Seemingly always making the right play, Horford is a rare big who can pass, defend and shoot the three.



37. JRUE HOLIDAY

Overlooked no more. Jrue Holiday took over in the playoffs, helping to shut down the Blazers' vaunted backcourt while scoring 27.8 ppg. Silent but very deadly, Holiday can go toe-to-toe with any guard.



38. GORDON HAYWARD

Nearly a year removed from his gruesome injury, Hayward is fully healed and has no restrictions. It'll take time to get his rhythm back, but seeing Hayward back on the court will be a welcome sight.



39. MIKE CONLEY

Mike Conley managed to appear in just 12 games last season as he opted to undergo left heel surgery. Now fully healthy, the 30-year-old should be able to bounce back to near-All-Star form in 2018-19.



40. KYLE LOWRY

Entering this season at age 32, Kyle Lowry no longer attacks the basket like he did used to, but he'll fit in perfectly alongside Kawhi Leonard as a dangerous No. 2 scoring option and primary facilitator.



41. JAYLEN BROWN

With Kyrie Irving and Gordon Hayward out in the playoffs, Brown averaged 18.0 ppg as the Celtics came just a game short of reaching the Finals. Brown is an integral part of Boston's future.



42. MARC GASOL

One of the most skilled players in the League, Gasol endured the most challenging season of his career last year. Will he ask for a trade as he enters the final chapter?



43. CLINT CAPELA

Less than four years ago, Capela was spending extended stints in the G League. This summer, he agreed to a \$90 million deal. Capela should remain one of the League's elite bigs for years to come.



44. KHRIS MIDDLETON

One of the game's most underrated wings, Khris Middleton has returned to form after tearing his hamstring two years ago. An efficient scorer from anywhere, Middleton really does it all.



45. AARON GORDON

Fresh off signing an \$80 million deal with Orlando, Aaron Gordon will be counted on to lead the rebuilding Magic. A versatile, two-way player, AG has the tools to become an All-Star this season.



46. DEANDRE JORDAN

After backing out of a verbal deal with Dallas three years ago, Jordan will finally be donning a Mavs jersey. The 30-year-old is still one of the best rebounders and pick-and-roll bigs in the game.



47. LOU WILLIAMS

The personification of a walking bucket, Lou Will is coming off the best season of his career. Rewarded with a three-year, \$24 million extension, Lou has found a home in L.A.



48. KYLE KUZMA

He may come off the bench to make room for King James, but Kyle Kuzma will continue to be a major source of buckets for the Lakers during his sophomore campaign.



49. CARMELO ANTHONY

There's no dancing around the fact that Carmelo Anthony had the worst statistical season of his career last year. But Melo is still a bucket and is capable of being very effective in his new role.



50. BRANDON INGRAM

It's easy to forget that Ingram just turned 21. Capable of doing a bit of everything on the court—including at times running the point—Ingram is poised for another big leap.

31. BRIAN SEVARD/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 32. STREETEER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES; 33. DAVID LIAM KYLE; 34. JACK ARENT; 35. BRIAN SEVARD; 36. BRIAN BABINEAU; 37. JONATHAN BACHMAN; 38. BRIAN BABINEAU; 39. BRANDON DILL/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; 40. STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES; 41. BRIAN BABINEAU; 42. JOE MURPHY; 43. JEFF FITLOW; 44. GARY DINEEN; 45. GARY BASSING; 46. GLENN JAMES; 47. WILL NAVARRO; 48. ADAM PANTOZZI; 49. JEFF FITLOW; 50. ATIBA JEFFERSON/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES

ROOKIES MOST LIKELY TO...



WEAR YEEZY HOOP SHOES IN A GAME
LONNIE WALKER JR

BE A SECOND-ROUND STEAL
HAMIDOU DIALLO

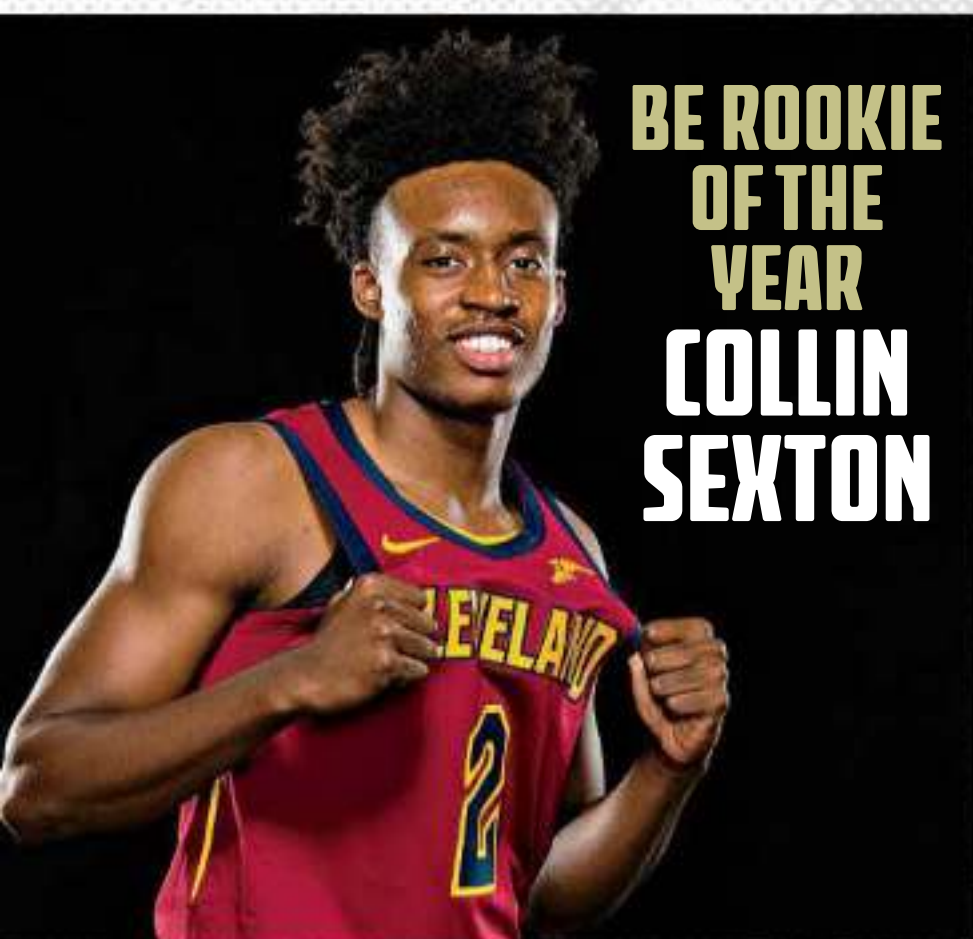
APPEAR IN A MUSIC VIDEO
MARVIN BAGLEY III



STEAL YOUR GIRL
MICHAEL PORTER JR



BECOME AN @LEAGUEFITS STAR
SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER



BE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR
COLLIN SEXTON



START DANCING IN THE MIDDLE OF A GAME
MO BAMBA

AVERAGE
20 POINTS
KEVIN KNOX



AVERAGE
20 REBOUNDS
DEANDRE AYTON



AVERAGE
20 ASSISTS
TRAE YOUNG



WALKER JR: MARK SOBANI; DIALLO: ALEX NAHORNIK-SVENSKI; WIDNER: ROCKY WIDNER; PORTER JR: JAMIE SCHWABEROW/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; SEXTON: JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; BAMBA: JENNIFER POTTHEISER; GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER: ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN; KNOX: MICHELLE FARSI; AYTON: MICHAEL GONZALES/ALL NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; YOUNG: KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES

TALK UP



OVER THE PAST YEAR, CANADA NATIVE
R.J. BARRETT BECAME THE MOST DECORATED
HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL PLAYER SINCE A
HALFWAY-DECENT ATHLETE NAMED LEBRON JAMES.
NOW R.J. IS LEADING AN ABSOLUTELY STACKED
TEAM AT DUKE UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE'LL
SHOW OUT FOR ONE SEASON BEFORE HE'S
OFF TO NBA SUPERSTARDOM. BELIEVE IT.

WORDS FRANKLYN CALLE

PORTRAITS JOHN KEALEY

SLAM #218 // PAGE 47





STANDING ON THE rooftop of the Thompson Hotel in downtown Toronto, R.J. Barrett is staring at the ever-evolving skyline. He's in his native country for a three-game, two-city tour with his Duke Blue Devils squad. The 6-7 wing and his teammates are the talk of the city. A family friend pulls out his phone to show that courtside seats for the game against Ryerson University are on StubHub for as much as \$5,000. Five thousand American dollars, that is.

"I find it kind of crazy that I get to play in front of everyone I love at home with my brothers," Barrett says. "I definitely didn't expect this. I was really excited because it's right in my city—my hometown—[and] I wanted to show the guys Canada. Not a lot of people have been to Toronto."

While Duke features one of the most star-studded, top-heavy recruiting classes in recent history—Barrett, along with fellow freshmen Zion Williamson and Cam Reddish, were ranked as the top three recruits in the Class of 2018 coming out of

high school—R.J., as the hometown hero, is the main draw this week in The North.

Although the view from the outdoor deck provides a tranquil ambiance, it doesn't mean R.J. doesn't draw a crowd, even on a relatively quiet Tuesday afternoon. There are ESPN cameras trailing R.J. and the rest of the squad during the off-season as part of a docu-series expected to air before the start of the season. Nonetheless, R.J. and family seem to embrace it all, understanding the impact that his status at Duke will bring not only to college basketball, but to his native country as well.

THE SON OF two former athletes—R.J.'s dad Rowan Sr hooped at St. John's University, represented Canada in the 2000 Summer Olympics and is now the Assistant General Manager/Executive VP for the Canadian National Teams; his mother Kesha was a sprinter on SJU's track and field team; his aunt (his mom's sister) represented

Jamaica as an Olympic sprinter in the '92 Barcelona Games—R.J. hit the genetic jackpot long before he set foot on a court.

It also doesn't hurt to have a two-time NBA MVP as your godfather, as in Steve Nash, who has been friends with R.J.'s father ever since the two played together on Canada's U19 squad in the early '90s.

But his rich background doesn't just stop with his genes. R.J.'s upbringing also has versatility of its own. He lived in France, where his dad played professionally until 2008, and is fluent in French. So you have a hooper of Jamaican descent, who lived from 2003-2008 in France before relocating to Canada while making multiple trips to visit family (and hoop) in Brooklyn in between.

"When we started having children we wanted to settle in one country, get a language and some normality, and we decided on France," recalls Rowan Sr, who also hooped professionally in Spain, Greece, Israel, Argentina and Venezuela. "We were in a town called Dijon, another called Chalon and another, Lyon, in southern France. It was a soccer country, so R.J. played both soccer and basketball and ran a little track,

but his passion was always basketball.

"We had a huge playroom in one of our places and we had everything in there—soccer goals, etc.," Rowan Sr adds. "We'd always hide the basketball goal because we were cognizant that we didn't want him to gravitate toward it because he felt we wanted him to. But he'd go in there looking for it until he found it. He always had a love for it. When my team was practicing and we'd go shower [afterward], he'd go on the court and start shooting until we turned off the lights."

Aside from his exposure to the international game, Rowan also made sure that R.J. received the proper mental training. Both Rowan and Kesha have family in Brooklyn, NY, and the family often made trips to the Big Apple to partake in the gritty hoops culture there.

"We'd go to see family and take him out to the blacktop. I went to school in New York so I'd just travel to Harlem and Coney Island. I had an understanding of what that was and how important it was for him," Rowan Sr says "The city game isn't a lot of

"Winning that National Championship. That's all I want."

jump shots—it's a lot of going to the rim, figuring out how to get to the rim. No one calls foul. All the trash talk, the chatter. Can you play while someone is talking to you? Don't look over to the side, Daddy can't help you. So we'd take him there in the summer and it was great for his development in terms of toughness. He learned the European way, and then he played in Brooklyn."

Plus, after attending St. Marcellinus Secondary School in Mississauga for one year, R.J. did what almost every other promising Canadian hooper has done: he moved south of the border to match up against top-ranked players in the States.

In 2015, he landed at powerhouse Montverde Academy in Orlando, and it didn't take him long to claim his spot among the best in the U.S. Head coach Kevin Boyle had heard some rumblings about the Canadian's potential but had made no promises regarding playing time upon his arrival.

Just a handful of weeks into his first season at Montverde, when he was technically still considered a freshman, R.J. dropped 31 points, 9 rebounds and 6 assists against a Lonzo Ball-led Chino Hills squad, a team that went on to finish undefeated and as the top team in the nation.

By his senior year, R.J. solidified his place as the No. 1 recruit in the Class of

2018. At Montverde, which counts D'Angelo Russell, Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons as alumni, R.J. was able to take the Eagles to a perfect 35-0 as a senior, claiming the Geico Nationals championship and the No. 1 spot in the high school national rankings.

Following the season, the shifty lefty who frequently draws comparisons to James Harden went on to claim all major National POY awards: Gatorade, Naismith, Morgan Wootten, All-USA Today, MaxPreps and Mr. Basketball USA. The last high school hooper to sweep these national accolades was LeBron James in 2003, which makes R.J. the single most decorated HS prospect since the King himself.





"I [knew I] wanted to take basketball serious at 11, 12 years old," R.J. says. "That's when I started writing all my goals and dreams out on a board in my room. And they're all coming true one by one. Some things I wrote were become a McDonald's All-American, go to a DI college, get drafted in the first round, No. 1 pick, All-Star, Hall of Fame—you know, anything a kid wants."

But these milestones (at least the ones he's accomplished thus far) aren't even his biggest achievements to date. In the summer of 2017, R.J. represented Canada in the FIBA U19 World Cup in Egypt. After going 2-1 in pool play and defeating France by six points in the quarterfinals, Canada was matched up against the John Calipari-led U.S. squad in the semifinals.

Barrett, then 17, was competing against

a U19 American squad that featured big-time collegiate hoopers. He dropped 38 points, 13 rebounds and 5 assists in a shocking 99-87 upset victory. It was the first time the Americans lost a game in any age group in six years. The next day he dropped 18 and 12 against Italy in the championship game to capture the gold. It marked the first time ever that a Canadian men's basketball team won gold in international play in any age group. The historic feat sent R.J. into legend status back home. Last year's run also brought optimism to a country that hasn't qualified for the Olympics in men's basketball since 2000.

"It meant a lot for the country," R.J. says. "Canadians are starting to believe. The kids now say they want to get a gold medal and do the things we did. That makes me happy,

that we were able to put on for our country.

"Five years from now, we'll have a strong group of guys for the Canadian National Team," he adds. "I think we could form a pretty good team. I feel like NBA players are going to have to get cut because there is going to be so many of us. We'll just see what the future holds."

Beyond R.J., Canada is experiencing a basketball renaissance of its own. The country is expected to have a handful of players in the 2019 NBA Draft, with Barrett unanimously projected at No. 1. Aside from the volume of local players becoming high-profile recruits in the U.S., it's this new level of competitiveness, assertiveness and intensity that is separating this next crop of Canadians from the generations before it. Just ask Duke associate head coach Jon Scheyer, who witnessed it first hand this summer when R.J. arrived on campus.

"I remember one of the first workouts, [Director of Basketball Operations] Nolan Smith and I were working with him, and we said you have to score a certain amount of points without us getting a stop," Scheyer says. "And it was like a light switch turned on. He became a different person. Ever since then, when we do shooting drills or anything else, everything is either winning or losing. And if he loses, he's as pissed as could be. He's angry because he's that competitive. It's refreshing to have that."

Adds R.J., "In my family we're very competitive. Everyone is always trying to beat each other. Everyone is an athlete, so that's where I get all my competitive drive."

DUKE'S CANADIAN TOUR went as expected. Sold-out crowds. Blow-out victories. R.J. led the team in scoring with 30.7 ppg and 5 apg. Zion Williamson wasn't far behind, averaging 29.7 points and 11.3 rebounds. The duo dominated that week's *SportsCenter* and gave a glimpse of what's expected this winter. R.J. already has all kinds of personal accomplishments on his résumé, and with high expectations bestowed upon him for the upcoming season, one would think he has a whole list ready to tackle. But that list is a little shorter than you might think.

"Winning that National Championship," R.J. says, naming the first and last goal for the coming six months. "That's the highest honor of being a collegiate athlete, so that's all I want." **S**

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COLLEGE BASKETBALL BACK! HERE'S A LOOK AT 10 MEN'S AND WOMEN'S SQUADS WE EXPECT TO MAKE SOME SERIOUS NOISE OVER THE COMING MONTHS. SEE Y'ALL IN MARCH.

WORDS DAVID CASSILO



UDOKA AZUBUIKE

MEN'S TOP 10

10. SYRACUSE ORANGE

While Syracuse is typically ravaged by early exits, this time the Orange return every major contributor from last year's

Elite 8 team. **Tyus Battle**, **Oshae Brissett** and that vexing zone defense should be enough to have Jim Boeheim's crew pushing for the ACC crown and a Final Four berth.

9. MICHIGAN STATE SPARTANS

The Spartans lost two lottery picks but return the elite inside-out duo of point guard **Cassius Winston** and big man **Nick Ward**. They give Tom Izzo the Big Ten's best team and one that should clear the NCAA Tournament first weekend hurdle that has tripped them up the last three seasons.

8. VILLANOVA WILDCATS

The reigning national champions lost four players to the NBA draft but have the talent for a quick reload. Starters **Eric Paschall** and **Phil Booth** are back, while freshmen **Jahvon Quinerly** and **Cole Swider** enter the mix. Jay Wright's team is eyeing a third national title in four seasons.

7. NORTH CAROLINA TAR HEELS

Senior **Luke Maye** and freshman **Nasir Little** give the Tar Heels an edge in the frontcourt, especially with **Sterling Manley** ready to take the next step. The ACC is deep this season, but if the backcourt can support the interior, UNC can wear the league crown.

6. GONZAGA BULLDOGS

The trio of **Killian Tillie**, **Rui Hachimura** and transfer **Brandon Clarke** give the Zags more depth and experience in the

frontcourt than any team in the country. It's no question that their returning talent is among the nation's best, but will a weak conference schedule doom them in March?

5. NEVADA WOLFPACK

After nearly making last year's Final Four, the Wolfpack may even be stronger in 2018-19. **Caleb** and **Cody Martin** are back, as is double-double threat **Jordan Caroline**. The depth should be better too, as Nevada adds five transfers who averaged double-figures in scoring and McDonald's All-American **Jordan Brown**.

4. VIRGINIA CAVALIERS

Yes, they lost as a No. 1 seed, but they also return the key pieces that earned



TYUS
BATTLE

THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT: JAMIE SCHWABEROW/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES; KIRK IRWIN/GETTY IMAGES; JASON MOWRY/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; WILLIAM MANCEBO/GETTY IMAGES

them that top seed. **Kyle Guy** and **Ty Jerome** control the backcourt, while sophomore **De'Andre Hunter** is the next Cavalier destined for the NBA. Virginia's experience and stifling defense make them the ACC favorite.

3. DUKE BLUE DEVILS

The Blue Devils have a brand new starting five, which includes freshmen **RJ Barrett**, **Zion Williamson**, **Cam Reddish** and **Tre Jones**. With **Joey Baker**, those five make up as talented a recruiting class as you'll ever see, but winning league and tournament games has proven to be difficult for teams without experience.

2. KENTUCKY WILDCATS

John Calipari has his kind of team, as there's experience in **PJ Washington**, **Quade Green** and transfer **Reid Travis** to go along with impact freshmen led by **Keldon Johnson** and **EJ Montgomery**. The SEC is tough, but it shouldn't slow up a group that is a legit national title threat.

1. KANSAS JAYHAWKS

Bill Self has Kansas looking stacked, as the Jayhawks add in the transfer duo of brothers **Dedric** and **KJ Lawson** from Memphis to team up with 7-footer **Udoka Azubuike** and five-star freshman guard **Quentin Grimes**. It's a better group than last year's Final Four team and one that can cut down the nets.

WOMEN'S TOP 10

10. TENNESSEE LADY VOLS

There's a young core in Knoxville, and the group is looking to build off of last year's second round NCAA exit. **Rennia Davis** should take the next step in her development and become the go-to scorer this team needs. Freshman **Zarielle Green** will give the Lady Vols a much needed boost.

9. STANFORD CARDINAL

The PAC-12 won't be easy to navigate, but Stanford has the depth necessary to survive a grueling slate. **Alanna Smith** and **Kiana Williams** make up a formidable inside-out duo that will cause defenses

mismatches. An improvement from last year's Sweet 16 appearance is within reach.

8. OREGON STATE BEAVERS

After an Elite Eight trip last season, the Beavers return most of their team and are poised for another deep March run. **Mikayla Pivec** and Maryland transfer **Destiny Slocum** lead a talented backcourt that was part of the most efficient three-point shooting team in the nation last year.

7. MARYLAND TERRAPINS

The likely Big Ten favorite, Maryland returns almost all its scoring from last season. **Kaila Charles** is probably the best of the group, but the most important player is **Blair Watson**, who broke out last season but suffered a torn ACL in January. If healthy, the Terrapins are Final Four threats.

6. MISSISSIPPI STATE BULLDOGS

The core that led the Bulldogs to back-to-back NCAA title games is gone, but the fall off in talent will not be far. **Teaira McCo-
wan** leads the group of returning players and could end the season as the nation's best. She had four games with 20 points and 20 rebounds last season.

5. LOUISVILLE CARDINALS

The Cardinals lose star Myisha Hines-Al-
len from last season's Final Four squad but should pick up where they left off with **Asia Durr** leading the way. Every other key contributor is back from last year's



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SABRINA IONESCU

group, meaning Louisville fans can proba-
bly count on another deep March run.

4. CONNECTICUT HUSKIES

Despite losing three of their best players from last season, UConn shouldn't miss a beat. **Napheesa Collier**, **Crystal Dangerfield** and **Katie Lou Samuel-
son** are all back, and the team adds star freshmen **Christyn Williams** and **Olivia Nelson-Ododa**. As usual, the Huskies will have significant say in who wins it all.

3. OREGON DUCKS

Now is the time for Oregon, which returns almost everyone from a group that reached its second-straight Elite 8 last season. **Sabrina Ionescu** is the Ducks' best player and perhaps the nation's top player, too. Interior standout **Ruthy Hebard** and Notre Dame transfer **Erin Boley** should give Ionescu the support she needs.

2. BAYLOR LADY BEARS

Despite an abrupt end to last season, it's hard to bet against perennial contender Baylor. **Kalani Brown** and **Lauren Cox** are back and should control the frontcourt against nearly any opponent. It's been seven seasons since Baylor's last Final Four, and this group could end the drought.

1. NOTRE DAME FIGHTING IRISH

It will be hard to top the magic of last season's national title, but Notre Dame has the pieces in place to at least match it. All of last year's key contributors return, including **Arike Ogunbowale**, and the Fighting Irish should get back **Brianna Turner** and **Mikayla Vaughn** from ACL tears.



TO THE TOP

BREANNA STEWART NOW HAS A WNBA CHAMPIONSHIP, MVP, FINALS MVP, TWO ALL-STAR NODS, FOUR NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS AND AN OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL TO HER NAME. OH, AND SHE'S BARELY 24 YEARS OLD. SAFE TO SAY IT'S OFFICIALLY STEWIE'S WORLD, AND WE'RE ALL JUST LIVING IN IT.

WORDS HOWARD MEGDAL

SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES



IN THE MINUTES after Breanna Stewart won her first WNBA championship, her veteran teammate and league legend Sue Bird said something interesting about Stewart's career arc.

"She clearly knows what it takes, and sometimes it just takes a couple of years to really figure out yourself in this league because it's a very tough league to play in, and now here she is," Bird said. She was sitting next to Stewart, who was seated directly behind her Finals MVP trophy, the Seattle Storm now champions of the WNBA world. "She's figured it out. It's

probably going to get a little harder from here to be honest, but I think she's ready for it."

At the risk of disagreeing with Bird, it's hard to see exactly how it gets more difficult for Stewart, now that she's experienced precisely what it takes to win a WNBA title.

Consider how utterly at home she looked in the close-out game of the series against the Washington Mystics. Nevermind that she is job one on every scouting report on the Storm, with the general consensus of the league similar to the determination Mystics coach Mike Thibault reached: No matter how you play her, Stewart is going to get hers.

The days, even the minutes leading up to that final game itself, provided a window into the overreaching skills Stewart has at her disposal already, an array of attributes one might choose if genetically engineering the most dominant basketball player imaginable.

Nothing about Stewart's role on the Storm is indicative of a 24-year-old who just over two calendar years ago could be found on a college campus. Stewart approached Bird about the form on her three-point shot in the cauldron of a Game 5 semifinal against Diana Taurasi and the Phoenix Mercury—the "Use your legs, Sue!" imploring from Stewart led first to a 14-point explosion by Bird, then a custom t-shirt both Bird and Stewart wore at separate Storm title celebrations.

That image of Stewart from the gathering at Key Arena, after a parade in Seattle to honor the latest title winner in franchise history, is a legitimate stand-in to how opponents must see her: Stewart, holding a broom that only accentuated further her 7-1 wingspan, not bragging, but not shying away from her accomplishments, either.

"Honestly, it didn't feel like my first WNBA Finals close-out game," Stewart said after it was over. "I think the way I looked at it was just another game. One game leads us to what we've been working for, for four months, and just having that mindset."

The dominant Syracuse, NY, product has plenty of championship experience, from the four titles she won at Connecticut to a gold medal with USA Basketball. Her coach, Dan Hughes, didn't have to look far to understand how his youthful star turned the Storm from a talented enigma in 2017, finishing 15-19, into champions.

"In the course of the game, I happened to look down the other side and just down a little bit, and all of a sudden there's CD [UConn assistant Chris Dailey] and [head coach] Geno [Auriemma] sitting, and I knew how well she was coached," Hughes said. "And I knew she had not only been coached, but had been in these moments, and that wasn't lost on me—trust me. That was not lost on me."

Stewart won't need to scale the ever-steeper repeat journey to the mountaintop alone. She has a supporting cast that includes Jewell Loyd, 25, Jordin Canada, 23, and Natasha Howard, 27. Sure, Sue Bird turns 38 in October, but she just had the most efficient shooting season of her career, and already announced she's returning in 2019, while the 2020 Olympics look like a more-than-realistic goal as well.

For Stewart, too, there's the direction the league has moved, to positionless basketball, where matchups are determined from skills instead of select spots on the court. No one can occupy as many trouble spots as Stewart can, equally adept at the blocked shots and three-point closeouts on the defensive end, capable of draining the three or going hard to the basket against the league's biggest 5s, even delivering entry passes from an angle, higher up, that makes denial impossible.

It's dispiriting for opponents to see Bird deliver the ball to a rim-running Stewart. But watching the body language of the Mystics, shoulders dropping, when Stewart sent it into Bird as she entered the lane, it's as if the play itself signaled to everyone who isn't Breanna Stewart just how impossible the years ahead will be. **\$**



ALL THE STARS

IF YOU HAVE AN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT, YOU ALREADY KNOW RENOWNED TRAINER **CHRIS BRICKLEY**'S BLACK-OPS PICK-UP RUNS FEATURED TOP NBA TALENT ALL SUMMER. HERE, HE RECAPS THE FULL EXPERIENCE, BREAKING DOWN THE BEST MOMENTS OF THE PAST FEW MONTHS.

WORDS CHRIS BRICKLEY

SLAM #218 // PAGE 56



CARMELO ANTHONY AND I ACTUALLY came up with the idea together. The runs, the Life Time gym in New York City, it's almost like a secret, like black-ops style. *Let's just call all the open runs and training Black-Ops Basketball*, we decided. That was how it started and we just ran with it.

Last summer was the first summer I did it, so everything was new. We were doing the training and saw all the Hoodie Melo stuff and the open runs were going viral. When it was over, a lot of people thought it could've been a one-time thing or a fluke. I really wanted this summer to be as powerful so Black-Ops could become a staple within basketball culture. We did it again and it was even busier—more workouts, more open runs. And it was just as good. That was the goal. Here are some of the standout moments and the inaugural Black-Ops awards:

LEBRON JAMES AND BEN SIMMONS

LEBRON AND BEN came the same day. Before the runs, I'll go up to the big players and say, *Are you cool with these being the teams?* So I had the teams set, and I had LeBron guarding Ben. I showed LeBron and he was like, *I want to play on Ben's team. I want to play together.*

As the run started, they played super well together. Just jelled really well. It was almost like LeBron was mentoring Ben throughout the run. That was a cool moment, just to see the Rookie of the Year being mentored by one of the best players to ever play the game.



CARMELO ANTHONY

IT WAS INTERESTING—the whole summer, a lot of people were down on Melo. Even among his peers, they saw the OKC year and he didn't have the best year, so a bunch of people who walked into the gym—players included—were thinking, *I'm going to be able to guard Melo*. But regardless of who is guarding him, at the end of the day, he is still a walking bucket.

No one could guard him all summer. That was cool to see—him showing people that he hasn't lost it. He for sure had a chip on his shoulder, especially when the younger guys would try to guard him. There were guys who came in and you could tell they were going into the day like, *I'm going to lock Melo down today*. And, you know, they could never do it.



JAMES HARDEN AND MELO

IT WAS THE first time since Carmelo officially became a Rocket that he was playing on the same team as James in a run. It was cool to see how they were finding each other and playing the two-man game. That day, they won every game. We usually do best of seven and they won every game. The chemistry was definitely there.

CJ MCCOLLUM

EVERY SINGLE SPECTATOR who came in the gym—whether it was an actor, rapper or just a random person—they were always like, *Wow, CJ is really good.* He really surprised everyone the whole summer. No one could stop him. He was literally one of the most consistent guys in the gym. And he actually held the record for most points in a day—he had 68. That's spread out over seven to nine games. We play ones and twos to 9 or 11. But I count the twos and threes, and he got the most points in a day. Sixty-eight. Which is crazy.



ROOKIE EDITION

MELO AND I went to the National Basketball Players Association building. He spoke to the rookies and invited them to come to the Black-Ops open run when they were done with the Rookie Transition Program. Trae Young, Miles Bridges, Mo Bamba, Hamidou Diallo, Isaiah Briscoe and Anfernee Simons came through. They literally all came together, all the Ubers came together straight to the gym from NBPA. And they had been on lockdown at the Rookie Transition for four days, so they had all the energy in the world. It was like they were playing in the playoffs, going super hard. And Melo was playing—it was just really fun to see the next group of stars play against some NBA guys. All the NBA guys were joking, like, *Man, you guys have extra energy because you haven't done anything for four days.*



KEVIN DURANT, AARON GORDON AND COLE ANTHONY

DURANT FLEW ACROSS the country, landed at like 3 in the morning from Los Angeles. The same day, high school superstar Cole Anthony left one of the camps he was at. He wanted to play with KD so bad that he landed at like 10 a.m. Both of them came in, they were super tired from their flights. We had Cole and KD on the same team, and that was really cool to witness. It was Cole's first time playing against NBA players in that setting. He was facilitating to KD and they were playing really well together. Really cool that they both flew in just to play in the run.

At the same time, KD and Aaron Gordon were going back and forth. To Aaron Gordon, it was like Game 7 of a playoff series, because he got to play against KD. He played very well. His whole game is developing.



RUSSELL WESTBROOK AND CJ

THE WESTBROOK, MCCOLLUM day—that was really cool because they are both Western Conference guards and match up against each other numerous times throughout the season. They weren't necessarily guarding each other the whole day, but they were on separate teams and were literally going basket for basket the entire session. That was one of the most entertaining days to watch. Those guys are super competitive.

TRAE YOUNG

TRAE CAME A FEW times before and also for the rookie edition. He looked really good. His first time, he was matched up against CJ McCollum, which is a great matchup for him. It was almost like a “Welcome to the NBA” moment. CJ is so hard to guard and a vet with the way he plays, so I bet that was a really good learning experience for Trae.



HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

EVERY NOW AND then we’ll do something different. This year, we decided to give high school kids Cole Anthony, [New Jersey small forward] Scottie Lewis and [New York big man] Precious Achiuwa a chance. All top-15 rising seniors in the country. It was cool just to see what they had against the NBA guys. The first two or three games, they were kind of nervous. You could tell they were playing timid. As the games progressed, they got more confident. Once they got all the jitters out, they performed really well—especially how Cole was working with KD, they had good cohesion. And Precious actually had one of the plays of the summer. He dunked on Amar’e Stoudemire so hard.

AWARDS

BEST FIT (FROM A PLAYER):

LeBron James. He debuted the Versace x Kith collab, which was huge in the fashion world. Later that day they announced it, but when LeBron walked in, that was the first time anyone had seen it. People went crazy.

BEST FIT (FROM ANYONE WHO ROLLED THROUGH):

Quavo. He wore, like, \$3,500 worth of Louis Vuitton workout gear. That was definitely outfit of the summer.

MOST THREES: Tim Hardaway Jr. He hit 13 three-pointers in

one of the runs (seven games). Just had a ridiculous shooting performance that day.

HEAT CHECK: JR Smith. In a game to 9, he scored all nine baskets to lead his team to a win. Everyone knows he can get really hot. That was the first time I’ve ever seen that—he literally scored every one of his team’s baskets.

EARLY BIRD: Donovan Mitchell. He had a 6 a.m. workout and called me at 5:27 a.m. and was like, *Hey, I’m at the gym.* He’s always early, but this

time he was super early.

BEST RAPPER WHO HOOPS:

Quavo. Rappers sometimes come and watch the pickup, and when it’s done they’ll get shots up. We had Quavo, Travis Scott and YG in the gym. Quavo was the best basketball player.

MOST SURPRISING: Terry

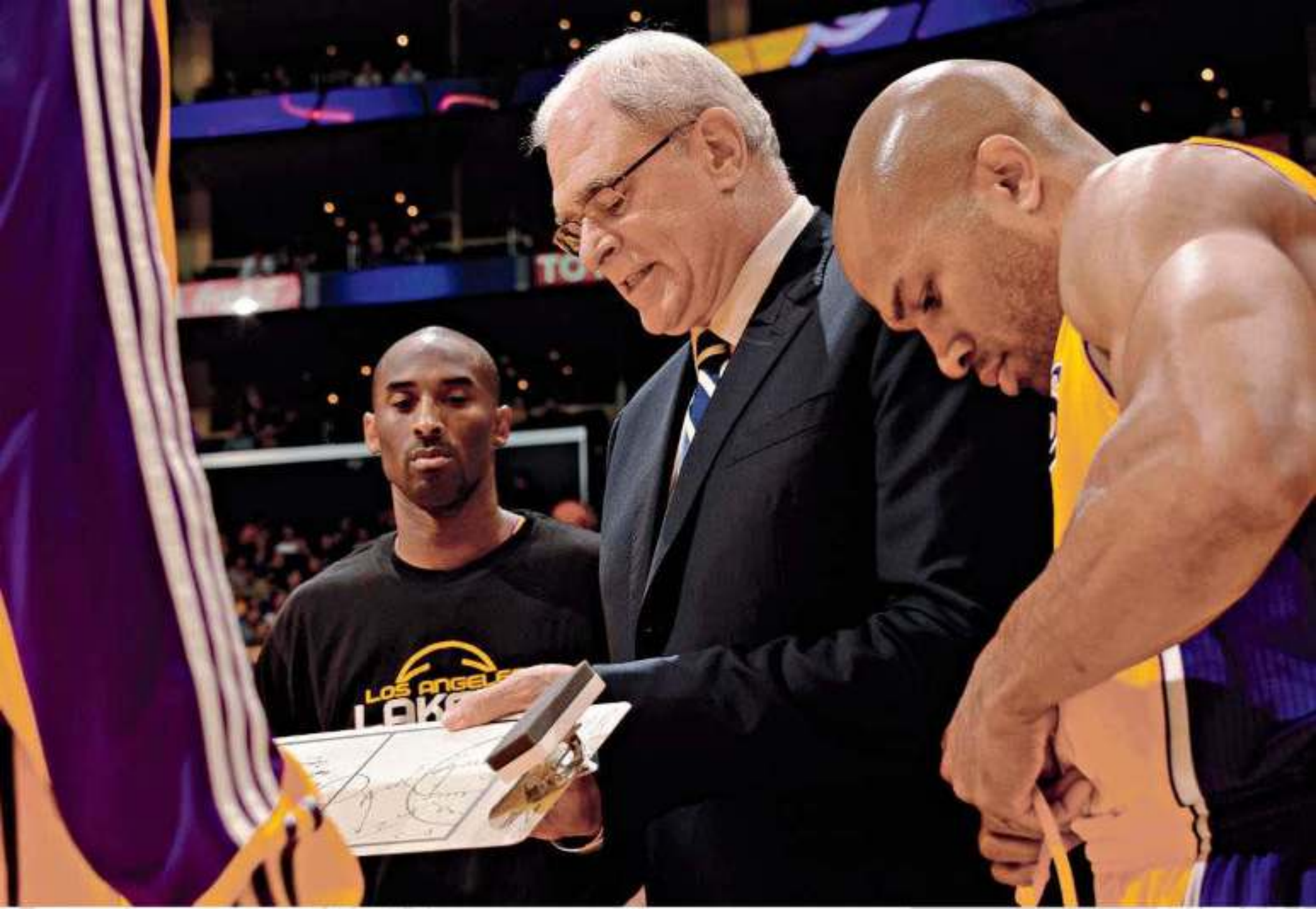
Rozier. He shocked me in his individual workout. Just shot the ball phenomenally. I’ve always known he was good and been a fan of his, but he still really surprised me. Everyone knows he can handle it, pene-

trate and defend, but his shot was phenomenal.

MOST UNDERRATED: Enes Kanter. In an open run setting, it’s tough for big men to shine. He didn’t get enough love or attention, but he was literally at every run and shot a ridiculous field goal percentage and played super hard.

MOST INTENSE: Russell Westbrook. He has one speed, goes 100 percent all the time.

MOST VIRAL MOMENT: Durag Lance Stephenson



MIND CONTROL

HERE'S AN EXCERPT FROM **KOBE BRYANT**'S NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHY,
APPROPRIATELY TITLED *THE MAMBA MENTALITY*, WHICH TOUCHES ON
COACHING, MENTORSHIP, DUNKING, CLUTCH BUCKETS AND PLENTY MORE.

THE MAMBA MENTALITY BY KOBE BRYANT. PUBLISHED BY MCD•FSG. IS OUT OCTOBER 23.

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN

A good coach is of the utmost importance.

COACHES ARE TEACHERS. Some coaches—lesser coaches—try telling you things. Good coaches, however, teach you how to think and arm you with the fundamental tools necessary to execute properly. Simply put, good coaches make sure you know how to use both hands, how to make proper reads, how to understand the game. Good coaches tell you where the fish are, great coaches teach you how to find them. That's the same at every level.

In certain situations, like in the midst of a game, good coaches relay executional information. They point out what specifically is and isn't working. Based on that and your own feel for the game, you utilize some of that information immediately and you save some of it in your back pocket for crucial moments during the game. Then, when the time is right...boom!

Phil Jackson was more than just a coach—he was a visionary.

WHEREAS HIS ASSISTANT coach Tex Winter was all about the minutiae. Phil was about the scale. He taught concepts within basketball, but more so the macro concept of basketball. He was able to teach—without lecturing—the importance of being a team and how to get from Point A to Point B to Point Championship. He was also able to get guys to understand energy, flow, and meditation.

We had a great relationship and, obviously, won a lot of games and made Purple and Gold history together. One of the reasons our relationship worked is because, in a lot of ways, we were polar opposites. Every team needs either a confrontational star player or coach. In San Antonio, Gregg Popovich was that guy and Tim Duncan was not. In Golden State, Draymond Green is the confrontational one; Steve Kerr is not. For us, Phil was not that type of person, so I provided that force. You always have to have that balance and counterbalance, and Phil and I were perfectly suited for each other in that way.

However, it took us until our second



stint together to realize how we were perfectly suited for one another. During our first go together, Phil thought I was uncoachable. He thought I questioned his authority and questioned his plans. He thought I didn't listen. When he came back, he realized that was just me being me. He realized that I was just very inquisitive and unafraid to ask questions. He realized that that's how I process information and learn. Once he put his pulse on that, he was more patient with me. He was more willing to sit and answer my many questions and talk everything through.

Now, I coach my daughter's team, and we run the triangle offense. Recently, I called Phil and filled him in on what I was teaching the girls. He was surprised by how much I learned from him. More than that, he was surprised how much detail I had retained and was now passing down.

Tex Winter was a basketball genius.

I LEARNED AN incalculable amount from him. Tex, specifically, taught the

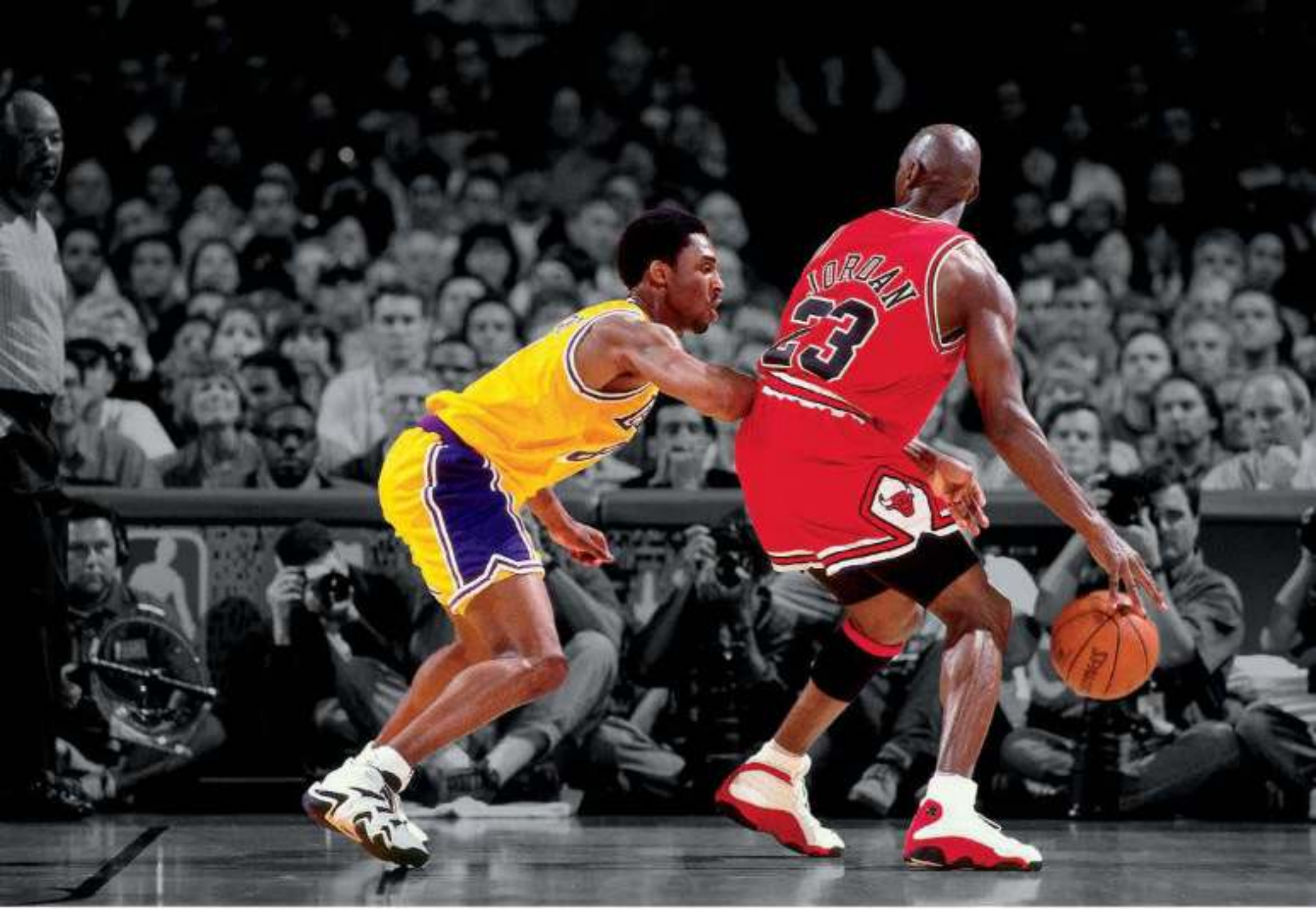
process of the game. He taught the pure craft of it. He focused on the details, flow, and nuances of the game. He was able to bring the littlest details to life and show their ultimate importance.

He was also exceedingly patient. In our first year together in L.A., he and I would re-watch every single game together—pre-season, regular season, playoffs. That's a lot of basketball. That's also detail, teaching, and patience. That's Tex. He had a great mind, and a great mind for basketball. Coaches like him are rare, and I'm blessed I got the chance to study with him.

I always said Luke Walton was destined to be a coach.

LUKE WAS A VERY smart player. He also had certain coaching traits: a bad back, like Phil used to have, and hippie lineage. I used to tell him that all the time. He didn't find it as funny as I did.

For real though, Luke had a great feel for the game. He understood how to



look at it in sequences, versus looking at one play at a time, and he was able to communicate very clearly. When I looked at the amalgamation of those things, I could see he was going to be a really good coach.

A teaching moment.

MY BALANCE, AS A young player, is off.

Just look (left) at the dichotomy between us, starting with posture. Michael is standing straight from the waist up. He's not leaning in either direction, and because of that he is balanced and centered. He is in control of his body, and the play.

Compare all that to my defense. Now, I'm using my forearm to thrust weight into his back, just like they teach it. Unfortunately, that's about all I'm doing right. I'm leaning forward, which is a major no-no, and putting too much pressure on him. That alone, by dint of gravity, causes me to be off-balance. As a result, one move by Michael, one decisive spin right or feint left, would throw me off and give him room to either shoot or spin off of me. This defense is definitely no bueno.

Thankfully, I actually saw this photo back in 1998. After studying it, I corrected my posture and balance. After that, it was a lot harder to operate against me in the post.

A big shot is just another shot.

PEOPLE MAKE A huge deal out of clutch shots. Thing is, it's just one shot. If you make a thousand shots a day, it's just one of a thousand. Once you're hitting that many, what's one more? That was my mentality from day one.

This particular shot (left) was a game-tying three in the NBA Finals. I was going to get the ball on this play, no matter what. The defense could've tried to deny me, but it would not have mattered. I was going to do whatever I had to, in this moment, to come get it.

Once you have the rock, you always have to know who is guarding you. You have to not just know, but know—and I knew Rip Hamilton's defensive strategy. Rip was very fundamentally sound and



played you straight up. He didn't do much out of the ordinary, which can be fine. Fundamentally sound, though, was not going to stop me.

So, I sized him up, kept all that information in mind, and made him do what I wanted him to do. I dragged the ball over to the wing, rocked him back, and rose up, knowing that he would only raise his arms to contest. At that point, it's just about whether I make the shot or not.

As a team, our spacing was really good. Even if they wanted to help Rip, they would not have been able to. We would spread the floor and make sure any help defenders were a long way away. By the time they'd get over, my shot, which came off of a quick rocking motion, would've already been in the air.

The last thing you notice in the photo is the lift that I'm getting. That didn't just happen overnight. It was late in the game, and it was the Finals, but I was able to get up because I was in shape. It's a small thing, but it makes a big difference.

Dunking is about domination.

WHEN YOU DUNK the ball, it lets the opposition know your mentality. It lets them know you're there to humiliate

them. It also sets an emotional tone with your teammates. It lets them know you're going to climb mountains this game and inspires them to want to climb with you.

Now, you can't just attack the cup and hope to dunk. You have to know your own limitations. More than that, you have to know the defense. To do that, you have to study film and watch how opponents like to block shots. If you're prepared with that info—with the hand they prefer to rise up with, the situations they'll back down in—you'll know how to attack and confront them.

Dikembe Mutombo was, obviously, one of the greatest defensive players of all time. He was long and lean, and he knew what he could get away with. One of the things he was great at was using his left hand to subtly try to pull you down or at least knock you off balance in the air. That, in particular, was so crafty because it appeared fundamentally sound, but in reality he was using that hand as a weapon.

My response in that situation was simple: I had to let Dikembe know that I was the real threat and not him. So, like him, I'd use my left arm and elbow. They would create space, but more important, they'd send a message: If you come any higher, you're going to run into my arm and it won't be fun for you.

Like always, you want to be the one dishing out the punishment. And the dunks. **S**

SHOOTA

LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER **ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN**
STUNNINGLY DOCUMENTED EVERY STEP OF KOBE BRYANT'S
UNBELIEVABLE 20-YEAR NBA CAREER.

WORDS ALEX SQUADRON

KOBE BRYANT MADE the rounds, stopping at station after station, conducting interviews and posing for the cameras. It was Lakers media day, October 1996. The 18-year-old, fresh out of high school, was just getting introduced to the spotlight.

He eventually made his way over to the set of NBA and team photographer Andy Bernstein, who promptly extended his hand to introduce himself, as he does with all new players.

Oh, I know who you are, Kobe said. *I had all your posters in my room growing up.*

It took Andy by surprise—not that Kobe had decorated his walls with the posters, but that he had noted the tiny credits tucked into the corner of each. It meant he had examined the shots thoroughly, studying and memorizing the details.

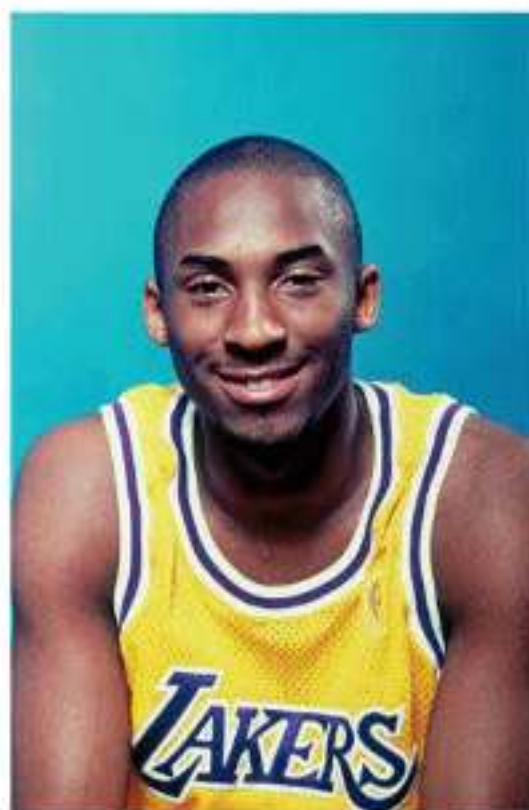
"It was really impressive to me," Bernstein recalls. "It kind of bonded us right from the beginning, because I could really tell that he was a student of the game, even at that age."

There was a lot about Kobe that immediately resonated with Andy. "He had this tremendous confidence, this tremendous drive. And quite frankly, I identified with that," he tells us. "I was like that at his age, too. I gravitate toward people like that. Kobe has a great quote: *If you're not passionate about what you do, then we don't speak the same language.* I really felt like he and I spoke the same language from day one."

That language bonded them as they both embarked on Hall of Fame careers in their respective fields, side by side.

The highlight plays. The game-winners. The locker room celebrations. The retirement tour. Bernstein was there every step of the way, beautifully capturing Bryant's path from that kid at media day to a five-time NBA champion.

As the two grew closer over the years, Kobe granted Bernstein exclusive access to observe some of his more private moments. Bryant was known to keep himself sequestered at times, trying to avoid distractions so he could



focus solely on his craft.

Andy documented independent workouts and meditation sessions, traveled with the Lakers and hung around Kobe's family.

"It just speaks to our relationship that he felt very comfortable with me and [there was] a tremendous mutual respect," he says. "Obviously, I respected him as a player, an athlete, somebody of that stature. And I also felt that Kobe was very respectful of what I had to do."

It is impossible for Bernstein to pinpoint a number, but he conservatively estimates that he has taken around 400,000 pictures of Kobe Bryant. Some in that vast collection stand out, such as a shot of Kobe sitting in the visiting locker room at Madison Square Garden before the second game of a grueling back-to-back (right). His feet are submerged in ice, his busted finger in a coffee cup. The expression on his face is pensive and intense. He is mentally and physically preparing for another battle.

In pondering their journey together, Bernstein reminisces about a commercial shoot from about 20 years ago, set somewhere in the rural parts of New York on a drizzly, windy day. Andy put up a white backdrop on an old country road to photograph Kobe, along with a few other NBA players, when they weren't filming.

As Bernstein is working with Spurs legend Tim Duncan, strong gusts begin to blow his set away.

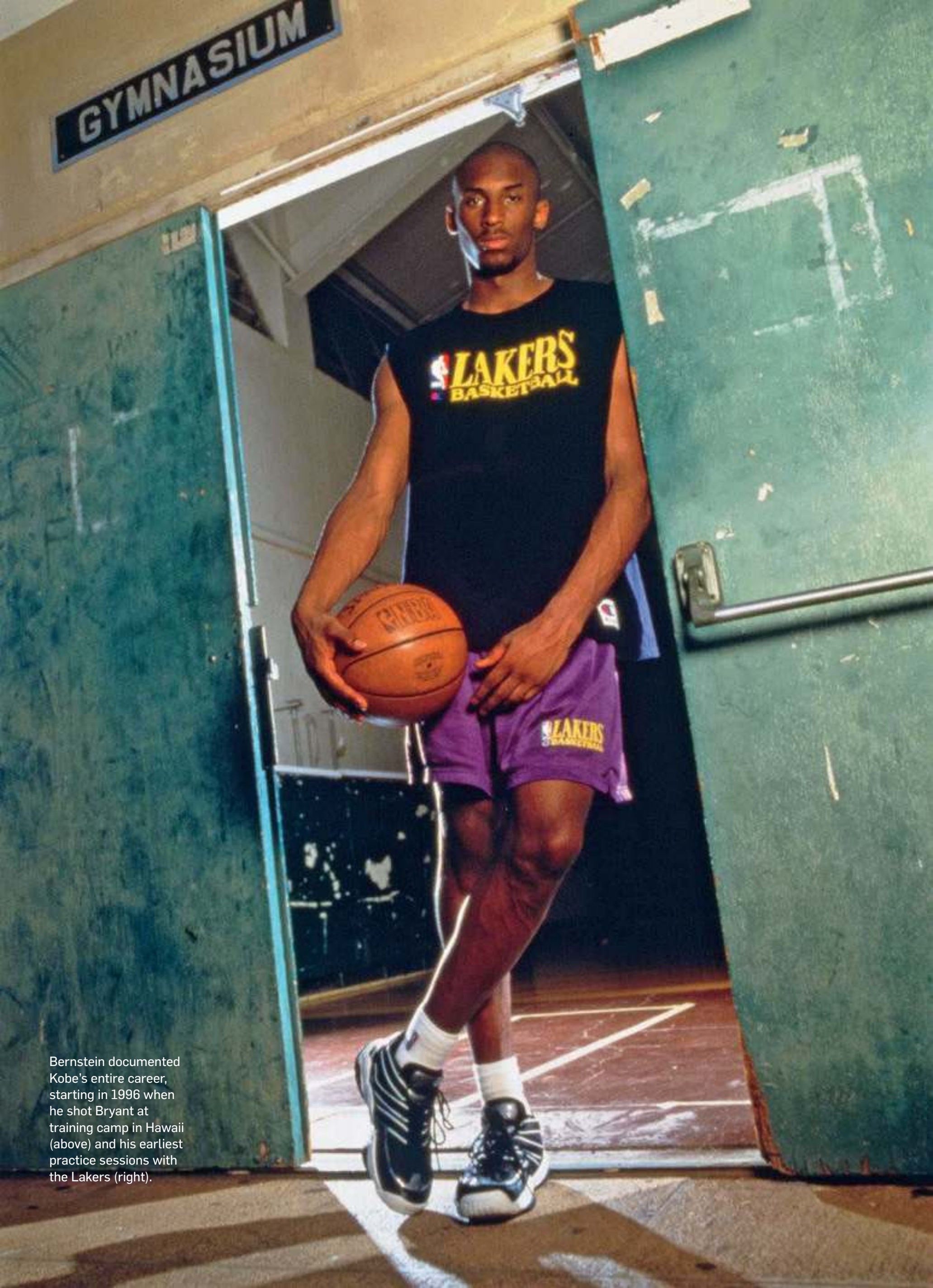
"And there's Kobe, young guy probably in his second year, standing there holding the stand that's holding up the backdrop," Bernstein says. "I thought it was really cool. He saw that we were all kind of in distress and came to the rescue. I'll never forget that."

It was emblematic of what made Kobe special. Amid chaos and distress, he came to the rescue.

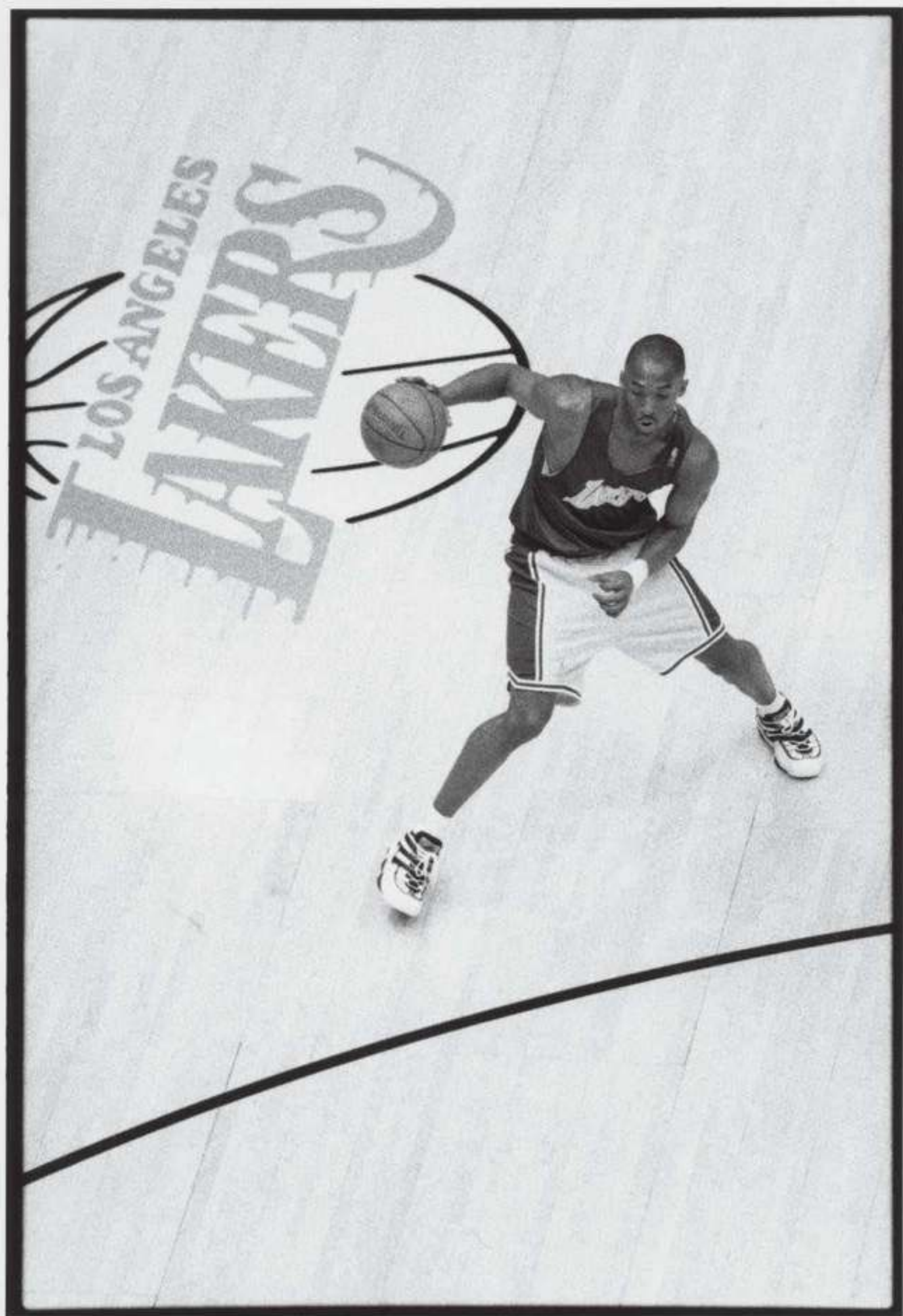
That lasting image—of Bryant propping up the backdrop against the wind—is also a symbol of the great bond he developed with Andy, a bond that has led them to collaborate on a new book entitled *The Mamba Mentality* that dives into the mind of Kobe and his unique approach to basketball.

Both of them possessed the ambition, drive and passion that lies at the core of that mentality. Both of them spoke the same language. **\$**





Bernstein documented Kobe's entire career, starting in 1996 when he shot Bryant at training camp in Hawaii (above) and his earliest practice sessions with the Lakers (right).



THE MAKING OF THE GOAT JERSEY

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, THE TORONTO RAPTORS WERE ESTABLISHED, AND TWO YEARS LATER THE TEAM MADE ITS NBA DEBUT WHILE ROCKING ONE OF THE WILDEST JERSEYS IN LEAGUE HISTORY, A PURPLE-AND-RED UNI WITH A MASSIVE DINOSAUR ON THE FRONT. IT WAS STRANGE AS HELL, BUT IT WAS PERFECT. THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY OF HOW THAT INCREDIBLE JERSEY CAME TO BE—AND WHY IT WILL BE FOREVER ICONIC.

WORDS ALEX WONG

IN 1993, THE NBA awarded Toronto with its first NBA franchise. Along with Vancouver, two new expansion franchises in Canada would join the League in 1995. Canadian businessman John Bitove Jr led a group of investors who became the original owners of the basketball franchise in Toronto, which was then tasked with the responsibility of coming up with a nickname and a logo for the team.

After months of research, a bit of inspiration from the movie *Jurassic Park*, a desire to create the Happy Meal box of uniforms, and a focus of becoming an international brand, the Toronto Raptors was born. This is the oral history of the Raptors' infamous dinosaur logo and accompanying jersey, from its inception, to the reaction at the time from players and fans, to its lasting cultural impact.

PART 1

THE ORIGIN

TOM O'GRADY (*Creative Director, NBA*): I was the first creative director at the

NBA. When I walked into the league office, there was nobody who knew Photoshop, and I just came in and started the department. My first business card said Art Director. I had a drafting table and some tracing paper. It was exciting. **JOHN BITOVE JR** (*Owner, Toronto Raptors*): There was a very creative talent at the NBA office, Tom O'Grady, who was a really fantastic guy to collaborate with. We had worked together on the 1994 FIBA World Championship logo, so there was a trust.

O'GRADY: Early on, everyone assumed they were going to be named the Huskies, because of the Toronto basketball team that was there in 1946.

BITOVE JR: I was going to call it the Huskies. But I talked to people at the League, and they said, "We already have the Minnesota Timberwolves. You might want to try something new." I was like, You guys are right.

O'GRADY: John was a younger guy, and while he didn't frown on Canadian pride, he told me, "The last thing I want is a maple leaf with a basketball. I want this to be an international brand."

BITOVE JR: We wanted something that

was global and something different that would stand out in the Canadian landscape. That's how we ended up with purple as our dominant color. It wasn't being used anywhere in Canada at the time.

HIMAL MATHEW (*Consultant, Toronto Raptors*): We were looking for something contemporary, youthful, energetic and with an appeal that would be much wider than the traditional hockey culture at the time.

ISIAH THOMAS (*Part Owner and Executive Vice President, Toronto Raptors*): John and I felt focusing on the youth and capturing the next generation was the most important thing. We spent a lot of time studying Disney and McDonald's. When you look at someone like Mickey Mouse, we wanted something that would basically stand the test of time.

O'GRADY: He saw what McDonald's had with the happy meal. Kids would walk in for a crappy hamburger and apple juice, and their eyes would light up because of the Happy Meal box. John wanted the Happy Meal box of uniforms. He wanted kids to be attached to it. I remember Bitove Jr asked me what my experience was with other teams in professional



STOUDAMIRE

sports that had been named after dinosaurs. I know more about sports logos than I should, and I couldn't think of any team. He asked if I thought there was an opportunity there, especially with the popularity of *Jurassic Park*.

BITOVE JR: My personal preference was T-Rex. I thought Toronto T-Rex had a good ring to it. But people said the T-Rex was slow and lumbered around, where the Raptor was faster, and it just seemed to identify more with what you wanted a basketball player to be. Hockey is the old, established white man sport in Canada. The only way we were going to grow the

sport was focusing on the youth, women and new Canadians. We did a focus group on the final 10 names (Beavers, Bobcats, Dragons, Grizzlies, Hogs, Raptors, Scorpions, T-Rex, Tarantulas, Terriers) and people got the most excited about the Raptors name.

MATHEW: Almost every individual pundit had their own favorite name, which they argued for passionately. Similarly, there were names that people didn't like and took great pleasure in mocking. The name "Raptors" came as a surprise to me and I think to many. I thought it was creative, original and strategically right on target.

O'GRADY: We designed a few versions of the Raptor and I faxed some stuff to him.

BITOVE JR: It was awesome. It hit everything that we wanted. It was global. It was different. It was animal-like.

O'GRADY: The original uniforms were pretty simple. We had the Raptors font on top of a logo, a circle and a number underneath it. John was like, I want more, this is not enough. The marching order was let's do something that's over the top with the uniforms. We did one with the claw marks on the pinstripes. And he said, we need one more thing.

BITOVE JR: I told Tom, why don't we throw the full logo on the jersey. He sent it back to me and was like, this thing is really standing out. I said, Good, that's what we want.

O'GRADY: He ran home. He went crazy. His kids loved it. Restraint was never a desire. We really let it rip. It was really fun. It was a great chance as a designer to get in there and do something that pretty much no one had ever seen before.

BITOVE JR: We had a lime green version [pictured on next page]. We had gold as the color instead of silver. We had various different versions.

O'GRADY: The red didn't pop in until later. John started having conversations with some of the other owners, and they mentioned there was nothing that spoke to Canada here. I remember he called and said he wanted to change the Raptor to red instead of green.

BITOVE JR: The lime green Raptor was a very close second. At the end of the day, we had to have some red because we're in Canada, so I said fine, we'll put the Canadian red in there so there's some Canadian in it.

O'GRADY: When we started putting together the purple, the red and put it together with the black, it started to look really badass. It was tough looking.

THOMAS: Purple was my favorite color, and our colors became very popular. The city and the fans embraced it.

PART 2

THE REACTION

THE TEAM'S LOGO was officially unveiled in 1994. The official colors were red, purple, black and "Naismith silver," in honor of James Naismith, the Canadian

who invented basketball in 1891. Even if not everyone fell in love with the logo, they could all agree on one thing: it was different.

JOSHUA ROTER (Co-owner, *In Vintage We Trust*): The Raptors took an amazing risk and giant leaps in terms of branding. It didn't look like anything that existed in pro sports. It really personified that specific era.

O'GRADY: The traditionalists hate it. It's not classic, it's not the Celtics or Lakers—well, no shit. The younger kids love it because it's so different and so fresh and it's so anti-traditional sports design.

PAUL LUKAS (Journalist, *Uni Watch*): In the earlier eras, cartoon animals in sports logos were Bugs Bunny characters. They were fun loving and a little mischievous. The Raptor looked ferocious and intimidating. Although it was also so over the top, there was a camp element to it.

ROTER: Graphically, looking at the logo, it's really well done. The teeth, the shoes with the toes coming out are fire. There's a lot to love about it.

J.E. SKEETS (TV Personality, *NBA TV's The Starters*): The logo is gigantic—that's another hilarious part, not only is it a Raptor dribbling, which is hilarious, it's just gigantic. It takes up the entire jersey. And then you throw in those weird pinstripes. There's a lot going on.

TRACY MURRAY (Player, *Toronto Raptors 1995-96*): I loved the colors. The original colors, man. Purple, black and white. I loved it.

SKEETS: On the one hand, it didn't matter because I was such a huge basketball fan, so it was like, who cares, Toronto is getting a basketball team. And then it was like, what are they called? What was that thing? What does that have to do with Toronto and Canada?

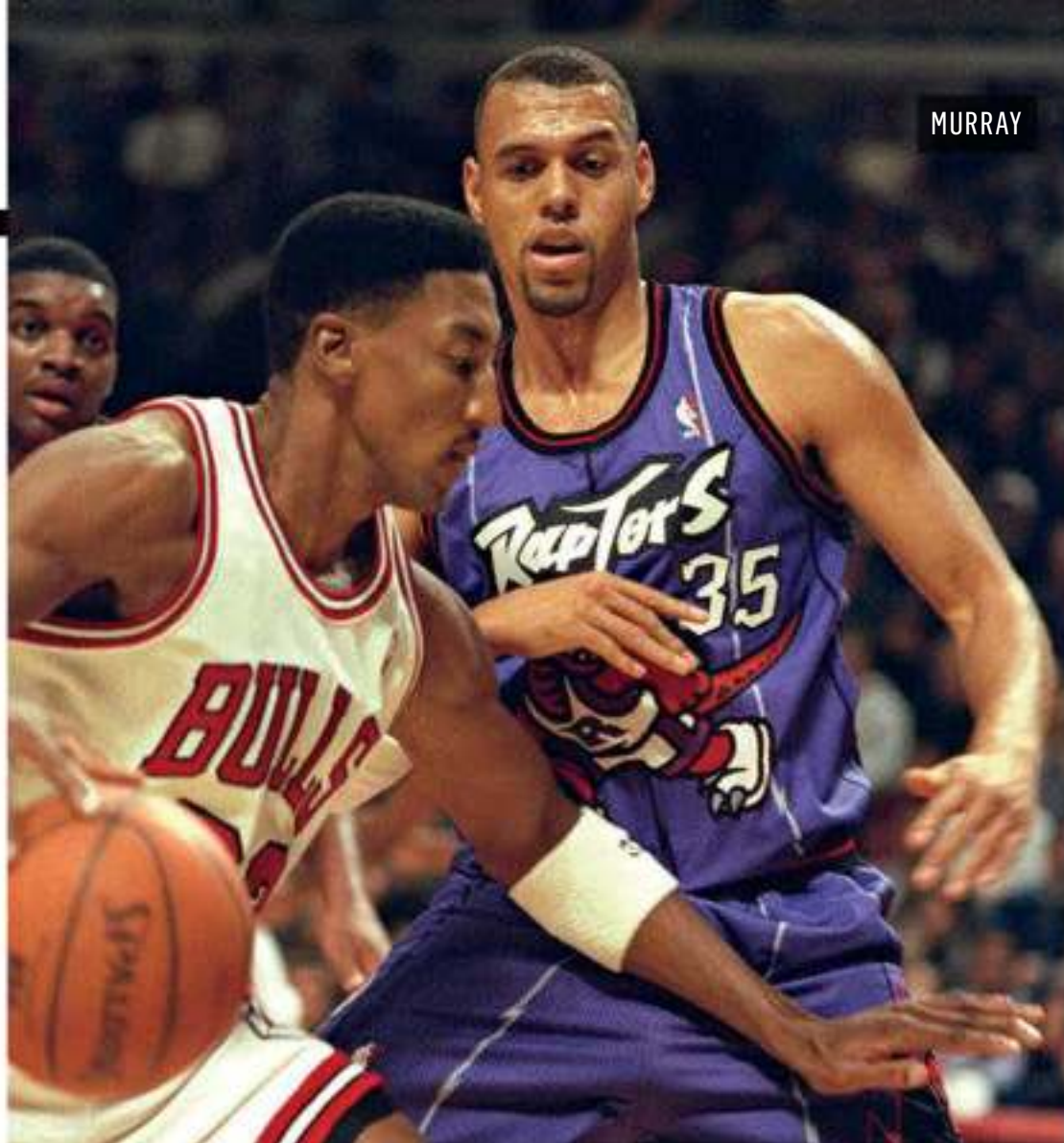
THOMAS: *Jurassic Park* was very popular, and the Raptor just fit what we wanted to be. It had ferocity and intelligence, and the Raptor was known for its intellect and one of the smartest dinosaurs. It fit what we were trying to impart into our team.

MURRAY: It was based on a pack of smaller carnivore dinosaurs that operates as one. I thought it was appropriate for us. We played extremely hard and we played as one.

ROTER: If you look up the dictionary of what a sports logo looked like in 1995,

EARLY RAPTORS LOGO SKETCHES





the Raptors logo would be there. The era was louder and much more stylized than it is now.

DAMON STOUDAMIRE (*Player, Toronto Raptors, 1995-98*): I thought it looked like Barney at first.

MURRAY: It was Barney with teeth.

BITOVE JR: That was a complete coincidence. We knew people were going to say that, but we didn't want to give up on the color purple. We established the color purple before we established the logo.

JEROME WILLIAMS (*Player, Toronto Raptors, 2001-03*): It didn't remind me of Barney, because the Raptor was always mean and aggressive.

O'GRADY: I always thought what we did was badass and different. If you see the *Jurassic Park* logo, it's got this extinct dinosaur. I thought no one would ever call that guy Barney. I understand people react because of the purple, but it wasn't a purple dinosaur—it was red, and he had some character to him.

MURRAY: We used to make jokes about that, and jokes were flying from opposing players all the time about it.

STOUDAMIRE: I knew people were making fun of them, but no one said anything directly to me.

MURRAY: You could make jokes, but we would come at you like a pack of Raptors.

STOUDAMIRE: It grew on me. It became synonymous with who we were.

PART 3

CULTURAL IMPACT

AS BITOVE JR PREDICTED, the Raptors were a bad basketball team for their first few years in the League. But everything changed when Vince Carter ended up with the franchise in 1998.

By the time he captured the attention of basketball fans worldwide at the 2000 Slam Dunk Contest, the Raptors were wearing a different jersey design, albeit one that was still purple.

At last year's Slam Dunk Contest, when Donovan Mitchell paid homage to Carter by wearing his jersey, it was a Mitchell & Ness throwback of Carter's rookie season, the famed dinosaur logo jersey. (As opposed to the actual, much-less-cool jersey VC wore in the '00 Dunk Contest.) Over two decades later, the original Raptors logo/jersey combo continues to make a pop culture impact as one of the most popular and fun-to-wear throwbacks in existence.

O'GRADY: A lot of people have fond memories of the logo today.

ROTER: I definitely miss the purple. The best memories of being a Raptors fan is the Vince Carter era.

LYNN BLOOM (*Director, Authentics and*

Archives, Mitchell & Ness): In 2017, the Vince Carter 1998-99 season jersey was our fifth best selling authentic jersey. The authentic Raptors shorts were fifth and the Swingman shorts were seventh. The Raptors warm-up jacket was our sixth best selling outerwear piece. The Raptors are definitely one of our top-selling teams.

SKEETS: I think the part of Vince Carter wearing that colorway when he's in the Dunk Contest and getting on *SportsCenter* every night, that's a big part of it. Vince Carter is forever going to be known as one of the coolest basketball players we ever saw.

BLOOM: I think it's a true appreciation of the uniqueness of the logo, design and colors. And Vince Carter.

BITOVE JR: Everyone remembers Vince Carter's Slam Dunk Contest and remembers him doing it in the dinosaur jersey—but he didn't. That speaks to the strength of the dinosaur jersey.

ROTER: We have a lineup of people at the door at our store ready to buy whatever dinosaur piece we have. It doesn't matter if it's a hat, a jersey, a t-shirt, a jacket. I could drop a floor-length parka with a dinosaur logo in July and someone would buy it. It's definitely the most sought-after sports logo in the store.

STOUDAMIRE: In hindsight, the dinosaur design was ahead of its time.

KAYLEM MULLINGS (*16-year-old Toronto-area High School Basketball Player*): I have noticed its popularity coming back. I think that it's a really cool outfit and the design has a higher artistic value compared to the other throwback jerseys.

KEVIN NGURE (*17-year-old Toronto-area High School Basketball Player*): My favorite part of the original logo would have to be the purple. It just stands out. Purple isn't really common with NBA teams so it makes it unique.

LUKAS: Nostalgia is one of the strongest forces in sports. People really embrace memory and history. Things that were once lambasted as horrible and the worst design ever and an embarrassment, give it enough time, and suddenly it becomes nostalgically endearing.

BITOVE JR: There's pride that we created something and achieved what we wanted.

O'GRADY: It's been fun to see it have a second life. The logo has such a polarizing identity. You either love it or hate it. It's one of those rare birds. **\$**



HE GON' BALL

HARLEM RAPPER **TJ PORTER** HAD HOOP DREAMS BEFORE HE EVER PICKED UP A MIC, BUT WITH A HOT SINGLE AND A MAJOR LABEL DEAL JUST MONTHS AFTER GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL, IT'S CLEAR CHANGING COURSE WAS THE RIGHT DECISION.

WORDS ALEX SQUADRON PORTRAITS JOSEPH L. SHERMAN

GROWING UP IN Harlem, NY, a young TJ Porter had a vision. He was going to dominate the city hoops scene, earn a scholarship to Duke and go on to play in the NBA. The game was his first true love, which should come as no surprise if you're at all familiar with his hometown.

"You can't get New York basketball nowhere else," says Porter, who was a point guard for powerhouse NY high school Cardinal Hayes.

His style?

"I'm athletic, I play a lot of defense and I can get to the basket easy."

And of course, coming from NYC, he talks a lot of trash.

"That's all I do," he says.

TJ's staple is to shout "We gon' ball!"—a phrase that has also served as his motto in the music industry. You see, Porter's dream has been slightly altered from when he was a kid. Now 18, he's not on his way to Duke, but rather has established himself as a promising, up-and-coming rapper.

It was roughly three years ago that Porter changed courses after his close friend Juwan "Chico" Tavaréz was tragically shot and killed. Scrolling through old text messages, he was reminded of how much Tavaréz liked his rapping—a



hobby TJ had largely abandoned due to his obsession with basketball. He decided right then to revisit it.

"I wasn't doing it for me," he tells us. "I was doing it for [Juwan]. He always wanted me to."

Porter has since released hits such as "Tricky" that have garnered over 849,000 listens on SoundCloud (as of this writing)

and inked a deal with Def Jam.

With a new chapter of his life just beginning, Porter recognizes the parallels between his past path and his current one.

"The hard work you got to put into music is the same hard work you got to put into basketball," he says. "Just how [I was] in the gym every day, I'm in the studio every day." **\$**



SAN DIEGO STATE

5

ROTARY

2

THE COME UP

Quiet Storm

JALEN MCDANIELS is a stud at San Diego State University who's projected as a first-round pick in the 2019 NBA Draft. His little brother **JADEN** is a high school star who's one of the top players in the Class of 2019. They don't talk much, but their games speak for them—and those games are loud as hell.

WILL MCDANIELS always had a simple message for his two sons: Just work and it'll click. In an era when discussing "the process" is oversaturated and considered a cliché, Will knew those words would resonate with his boys, Jalen and Jaden, and translate to the hardwood.

"Kids these days," says Will, via phone from Federal Way, WA, "always want to see the results immediately."

And for the McDaniels brothers, results on the court weren't immediate, not like those for the typical highly touted prep talent who sit atop recruiting rankings and are in the public eye long before they enter high school.

Jalen McDaniels was ranked No. 98 in the Class of 2016 before committing to San Diego State University. The idea of redshirting became a reality for the four-star recruit, who arrived to campus with a 6-10, 190-pound frame and sat out the majority of what would've been his proper freshman season while getting both stronger and better.

"Just soak up the game," Will, who knew it'd be beneficial, told Jalen. "Then when your time comes, you'll be prepared."

In Jalen's first 10 games following his redshirt year, his minutes on the floor were sporadic, only scoring in double

figures twice. He posted 15 points and 10 rebounds en route to a win over Gonzaga, earning him a starting role in the lineup in late December.

As the season progressed, Jalen led the Aztecs in points (226), rebounds (8.5 per game) and field-goal percentage (62.8) in Mountain West Conference play. He was one of four freshmen to post double-digit rebound performances in his first nine games, the most by a freshman since Kawhi Leonard in 2010, as the

Aztecs captured their fifth MWC championship since 2011 and punched a ticket to the Big Dance.

"At first I didn't want to do that," he says, referencing the year he spent redshirting, "but it made me a better player and person."

In March, Jalen tested the NBA waters, declaring for the draft without signing with an agent to retain his eligibility. With a glimpse into what the pro process was like, he returned to school with a better





understanding of what teams were expecting from draftees.

"It was all about competing 24/7 when you go to each team, and they're looking at everything," he says. "You have to be a perfectionist, and I feel like when you do that, that's when you grow."

Meanwhile, Will noticed a difference in his youngest son, Jaden, now a senior at Federal Way (WA) HS, during the EYBL's opening session in Dallas this past April.

"He was doing some shit that I'd never seen him do before," Will says.

The shit Will was referring to was Jaden's versatility to thrive from anywhere on the court—low-post, high-post, short corner, on the perimeter and in the open court—making him a nightmare for opposing teams as he blossomed into contention for top player in the Class of 2019.

"It was fun just competing against all the top guys that were ahead of me," Jaden says. "I was just showing that I could play, too."

Jaden averaged 18 ppg and 9 rpg, shooting 48 percent from behind the arc for the Seattle Rotary. He led the squad to its first Peach Jam berth in six years and his ascension into the national spotlight was the talk of the summer, jumping to No. 5 in ESPN's Top 100 and then earning an invite to this past August's SLAM Summer Classic.

"My whole thing has been, you always have to keep working," says Will, who's quick to reiterate that prep stars can be here today and gone tomorrow. "I thought [the ranking] was cool, but we never paid too much attention to it."

Jaden possesses the same stature as Jalen, but at 6-9, is the prototypical point-forward in today's game. Aside from

close-up of one of the L's deadliest scorer's mannerisms during pickup games.

"We played 5-on-5 and I was on Kevin Durant's team," Jalen says. "Just watching and seeing the things that he does is something to pick up."

"It was a great experience," Jaden adds. "Watching KD and everything he does is the same—the way he shoots [and] every-

**"THEY REALLY LOVE TO WORK.
IF THEY'RE NOT IN THE GYM,
IT DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT."**

— CLINT PARKS

a wiry frame that he's still filling into, good luck trying to find a major flaw in his game. Pull up highlight tapes and his full repertoire is on display—let's just say there's *a lot* of Kevin Durant in his style of play.

"It means a lot," Jaden says of the comparison. "I look up to KD and I model my game after him."

Both Jalen and Jaden were in attendance for Nike's The Academy and got a

thing is on point."

The duo speaks to us on a Saturday afternoon during Labor Day Weekend in a gym in Montebello, CA, a suburb about 20 minutes east of downtown Los Angeles. Jalen arrives in town by train, a two-hour trek from San Diego, while Jaden, flew in that morning from Seattle. It's the brothers first SLAM photoshoot together.



The two are in their natural element getting flicked up by our photographer. Jaden is posted in a black Seattle Rotary jersey, rocking the vibrant “Lucky Charms” Kyrie 4s, while Jalen keeps it clean and simple—SDSU home whites with white-red AJXIIIIs.

As they pose for a plethora of shots around the gym, they each take turns attempting to dunk on each other for the perfect stills. Jalen pleads his case as to why he didn’t get bodied after little bro outstretches his lanky arms for the left-handed slam.

As our interview portion moves inside the gym, Jalen proves to be a seasoned vet when it comes to being in front of the mic, whereas Jaden, a bit camera shy, answers in a sotto voce tone until competition-related questions are asked.

“No,” Jaden says when asked if Jalen can beat him in a shooting competition. “I have a certified strap.”

“We can do it right now,” Jalen instantly claps back.

Before the competition juices get flowing again, they discuss everything from working on weaknesses to the individual goals they’ve set for the coming season.

“I want to be Conference Player of the Year,” Jalen says. Of course, this will likely be his final season at SDSU before he declares for the 2019 NBA Draft.

And Jaden?
“Win another state championship,” he says. His Eagles squad took the Class 4A state title in 2016. “That’s mandatory and all I can think about.”

When the college questions pour in (Jaden says he doesn’t have his options narrowed down yet; days later, he’d post his final five, consisting of SDSU, UCLA, Kentucky, Oregon and Washington), Jalen claims he won’t be steering his younger brother to SDSU, one of the myriad of schools recruiting Jaden. He does say that he’ll be there for advice, if his baby bro needs any.

“I already went through this process, so I’m not going to get into the way he thinks,” Jalen says. “Of course I go to San Diego State, but it’s his choice.”

As everything wraps up for the day and the interview and photo shoot come to a close, the three-point competition can finally get going. For now, bragging rights are on the line, similar to childhood games in Federal Way, and the McDaniels brothers take turns showing off their fluid shooting strokes until it’s time to call it a day. If it were up to them, they’d spend the entire day honing their craft.

“They really love to work on their game,” says Clint Parks, a SoCal-based trainer who works with Jalen and Jaden. “If they’re not in the gym, it doesn’t feel right.” **\$**

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Heat of the Moment

The **NIKE LEBRON 16** is another banger in a long line of absolutely fire sneakers from The King.

LEBRON JAMES has evolved into a storyteller, and his sneakers are one of the main platforms he uses to share messages. He's dedicated his kicks to his family, he's used them to shine a light on racial inequality, to uplift women, to even talk trash to his opponents—he once wore a pair of LeBron 15s at Madison Square Garden that had “I”M KING” plastered on the heels. Hi, Enes Kanter.

“We had a renewed interest in going deeper in stories for two reasons,” Jason Petrie, the lead designer on the LeBron line, tells us. “LeBron

really started to open up, he's reaching out beyond basketball. And also it seemed like [the line] was getting kinda boring.”

Petrie had James' interest in narrative at the top of his design board when creating the LeBron 16. The silhouette's made out of a BattleKnit upper and it sits on top of a Nike Max Air midsole. Petrie left the heel counter wide open, the perfect real estate to give to the King, forever on a mission to come up with new narrative-driven colorways.

“There's gonna be some shit,” Petrie says with a big smile, promising a ton of heat



for the 16. The #LeBronWatch Program will return this season, too. The LeBron 15 was treated to different variations of famous Nike sneakers thanks to the Program.

The Shox BB4, the Air Diamond Turf, the Waffle Trainer

and the Air Griffey Max 1 were among the silhouettes to be adapted to the 15. Petrie says he now has an entire team of people dedicated to #LeBron-Watch on the 16.

Yeah, there's gonna be some shit. —**Max Resetar**

Drip or Drown

This summer, the NBA dropped any remaining rules related to players' sneakers matching up with their team colors. Which means one thing: Crazy colorways on deck.

THE LEAGUE banned Michael Jordan's black and red sneakers over three decades ago because the shoe, according to NBA brass, didn't have enough white in them. In the years that followed, Mike's signature sneaker line brought different colorways each season.

MJ won his first chip in the “Infrared” Air Jordan VI, a pair that barely featured any white. He wore a black pair of Vllls to the '93 All-Star Game that had

purple and blue accents. The “Last Shot” XIVs, on-feet for his incredible game-winner in the '98 Finals, didn't have any white at all.

And now the League has finally, officially, gotten rid of all rules about sneaker uniformity. Over the past few years, sneakers were expected to at least lightly match up with team colors or maintain a black/white aesthetic. But now players are totally free to wear any colorways they want, starting this season.



Sal Amezcua, aka Kickstradomis, one of the most popular sneaker customizers for NBA players, can't hide his excitement about the lack of restrictions.

“It's amazing,” Amezcua says. “It's opened Pandora's Box. The moment that news broke, that night, I had about 60-75 text messages from different players. It opened the floodgates.

“It's just gonna be a really crazy season,” he teases.

PJ Tucker and Kyle Kuzma are just two of the players who have used social media during the summer to promise an entire year's worth of rare pairs. Kuzma said “somebody gave [him] the keys” to the sneaker vault and Tucker posted two pairs of Kobe 1s on IG, teasing that he was just getting started. Let's get it. —**MR**

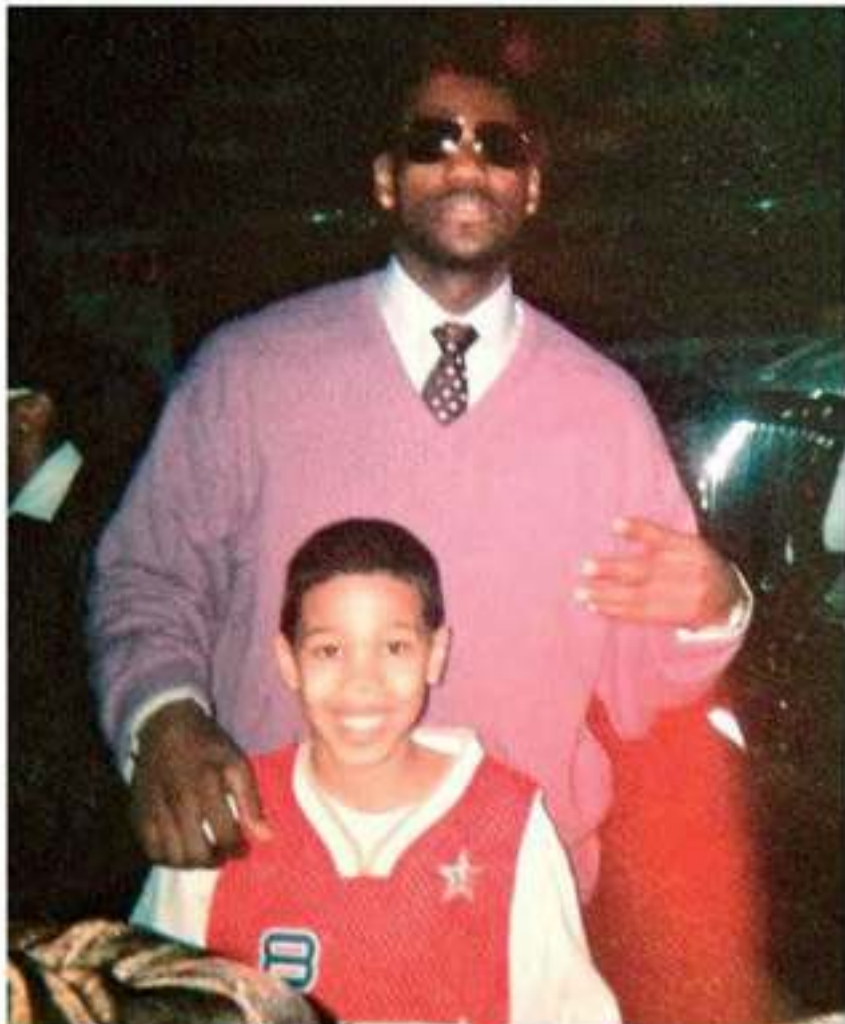
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