

VANITY FAIR



The Global
SPORTS
ISSUE

KING CARLOS ALCARAZ

BY JOSÉ CRIALES-UNZUETA
PHOTOGRAPHER
ETHAN JAMES GREEN

PLUS

The Last
Status
Symbol?
Owning
a Sports
Team

**DOPE
OPERA**
WELCOME TO
THE STEROID
GAMES

THE RACECAR
DRIVER WEARS
PRADA

FEATURING

**KYLIAN
MBAPPÉ**

**A'JA
WILSON**

**TRINIDAD
CHAMBLISS**

**LINDSEY
VONN**

**ROGER
GOODELL**

**TONY
HAWK**

and more!

"I don't want to be
a star. It just works
out that way."
REGGIE JACKSON

VANITY FAIR

A'ja Wilson is the central figure on the cover, smiling and looking towards the camera. She has long, wavy, light brown hair with braids at the roots. She is wearing a vibrant red, strapless, off-the-shoulder dress with a large bow on the left shoulder. The background is a plain, light color.

**DOPE
OPERA**
WELCOME TO
THE STEROID
GAMES

THE
RACECAR
DRIVER
WEARS
PRADA

PLUS
The Last
Status
Symbol?
**Owning
a Sports
Team**

The Global
**SPORTS
ISSUE**

A'JA WILSON TAKES FLIGHT

BY ERIN VANDERHOOF
PHOTOGRAPHER
CAMPBELL ADDY

FEATURING

**CARLOS
ALCARAZ**

**KYLIAN
MBAPPÉ**

**TRINIDAD
CHAMBLISS**

**LINDSEY
VONN**

**ROGER
GOODELL**

**TONY
HAWK**

and more!

"When in doubt,
win the trick."
EDMOND HOYLE

VANITY FAIR



FEATURING

**CARLOS
ALCARAZ**

**A'JA
WILSON**

**TRINIDAD
CHAMBLISS**

**LINDSEY
VONN**

**ROGER
GOODELL**

**TONY
HAWK**

and more!

The Global
**SPORTS
ISSUE**

**LIBERTÉ,
ÉGALITÉ,
MBAPPÉ!**

BY AIDAN McLAUGHLIN
PHOTOGRAPHER
ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

"When you've done
it all, what do you
do for an encore?"

BERTIE MEE

**DOPE
OPERA**
WELCOME TO
THE STEROID
GAMES

THE RACECAR
DRIVER WEARS
PRADA

PLUS

The Last
Status
Symbol?
**Owning
a Sports
Team**



Van Cleef & Arpels

Haute Joaillerie, place Vendôme since 1906





Perlée
Bracelets and ring



REACH FOR THE CROWN





THE DAY-DATE



ROLEX

FOR AN OFFICIAL ROLEX JEWELER VISIT ROLEX.COM
ROLEX OYSTER PERPETUAL AND DAY-DATE ARE ® TRADEMARKS. NEW YORK



HOLGER RUNE



JANNIK SINNER



STÉFANOS TSITSIPÁS



JOÃO
FONSECA

REACH FOR THE CROWN



SUPPORTING TENNIS SINCE 1978



CARLOS ALCARAZ



TAYLOR FRITZ



BEN SHELTON



THE SKY-DWELLER



FOR AN OFFICIAL ROLEX JEWELER VISIT [ROLEX.COM](https://www.rolex.com)
ROLEX OYSTER PERPETUAL AND SKY-DWELLER ARE ® TRADEMARKS. NEW YORK

VANITY FAIR

Departments

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|----------------------|
| 10 | Behind the Scenes | 16 | Contributors |
| 14 | Editor's Letter | 146 | Proust Questionnaire |

Vanities

19 TRINIDAD CHAMBLISS How the 23-year-old Ole Miss star quarterback is changing the game.

By **BOMANI JONES**

Photographer **PHILIP-DANIEL DUCASSE**

22 TRAVEL Big games, bigger budgets. Inside the luxury sports tourism boom.

By **LEAH FAYE COOPER**

Illustrator **TIMBA SMITS**

24 REALITY TV Choose your fighter! Draft Real Housewives, *Love Islanders*, and Traitors for your fantasy football team.

By **SAVANNAH WALSH**

26 PASTIMES Forget boats and jets: Owning a sports team is the new status symbol.

By **DEREK C. BLASBERG**

Illustrator **YANNICK LOWERY**

29 WORLD CUP Yes, it's called football. Your cheat sheet for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

By **JACK HOLMES**

30 MY STUFF The NFL's first fashion editor, Kyle Smith, shares the tricks of the trade.

By **ELISE TAYLOR**

Photographer **CHANTAL ANDERSON**

33 FANDOM The die-hard A-listers rooting for their favorite teams.

By **CHRIS MURPHY**

Columns

34 ESSAY The grueling gambling addiction that robbed one writer of everything.

By **KIESE MAKEBA LAYMON**

Illustrator **DEBORAH ROBERTS**

38 MEDIA Hollywood wants to play ball with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, and he's playing to win.

By **LACHLAN CARTWRIGHT**

Photographer **SCOTT ROSSI**

HORSE POWER

Jessica Springsteen and her horse Don Juan in Wellington, Florida. Page 78

ON THE COVERS

Carlos Alcaraz's tank top by Louis Vuitton Men's; shorts and wristband by Nike. Fashion editor, Dara. Photographed exclusively for VF by Ethan James Green in Miami. A'ja Wilson's dress by Givenchy by Sarah Burton. Fashion editor, Max Ortega. Photographed exclusively for VF by Campbell Addy in Miami. Kylian Mbappé's clothing by Dior; watch by Hublot; jewelry by Messika. Fashion editor, Law Roach. Photographed exclusively for VF by Annie Leibovitz in Washington, DC, at the Fairmont, member of ALL Accor. For additional credits, see pages 45, 52, and 64. For details, go to VF.com/credits.

42 KING OF THE COURT Getting down and dirty with Carlos Alcaraz, one of the best tennis players in the world.

By **JOSÉ CRIALES-UNZUETA**

Photographer **ETHAN JAMES GREEN**

50 RARE AIR Four-time WNBA MVP A'ja Wilson talks basketball, making history, and her quest for greatness.

By **ERIN VANDERHOOF**

Photographer **CAMPBELL ADDY**

56 THE TIPPING POINT Clara Wu Tsai on the New York Liberty and justice for female athletes.

By **YOHANA DESTA**

62 THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR Meet Kylian Mbappé, the global superstar who could lead France back to World Cup glory.

By **AIDAN McLAUGHLIN**

Photographer **ANNIE LEBOVITZ**

66 UNITED NATIONS Can the beautiful game still unite us? A report from Mexico ahead of the main event.

By **FRANKLIN LEONARD**

72 PRADA'S FORTUNATE SON Heir apparent Lorenzo Bertelli goes full speed ahead into the family business, starting with Versace.

By **MARISA MELTZER**

Photographer **JESPER D. LUND**

78 HIGH HORSES A horse girl's dream come true. Inside Wellington, Florida, the elite Palm Beach County equestrian enclave.

By **ELISE TAYLOR**

Photographer **TINA TYRELL**

92 BODIES, BODIES, BODIES Welcome to the Enhanced Games, a sporting event on steroids. Actually.

By **CLARA MOLOT**

Photographer **MATEUSZ STEFANOWSKI**

100 LORD OF THE RING As the war in Ukraine rages on, this heavyweight champion refuses defeat.

By **ANNA ZOLOTARIOVA**

Photographer **CHARLIE GRAY**

102 YOU'VE GOT A FAST CAR In the driver's seat at the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai.

By **MAXWELL ADLER**

Photographer **HAILUN MA**



112 THE INVINCIBLE LINDSEY VONN For the first time since her horrifying crash at Milano Cortina, the skiing legend speaks.

By **ELISE TAYLOR**

Photographer **QUIL LEMONS**

118 TROUBLE IN THE WATER The water polo scandal that rocked LA's most prestigious private school.

By **DEANNA KIZIS**

124 A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN Artists and athletes on mastering their craft.

By **NATE FREEMAN**

Photographer **JOSHUA WOODS**

LOVE AND BASKETBALL
A'ja Wilson, photographed in Miami. Page 50





Regent

SEVEN SEAS CRUISES®

EXPERIENCE THE UNRIVALED®

NOBODY DOES IT BETTER™

Spaciously Intimate All-Suite,
All-Balcony Ships

Welcoming No More Than 822 Guests

Nearly One Dedicated
Crew Member Per Guest

Exquisite Fine Dining, Wines and Spirits

Sailing the World with Over 3,400
Included Excursions

One All-Inclusive Fare

CRUISE IN ALL-INCLUSIVE, UNRIVALED LUXURY™
VISIT [RSSC.COM](https://www.rssc.com) | CALL 1.833.830.1045 | CONTACT YOUR TRAVEL ADVISOR





Clockwise from top left: the Lombardi Trophy in Roger Goodell's office; a traffic jam in Wellington, Florida; artist Rashid Johnson with Carmelo Anthony; Philip-Daniel Ducasse photographs Trinidad Chambliss in Oxford, Mississippi; Carlos Alcaraz in his Vuitton suit during his cover shoot; Campbell Addy photographs A'ja Wilson in Miami.

When *Vanity Fair* constructed a 16-foot clay pit in Miami for Carlos Alcaraz, one of three cover stars for this supersize global issue, no one knew if he would take to it as willingly or ably as he does the tennis court. So the creative team was pleasantly surprised by how game he was to get very, *very* dirty. Over the course of a two-hour shoot, Alcaraz and photographer Ethan James Green moved through a tightly choreographed series of looks, and your smiling cover was born. Ever a winner, Alcaraz.

This issue—which also has covers featuring A'ja Wilson and Kylian Mbappé—was photographed in 11 cities on three continents, including one shoot in Dubai, where the athletes of the so-called Enhanced Games showed off their physicality.

Other subjects offered hospitality stateside. Wilson invited me into her Miami home on a warm Friday morning in February, while my colleague Elise Taylor flew out to Park City, Utah, to

visit with Lindsey Vonn as she recovered from surgery. And an array of fine artists opened their inner sanctums for studio visits across New York City.

For *Vanity Fair*'s fashion team, this photographic marathon meant lining up the perfect ensemble for each talent, whether Wilson in Alaïa, Mbappé in Dior, Alcaraz in Louis Vuitton, or Vonn in Akris. "Any stylist should be able to look at the talent and come up with a visual representation of what their style is," as *VF* fashion director Nicole Chapoteau puts it. "It's about versatility."

When it came to shooting Trinidad Chambliss at the University of Mississippi, the crackling energy of his growing celebrity on campus and across the country set Chapoteau's mind to work. "I was thinking of Michael Jordan at the peak of his career, out of uniform," she adds. "Getting custom suits and wearing them well." Sometimes, style is about knowing what *not* to wear. For his *Vanities* portrait, Chambliss lounges shirtless in an ice bath, dominating his field. —ERIN VANDERHOOF

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ELISE TAYLOR; SCOTT ROSSI; CHARLIE JOHNSON; JOSHUA WOODS; JOSE CRIALES-UNZUETA; CAMPBELL ADDY; CHAMBLISS'S PANTS BY LOUIS VUITTON MEN'S; SHOES BY BALENCIAGA. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

Visibly hydrated skin

that steals the spotlight

FROM DRY TO INTENSELY
HYDRATED SKIN IN 1 USE

—  —
Love the skin you're in



VANITY FAIR

MARK GUIDUCCI
Global Editorial Director

Deputy Editor **CLAIRE HOWORTH** Global Creative Director **JENNIFER PASTORE** VP, Global Content Strategy **DANIEL KILE**

Executive Editor **ADRIENNE GREEN** Senior Editors **HILLARY BUSIS**, **MAGGIE COUGHLAN**, **CAITLIN DICKSON**, **LINDSEY UNDERWOOD**
SVP, Global Head of Talent **ALISON WARD FRANK** Director of Special Projects **SARA MARKS**
Washington Correspondent **AIDAN McLAUGHLIN** Style Correspondent **JOSÉ CRIALES-UNZUETA**
Art Correspondent **NATE FREEMAN** Tech & Money Correspondent **JULIA BLACK**
Senior Hollywood Correspondent **REBECCA FORD** West Coast Director, Editorial Projects **JOHN ROSS**
Senior Staff Writers **MAXWELL ADLER**, **TA-NEHISI COATES**, **MARISA MELTZER**, **ELISE TAYLOR**
Staff Writers **DAN ADLER**, **CLARA MOLOT**, **CHRIS MURPHY**, **ERIN VANDERHOOF**, **SAVANNAH WALSH**, **KASE WICKMAN**
Associate Editor **DANIELA TIJERINA** Entertainment Director **CAITLIN BRODY**
VP, Communications **NINA JOYCE** Senior Director, Communications **CAROLINE BROOKS**
Special Projects Manager **ARI BERGEN** Assistant to the Global Editorial Director **ABIGAIL SYLVOR GREENBERG**

Special Correspondents

DEREK C. BLASBERG, **JOE HAGAN**, **MAUREEN ORTH**, **JAMES POGUE**, **JOY PRESS**, **MARK SEAL**, **GABRIEL SHERMAN**

Design & Photography

Senior Design Director **JUSTIN PATRICK LONG**
Visuals Director **CATE STURGESS** Art Director **EMILY CRAWFORD**
Senior Visuals Editors **NATALIE GIALLUCA**, **LAUREN MARGIT JONES**
Senior Designer **KHOA TRAN** Visuals Editor, Photo Research **ERIC MILES** Associate Visuals Editor **MADISON REID**

Fashion

Fashion Director **NICOLE CHAPOTEAU**
Accessories Director **DAISY SHAW-ELLIS** Menswear Director **MILES POPE**
Senior Fashion Market Editor **KIA D. GOOSBY** Assistant Fashion Editors **GRACE CONNAUGHTON**, **CHARLIE JOHNSON**

Social & Video

Executive Director, Global Video **ELLA RUFFEL** Global Director, Social **CARLY WALSH**
Director of Creative Development **CLAIRE BUSS** Director of Content Production **LANE WILLIAMSON**
Video Directors **ADAM LANCE GARCIA**, **JAMEER POND** Senior Manager of Creative Development **HANNAH PAK**
Manager, Social **EMILY DENTINGER** Coordinating Producers **EMEBEIT BEYENE**, **MADISON COFFEY** Coordinator, Social **WENGEL BEKELE GEMU**

Copy, Research, Production & Audience

Executive Director, Global Operations and Audience **MARTINA NAVRATIL** Senior Counsel **TERENCE KEEGAN**
Production Director **J JAMERSON** Senior Director of Copy & Research **DAVID GENDELMAN** Copy Director **MICHAEL CASEY**
Business Director **GEOFF COLLINS** Director, Audience & Digital Operations **MATT CARLSTROM**
Online Director of Copy & Research **RACHEL FREEMAN** Legal Affairs Editor **SIMON BRENNAN**
Associate Director, Analytics **NEELUM KHAN** Production Managers **SUSAN M. RASCO**, **ROBERTO RODRÍGUEZ**, **HOLLIS YUNGBLIUT**
Research Managers **BRENDAN BARR**, **KELVIN C. BIAS**, **MICHAEL SACKS** Copy Manager **MICHAEL QUIÑONES**
Audience Development Manager **BRANDON LEUNG** Associate Web Producer **KENNEAL PATTERSON**
Associate Newsletter Producer **WISDOM IHEANYICHUKWU** Associate Editor **S.P. NIX**
Line Editors **LILY LEACH**, **NATASHA O'NEILL**, **LEAH TANNEHILL**

Audio

SVP, Global Head of Central Video & Audio **LLOYD D'SOUZA** Vice President, Global Audio **STEVEN VALENTINO** Senior Producer **MICHELE O'BRIEN**

Vanity Fair Studios

Head of Film & TV **HELEN ESTABROOK** VP, Development & Production **SARAH AMOS**

Vanity Fair Global

European Editorial Director & Head of Editorial Content, Italy **SIMONE MARCHETTI**
Head of Editorial Content, France **OLIVIER BOUCHARA** Head of Editorial Content, Spain **ALBERTO MORENO**

Contributing Photographers

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ
JONATHAN BECKER, **ETHAN JAMES GREEN**, **NORMAN JEAN ROY**, **MARK SELIGER**, **TARYN SIMON**

Contributing Editors

KURT ANDERSEN, **LILI ANOLIK**, **CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN**, **MARIE BRENNER**, **DOUGLAS BRINKLEY**, **BRYAN BURROUGH**,
LACHLAN CARTWRIGHT, **ADAM CIRALSKY**, **SLOANE CROSLEY**, **JANINE DI GIOVANNI**, **LISA EISNER**, **DAVID FRIEND**, **PAUL GOLDBERGER**,
ADAM LEITH GOLLNER, **VANESSA GRIGORIADIS**, **CAROL BLUE HITCHENS**, **MAY JEONG**, **SEBASTIAN JUNGER**, **SAM KASHNER**, **TOM KLUDT**,
HILARY KNIGHT, **WAYNE LAWSON**, **KIESE MAKEBA LAYMON**, **FRANKLIN LEONARD**, **MONICA LEWINSKY**, **WILLEM MARX**, **BETHANY McLEAN**,
KATIE NICHOLL, **LORRAINE NICHOLSON**, **JEN PALMIERI**, **ANNA PEELE**, **EVGENIA PERETZ**, **MAXIMILLIAN POTTER**, **JAMES REGINATO**,
ROBERT RISKO, **LISA ROBINSON**, **MARK ROZZO**, **NANCY JO SALES**, **ELISSA SCHAPPELL**, **JEFF SHARLET**, **MICHAEL SHNAYERSON**,
CHRIS SMITH, **KAREN VALBY**, **DIANE VON FURSTENBERG**, **ELIZABETH SALTZMAN WALKER**, **BASIL WALTER**, **JESMYN WARD**, **JULI WEINER**

In Memoriam

DOMINICK DUNNE, **A.A. GILL**, **TIM HETHERINGTON**, **CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS**, **JOHN HOMANS**, **WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE**,
HELMUT NEWTON, **HERB RITTS**, **MICHAEL ROBERTS**, **GAIL SHEEHY**, **INGRID SISCHY**, **GORE VIDAL**

6000 YEARS FLOATING OVER L.A.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY GUICHO PALMA

ALWAYS FREE FOR MEMBERS
AND LOS ANGELES COUNTY YOUTH
17 AND UNDER

LACMA.ORG | 323 857 6010

VERY LACMA

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
5905 WILSHIRE BLVD.
AT WILSHIRE/FAIRFAX METRO STATION

LACMA

Last July, I met a semiretired mogul who had a lot of thoughts about *Vanity Fair*. Over a salad at the Polo Lounge, I asked him which politicians he thought might be able to extract Excalibur from the proverbial stone and slay the orange dragon.

"None," he flatly assessed. "They're all disqualified." I couldn't help but feel he might be right. Looking around the terrace, where Elizabeth Debicki and Reese Witherspoon were having lunch at separate tables, I wondered if the Democrats' answer might come from Hollywood, the way the GOP's favorite president had made his name in Westerns. "Unlikely," the mogul said, but then he suggested a cultural field at least as telegenic as Hollywood: sports. What if Tom Brady weren't so tan, or Tiger Woods weren't so irresponsible, or Serena Williams were at all interested? A field of candidates emerged.

In 2026, sports intersects with film, music, fashion, and the art world. It influences international markets, geopolitical relations, and yes, maybe even national elections. It is arguably the closest thing we have to a monoculture. Sports is, in a phrase, show business. Just like politics.

So was born *Vanity Fair*'s first global Sports Issue, a collaboration with our European editors that tackles this ancient subject from modern angles.

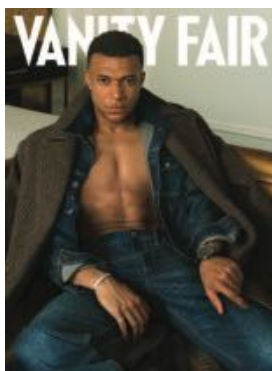
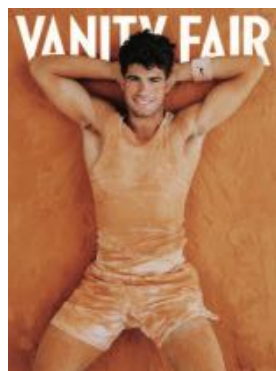
Beyond the profiles of our three cover stars—tennis superman Carlos Alcaraz, WNBA phenom A'ja Wilson, and France's World Cup captain Kylian Mbappé—our writers and editors met Olympic hero Lindsey Vonn for her first interview since her crash in Milano Cortina, as well as Lorenzo Bertelli, the son and heir apparent of Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, who before leading Versace was a professional rally car driver. We traveled to the Chinese Grand Prix to witness F1's 2026 season rev up; visited Wellington, Florida, mecca for the world's most ambitious horse girls; and photographed elite athletes in the United Arab Emirates for an investigation into the Enhanced Games, the so-called "Steroid Olympics" where doping is not only allowed, it is encouraged and studied.

Sports have cultural resonance and hard power too, and our issue addresses those who wield it: Trinidad Chambliss, one of the highest-paid college athletes, who is taking up a precedent-setting

battle against the NCAA; NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, one of the most influential figures in media; and New York Liberty owner Clara Wu Tsai, whose league is at a make-or-break moment. (Owning a sports team, we determined, is the last true status symbol.)

Anyone who knows me personally will be dubious that *Vanity Fair* has trained its aim on the world of sports. My athletic accomplishments are limited to—and here you may roll your eyes—one season on the ski team (free trips to the mountains), two weeks rowing crew in college (the boathouse was so beautiful), and a recent courtside Knicks game (we lost). But that is what I love about this issue. Every story is as compelling to me as it will be to die-hard sports fans and longtime *Vanity Fair* readers alike. Let the games begin.


MARK GUIDUCCI



COVERS: PHOTOGRAPHERS ETHAN JAMES GREEN; CAMPELL ADDY; ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

MISSION TO THE MOON 1965



Ω
OMEGA
×
swatch[®]+

Only available in selected Swatch Stores



ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

"THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR," P. 62

Contributing photographer Leibovitz has a long history at *Vanity Fair* of photographing athletes and footballers, from Hall of Famers like Mia Hamm and David Beckham to a portfolio of the most influential players at the 2010 World Cup. For this issue, she continued the tradition by capturing Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappé in Washington, DC, for the cover of the first global sports issue.



AIDAN McLAUGHLIN

"THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR," P. 62

When McLaughlin, *VF*'s Washington correspondent, sat down with Kylian Mbappé for an interview conducted in French, he noted that the captain of Les Blues "answers tough questions thoughtfully and directly, avoiding the kind of pablum you'd expect from star players." Add the fact that at 27 he's already one of the greatest footballers of all time, and it "might explain why he's emerged as France's most prominent cultural export," McLaughlin says.



ADRIENNE GREEN

THE SPORTS ISSUE

"From Shanghai to Abu Dhabi to Wellington to Guadalajara, it was so fun to lead the team to examine the *Vanity Fair* universe through the lens—or rather, at the courts and on the fields and racetracks—of sports, which is driving the culture right now," says Green, *VF* executive editor. "These stages are where some of the most exciting ideas about showmanship and style, money and influence, performance and power, are being explored. Making it felt like a marathon of its own at times."



DEANNA KIZIS

"TROUBLE IN THE WATER," P. 118

Over three months, Kizis conducted more than 20 hours of interviews and pored over hundreds of pages of documents to tell Aidan Romain's story. "I still think about how brave an 18-year-old has to be to volunteer as the face of a story about alleged sexual violence at an elite private school like Harvard-Westlake," she says. "He's a whistleblower. He's an impressive human being. And he also happens to be an incredibly talented water polo player."



LAW ROACH

"THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR," P. 62

Roach has worked with stars like Zendaya, Céline Dion, and Ariana Grande, transforming them into fashion icons. For this issue, the award-winning stylist veered into new territory, working with French soccer star Kylian Mbappé alongside photographer Annie Leibovitz. "It is always an honor to work with Annie, and it was an even greater honor to work with Mbappé, who is such an incredible athlete," says Roach.



HAILUN MA

"YOU'VE GOT A FAST CAR," P. 102

For photographer Ma, capturing the energy and the culture surrounding Formula 1 at the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai felt instinctual. "Being on set at F1 triggers a kind of adrenaline—the roar of the engines, the smell of fuel in the air, the intensity of the paddock constantly stimulating my senses," she says. "It felt unlike anything I've experienced before, almost like stepping into a film."

LEIBOVITZ: KATHRYN MACLEOD; McLAUGHLIN: BRETT HARRISON; GREEN: KATHY RYAN; KIZIS: KATRINA DICKSON; ROACH: EASTON SCHIRRA, MA: COURTESY OF THE CONTRIBUTOR.



KIESE MAKEBA LAYMON

"KEEP OUTSIDE THE HOUSE THAT ALWAYS WINS,"
P. 34

"I wanted to write a piece about how watching athletic artistry has changed so much due to technology, gambling, and late-stage capitalism," says Laymon. "But it morphed into a piece that also interrogates the American sports stories we run to, and run away from, while playing on our phones in 2026." He is the author of *Heavy: An American Memoir* and the forthcoming *Good, God* and is the Moody professor of English and creative writing at Rice University.



JENNIFER PASTORE

"KING OF THE COURT," P. 42

As a lifelong tennis player and fan, Pastore, *VF*'s global creative director, was thrilled to work with Carlos Alcaraz on a shoot featuring a custom-built mini red clay tennis court. When the two paused for a photo at the end, she looked down to find an Alcaraz-shaped clay print on her shirt. "The shoots with A'ja Wilson in Miami and Kylian Mbappé in Washington, DC, were less clay-filled but every bit as creatively challenging and exhilarating," she says.



CAMPBELL ADDY

"RARE AIR," P. 50

"A'ja's candor, poise, and chameleonic spirit invite close study. With an effortless grace, she shifted from the ease of the girl next door to a focused, commanding presence in front of the lens, making my role feel almost instinctive," says Addy, who photographed Wilson for the cover in Miami. "The shoot explored a dialogue between softness and structure: gentle light meeting decisive lines, pushing us toward new heights and expanded possibilities."



FRANKLIN LEONARD

"UNITED NATIONS," P. 66

VF contributing editor Leonard's devotion to football metastasized when France won the 1998 World Cup and Jean-Marie Le Pen declared the team too Black, too Arab, and too foreign to represent the nation. He has attended matches on four continents and traveled to Guadalajara for the FIFA Inter-Confederation Playoffs for a preview of the 2026 World Cup, the largest in history and the first to be held across three nations. Leonard is the founder and CEO of The Black List.



JACK HOLMES

"PRACTICE SESSION," P. 29

Holmes is a self-proclaimed football fanatic and senior editor at *Vanity Fair*. "While writing our World Cup cheat sheet, I realized I speak an entirely different language," he says. "The translation into civilian English from Soccerese wasn't always straightforward, a testament to just how far some of us American fans have gone down the rabbit hole. But it was the least I could do: No *VF* reader will be left to fend for themselves during the biggest event in the history of sports."



MAX ORTEGA

"RARE AIR," P. 50

"A'ja loves clothes, and I get the sense she loves using them to show how well she understands the power of her body. It was important to show up for that part of her," says Ortega, who styled the WNBA star in Miami for her first *Vanity Fair* cover. "Campbell and I discussed reaching new heights because of, well, her height, yes, but also because her spirit feels even taller, so open, easy, and engaged. It's not every day you get to photograph and dress an actual goddess."

VANITY FAIR

Power. Personality. Style.
Direct to your inbox



TRUE COLORS

by Nate Freeman

Inside the global deals and colorful critiques that make the art world go round.

A BILLION TO ONE

by Julia Black

From the mad scientists to the mega-donors, a dispatch on the money, power, and influence of technology.

PARTY ANIMALS

by Aidan McLaughlin

A letter from the back rooms, barstools, and bacchanals of Washington, DC.

FIT CHECK

by José Criales-Unzueta

Your front-row seat to the power players, peacocks, and deep pockets of fashion.



Scan to subscribe or visit vanityfair.com/newsletters

22
SPORTING EVENTS
THAT ARE OUT OF
YOUR LEAGUE

24
REALITY TV STARS IN
A GAME OF
FANTASY FOOTBALL

26
EVERYONE WANTS
TO OWN A
SPORTS TEAM!

29
YOUR CHEAT SHEET
TO THE
WORLD CUP

30
THE STARTING
LINEUP FOR AN
NFL STYLIST

33
FAN BASE MEET FAN
BASE: CELEBS ON
THE SIDELINES

VANITIES

MONEYBALL

Mississippi quarterback Trinidad Chambliss is one of the highest paid stars in college football. As BOMANI JONES reports, he's also the face of an epic showdown with the NCAA

On a Saturday morning in March, college senior Trinidad Chambliss arrives at the Olivia and Archie Manning Athletics Performance Center at the University of Mississippi in his black Jeep Grand Cherokee for an interview arranged by his agent.

Five years ago, his car could have warranted an NCAA investigation, and his agent—just the fact of having one—would have immediately ended Chambliss's college career. Now, the most shocking thing

is that his vehicle is so modest—and that, rather than enter the NFL draft, he is heading into his sixth year of college. He'll make more money for the upcoming season than he would have in two years as a late second-round pick, where experts projected his selection in this year's draft would be.

"I have a financial adviser, I have an agent, I have a marketing agency," Chambliss tells me on Saturday, still trying to believe it himself. When he started college, Chambliss recalls, "it was, Okay, I have \$100 to spend on my groceries for these

two weeks. It's just wild to see, like, the first check hit and it's like, Wow, I have that much money. That's crazy."

College athletics are changing at a breakneck pace; the nexus of college football's past, present, and future is embodied in this young man from Grand Rapids, Michigan. His journey recalls the charm of days gone by, where the love of the game was its glue. The present is reflected in his decision to leave one small school for another's bigger stage and deeper pockets. And his future, a raging battle between the state courts and the NCAA, will be a bellwether for all college sports.

A highlight reel of big money and college athletics: In 2021 the Supreme Court unanimously ruled the NCAA's restrictions on "education-related benefits" violated antitrust law, striking down the notion of "amateurism," which the NCAA had used to justify banning player pay. And so, players were allowed to profit from the rights to their name, image, and likeness (NIL). A separate 2025 case paved the way for athletes to enter revenue sharing deals with their schools. Add to this the NCAA Transfer Portal, which effectively allows athletes and coaches to swipe right. Enter: college athletes who want to stay in school and play for longer.

Walter Byers, the architect of the NCAA, once compared the thing he helped build to a plantation, but now the body has lost its control over athletes and their money. And it's treating Chambliss's case as a last stand.

"The NCAA's entire business model is illegal and unenforceable," says Andrew Cooper, executive director of United College Athletes Association, a nonprofit players group. "So what the NCAA is trying to do, for whatever reason, is waste lots of resources to drag this out for as long as possible." An NCAA spokesperson tells *VF*, "The vast majority of legal challenges to the NCAA's eligibility rules have failed and these attempts to undermine college sports eligibility rules are robbing high school athletes of the opportunity to compete and get a scholarship—a life-changing opportunity for many young people."

The story of Trinidad Chambliss has the hallmarks of sports cinema: the unassuming hero coming from an inauspicious beginning in search of a chance.

Chambliss played his senior year of high school six years ago, in the fall of 2020. In

peak-pandemic times, even something as simple as working out was a challenge, so his coaches at Forest Hills Northern High School personally delivered weights to players' homes. Lockdown also made exposure hard to come by for players like Chambliss.

"Because of COVID, it really, really knocked everybody in his class," says Cheryl Chambliss, Trinidad's mother, referring to the athletes who graduated high school in those years. "Especially him, for a loop, because the recruiting was little to nothing."

Chambliss was a talented multisport athlete but undersized even by Division II standards. "He was always chasing weight, and chasing weight is not easy," says his dad, Trent, who basically trained Trinidad from birth. (His name, by the way, has nothing to do with the country—his mother has told reporters she would have named a girl Trinity and therefore named her son Trinidad. Around the town of Oxford, Mississippi, however, the flag of Trinidad and Tobago flies on dozens of homes for the local hero.)

In 2021, Chambliss arrived at Ferris State University, a Division II powerhouse an hour from Grand Rapids. His first year, he redshirted—meaning he joined the team but did not play, thereby retaining a season of eligibility. In 2022, Chambliss suffered from tonsillitis and sleep apnea.

Both those years, Ferris won the national championship. When Chambliss finally hit the field in 2023 as the backup quarterback, the team went 8-3. In 2024, he was the starter but threw two interceptions in the opener. "I lost the game," Chambliss says. "And it was a huge game." He fought self-doubt, but the bounce-back was immediate. Chambliss threw 10 touchdowns in the next four games.

"By the middle of the season," Ferris State coach Tony Annesse says, "you're saying, 'He's the best player in Division II.'"

The Bulldogs dominated the rest of their season, won another national championship, and Chambliss finished third in voting for the Harlon Hill Trophy, awarded to the best player in Division II football.

His private quarterback coach, Steve Calhoun, leveled with the pupil. "After that national championship game that they won, I said, 'Hey, T, like, you've outgrown the Division II Ferris State level,'" he says. Four months later, Chambliss committed to play at the University of Mississippi, known as Ole Miss.

"I trusted the people at Ferris State, I trusted my community there, I trusted

my teammates, and it was tough," he says, but "that was a very small window to bet on myself and provide for my family and for myself."

His coach understood. "I love Trinidad, and I think he loves me," Annesse says. "[But] millions of dollars is going to matter more than love."

After Ole Miss's starting quarterback suffered an ankle injury in week two, Chambliss took the reins and thrived. And then, at the very end of the 2025 season, after months of speculation in national sports media, Ole Miss head coach Lane Kiffin bailed for bitter rival LSU and a \$91 million contract. The team was on the precipice of the College Football Playoff, a feat the school had not done since the format's inception in 2014.

Kiffin was excoriated by fans and media for abandoning his team, but neither Chambliss nor his family begrudge the coach for leaving. "I don't know what it would have looked like," Chambliss says, if they'd made the championship game.

The task of winning it all fell to Pete Golding, who had been defensive coordinator under Kiffin, and a staff in flux, composed of some assistants who worked for both Ole Miss and LSU at certain points. As the new head coach, Golding felt his staff was capable, but when it came to the plan, "I don't think *clear* is the right word," he says. He saw no reason for Chambliss to take on any additional pressure.

A quarterback, "by image, is going to be the leader," Golding says, "but I think the biggest thing for us is, like, Look, man, we don't need anybody to do anything they haven't done up to this point, right?"

Chambliss responded with three excellent performances in the College Football Playoff, but it ended in a 31-27 loss to the University of Miami Hurricanes, with 18 seconds left. What was more, Chambliss knew he may have played his last college football game.

Because Chambliss had redshirted in 2021 and could not play the following year because of illness, 2023 was his first season as a player and 2025 his third. Under those circumstances, NCAA protocol is for a school to apply for one more season of eligibility. Given Chambliss's documented illness, he, his family, and the compliance department at Mississippi expected his application to be approved.

On January 9 this year, the day after the heartbreaker loss, his waiver request was denied. In December, even after leaving for

HAIR PRODUCTS BY LEVELS AND THE DOUX; GROOMING PRODUCTS BY DANESSA MYRICKS BEAUTY; BARBER, DEWAYNE (D. BLADEZ); CARROLL; HAIR AND GROOMING, KIMBERLY YASMINE. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY AGENCY M.J. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

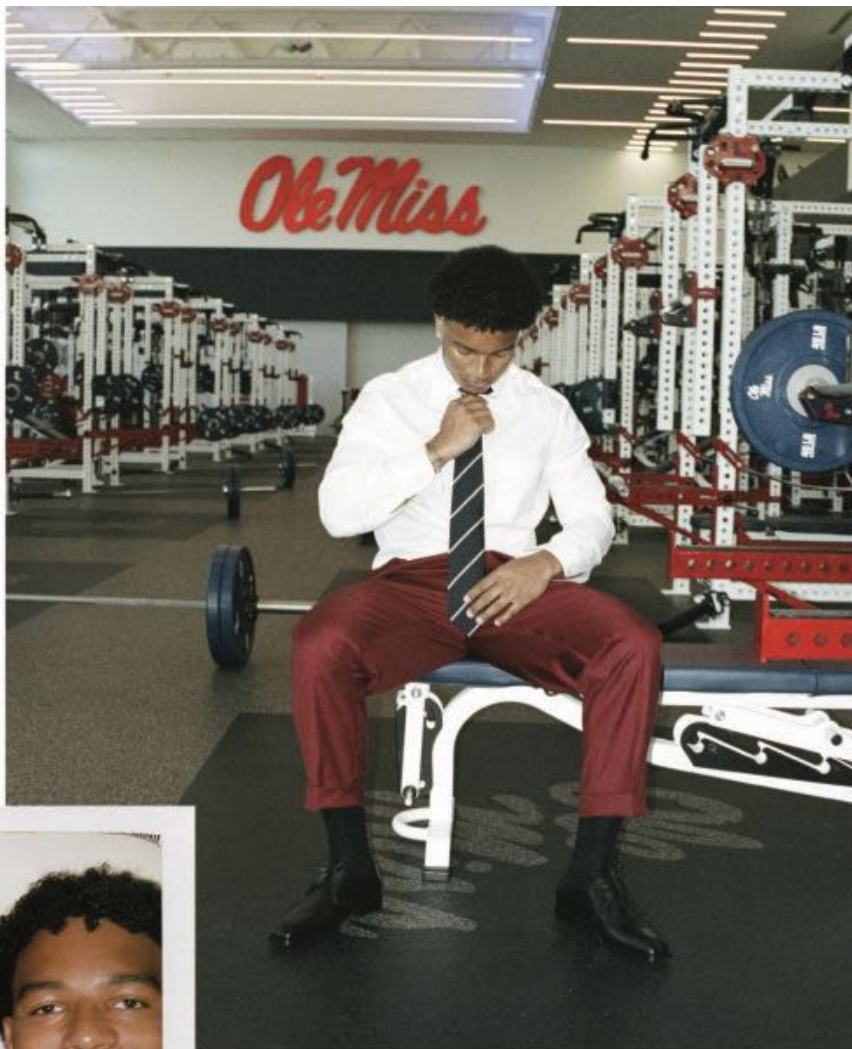
LSU, Kiffin had called Arkansas attorney Tom Mars about Chambliss's case. Mars thought, "Here's a guy with a mountain of medical records, a doctor who said he was incapacitated. And [the NCAA] said they're not going to look at it."

Mars told Chambliss's agent Fletcher Smith that they would have to sue the NCAA. "There's all kinds of reasons they're not gonna grant this waiver," Mars says, "none of which have to do with the merits." To *Vanity Fair*, the NCAA says this characterization is "false," and that they provided significant information regarding the decision. In a widely released extensive statement, the NCAA said that Chambliss had failed to submit sufficient documentation of his illnesses while at Ferris, and thereby didn't meet the criteria for an extension.

Chambliss calls the situation "ridiculous." Cheryl takes personal offense, as a mother, at the notion that it was anything other than what they've asserted. "What people don't really realize is that when you have something like that with the swelling of the glands and the tonsils and all of that, people's had, you know, a tragedy occur in their sleep," Trent Chambliss says. "They just want to look at maybe a broken bone or a limb or whatever. But if you're not well, you're not well."

Chambliss appealed the NCAA's decision and sued the NCAA in Mississippi state court, requesting an injunction that would allow him to play immediately, which he was granted, and in March, the Mississippi Supreme Court denied the NCAA's request to appeal the lower court's injunction.

Mars, who is working with Oxford attorney William Liston on the case, has a doozy of a theory. Eligibility agreements in college sports are between the NCAA and its member schools—technically Mississippi applied for Chambliss's waiver—but the NCAA is duty-bound to support its athletes.



Above: clothing by Brunello Cucinelli; shoes by Ferragamo; tie by Drake's; bracelet by David Yurman. Previous page: bracelet by David Yurman. Fashion Editor: Nicole Chapoteau.

"We know that because its mission statement says it exists to serve students," Mars says. Chambliss, he says, "was damaged because they refused to follow their own rules."

In 2026, those damages would be stadium-size. In 2024, Bryce Underwood signed to play quarterback for Michigan reportedly for \$3 million per season. Chambliss, armed with rare leverage after a spectacular 2025 season, scored a one-season salary far greater than that.

"Chambliss's case is setting up a blueprint for state-by-state litigation," Cooper says.

The irony is unavoidable. To win in court the organization must dispute its obligation to its athletes.

But where the NCAA truly wants to win is in Congress, which it has spent years and millions of dollars lobbying.

Cooper says, "They're trying to delay the inevitable and hope that Congress miraculously grants them a blank check bailout through the SCORE Act," a bipartisan bill that would standardize NIL rules and, most importantly, deem athletes as nonemployees. (The bill has not been brought to the House floor for a vote.)

"I think they used [Chambliss] as a pawn in this lobbying effort that seems to be their sole focus in life," Mars says. "That's the only logical explanation I've been able to come up with."

Everyone around Chambliss, including his lawyer, is certain he'll play this fall. ("I care about my win-loss record," Mars says.) Chambliss has seemingly gone pro but stayed in school.

And the body that sold stories like Chambliss's for years, who swore compensating players would cheapen the game, is the only entity who wants his story to end.

That is college sports in 2026. **VF**



TRAVEL

GAME CHANGER

Forget Super Bowl watch parties and last-minute Stubhubbing—luxury sports tourism is here. LEAH FAYE COOPER breaks down the big spenders in the big leagues

When Seattle Seahawks fan Stephanie Daniel and her husband wanted to attend Super Bowl LX in VIP fashion, they couldn't call any old travel agent. Instead they tapped On Location, a company that designs bespoke experiences for the Olympics, FIFA, the NFL, and

more—ensuring those with deep enough pockets don't just enjoy a game, but feel like they're running plays. Seventy-five hundred dollars later, the couple were mingling with NFL legends Earl Thomas and Adam Vinatieri at an all-inclusive pregame tailgate. From their vantage point behind the end zone, Bad Bunny's halftime show felt more like being serenaded, and witnessing their team win

before their very eyes, “was electric in every way,” says Daniel, a voice actor.

An even more eye-popping “tier” included private concerts by Sting and the Killers; a Napa Valley brunch hosted by Julian Edelman and Megan Rapinoe; club-level sideline seating; a chef-curated menu and open bar; and an opportunity for clients to trot their designer footwear onto the field as the Seahawks were hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy, showered in blue and green confetti. That would set a high roller back at least \$17,500 per person. Tack on access to a sprawling field-level 50-yard-line lounge and a private dinner with your favorite retired quarterback, and the cost is disclosed only to those brave enough to face consumerism's most formidable three-word phrase: “price upon request.”

Once relatively niche, sports tourism has gone up with the Dow. According to the World Economic Forum, in 2023 the sector was valued at \$609 billion; that figure is expected to swell to \$1.7 trillion by 2032. Given what some will pay to kick their fandom up a notch—thousands of euros for a few rounds of golf ahead of the 2027 Ryder Cup in Ireland; five figures for a concierge on speed dial at the 2028 Olympic Games in LA—it's a reasonable estimate.

Who is actually buying these things? Well, rich people. People who “are going to Michelin restaurants and five-star hotels; people who are very discerning,” says Paul Caine, president of On Location. Of course the most luxurious way to experience a game is in the owners box (see page 26 for more on that). But if that's just out of reach, if not aspirational, for these Very Discerning People, this kind of access is a way to get “closer than ever to the game,” he says. At the 2026 FIFA World Cup, taking place across North America, “some people will be on the pitch,” Caine explains. City-specific off-site excursions are planned too—like literal breakfast at Tiffany's in New York, celebrity training sessions in LA, and a dance workshop with the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders in Texas.

How much are the top-tier World Cup experiences going for? Unfortunately, if you have to ask, you probably can't afford them anyway. **W**

FULL THROTTLE



Starting at
\$37,080

F1, though not partnered with On Location, spares no indulgence with its over-the-top offerings. At this year's British Grand Prix, revel in track-level seating, exclusive views of each car garage, access to the podium celebration, and meals by Gordon Ramsay.

FIELD GOALS

Starting at
\$38,150

Can you put a price on the world's most popular sport? You can start at nearly \$40K for a 14-ticket suite in Houston during the group stage. Double the fun with 31 friends at a round of 32 match outside Boston for \$113,600.



MATCH MAKER



Starting at
\$33,605

Sure, you can take the 7 train to Arthur Ashe Stadium for the 2026 US Open and sip on a \$23 Honey Deuce in the nosebleeds. Or savor five nights at the Waldorf Astoria and court-side tickets to five semis and finals matches—Honey Deuce and Champagne included.

ALL: GETTY IMAGES

SKECHERS® **AERO BURST**®

DESIGNED TO CUT THROUGH THE WIND

WOMEN'S

GOODYEAR
PERFORMANCE OUTSOLES

CARBON
INFUSED
PLATE

SKECHERS
ARCHFIT
Podiatrist Certified Arch Support



S
SKECHERS
RUNNING

*AVAILABLE AS
SKECHERS
SLIP-INS
MSRP:
\$165

SKECHERS
HYPER BURST ICE

MEN'S

SKECHERS.COM

Skechers and "Skechers" are trademarks of Skechers USA, Inc. in the U.S. and other countries. © 2020 Skechers USA, Inc. All rights reserved. Skechers USA, Inc. is not responsible for any damage or injury caused by the use of Skechers shoes.

REALITY TV

WHAT'S YOUR FANTASY?

As Mormon wives dance with the stars, *Love Islanders* turn traitorous, and Bravo bad boys check into a house of villains, good reality TV has proven to be a team sport. Loosely inspired by fantasy football, SAVANNAH WALSH sets a must-watch draft



KICKER



RUNNING BACK

HEAD COACH



TIGHT END



RUNNING BACK



QUARTERBACK

MANAGEMENT

GENERAL MANAGER
(Pick one)

Builds the roster, manages salaries, acquires talent, and sets the vision for the team. **Our pick:** Kris Jenner (*The Kardashians*). Who better than the momager who launched her offspring into a multi-billion-dollar brand?

COACHES
(Pick two)

Trains and develops the team. **Our picks:** head coach RuPaul Charles (*RuPaul's Drag Race*) and assistant coach Jeff Probst (*Survivor*). They devise trick plays but preserve their reputation as brand safeguards.

REFEREE
(Pick one)

Ensures that the game is played fairly. **Our pick:** Bravo's Andy Cohen. Nothing fazes Cohen, who, after 20 years of *Real Housewives*, *Below Deck*, *Traitors*, and *Love Island USA* reunion episodes, has only walked offstage once.

GORDON RAMSAY
Hell's KitchenARIANA MADIX
Vanderpump Rules,
Love Island USARYAN SEACREST
ABCJESSE PALMER
The Bachelor
universeKRIS JENNER
The KardashiansALAN CUMMING
The TraitorsRYAN SERHANT
Owning ManhattanBRETT AND
JASON OPPENHEIM
Selling SunsetCHRISTIAN
SIRIANO
Project RunwayALEX COOPER
Call Her Daddy,
executive producing
reality dating shows
Love Overboard and
Let's Marry HarryNICK VIALL
former Bachelor,
cohost of *Age of Attraction*TYRA BANKS
America's Next Top ModelHEIDI KLUM
Project RunwayNEY SCHULMAN
CatfishKRISTEN KISH
Top Chef

STARTING LINEUP

QUARTERBACK
(Pick one)

Requires leadership and decision-making under pressure. **Our pick: Rob Rausch** (*Love Island USA, The Traitors*). Rausch knows how to run a play—first enduring the *Love Island* villa, then becoming the last traitor standing.



NENE LEAKES
RHOA



BETHENNY FRANKEL
RHONY



HARRY JOWSEY
Too Hot to Handle, Perfect Match, Dancing With the Stars, Let's Marry Harry, etc.



VICKI GUNVALSON
RHOC



RACHEL LINDSAY
The Bachelorette

RUNNING BACKS
(Pick two)

Skills include speed, strength, and agility to gain yards and score touchdowns. **Our picks: Cardi B** (*Love & Hip Hop: New York*), **Kelly Clarkson** (*American Idol*). Both started on reality TV and went on to win Grammys.



JENNIFER HUDSON
American Idol contestant turned Oscar winner, host of The Jennifer Hudson Show



OLANDRIA
Love Island USA



GABBY WINDEY
The Bachelorette



KIM KARDASHIAN
The Kardashians



KENDALL JENNER
The Kardashians

TIGHT END
(Pick one)

Requires strength for blocking and catching ability. **Our pick: Tiffany "New York" Pollard** (*Flavor of Love, I Love New York, House of Villains*). Pollard has proven her versatility in both brokering alliances and as a reality TV mainstay.



JOHNNY BANANAS
The Traitors, The Challenge, House of Villains



OMAROSA
The Apprentice, Celebrity Big Brother, House of Villains, etc.



KANDI BURRUSS
RHOA



JoJo SIWA
Dance Moms, Special Forces



KATE CHASTAIN
Below Deck, The Traitors, House of Villains

DEFENSE/SPECIAL TEAMS
(Pick one cast)

The collective performance of a team's defense and kicking plays/returns. **Our pick: The Summer House cast.** Amanda Batula mocking her soon-to-be ex-husband Kyle Cooke's DJ career should be considered a sack.



THE TOMS
Vanderpump Rules



THE CAST OF BRAVO'S SUMMER HOUSE



THE FAB FIVE
Queer Eye



THE CAST OF JERSEY SHORE



PPG (LEAH, JANA, SERENA)
Love Island USA

WIDE RECEIVERS
(Pick two)

Requires speed, and the ability to run specific routes. **Our picks: Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag** (*The Hills*). These players make or break a season of TV, making flashy moves on the field, but not without a few fumbles.



WHITNEY LEAVITT
The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, Dancing With the Stars



HEIDI MONTAG
The Hills



SCOTT DISICK
The Kardashians



GIZELLE BRYANT
RHOP



"SHAKE" CHATTERJEE
Love Is Blind

KICKER
(Pick one)

Only in the game for a few minutes max to score field goals and extra points. **Our pick: Lisa Vanderpump** (*Vanderpump Rules, Vanderpump Villa*). LVP isn't the star of either show, but her screen time always delivers.



MALIKA HAQQ
The Kardashians



PETER MADRIGAL
Vanderpump Rules



KATHY HILTON
RHOBH



FERGUS
The Traitors



CAROLE RADZIWILL
RHONY

BENCH

(Pick seven not in your starting lineup)

Our picks: Rachel Lindsay (*The Bachelorette*), Nene Leakes (*The Real Housewives of Atlanta*), Bethenny Frankel (*The Real Housewives of New York City*), Rob Kardashian (*The Kardashians*), J. Alexander and Jay Manuel (*America's Next Top Model*), Ashlee and Jessica Simpson (*The Ashlee Simpson Show, Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica*), Brad Goreski (*The Rachel Zoe Project*)

FLEX

(Pick one)

A spot that allows you to start an extra RB, WR, or TE. **Our pick: Heather Gay** (*The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*). Few can shift their alliances like Gay, who brings the receipts, proof, timeline, and screenshots.



PASTIMES

SPEND IT LIKE BECKHAM

For the ultrawealthy, boats or jets are yesterday's toys. DEREK C. BLASBERG digs into how owning a sports team became the last bastion of status for a well-moneyed few

On a recent Saturday in Los Angeles, a flag football game unfolds at Exposition Park's BMO Stadium that looks more like a glossy awards show than a light-touch sporting exhibition.

Tom Brady has temporarily unretired (again) and is back on the field. Travis Scott is DJ'ing in the stands for a crowd that includes Kendall Jenner, Hailey and

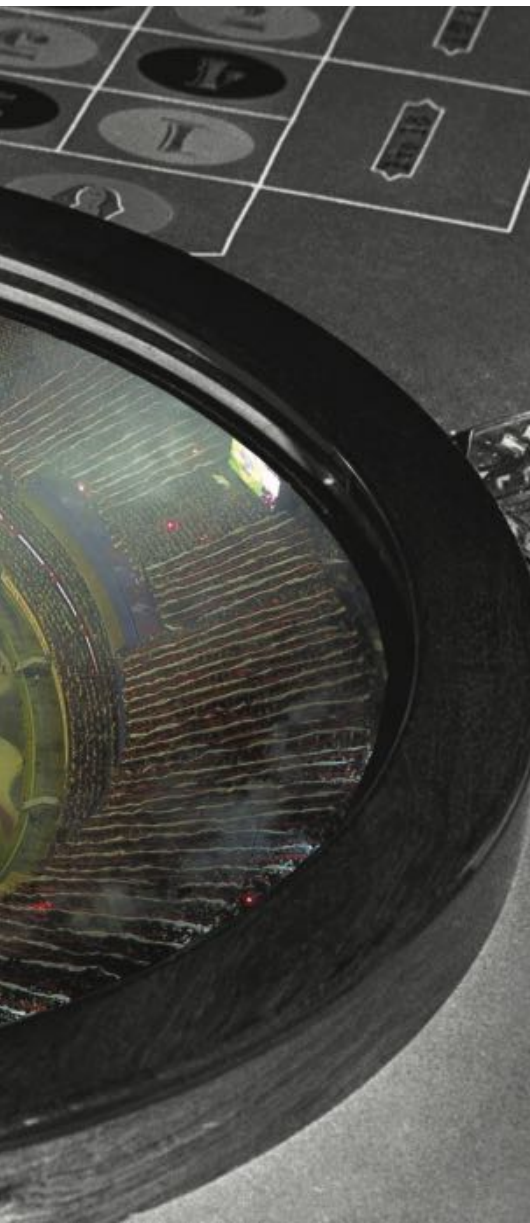
Justin Bieber, and Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis. Kevin Hart is on the mic. There are trophies and confetti cannons, and the whole thing is broadcast live on Fox, Fox Sports, and Tubi to millions of viewers.

In the middle of it all—including group shots that pop up all over Instagram in the hours and days that follow—moving easily between the suites, the sidelines, and the cameras, is Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots and one of the most

powerful figures in American sports.

It's hard not to notice Kraft. Not because he stands out—it's not like he's wearing a giant fur coat à la Joe Namath, the swaggering 1969 Super Bowl-winning New York Jets quarterback who turned himself into one of the first true sports celebrities. Quite the opposite: Kraft, in a half-zip polo and mirrored sunglasses, looking like a sportier, clean-shaven Santa Claus, fits perfectly into the room of power players.

STADIUM: MIGUEL SCHINCARIOL/AFP. ROULETTE WHEEL: BETTMANN. ALL: GETTY IMAGES.



This is how to flex now. Kraft has become the unlikely muse for the wealthy and status-conscious, because owning a pro team—or owning a part of one, which recent rules in the National Football League, as well as Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association, have allowed—has become the ultimate trophy asset for the rich and powerful.

Think about it. An invite to a fashion show? That's sweet. A free ride on a private plane? It seems everyone has a NetJets account now. (Private jet flights hit a record high of 3.9 million globally in 2025, roughly a 34 percent increase from 2019.) But a walk-on pass to the 50-yard line at a Patriots game? Now we're talking.

For years, pro teams were owned by familiar names: the Tischs of the New York Giants, the Rooneys of the Pittsburgh

Steelers, the Fords of the Detroit Lions, the Johnsons of the Jets. But today there are many new (and familiar) faces in owners' boxes. Last year my friend Karlie Kloss became an investor in the WNBA's New York Liberty alongside Olivia Walton of the Walmart family and Robin Roberts, among others, joining Clara Wu Tsai, who's also a partial owner of the Brooklyn Nets. (Still waiting for our courtside date, Karlie!) Kloss's husband, investor Joshua Kushner, is a minority owner of the Memphis Grizzlies. A few years ago Natalie Portman helped found Angel City FC, whose cap table reads like a Hollywood call sheet: Eva Longoria, America Ferrera, and Jennifer Garner.

Actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney bought Wrexham A.F.C. in 2021 for \$2.5 million; it's now valued in the hundreds of millions, with an FX docuseries on Disney+ to match. LeBron James parlayed a \$6.5 million stake in Liverpool F.C. into a position within Fenway Sports Group, whose portfolio includes the Boston Red Sox and the Pittsburgh Penguins. David Beckham is a co-owner of Inter Miami CF.

Even on TV, team ownership has become a saucy plotline. In *Ted Lasso*, Hannah Waddingham plays Rebecca Welton, a newly divorced owner navigating revenge and redemption through her football club who hires the hapless but effective coach Ted Lasso, played by Jason Sudeikis. In Netflix's *Running Point*, Kate Hudson plays a woman trying to corral her siblings in the Gordon family after inheriting a professional basketball team. And in *Ballers*, Dwayne Johnson plays a former NFL player turned financial adviser whose later seasons revolve around assembling investors to buy an NFL franchise.

So, if it seems like there are more people who can say they're team owners now than ever before, it's because there are. In 2021, NBA commissioner Adam Silver opened the door to private equity funds purchasing minority stakes in teams, making it easier for institutional investors, celebrities, and global capital to enter the ecosystem. In 2024, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell followed suit, approving private equity investment. (Major League Baseball, under Rob Manfred, loosened restrictions in 2019.) The result is a new ownership class that's less top hat and cigar, more group chat and group investment.

Why does everyone suddenly want to be around the world of sports? A few reasons. First, it intersects with something more cultural: the rise of hospitality. Remember lockdown? There we were, on our phones,

quarantining, not exactly bragging about our social lives. When the world reopened, people didn't just want to go out. They wanted to be *seen* going out. And what splashier way than by appearing in the owner's box during the finals?

Even as a self-described fashion person, I, too, have been bitten by the bug and regularly seek invites to live sports. My favorite invitation: Met board member Robert Denning and his husband, Charles Porch, the longtime Instagram VP who recently decamped to OpenAI, have JFK Jr.'s old courtside seats at Madison Square Garden, which happen to be next to James Dolan, the longtime, often polarizing owner of the New York Knicks.

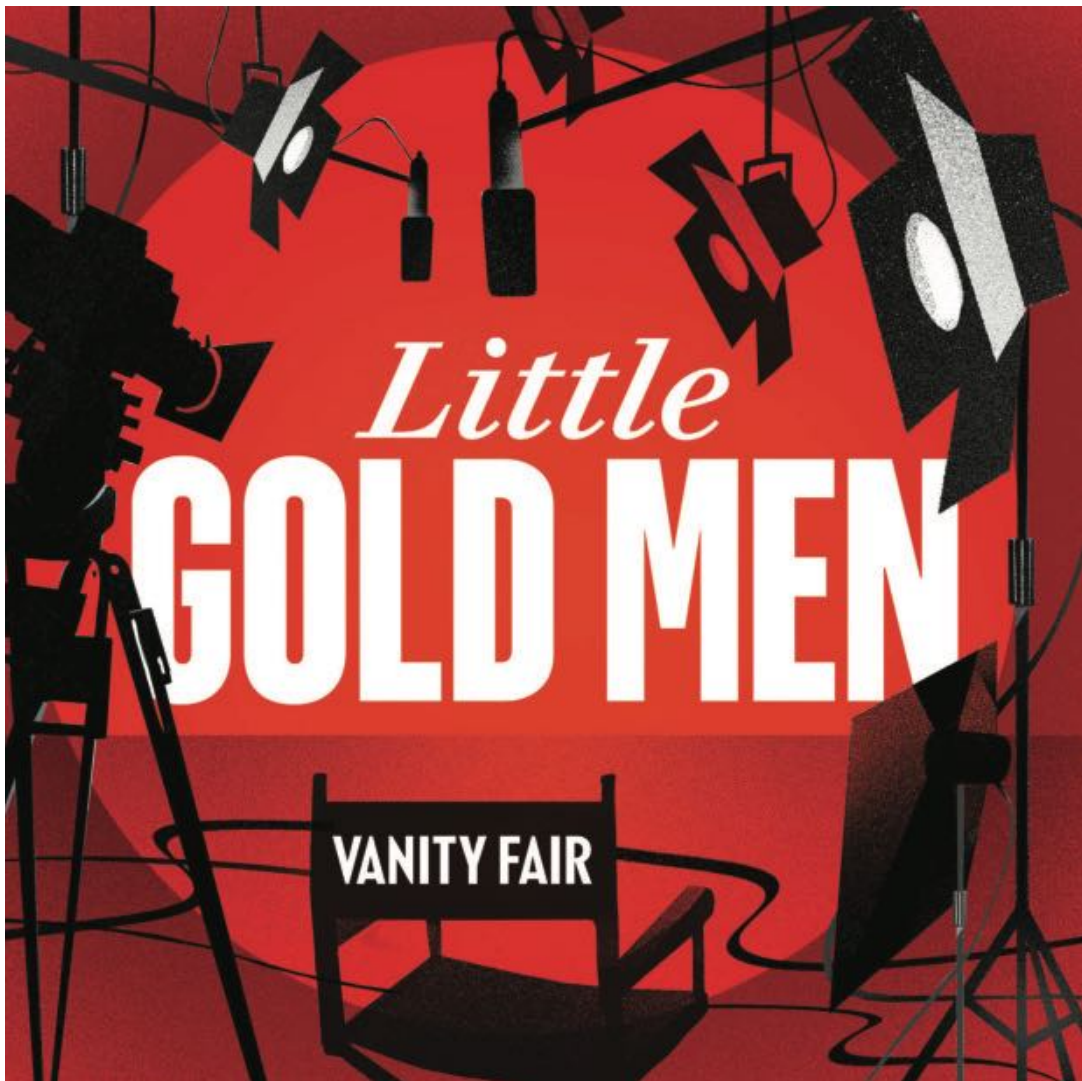
The football field and basketball court are among the few stages that can't be replicated—for now at least. AI may give us a four-day workweek, and it's already reshaping entire creative industries: Songs can be generated, movies can be synthesized, and influence itself can be engineered. But sports—live, unpredictable, physical—still have to happen in real time. Which means the people who control it don't just own a team. They own a moment.

Women's sports may be the most dynamic growth sector of all. Angel City FC launched a new model of celebrity-backed, community-driven ownership, and the WNBA's surging valuations suggest that what once looked like a niche investment is quickly becoming mainstream. The salary for Caitlin Clark, the Indiana Fever star and number one overall pick in the 2024 WNBA Draft, will increase from \$78,000 to \$530,000 in 2026 because of a new provision in her salary agreement called EPIC ("exceptional performance on initial contract"), which fast-tracks high-performing players to max and supermax deals.

But let's get back to that flag football game. Kraft's hosts are Michael Rubin, the founder of digital sports platform Fanatics (the guy who throws the now infamous Hamptons white party), and Michael D. Ratner, a filmmaker and entrepreneur who cofounded Hailey Bieber's skin-care brand, Rhode. Together they're curating the guest list. Controlling the camera angles. Deciding who gets sideline seats and who gets sidelined.

The owner's box has become a kind of modern salon, a place where money, fame, media, and politics sit side by side, in real time, with the cameras rolling. It's no longer enough to simply attend.

Who won this game? I don't remember. But that's not the point, is it? **W**



Vanity Fair's Little Gold Men podcast takes you inside the world of film and television, from standing ovations at Sundance to the Best Picture award at the Oscars.

With special guest appearances from stars, creators, and critics, our expert hosts dive into the power, prestige, and glamour of Hollywood, as only *Vanity Fair* can.

LISTEN WHEREVER YOU GET YOUR PODCASTS

Follow now at [*vanityfair.com/podcasts*](https://www.vanityfair.com/podcasts)



WORLD CUP

PRACTICE SESSION

It's the summer of soccer, and you don't speak a lick of Soccerese. Not sure where to begin? Fear not, JACK HOLMES has your World Cup cheat sheet



Each World Cup is the biggest event in sporting history.

1.5

BILLION PEOPLE watched Argentina battle France in the last final in 2022.

2



On February 8, 220 million viewers worldwide tuned in for Super Bowl LX. Earlier that day, a regular-season English Premier League match between Liverpool and Manchester City drew more than **700 million viewers globally.**

3

The United States could be the first World Cup host nation to be at war with one of its purported guests when the tournament kicks off. All I heard was "USA No.1."

4



At the World Cup the **KNOCKOUT STAGE** is like the NCAA Tournament or The Real World/Road Rules Challenge: Win or go home.

5

Every World Cup has an official song:

SHAKIRA'S "WAKA WAKA (THIS TIME FOR AFRICA)" in 2010

PITBULL'S "WE ARE ONE (OLE OLA)" for 2014

and this year's "LIGHTER" BY CARÍN LÉON AND JELLY ROLL, which sounds roughly like it was repurposed from a Ford F-150 commercial.

6

Don't say a shot was **BAD**, say it was **A POOR EFFORT.**

Don't say someone "got a red card." Say: "HE WAS SENT OFF." Or: **"¡FUE EXPULSADO!"**

7



Not everybody who qualified for the tournament is invited, of course. **FOUR NATIONS ARE FACING FULL OR PARTIAL U.S. TRAVEL BANS.** If the players come, few citizens will be allowed to join them. Of course, Iran's invitation got particularly lost in the mail.

9

If you think somebody's great? Call them **WORLD CLASS.** Nobody agrees on what it means or who qualifies, but it sounds official.

10



STOPPAGE TIME is the same as **INJURY TIME** and **ADDED TIME**, but it's very different from **EXTRA TIME.**

11

This tournament is the last rodeo for two of the four greatest players in history:

CRISTIANO RONALDO IS LEBRON JAMES the hardest-working player in the game who spends ungodly sums to keep his body in top condition at **41 YEARS OLD.**

Football is a mode of self-expression.

48

NATIONS will convene this summer to tell us who they are.

13

12

The other two greatest players ever? **Pelé and Diego Maradona.** They're the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, respectively.

14



It's not all about the US, of course. Canada and Mexico are hosting too, and for the very best of the tournament, you might want to head to **Monterrey or Guadalajara or Mexico City.**

15



World Cup matches are historically very safe, but there were some crowd-control issues at the last major football event stateside. **Fans broke into Hard Rock Stadium at the 2024 Copa América final in Miami, breaking down barriers and crawling into the ventilation systems.**

16

Small countries, like

CROATIA

3.8
MILLION PEOPLE

URUGUAY

3.4

MILLION PEOPLE consistently get themselves deep into the World Cup, with around 1 percent of the American population.

17



If you can find it within yourself, **CALL IT FOOTBALL. YOU'LL BE WELCOME IN WAY MORE BARS ACROSS THE WORLD.**

18



MY STUFF

KYLE SMITH

The NFL's fashion editor makes the players look good—win or lose—for every game. Call it tunnel vision

Kyle Smith is the NFL's first-ever fashion editor—the official point person between the league and the world's clothing brands. It's a job that entails arranging fashion show invites, negotiating partnerships, and having complete tunnel vision: Smith helps athletes like the Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow choose the polished outfits they wear as they depart their team bus for the locker room—a camera-crammed feat known colloquially as the tunnel walk. (Many of those photos are then posted to the @nflstyle Instagram.) It takes practice: How does one find pants for a 250-pound six-foot-five linebacker whose muscles are so utterly ginormous that they defy universal sizing? "It's a lot of big thighs, I will say that," Smith says, laughing. *Vanity Fair* caught up with the high-profile clothes-horse at his Rimowa-trunk-filled studio in LA's Los Feliz. Here, he shares his favorite things, from Maison Margiela shoes to the balm Roger Goodell once tried to steal. —ELISE TAYLOR

STYLE

Most-worn item in your closet: Yohji Yamamoto hakama pants.

Prized clothing possession: My dad's vintage Burberry hunting sweater. I can never get rid of it.

Least-worn item: a gold watch family heirloom. I wear silver.

Go-to shoe: Maison Margiela Tabi heel.

Best black-tie look: I just wore a Rick Owens dress and an Egyptian headpiece to a good friend's wedding. So probably that.

Pajamas: Desmond & Dempsey.

Favorite white T-shirt: I don't wear white, but I wear black and I love the cropped black T-shirt from Abercrombie & Fitch.

Sunday afternoon outfit: Some sort of cashmere and black Marni trousers.

CULTURE

Last book read: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
Book you want to read: *Cairo Circles* by Doma Mahmoud. My favorite book is *Let the Great World Spin*, which takes place in New York, and this book feels like the Cairo version of that, which hits close to home.
Watching: *Industry*. But I'm on season two. Don't spoil anything!
Listening to: I'm always listening to the same five albums on repeat. Currently, it's Does It Offend You, Yeah?'s *You Have No Idea What You're Getting Yourself Into*.
Inspired by: Wolfgang Tillmans's and Philip-Lorca diCorcia's work. Imagine their style of photography in the NFL tunnel?



BEAUTY

Skin-care routine: Gentle cleansers and toner. Vitamin C and snail mucin and a mild retinoid are key. Then a moisturizer with SPF.

Lip balm: My mom got me this Gucci multipurpose balm that I love and the commissioner tried to steal.

Shampoo: Mielle Organics Rosemary Mint Strengthening Shampoo.

Perfume: It's all very context-based (season, time of day, social goals), but I play a lot with layering La Collection Privée Dior and Byredo fragrances. And I never underestimate the power of a scented lotion.



HOME

Conversation-causing object: My Sicilian ceramic pine cones I got in Taormina.
Coffee-table book: *We Are Experienced* by Danielle Levitt.
Candle: The NH X Kuumba Transition Cone incense from the Japanese streetwear brand Neighborhood.
Stationery: I use the cards from the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, which gives me an excuse to go look at art every once in a while when I run out.
Beloved artwork: My poster of an old Egyptian stamp. My uncle who recently passed used to be the postmaster general of Egypt, so whenever I look at it, I think of him.
Pets? I'm never far from a dog.

FOOD & DRINK

Morning beverage: Water with electrolytes.
Drink after a long day: Diet Coke.
Most impressive thing you've made in your kitchen: If you ever catch me cooking, call the FBI because I'm being held hostage.
Last thing you cooked in your kitchen: A really bad mushroom ravioli in 2018.
Favorite takeout: Scallion pancakes, shrimp wontons, dandan noodles, and mapo tofu from Pine & Crane.

PLACES

Favorite restaurant: Funke.
Favorite store: Sticker Planet at the Original Farmers Market in Los Angeles.
Favorite museum: The original Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The newly opened Grand Egyptian Museum is very nice, but there's something about the OG that feels like I'm going to run into the characters from the *Mummy* films.
Favorite place to visit alone: There's a bench at Yoyogi Park in Shibuya [outside Tokyo] I go to cry at for a few hours every March.

HAIR: PRODUCTS BY BUNBLE AND BUMBLE. GROOMING: PRODUCTS BY REHAB. GROOMING: SHERRIANN COLE. BOOK: COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHER. PERFUME: COURTESY OF THE BRAND. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

THE
NEW YORKER

Find your next great read.



Our editors and critics recommend the most captivating, notable, and surprising new books. Updated every Wednesday with the latest fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

See the full list for 2026 so far at [newyorker.com/bestbooks](https://www.newyorker.com/bestbooks)



Scan to read.



GQSPORTS

THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE COURT

FOLLOW ALONG @GQSPORTS



FANDOM

GOOOOOALS!

What's better than one famous fan preening courtside? *Two* household names lighting up the jumbotron—one old-school, the other next-gen. CHRIS MURPHY explains who's who



THE KNICKS

The filmmaker can rest assured his fellow native New Yorker won't trade his courtside Knicks tickets for a subscription to the American Ballet Theatre anytime soon.



SPIKE LEE



TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET



THE LAKERS

The supermodel has been snapped at Lakers games more than 700 times, but that still pales in comparison to the acting legend's 1,600-plus photos courtside.



JACK NICHOLSON



KENDALL JENNER



THE RED SOX

The singer-songwriter may not actually be a Boston native—she's from LA—but her love of the Red Sox rivals that of Beantown's favorite son.



BEN AFFLECK



GRACIE ABRAMS

OLD GUARD

NEW GUARD



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

Both movie stars are tried-and-true Texas boys who can't help but root for the home team. Hook 'em Horns.



MATTHEW McCONAUGHEY



GLEN POWELL



THE DEVILS

The Canadian pop star cheers for the Devils—and her rumored boyfriend, star center Jack Hughes—just like the Jersey boy filmmaker.



KEVIN SMITH



TATE McRAE

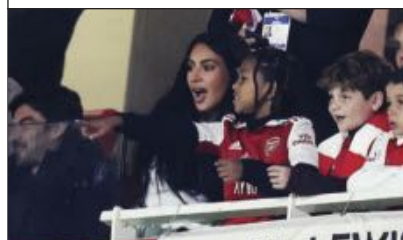


ARSENAL F.C.

The self-proclaimed "soccer mom" and F1 star were spotted getting cozy at the Super Bowl, where they may have shared their love of football—no, the other kind.



LEWIS HAMILTON



KIM KARDASHIAN

OLD GUARD

NEW GUARD

ABRAMS: JAMES SMITH/SAM SNAP; AFFLECK: LINDA CATAFFO/INY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE; CHALAMET: AL BELLO; HAMILTON: STUART MACFARLANE/ARSENAL FC; JENNER: ALLEN BEREZOVSKY; KARDASHIAN: CHARLOTTE WILSON/OFFSIDE; LEE: ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/BAE; MCCONAUGHEY: DONALD MIRALLES; NICHOLSON: JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA/LOS ANGELES TIMES; POWELL: DAVID BUONO/ICON SPORTS/IRE; SMITH: ANDREAS BRANCH/PATRICK MCMULLAN; ALL: GETTY IMAGES; MCRÆ: THEIMAGEDIRECT.COM.

Keep Outside the House That Always Wins

This is an American sports story about addiction and attention—one KIESE MAKEBA LAYMON has only told to his casino friends after losing his paycheck and nearly the rest of his life

This is an American sports story that I have only told to casino friends.

The year is 2000. The date is September 10. It is the beginning of my third year as a graduate student in creative writing at Indiana University Bloomington, and I am speeding back from a recreational league basketball game in a neighboring town called Martinsville when I hear that Bob Knight, the iconic head basketball coach at IU, has finally been fired for grabbing a student named Kent Harvey, who purportedly called him “Knight” instead of “Coach Knight.”

By the time I get back to my apartment, literally breathless, I hear from a downstairs neighbor that thousands of students are marching to university president Myles Brand’s house, some hoisting a burned effigy of Harvey. I step out of my apartment on Third Street and follow the roar. The roar leads me to the mob.

The mob reminds me of American stories from Mississippi, my home. I thought I knew mobs after having been kicked out of college five years earlier, for an altercation with some Confederate cape-wearing frat boys on Bid Day, until I saw thousands of mostly young white men marching for *their* coach, a shameless, withering basketball genius who’d survived being videotaped choking one of *their* players, survived throwing chairs during games, and survived saying to a female journalist on tape, “If rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it.”

On my way back to my apartment the evening of the firing, across from my favorite record store in Bloomington, I see a pickup truck and a mustached white man with an erroneous fade. I had seen his raggedy mustache and his erroneous fade earlier that day, at the gym in Martinsville. When Erroneous Fade was on the free-throw line earlier in the evening, I spotted the worst tattoo I had ever seen in my life on his left calf. The tattoo looked like a black and pinkish Skeleto, or

an elaborate twig, or that long-neck brother from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

I looked closer at the calf and asked my teammates if that was supposed to be Michael Jordan.

“Just do it,” I remember telling him. “Be like Mike, right?” My teammates died laughing.

This is an American sports story that I have only told to casino friends during halftimes of WNBA games. At this moment, my casino friends are also dying laughing.

Every decibel of laughter in that Martinsville gym must have felt like Mississippi fire ants eating away Erroneous Fade’s heart meat.

I remember watching his teeny tiny bottom lip quiver as I pulled on my mesh shorts smugly like I’d seen the actual Jordan do a hundred times on the free throw line.

Erroneous Fade cradled the ball and looked at me through glassy blue eyes.

I chucked long and slow at those sad glassy eyes.

“Why you mad?” I asked him.

“Keep laughing,” Erroneous Fade told me. “I kill n-ggers. I’ve done it before.”

Everyone who was laughing with me, including his teammates, stopped laughing. This is the part of the American sports story that I want these casino friends to remember most. That week in 2000, I was six feet one, 185 pounds with 8 percent body fat. I had a Mississippi-bred contentious demeanor. Could take a punch, could shoot midrange jumpers in my sleep, loved the physicality of offensive rebounding. After playing my final two years at Oberlin College, I realized the day I started my graduate program that my identity as a basketball player was over. This

didn’t stop me from running the same drills Iran in college at the court outside my apartment, or playing in rec league tournaments in Martinsville, a place I did not realize until it was too late that was considered a sundown town, where a young Black woman named Carol Jenkins was murdered for selling encyclopedias door-to-door.

The night the mob took over IU, when Erroneous Fade’s truck chased me, I jumped back across the street onto campus and ran behind the admissions building. I was not as scared as I was angry that I was getting chased in Indiana by a white boy with a suspect fade and the worst Jordan tattoo in the history of the galaxy.

I want my casino friends to know that though I am, like them, currently a dishonest degenerate American gambler unsuccessfully reckoning with sadness, I was once good at something other than giving my money to contraptions programmed to pilfer. Once, I was agile, and swift, and had the discipline of an athlete. Once, I could fight. When I tell this American sports story, I glide, or stumble, over the part about having body dysmorphia, obsessive exercise disorder, and anorexia, because who has the stomach for that part of real American sports stories in a casino?

This is an American sports story I have only told to casino friends while sitting in floor seats at the WNBA game after losing my paycheck, my SUV, my apartment, my furniture, and all of my savings.

The first time I tell this story to casino friends, we are watching the Connecticut Sun play the LA Sparks in 2010. That Sun team, led by Tina Charles, is beating the breaks off the Sparks. I am a full-fledged gambling addict with no folding money in my pocket, no car to drive home, no savings in my accounts, but I have courtside Suns tickets and free hotel rooms for the next decade.

The last time I tell this American sports story to casino friends, it is the summer

OVER OR UNDER?

“Casinos try to lure me into losing all my money by offering me great seats to watch the greatest basketball players on earth,” Kiese Makeba Laymon says. “They’re betting on me relapsing.”

A WAY OUT., 2025. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



of 2025 and we are watching the Sun, led by Marina Mabrey, play the Indiana Fever, led by Kelsey Mitchell and Caitlin Clark. I am no longer a degenerate gambler. I do not have any casino friends. I have prayed, and written, and meditated, and worked, and strategized, and narrated my way out of giving every dime I make to the casinos by reckoning with the immovable sadness I once fed to slot machines and blackjack dealers.

Of course, casinos are betting on me relapsing and giving my future away. I will not relapse. But I want to be liked, so at the end of the first quarter, I break out my Martinsville/Bob Knight/Erroneous Fade story with the thick-wristed man sitting to my left who I hear also went to school in the Big Ten.

I do not get to the *Nightmare Before Christmas* part of the story when I look down and see my new casino friend betting on the game we're watching. He starts talking about parlays and other words I do not understand. I begin to feel that supremely American feeling of unearned

more to an athletic artist than their name, image, and likeness and whether we can adequately predict how that name, image, and likeness will numerically perform. That there was a moment in time where these athletic Black boy artists were the most valued, imitated, and respected Black boys on earth. They created culture in our communities through athletic artistic styles, and they appeared to be the Black boys with the greatest access to good love, healthy choices, and second chances.

I do not tell my new casino friend any of that.

I will tell him later. Right now, I tell my new casino friend that I do not bet on sports.

He tells me that I should, and he keeps flipping through different screens, placing bets on more WNBA games, some knife-throwing event, a pickleball tournament somewhere in Florida. We start talking about name, image, and likeness in the NCAA. He says that he can't believe college kids are getting so much to play sports. I tell him that I don't think they get enough, and the NCAA and universities

Over the pandemic, I tell him, my best friend encouraged me to put money earned on side hustles into Bitcoin on something called Robinhood. My best friend assured me that I was in my "monymaking prime," and that I had plenty of money in savings and retirement since I quit giving all of my money away at the casino. My best friend knew that I'd spent a decade cradled in the risk associated with gambling addiction. They knew that I'd somehow made it out.

"Exactly," Not Casino Friend says. "That's why now is the time to find a crypto to 'play' with."

I tell Not Casino Friend that I went into Robinhood looking for Bitcoin but decided to play with something called Fubo for two horrendous reasons. First, Fubo looked and sounded like FUBU, a brand that made me feel anointed as a kid. The makers of FUBU convinced us that we were culturally rich and actively investing in our communities by wearing their really big, really colorful clothes. Whether it was true or not, I felt Black-people rich

Degenerate gambling, I think to myself, used to have so much integrity.

moral superiority. The casino is where I almost gave everything away, including my future, my profession, my family, and my health. Yet I feel a superiority to all the degenerate gamblers in the arena, in the casino, and especially morally superior to the gambler I am watching whose shaking thumbs are currently betting on the game, while watching the game, from the casino where gaming is plentiful, on a Native American reservation, in this haven for late-stage capitalism, which could easily be considered the biggest rigged game in the history of the hemisphere.

I want to tell my new casino friend that the phones and the casinos make valuing the texture of athletic stories harder. Without us investing our time into textured narratives of these layered athletic artists, we get a land where humans who have reached the height of a skill are simply sleek, powerful uniformed machines that we put money into, hoping to get a jackpot, a big win, and something that will help us win our money back. I want to wag my finger and tell him that there is so much

should compensate players retroactively who provided hundreds of billions of dollars in underpaid, and unpaid, labor.

My new casino friend's name, in my head, is Not Casino Friend. Not Casino Friend loves his phone and gambling too much to participate in listening to American sports stories.

Degenerate gambling, I think to myself, used to have so much more integrity.

The crowd is as electric as I've ever seen a Sun crowd, but it's obvious that a lot of people are here to see Clark make 30-foot three-pointers. I ask Not Casino Friend if he's betting on the over or under in the second half for Clark. "Over," he says. "Always over."

I want to finish telling him my Jordan tattoo story. But he does not care. I start telling him the kind of story that might keep his attention. I tell him that I had to stop bringing my phone everywhere a few years ago because I'd become obsessed with something called Robinhood.

Not Casino Friend turns his phone off and finally faces me.

in FUBU as a child, so duh, of course, Fubo could make me white-people rich as an adult.

Second, Fubo's supposed innovation was that for the first time, viewers could stream any sport we ever imagined and bet on that sport in the same app at the same time. Not Casino Friend looks at me with the screw face. He tells me that he was doing exactly that a few minutes ago without Fubo.

"Exactly," I tell Not Casino Friend, who is finally glued to my story and the Mabrey versus Clark matchup in front of us. I tell him that when I put my first \$10K into Fubo in late December 2020, it was around \$36 a share. One year later, I was into Fubo for more money than I'd ever lost in a year at the casino, and Fubo was around \$18.

On April 2, 2023, the night the LSU women beat Clark's Iowa team, I tell him that the stock was just over \$1.30. I'd lost all of my side hustle money. But I still patted myself on the back for not giving my side hustle money away to slot machines, not betting on the game of the year, not wagering my "real"

money, and not knowing how to wager on the game of the year if I wanted to.

Not Casino Friend asks again if I ever bet on sports.

I sit up straight and say, “Never.”

“But you lost a year’s salary investing in Fubo because you used to wear FUBU clothes?”

I slump back in my seat.

Not Casino Friend tells me that if I had “played” with the same amount of money I had in Fubo in Bitcoin instead, I would have made more than a million dollars. He says that if I simply took that same amount of money and bet the over on the rebounds of Angel Reese during her rookie WNBA season, I would have made more than a million dollars.

“Right,” I tell him. “But then I’d be addicted to betting on sports.”

Not Casino Friend looks me directly in the eyes for the first time since we’ve been talking. He looks at me like he knows something about me that I cannot admit about myself in this arena, in this casino. *Yeah, his familiar blue eyes say. Then you’d be addicted to betting on sports.*

The day after Knight was fired and Erroneous Fade chased me onto IU’s campus, I made sure to wear an inconspicuous Jackson State Tigers outfit and hat to class so Erroneous Fade wouldn’t recognize me around Bloomington. I was reading about Richard Wright, one of the most virtuosic literary talents the nation has ever produced, in an essay by Ralph Ellison called “Remembering Richard Wright” from a book entitled *Going to the Territory*:

“Because while baseball, basketball, and football players cannot really tell us how to write our books,” Ellison wrote, “they do demonstrate where much of the significant action is taking place. Often they are themselves cultural heroes who work powerful modification in American social attitudes. And they tell us in nonliterary terms much about the nature of possibility. They tell us about the cost of success, and much about the nonpolitical aspects of racial and national identity, about the changing nature of social hierarchy, and about the role which individual skill and excellence can play in creating social change.”

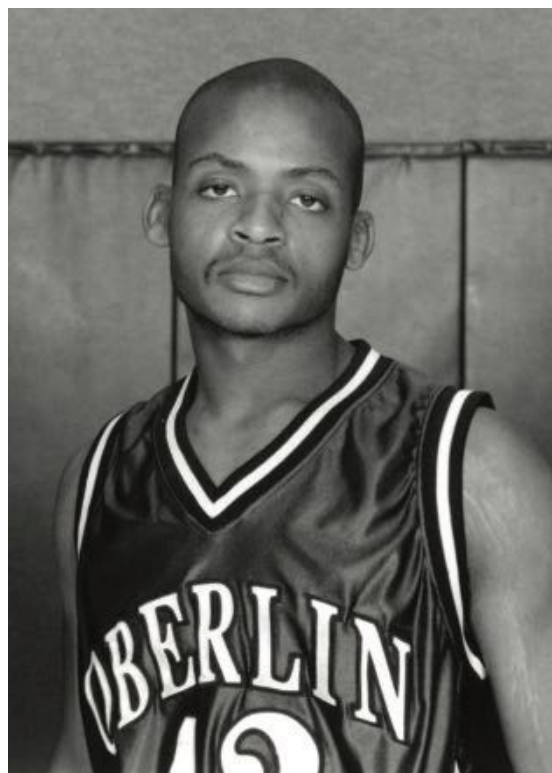
In September 2000, that quote made me quake because I was in a sports landscape dictated by the acumen of Nike

founder Phil Knight, the skillful, willful spectacle of Jordan, and the exploitative labor practices of the NCAA.

That was the big three at the turn of the century in sports and culture.

A quarter century later, as we’ve become more invested in winning and “playing” on our phones than witnessing and sincerely loving the absolute artful skill, will, and luck necessary for professional athletes to become professional athletes, I am wondering how perpetual betting on sports has changed our understanding of the possibility Ellison wrote about.

Conversely, it should not be lost on any of us that as the Trump administration has disappeared students and faculty



who resist while shaking down colleges and universities, gutting most everything associated with historic struggles around race, gender, and sexuality, it appears to be even harder for well-compensated college athletic artists to resist passivity and organize on behalf of vulnerable students, staff, and faculty at their collegiate institutions, and the cities and towns cradling their institutions.

THE CHASE

Laymon played basketball for Oberlin College in the late '90s. After graduation he played in rec leagues in Martinsville, Indiana, a KKK stronghold where he'd have a racist encounter on the court.

This is an American sports story, and like most American stories, the narrator is unreliable, and terrified of why he loves the insides of casinos, the performances of casino friends, and stories we could tell about sports if we had more guts. The stories that we tell about sports, and about how athletic genius impacts us, have to be more valuable and resonant than any bet one can wager on the work of athletic genius. This is hard to accept when casino friends are sad and greedy, and non-casino friends are sad and poor, and many of us feel less sad when we watch athletic artists defy our imaginations and even less sad when we win money from their culture-creating performances.

I get it. I hate it.

I get and hate that the nation has handed the health of the world’s children to one of the worst gamblers in North America. I get and hate that we have yet to really talk with each other about why, when our gambler in chief appears saddest, he seems, like most addicted gamblers, to erratically risk even more. Those gambles never lead to moral wins for the nation, or big wins or jackpots for the poor Black communities that most of our most prodigious athletic artists come from. Imagine gambling other people’s money, taking all the wins, and never, ever admitting that you lose.

Imagine living in a casino that allows you to lose and call it winning. That is not just the imagined reality of our gambler in chief; that was my dream for a decade, which means that the delusional, greedy liar I was in the casino will forever be a part of me. When I do not reckon with the ways that casinos, betting apps, and late-stage capitalism operationalize my sadness, economic anxiety, and greed, I risk more privately and talk less about that risk publicly.

And I lose.

And I lie about losing in this spectacular rotten American casino. And I kill generative possibility. And I eventually die knowing who I wish I’d become, yet absolutely unable to wrap words around the pitiful, fleshy, bloody-chinned, self-righteous, delusional gambler that the casino, the prediction market, and worst of this nation need to create and sustain for its survival.

This is the kind of American sports story I want to have the courage to tell to my casino friends in 2026.

I suppose I just did. **W**

Kissing the Ring

Turns out the most powerful man in Hollywood, at least for a moment, is NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. LACHLAN CARTWRIGHT chops it up with the mogul entertaining bids from every studio head in town, as they duke it out for the most valuable thing on TV

One evening in March, a healthy slice of the ruling class of media, politics, entertainment, and sports gathered in New York City to celebrate Rupert Murdoch's 95th birthday.

Among the A-listers who descended upon The Grill: his son Lachlan Murdoch, his ex-wife Wendi Deng Murdoch, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, Hugh Jackman, Michael Bloomberg, Tony Blair, Barry Diller, and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Also: Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, New England Patriots proprietor Robert Kraft, and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell.

That football tycoons occupied a chunk of the boldface names was not a coincidence. The sport—and Goodell in particular—has become a power center.

“The media landscape is changing quickly, and it’s not because we’re changing it—it’s because that’s where the consumers are going,” Goodell tells me. The NFL, he says, is simply “going where the consumers are.”

And like any power center, this one comes with internecine battles, petty rivalries, and lots and lots of money.

Goodell has become the envy of all the other sporting leagues for the way he’s been able to parcel out air and streaming rights. Amazon has Thursday Night Football. CBS and Fox have Sunday afternoons. NBC has Sunday nights. Monday night is the domain of ESPN and ABC. YouTube has the NFL Sunday Ticket, and Netflix has Christmas Day. And 86 of the top 100 TV broadcasts in 2025 were NFL games. But in 2024 the National Basketball Association

inked a monster \$76 billion deal with Amazon, NBCUniversal, and Disney. At first it had Goodell and the NFL fuming. Then they began salivating at the prospect that they could improve on their existing \$110 billion contract. And as live sports become the ultimate subscription driver, broadcast partners and streamers are fighting over every bit they can get—putting Goodell in an enviable position as the ultimate media kingpin.

“The media landscape is changing quickly, and it’s not because we’re changing it, it’s because that’s where the consumers are going,” Goodell tells me when we meet at his palatial NFL office the day before Murdoch’s party. “People think we’re leading it. We’re actually going where the consumers are. And I think that’s a fundamental thing that you have to spend a lot of time learning and trying to understand.”

It is perhaps Murdoch, if anyone, whom Goodell vaunts as the model titan, as Goodell pushes for a deal that will cement his own legacy. Murdoch “is a true visionary,” Goodell says, “on the way he builds everything. But what always struck me about him is he looked at things longer term.”

Over the past few months, the Murdoch empire has been a thorn in Goodell’s

side, as the Department of Justice has announced an investigation into how expensive and difficult it has become for NFL fans to watch games. *The Wall Street Journal*, Fox, and the *New York Post* have steadily aired accusations of anticompetitive, anti-consumer tactics. The accusations have irked the NFL, and Goodell.

“Well, I don’t agree with that because 88 percent of our games, roughly, are on broadcast television,” Goodell tells me, pushing back. “The other 12 percent are on platforms that are incredibly widely distributed and people are already there. Netflix is not a small distribution. In fact, you can make an argument it’s bigger than some of the networks.”

Goodell has been politically savvy from the cradle. His father, Charles, was a US senator, appointed by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller to Robert F. Kennedy’s seat after his assassination. Charles, the descendant of a prominent New York abolitionist, was among the loudest Republican voices against the Vietnam War. Roger, one of five children, joined the NFL in 1982, working under Commissioner Pete Rozelle. After a brief stint with the New York Jets, he returned to the league office, becoming commissioner in 2006.

“As a businessman, he’s direct, he’s aggressive,” says Versant CEO Mark Lazarus, who negotiated deals with Goodell when Lazarus was running NBC Sports. “He’s well prepared for any discussion. There aren’t many, if any, things in discussions that we’ve had that have ever, that he didn’t have a—I may not have liked his answers—but that he didn’t have an answer or a counterpoint to.”

Jones recalled being asked by a fellow owner whether Goodell, whom he had known in NFL marketing negotiations, was tough enough to be commissioner.

“I said, ‘Boys, don’t worry about it, he bit as a puppy, he bit hard as a puppy, he will bite back,’” Jones tells me in his trademark Texarkana accent.

Unlike other sports, the NFL has become entertainment crack. And as Jones puts it to me, the NFL “is a soap opera 365 days of the year.” Goodell has 32 constituents—the owners of the teams—who have come to trust and respect him as he has increased their wealth through rivers of media-deal gold. Part of Goodell and his team’s strategy has been to examine the value they are creating for their media partners.

THE COMMISH

Roger Goodell, photographed in April on the patio outside his office, is renegotiating more than \$110 billion in broadcast rights.



"He's a great negotiator and is sitting on top of one of the last must-see real-time day and date broadcasts, so he has a lot of great cards to play," former CAA chairman and cofounder Michael Ovitz, a friend of Goodell's, tells me.

Kraft describes Goodell as a "hard negotiator" who is "almost relentless in a positive way."

"Sometimes we have to calm him down. He's so good at it."

With a limited supply of games but seemingly unlimited demand from

package. CNBC reported that the NFL and Paramount Skydance were discussing a deal that could cost CBS an extra \$1 billion or more.

It's up for debate whether any of the key media partners are making money from the NFL rights they bought—and none wanted to discuss it on the record. Rather, they believe in the intangible benefits of being in partnership with the NFL. Having the rights buys you leverage with distributors, advertisers, and subscribers. And it's a promotional vehicle for CBS or Amazon

around, the NFL could suck out all the cash from sports rights.

"We have the ability to offset a portion of any kind of cost increases because we look at our sports portfolio as a whole, so we would certainly consider balancing or rebalancing our portfolio as we move forward when those opportunities become available," Fox CEO Lachlan Murdoch said on an earnings call earlier this year. But losing NFL rights would be an existential threat to Fox as much as any of the rights holders.

"The NFL doesn't need to fight, they don't care. If you decide to enter into a fight, you are going to lose," Skipper says. "So they would be very persuasive if they say, 'Sorry, we don't want to wait till '29.' And everybody's gonna have their press officer write a statement that says, 'Oh, we were so excited to get the chance to continue our relationship with the most valuable content in the world.'"

"I always thought that when we were negotiating with the NFL," says one former network executive, "the boys would turn up with ski masks and AK-47s." As another puts it, "If you decide to enter into a fight, you are going to lose."

the streamers, the NFL has become a cash-minting media company with an incredibly valuable product.

"My recollection of the negotiations is they were much more about what you were going to *get* for the money you were going to pay, and much less about the money you were gonna pay. And also much less about what games you were going to get," former president of ESPN John Skipper says, meaning, as he clarifies, "at least in my experience, the NFL did not negotiate much on price."

Thanks to David Ellison's Paramount purchase, Goodell has used a change-of-control provision in the contract to kick-start talks to renegotiate their deal and then set the market for the other partners.

"We look at the numbers, we look at the data. We look at the value behind it all," Hans Schroeder, the chief operating officer of NFL Media, tells me. "And yes, I think we think our rights are driving even more value today. As Roger said, our rights are undervalued."

The drumbeat started as soon as the Super Bowl was over. In late March, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Netflix, hungry for more NFL, is looking at a Thanksgiving eve game plus an international match to add to its Christmas Day

or NBC to plug new series as they try to manifest new hits.

"Part of it is we push our partners to do the best they can do with it," says Kraft, who chairs the league's media committee. "What we see happening now is they are bundling our content with other content they have that's not as strong and have people bidding on that basis, and we want to get our fair value, and I think that's really what is driving us."

Viewing figures leave no doubt that YouTube is the new TV, and Netflix is looking more and more like a broadcaster, having decided to add advertising. The streamers are essentially taking a page from the Murdoch playbook. When the media mogul created Fox in 1986, he looked to the NFL as a way to attract eyeballs. He then added NFL rights in the 1994 season to develop affiliates and bring in a bigger audience.

Producing live sports at scale is an incredibly complex job. The likes of Fox, NBC, CBS, and ESPN have decades of institutional knowledge and experience. But there is unlikely to be any material offset for CBS and other legacy media companies. The new deal may create an opportunity for new platforms looking to snap up other sporting rights as the older players are squeezed. At risk: Major League Baseball and Major League Soccer. With only so much money to go

With negotiations expected to pick up through the summer, one eventuality is the same partners lock down similar packages. There may be nips and tucks that would allow for the creation of another package, likely for a streamer. But the partners will then need to find ways to pay up, which will mean finding savings in other parts of their businesses—and passing on the extra costs to the fans.

"Sports and live content is unique, and I think we stand in a unique spot in that ecosystem," Goodell tells me. "So I think we create value. You know, everyone, every business makes calculations and has to make determinations of the cost of things and also how they allocate their resources, capital and otherwise."

At the Super Bowl halftime show, Bad Bunny belted out his hits "Tití Me Preguntó," "Yo Perreo Sola," and "Monaco." Some were distracted by the controversy of it all. But in reality, it was a masterstroke by the NFL as it looks to bring in a larger international audience: Latin America. South America. Hispanics. The international horizon is also where there is more money to be made. The NFL is currently shopping for a mini package (what it calls a strip), which will incorporate a game in Australia in September along with domestic games. That looks likely to go to YouTube and Netflix.

"I think the commissioner is somebody whose heart looks a lot like the NFL shield, and he cares about the league," Schroeder

says. “He’s worked really at one place his entire career. You know, he lives it, he breathes it, he sleeps it, and he’s always thinking about a couple things. One is what is best with the league and what’s best for the league. And two, how do we always move forward?”

The NFL looks closely at how its media partners are performing. Advertising. Ratings. Subscriptions. How they generate value from Thursday through Monday Night Football becomes part of the calculation. An 18th game would increase the league’s value by billions.

“In our new labor agreement, I hope we go to 18 games and two preseason games, and then if we do that, it would allow us to hopefully go to 16 international games, so we would have every team every year play an international game, which would be built mainly through a streaming audience,” Kraft tells me the day after Murdoch’s birthday party.

And old broadcast TV is in some ways the new broadcast TV.

“I believe that the majority of their games will still stay on networks,” former Fox Sports president David Hill tells me about the next iteration of the rights deal.

“Until the streamers are in a position to say that we can give you the same bulk audiences that the networks can, which

conversations with Amazon (and team owners) before the streamer landed its Thursday-night package. That package had previously been held by Fox, CBS, and NBC, who all opted not to pursue it because they had strength in their Sunday packages.

“I think streamers bring innovation, they bring technology,” Goodell says. “They bring an important platform. From YouTube we’ve learned a lot. The importance of creators and influencers, how they’ve done that. They took over Sunday Ticket, which is a package that we thought could have a lot more innovation, and they’ve done an amazing job with it.”

Goodell, who has not visited Australia before, will make three trips in six months Down Under ahead of the first-ever game in Melbourne between the Los Angeles Rams and the San Francisco 49ers in September. When he isn’t negotiating deals and at games, he finds solace in his “man cave” at his New York home.

“Everyone got a look at my man cave back in COVID,” Goodell tells me, referring to having to do the NFL Draft from his innermost fiefdom, before adding, “I hope not to do that again.”

When I ask the 67-year-old about succession, he acknowledges it’s on his mind. “That’s one of the things that you spend a lot of time focusing on,” he says. Brian Rolapp,

who negotiated a number of deals when he was running Fox Sports, says, laughing.

At Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, California, in early February, fans gathered for Super Bowl LX, where the Seattle Seahawks would ultimately defeat the New England Patriots. For the privilege of watching an underwhelming game—and a much more whelming live performance by Bad Bunny—the cheapest tickets went for just over \$4,000 a pop. The stadium’s capacity is more than 68,000. The math tells the stakes.

In a long, glass-fronted suite with tiered leather seating sat YouTube CEO Neal Mohan, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Axel Springer CEO (and Netflix board member) Mathias Döpfner, soon-to-be Disney CEO Josh D’Amaro, and Paramount Skydance CEO David Ellison. The men were gathered to kiss Goodell’s ring.

“It was a super relaxed atmosphere,” Döpfner tells me in April, recalling what was his first Super Bowl. The moguls “were just chatting,” he says, “from gossip to serious business talks, and then just focusing on the game and the whole event, and the entertainment part of it, which is also very important. And having fun.” That’s partly how, as he puts it, “Roger Goodell has

“I said, ‘Boys, don’t worry about it, he bit *hard* as a puppy, he will bite back,’” says Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, in his trademark Texarkana accent, recalling what he told fellow NFL owners about whether Goodell would be a tough enough commissioner.

I don’t know if they can at the moment, or if I don’t know if the NFL at this stage is going to make that fit, but what I think will happen is that the percentage of games on networks will come down slightly and the percentage of games on streamers will go up slightly.”

YouTube, Amazon, and Netflix have one big advantage over the competition: They have massive global footprints outside the US. Netflix, whose strategy had always been about binge watching, has also come around to the live events formula.

From NFL headquarters in New York, Goodell tells me that it was 10 years of

who was responsible for the NFL’s media businesses, was seen as a replacement until he left last year to run the PGA.

“He has created a situation that the shoes would be hard to fill; on the other hand it would be tremendously attractive for an outstanding talent,” Jones tells me.

One thing is for certain: Much like the Oscars defecting from ABC to YouTube in 2029, the Super Bowl could be shown on a streamer in the next decade—if the price is right.

“I always thought that when we were negotiating with the NFL, the boys would turn up with ski masks and AK-47s,” Hill,

created the most valuable sports rights in the world.”

“The NFL stands symbolically for success and for mass audiences, and in the way everybody wants to be part of that success, and I think that’s why there is a lot of competition for the events, that everybody is trying to get a piece of it,” says Döpfner. “That is a reflection of Roger’s success over more than four decades.”

And with Döpfner, Goodell has created one more fan, and one more partner. The day after the big fun game, Döpfner’s *Bild*, Germany’s popular tabloid newspaper, and the NFL announced a partnership. **W**

KING OF THE COURT

As the brightest star on the men's tennis scene, Carlos Alcaraz draws attention whether he likes it or not. JOSÉ CRIALES-UNZUETA speaks to the Spaniard about his rise to number one and the rivalry that promises the future of his sport

“I’m used to this,” Carlos Alcaraz says with a beguiling grin. “I’ve been on the floor on clay before, so this isn’t new!”

We’re watching Alcaraz roll around on brick orange clay, but we’re not watching him play tennis.

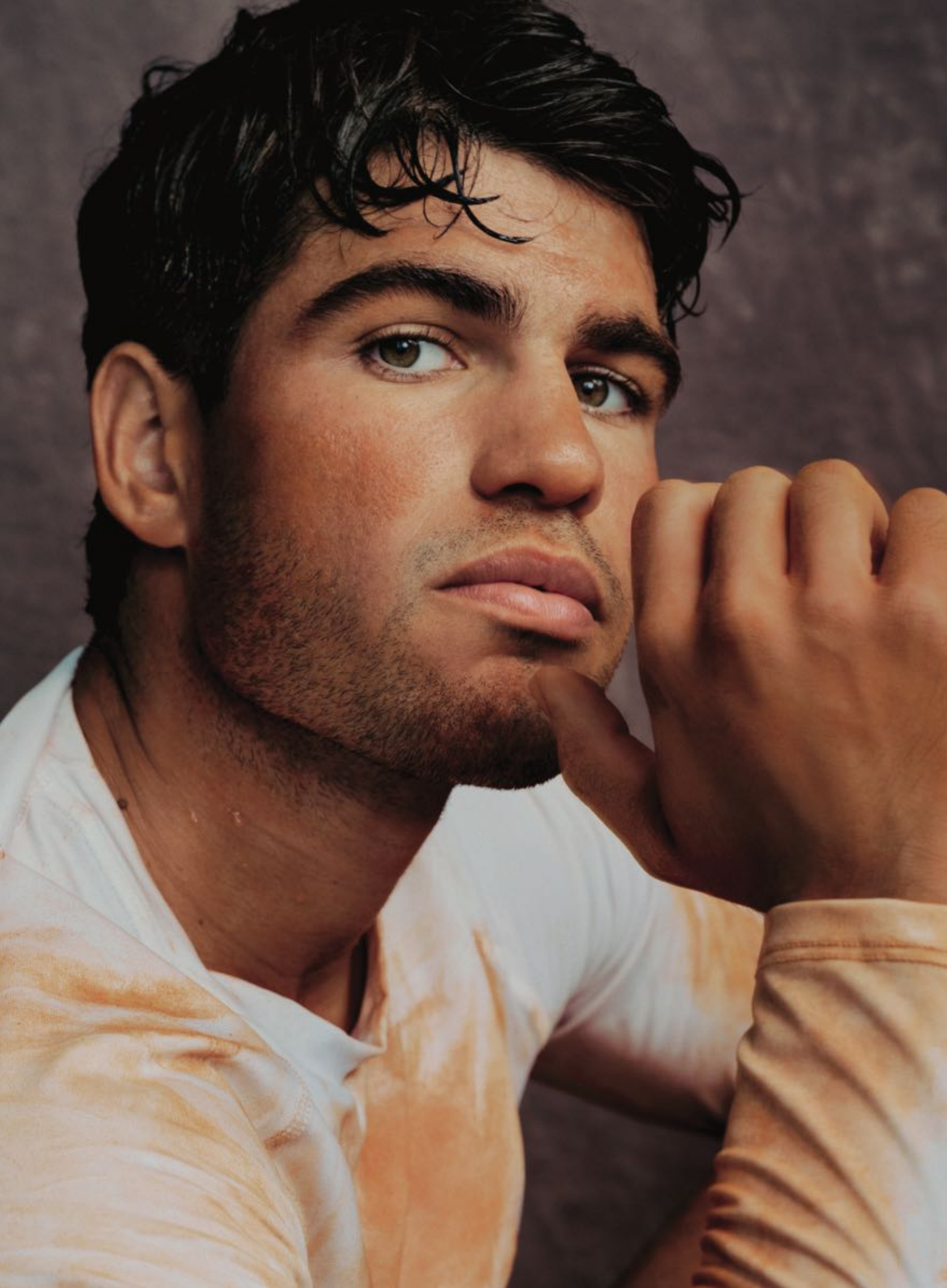
There’s some of it on his face; around his thick eyebrows and sprinkled above his lips. It’s lightly dusted over his freshly trimmed beard and his hair—longer than usual, a little disheveled. It’s all over his clothing too: a Louis Vuitton tank top that he’ll occasionally let slide up his taut abdomen, some Nike gym shorts (six-inch inseam, in case you were wondering) that offer a glimpse at his tan line, and his personal Rolex watch. Alcaraz, like many athletes of his stature, has lucrative apparel contracts, in his case with those brands. He’s not quite

a style icon—though he has his fascinations, like wearing zany highlighter-colored looks on the court and his 300 plus-strong sneaker collection—but he wears clothes well.

It’s the day before his first match at the Miami Open, and the Spaniard, who turned 23 earlier this month, has given *Vanity Fair* a fraction of his morning for a photo shoot and interview. Prior to his arrival alongside his formidable manager—Alcaraz’s fellow Murcian Albert Molina—there’s some anxiety in the air; we’re working on a tight schedule. But it clears once he walks in.

Alcaraz is down for it all. I had heard—and seen clips online—of Alcaraz being a gent: sweeping clay courts himself after practice rounds, greeting staffers and fellow players with the same warmth. And yet I was not prepared for his disarming niceness. If anything, he was deferential, in a manner surprising

NOW SERVING
At just 23 years old, Carlos Alcaraz has racked up many records that oftentimes start with “the youngest ever to....”
Top by Nike.
Fashion Editor: Dara.





for a person so famous and an athlete known for his vigor and on-court boldness.

When he hears his fans cheer, Alcaraz points to his ear to encourage them to scream louder.

He vigorously huffs and puffs and assuredly kicks his racket in between serves. His cockiness on the court is well-earned. On the day we meet, he sits atop the ATP Tour rankings and collects celebrity spectators with the same ease he does trophies: film legend Spike Lee, pop superstar Dua Lipa, soccer giant David Beckham, golf champion Rory McIlroy. The list goes on.

Together with Jannik Sinner, Alcaraz is one half of “Sincaraz,” the fan-coined nickname for his rivalry with the current world number two, which has been widely described as a “rebirth” for tennis following the dominance of the “Big Three” era (Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic).

In person, Alcaraz is more gentle than he lets his on-court persona reveal. But he’s tennis’s greatest contemporary showman, and he knows it.

In February, Alcaraz became the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam. Djokovic, his opponent at the decisive match in Melbourne, lauded the achievement: “What you’ve been doing I think the best word to describe it is historic,” the Serbian said in his on-court interview. “Legendary.”

When Alcaraz arrived at his first match in Miami, he carried a new Nike duffel bag that read “YOUNGEST EVER TO WIN THE 4 OF THEM.”

As it often happens with almost anything Alcaraz does, the bag lit a match—as journalist José Morgado pointed out on X, the statement seemed to forgo a key word: *man*. In the Open era, Steffi Graf was 19 when she achieved the feat in 1988, and Serena Williams was 21 when she did it in 2003.

But the flip side of Alcaraz’s bag read: “El más joven de la historia en ganar los 4 grandes.” In Spanish, the line is gendered, as any bilingual Alcaraz zealot may point out. His detractors will say that, in Spanish, the masculine form is the general one. Was the omission classic Alcaraz audacity or a mere translation issue?

Skeptics question whether what they see as immaturity is affecting his play. During a Miami match against American Sebastian Korda, Alcaraz approached his box. “I can’t anymore. I can’t anymore, dude, I want to go home, dude,” Alcaraz told his team in Spanish. (Last month, as the Monte-Carlo Masters kicked off, Alcaraz said he regretted these comments. The Spaniard lost to Sinner in the final in Monte Carlo, falling to number two.)

Did Alcaraz intentionally flunk out of Miami? Is he “bored” from Masters 1000 events, as French tennis coach and commentator Patrick Mouratoglou suggested? Had he come to Miami to party, as some online said mockingly?

“Well, I think that nowadays we have to be way more careful with what we say, and what we do, but at the end of the day, we’re just human, you know?” Alcaraz tells me. We spoke in Spanish, both our first language.

What he is acutely aware of is that people will react.

“It’s stressful, because you have to think about what you do and when you do it and where you are *all* the time,” Alcaraz says. “But as a person, we have good days and bad days, we wake up sometimes not wanting to do anything, but we still have to show up, and sometimes we don’t react in the way we should.”

Yet Alcaraz is not a victim of his stature.

What he is, really, is young. The youngest man to ever do it, but also just a guy in his early 20s.

“I don’t want to say vertigo,” he answers when I ask him about having already accomplished so much.

“I’m aware that I have so much ahead of me, and I try not to think that I have 12 or 15 years left of my career because I get overwhelmed,” Alcaraz says, laughing. What he doesn’t want is to end up leading a monotonous life that makes him “a slave to tennis.”

Alcaraz began his professional tennis career at 14 and broke into the top 100 rankings three years later. In 2022 he won the US Open and became the first male Zoomer to win a major singles title, in addition to becoming the youngest man to be ranked number one in the world. His name is mentioned alongside a plethora of records that oftentimes start with “the youngest ever to....”

“I know I’m living a dream life, a life I dreamed of,” Alcaraz says. “But I sometimes wish I could have more moments for myself, to do things a 22-year-old guy would do.”

From the outside, it looks like Alcaraz *does* make time to do those things. (After his losing match to Korda, a tennis-head friend jokingly texted me that we’d likely see photos of Alcaraz at E! even, the famed 24-hour Miami nightclub.) Alcaraz has become known for seemingly living his life off the court with as much intensity as he plays on it. He slips past questions about his private life; he is, however, happy to talk about his downtime. He shares much of his life online with his more than 8.5 million followers. From Miami alone: clips jumping off a yacht, a video of golf with his friends, snapshots watching an Inter Miami CF soccer match and an NBA game, a selfie with DJ Martin Garrix.

“Over time, you grow aware of what you need,” Alcaraz says.

“There’s been times in which I didn’t stop to take a break,” he says, “and that led to me not playing well, or becoming injured, or...” he pauses. “Let’s just leave it at that, that it didn’t end well.” (In the months after we spoke, Alcaraz injured his wrist. He’s since withdrawn from tournaments following the Monte-Carlo Masters and decided not to defend his championship at Roland Garros.) He’s been vocal about the intensity of the tennis calendar and tells me he’s working to change it. “I think it’s just as important, or more, than taking care of your body,” he says about his mental health. “There’s people who are, fairly so, obsessed with body aesthetics, but to me it’s just as important to take care of your head.”

There was a time in which it seemed, as Federer and Nadal appeared close to retirement, that men’s tennis would never be as exciting again.

Those reservations have been blown up by the bombastic presence of Alcaraz combined with Sinner’s stoicism, a synergy seen in full force at Roland Garros last year.

It was the first time they met at a major final. Sinner was ranked first and Alcaraz second and the defending champion. Alcaraz lost the first two sets but recovered in the third, and he and Sinner delivered what has been widely discussed as some of the most riveting tennis play in history in the last two, which the Spaniard also won. At 5 hours and 29 minutes, it is the longest French Open final of all time.

“It is, on record, one of the greatest matches ever,” Lee tells me. He recalls sitting courtside right where players leave their towels, so after every point Alcaraz would come over and Lee would, in his words, “pump him up.”

“Look, I’m a sports fan and a New Yorker, so I’m going to be loud and cheer for my guy,” Lee laughs.

LOVE ALL

Alcaraz is outspoken about prioritizing his mental health. “I think it’s just as important, if not more, than taking care of the body.” Tank top by Louis Vuitton Men’s; shorts by Nike.

RETURN SERVE

"I'm aware that I have so much ahead of me, and I try not to think that I have 12 or 15 years left of my career because I get overwhelmed."





"And as it got tighter, I got louder." After the match, Lee gave Alcaraz his Yankees hat.

Alcaraz likes to keep the tension with Sinner within the match. "We're showing the world that we can be on court and give our best, and try to do the most possible damage to the other while playing, try to beat each other, and then, off court, just be two guys who get along really well," he says. "We help each other give our best." There is, as Alcaraz says, no bad blood. "We are fighting for the same goal, but there's no need to hate each other because we want the same thing." That said, "when you are competing at this level, having a close friendship is complicated," he says. "It can be done," he clarifies. "I'm all for it."

Sincaraz has been great for tennis and for tennis fandom, but Alcaraz wants to manage expectations.

Rivalries are "long processes," he says. "It's not comparable to the historic rivalries that have happened in tennis, because we both have so many years ahead. Hopefully, we will continue playing against each other many times, at many finals, and that we will split the greatest tournaments."

Alcaraz is one of tennis's most decorated players today, but he is also becoming a pop culture obsession due to both his magnetism on the court and also to the fact that he is, objectively, very attractive.

"Buzzcaraz is elite," texts another friend as we discuss Alcaraz's hairstyle in Miami, which is longer than usual after he's grown out a mullet-style fade he debuted at Indian Wells.

online with the same speed and ease he hits a tennis ball. He has earned a perennial spot on social media feeds of anyone who is remotely interested in tennis or men.

From the Australian Open alone: more than 1.2 million views on TikTok for defending his opponent Alex de Minaur from a time violation warning; another 3 million on Instagram for removing his tank top after a match and nodding at the camera after erupting applause; 3 million on Instagram for a supercut of him after his victory in Melbourne; and 9.2 million across both platforms for his "vibing" with his headphones on after a match.

Then there's the hundreds of thousands of views Alcaraz procures from clips and supercuts from some of his most memorable points, remarkable foot speed, and impressive strength. He has been described as a "human highlight reel" by the tennis podcaster Matt Roberts, an assessment backed by *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *The New York Times*.

"What makes Carlos so compelling is the emotion he brings to the game—joy, spontaneity, real artistry," Pharrell Williams, the creative director of Louis Vuitton Men's, tells me via email. "Seeing him live, you feel his presence immediately. He's not just playing—he's expressing something."

If many of his counterparts tend to come across as self-serious and reserved, Alcaraz is explosive. Does he purposefully put on a show, or is he an innate performer? He suggests that his showmanship is integral to his game. "It's how I play, it's how I like to play, and how I want to play," he says. "When people are entertained and I notice that they're enjoying it, I have a good time too."

"I KNOW I'M LIVING A DREAM LIFE, A LIFE I DREAMED OF. BUT I SOMETIMES WISH I COULD HAVE MORE MOMENTS FOR MYSELF, TO DO THINGS A 22-YEAR-OLD GUY WOULD DO."

There's also been a shaved undercut, a bleached buzz, and myriad other hairstyles that have, Beckham-style, made headlines: "With respect to both [Reilly] Opelka and Alcaraz's tennis skills, though, the main thing fans will remember about this match was the surprise unveiling of Alcaraz's shaved dome," wrote *GQ* of the buzz cut in question.

Alcaraz is aware of the public compulsion to analyze his looks. He doesn't purposefully feed it, but he doesn't try to stop it either.

"Listen, I try for it to not be a disaster, but if there's something I want to do, I do it," he says. "If I were to listen to everyone's opinion, I'd go crazy, right?" He smiles again.

Alcaraz's smile is wide and unrestrained, baring his teeth and his full lips—features he's grown into since breaking into tennis as a teenager. When I ask him about the culture's preoccupation with his clothes and his training, he simply laughs, not denying, nor underscoring, his enjoyment of it.

There have been many other sex symbols in sports: Muhammad Ali, Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, Tom Brady, to name a few. Is Alcaraz on the same path?

None of those are children of the internet era. None of them have the same preternatural sense of how fast an image can travel that comes with being a digital native. None of them are "Carlitos," who goes viral

The viral moments are good for his image, he says, and for the sport in general. But there's also a downside. "Now, anyone can easily leave a comment, you can harm an athlete with just one comment," he says, admitting that negative comments have at times affected his game.

Despite the Nike duffel, Alcaraz says he doesn't obsess over breaking records. "There are records I want and that I'm chasing, but for when I can look back at my career when I reach the end of and see what I've done, and where I am in comparison to others," he says. "But I have to say that it is nice to see your name in some places."

Djokovic himself has said Alcaraz combines "the best of all three worlds," his own, Federer's, and Nadal's.

But Alcaraz argues that he's grown past simple parallels. "We've reached a point in which comparisons are over," he says. He can appreciate a compliment like Djokovic's. "It's nice to hear it," he pauses, then smiles like a young boy who's been praised by one of his idols: "It's *really* cool." He composes himself: "But I'm always going for my own style, it's what I've created and I've trained to perfect it. I haven't copied anyone," he says. "People now know that I am Carlos Alcaraz." **VF**

MATCH POINT

His rivalry with Jannik Sinner is closely watched, but Alcaraz likes to keep any tension on the court. "We help each other give our best," he says. Clothing by Louis Vuitton Men's; watch by Rolex.





RARE AIR

Whether she's shooting three-pointers or walking the red carpet, the WNBA's four-time MVP doesn't miss. ERIN VANDERHOOF catches up with A'ja Wilson

Every year after the WNBA season ends, A'ja Wilson takes a reset. "I put my shoes away. I get my long nails," the six-foot-four center says. "This makes sure I cannot touch a basketball."

When she is playing, Wilson's unstoppable. She's a four-time league MVP who's led the Las Vegas Aces to three championship victories—the first WNBA player to score more than 1,000 points in a single season. Her three-pointers float effortlessly; her jump shot is the move's platonic ideal. She bats away defenders like a cat with a toy mouse.

In April, the South Carolinian reportedly signed a deal that makes her the highest-paid player in

WNBA history—a three-year contract that starts at \$1.4 million and could reach \$5 million. Now she's making a case for inclusion on the list of greatest athletes ever, in any sport. She's not being shy about it, either. "I want to prove that I'm the best," says Wilson. "That allows me to have a great trophy case. It allows me to get rings. And it allows me to just play with peace."

Even off the court, Wilson reigns. Her first Nike shoe, the A'One, sold out within minutes in 2025. Wilson took its sister, the Nike A'Two, for a European tour this spring. She's walking carpets and trying out voice acting; her appearance on *Hot Ones* went viral after she stopped to pray for deliverance from the spicy wings.

FRONT AND CENTER

A'ja Wilson is a star but not a showboat. "If you're wearing the same jersey as me in the foxhole, I'm not leaving you. We're about to win." Top by Calvin Klein; skirt by Alaïa from Net-a-Porter. Fashion Editor: Max Ortega.

Becky Hammon, who's been coaching the Aces since 2022, has seen the change in her star player. "She went from a young girl to a woman" over the last few years, says Hammon. "Her work ethic, her groundedness—she just has all the pieces. She holds the locker room accountable, and she can only do that when she's holding herself to the highest standard."

Wilson's height and regal bearing make her an ideal conduit for bold fashion; you'd be hard-pressed to find another athlete who can wear head-to-toe Rick Owens as credibly as she does. On the trip for the Nike A™Two, Wilson posed in Jacquemus outside of the Louvre Pyramid by I.M. Pei.

Though Wilson has been in the national spotlight since high school, her transformation wasn't inevitable. Her mother, Eva, still remembers the days when Wilson would buy \$10 hoodies at Goodwill. "You're able to develop a sense of style when you have money to pay for it," Eva says over the phone with a knowing laugh. "Let's just be real—you can do a whole lot when you got money."

The Wilsons were hands-on parents, though there was a clear division of labor. "Roscoe was the athletic side. I was the academic side," says Eva, who shares Wilson's blunt yet affable manner and Southern twang.

When they're trying to explain her drive, the producers of Wilson's future biopic will have plenty of vivid moments to choose from: a racist disinvitation from a birthday party in the fourth grade, scoring a basket for the opposing team in middle school, the loss of her maternal grandmother during her college career. Wilson writes movingly about all of them in her 2024 memoir, *Dear Black Girls*.

Melinda French Gates, who published the book under her Moment of Lift imprint, was glad Wilson wrote the book with young girls in mind. "She has complete confidence in who she is," says French Gates. "There's a lot to admire about her, but one of the most important things she models is self-assurance. She learned that a lot earlier in life than I did."

Academically, Wilson struggled. "I always felt like I was in the 1st through 12th grades twice: I went through it myself, and then I went through with A'ja," Eva says. She was finally diagnosed with dyslexia at age 16, which reframed her previous challenges and opened up a flood of resources once she went to college, enrolling at the University of South Carolina to play with coach Dawn Staley—a retired WNBA player who had big plans for her team. In 2017, at the end of Wilson's junior year, she led the team to its first-ever NCAA Women's Basketball Championship title. Just over a year later, she was the number one draft pick for the WNBA.

She joined the Aces as the franchise moved from San Antonio to Las Vegas, becoming one of the few women's teams that doesn't share a market with an NBA franchise—though there are rumors of an expansion into the city. "When we moved, it was like, Oh, this is how professional athletes should be taken care of," Wilson says. "Not just female or male—professional athletes, period."

Initially, upon relocation, she worried fans might not be patient enough to let the franchise gather its strength. "We literally had three number-one draft picks in a row. We had to be bad to get those!" she says, laughing. "Now it's winning, winning, winning."

Vegas is a performing arts town, but the Aces have given even people outside the entertainment community something to love. "That's what really lit my heart up," says Wilson. "People know us."

The Aces are owned by billionaire Mark Davis; in 2023, Tom Brady bought a minority stake in the franchise. Wilson credits the former's investment for

raising the standard across the WNBA. Davis's actions have also prompted a bit of competitive spending across the league. "One thing about people with big wallets is when they see someone [else] with a big wallet and doing something, they're like, 'Wait, we got to do something about that.'"

Wilson's reality-bending powers do have limits. For a few years, she's been in a relationship with Miami Heat player Bam Adebayo; they share a white stucco house in one of the city's ritzy residential neighborhoods. But right now that home is draped in protective tarps as contractors stream in and out of the front door. An excavator is sinking into the driveway's mud.

"We want it to be more modern," Wilson says, looking up at the cacophony through a skylight. You can glimpse a few quirky, personal touches behind the plastic wrap: a two-foot Funko Pop of the Joker in the corner; a poolside topiary in the shape of an Easter Island head.

Wilson and Adebayo are both wearing white T-shirts and sweatpants as we meet in one of the house's only usable rooms. The previous night was a disappointment for the Heat—they lost by seven points to the Philadelphia 76ers—but Adebayo was the night's standout. The next morning, the pair are chatting and laughing. "That is why I love our relationship—we never lose the fun," Wilson says once our conversation begins. "We're just really two big kids."

The world only caught wind of Wilson and Adebayo's coupledom when they were photographed together between their his-and-hers gold-medal runs at the 2024 Paris Olympics. "We just wanted to make sure that we were secure in ourselves, our relationship, and our foundation," Wilson says. "People know more than they knew before, but it's still a situation that we hold really close to us only because this world is nasty."

Still, it's clear Wilson has had fun hiding in plain sight. By the time anyone noticed, she and Adebayo already had been together for at least a year. Their mutual support seems to be fueling a career renaissance for both players too. "I try to watch his games as a fan, but I always end up watching it as a player," she says. She's aiming for an attitude of casual, unflagging support, but can't help getting animated. "I do have so much happiness when watching him succeed, because I see the hours that he puts in."

Wilson was disappointed to miss Adebayo passing his 10,000-point career milestone because she was on her Nike tour. Days later, she was courtside when he scored 83 points in a single game, surpassing Kobe Bryant's 81 and coming within shooting distance of Wilt Chamberlain's record 100. She posted her effusive reaction on Threads in real time: "HISTORY!!!"

After eight years in the W, Wilson is now focusing on "moving rocks out of the path" for the players following in her footsteps. She's not interested in coaching, but might be interested in Hollywood—and has a few personal goals as well. "I would love to just dive into being a wife, being a mother," says Wilson. "Being an amazing daughter to my parents, that is always my number one goal.... My mom's like, 'Well, I want to go to cities I've never been to.' I'm like, 'Well, we got a long list to do, girl.'"

"I just want to be living. This world is just a lot of noise. And I'm like, I want to hear the noise," she adds as the workers make a racket. When she thinks about where she is now, though, she's feeling good. "You know what? I'm really in love with who I am and who I'm becoming. And I'm going to continue to be that." **VF**

STEPPING UP

Wilson knows that she transforms on the court: "It's the beauty and the beast of it," she says. Dress by Alaïa from Net-a-Porter.

HAIR: PRODUCTS BY AMIKA; SKIN CARE: PRODUCTS BY OLAY; MANICURE: PRODUCTS BY APRÈS; HAIR, LACY REDWAY; MAKEUP: JAMAL SCOTT; MANICURE: ANGIE CRISTINA; TAILOR: CHA CHA ZUTIG; SET DESIGN: IBBY NJOVA. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY SELECT. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

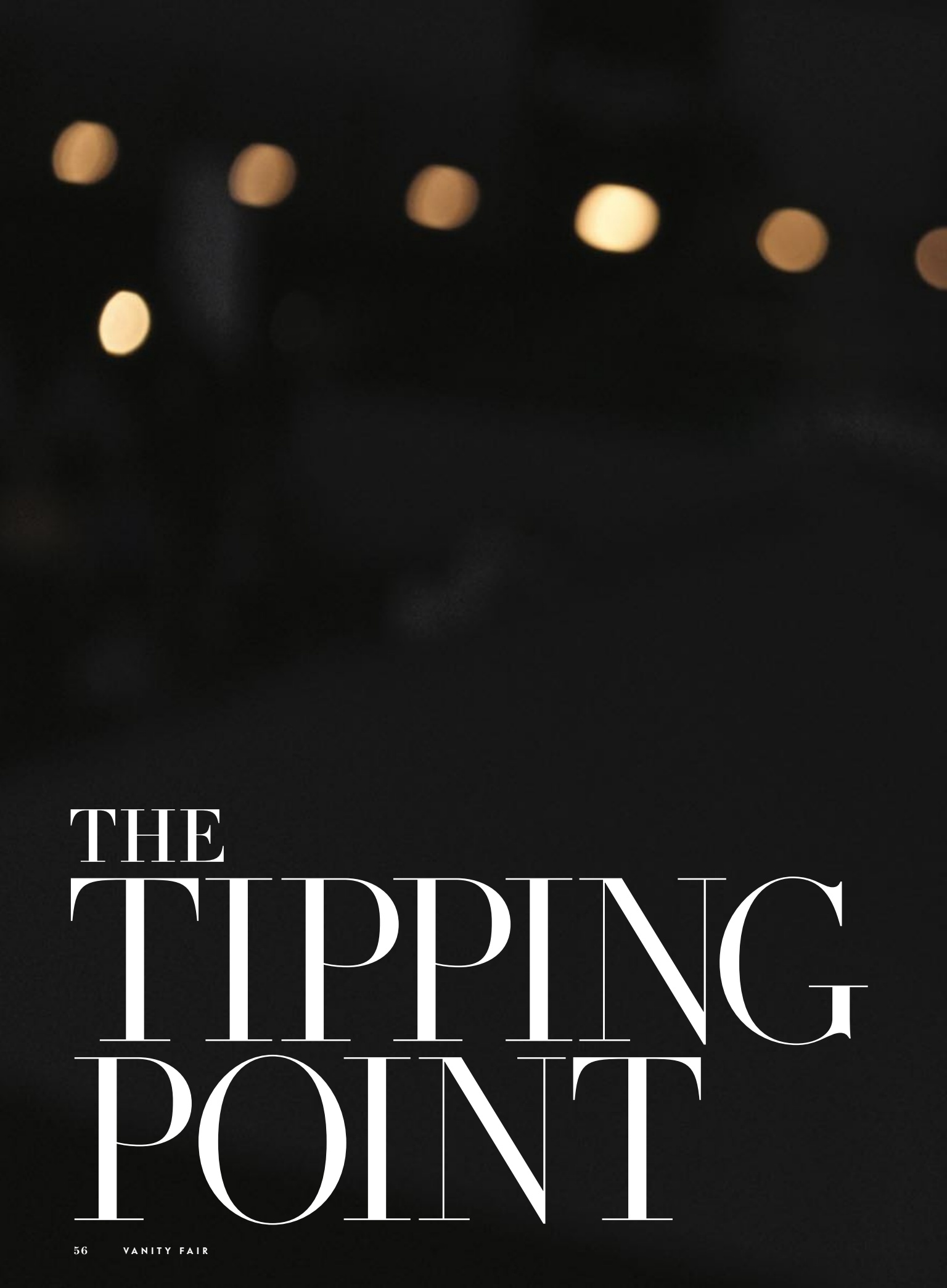






SPARKLE FINGERS

Wilson enjoys a rare moment of stillness—give or take some fireworks—on Miami's Crandon Park Beach in March. Dress by Khaite. Opposite: dress by Gucci.



THE TIPPING POINT

After 17 months of heated negotiations and decades of inequity, the WNBA and its players reached a deal this spring that has completely transformed women's basketball. YOHANA DESTA spent an afternoon with Clara Wu Tsai, the billionaire owner of the New York Liberty, to talk about the league's next chapter and the expansion that will forever change women's professional sports



C

lara Wu

Tsai is standing in the deliciously designed living room of her elegant Brooklyn town house (shoes off, please), disassembling the drop top of her New York Liberty 2024 WNBA championship ring, when we meet in early March. The walls around her bear works by Lorna Simpson and Rashid Johnson. Wu Tsai, who has shoulder-length black hair and is wearing a Miu Miu polo and a gleaming nameplate necklace, gently pulls apart the ring, a white gold behemoth encrusted with white diamonds, black diamonds, and seafoam Paraíba tourmalines; inside are a pair of gold “NY” stud earrings, a miniature rendering of the home court at the Barclays Center, and the phrase “We All We Got! We All We Need!” It was the team’s de facto slogan that historic year, as the Liberty won its first title since the WNBA was founded nearly 30 years before.

The league has, in the last couple of years, come into its own after a series of cosmic cultural events and a vicious union battle that almost threatened to undo every inch of hard-won progress but instead has completely reshaped the W’s future. For the Liberty, the championship opened the door to the dream of becoming a dynasty. For Wu Tsai, a wealthy businesswoman who owns the team alongside her husband, Alibaba Group cofounder Joe Tsai, it also heralded the possibility of a bigger, deeper ambition: creating the first franchise in the history of women’s sports to be worth \$1 billion.

Later that night she proudly wears the ring to the Barclays Center, the state-of-the-art Brooklyn arena that is, conveniently, the home of the Liberty. She chats amiably with various courtside celebrities; Issa Rae, Ashton Kutcher, and Jason Sudeikis are all in attendance that night. But she sits purposefully with new Liberty coach Chris DeMarco, who towers above her at six feet six, as well as CEO Keia Clarke and general manager Jonathan Kolb, both of whom



JUMP AROUND

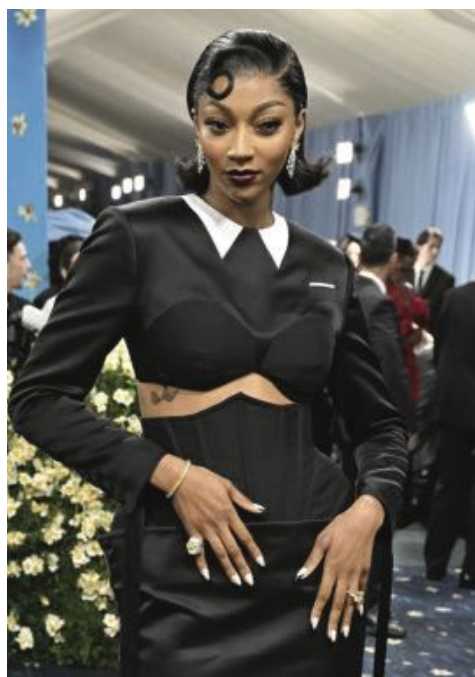
Clockwise from top: The Las Vegas Aces celebrate their 2025 WNBA championship victory; beloved Liberty mascot Ellie the Elephant; Indiana Fever star Caitlin Clark at Milan Fashion Week; Brittney Sykes, then of the Washington Mystics, holds a protest sign at the 2025 WNBA All-Star Game; the New York Liberty’s Breanna Stewart playing against the Atlanta Dream in 2025. Stewart is one of the most accomplished players in basketball history.





HOOPS, THERE IT IS

Clockwise from the top left: Stewart kisses her wife, Marta Xargay Casademont, while holding their daughter, Ruby Mae; Aubrey Plaza courtside at the 2024 WNBA Finals; Angel Reese at the 2025 Met Gala; players Isabelle Harrison and Natasha Cloud practice their dance moves; a jacket from the Liberty's fashion partnership with Off-White; Betnijah Laney-Hamilton and Liberty owner Clara Wu Tsai with artists Common, Alicia Keys, and Tierra Whack.



possess the air of genial valedictorians, high achievers whose days and nights are consumed by basketball.

But on this night, they are going to relax a little bit. This evening, Barclays is actually hosting the semifinals of Unrivaled, the lucrative three-on-three US women's basketball league that tips off in the WNBA offseason and streams live on HBO Max. Launched in 2025, the league was created by WNBA players Napheesa Collier of the Minnesota Lynx and Breanna Stewart ("Stewie" to fans), the decorated veteran and star forward of the Liberty. Pops of seafoam, the Liberty's signature color, abound at the sold-out game (that's close to 18,000 seats). But the house is full of women's basketball fans across the board, all of whom love the WNBA and are, perhaps, treating the game as an amuse-bouche for the season ahead.

The rise of the Liberty and Unrivaled has come hand in hand with the meteoric rise in popularity of women's basketball in the last couple of years, with the W's attendance, viewership, and cultural resonance quickly skyrocketing. But it hasn't been a smooth, or easy, ascent.

"Pay the players!" the crowd chants during the Unrivaled game. The chant grows louder, ripping around the arena with staccato force: "Pay! The! Play-ers!" Some fans even carry small black signs with the phrase emblazoned on it in white letters, which Barclays security guards quietly try to confiscate here and there. The chant is meant to echo beyond these walls and rattle in the ears of WNBA executive leadership, which, at that moment, had been locked in contentious negotiations with the union that represents the players over a new collective bargaining agreement. By then, the talks had stretched on for more than a year.

The tension between the league and its stars had grown bitter. "We have the best fans in the world, but right now we have the worst leadership in the world," Collier remarked in the fall, accusing those running the WNBA of "negligence." Norms that are taken for granted in the NBA—including but not limited to playing in sizable arenas, getting decent locker rooms (or even simply getting a locker)—had been a toss-up in the WNBA over the years, varying from team to team. And while NBA players receive roughly 50 percent of their league's revenue, W players reportedly got only about 9 percent, a fraction of the income generated from their athletic prowess.



Fans, who want to see their favorite athletes get the pay they deserve, were also increasingly anxious that the WNBA season would not start on time. Free agency plans were put on hold, and players in the draft queue were playing the final games of their collegiate career with looming uncertainty about the health of the league they were looking to join.

“What’s important is that the players get an increase in their salary,” Wu Tsai, who sat in on CBA negotiations, tells me. “But also that we build for the future so that a 10-year-old girl today has a really thriving league to play in when it’s her turn.”

Three weeks later a historic deal was finally ratified, ushering in a new era for the WNBA. “I was really proud of the league to land where we did,” Wu Tsai tells me when I speak with her next in early April. By its nature, she concedes, “collective bargaining is unpleasant” and this CBA had “a fair share of drama,” but the ups and downs have been worth it. “It was probably

THAT’S MEDAL

“We All We Got! We All We Need!” was the Liberty’s de facto slogan when the team won its first WNBA championship in 2024. The franchise is now valued at \$450 million, and Wu Tsai has her sights set on an even more ambitious goal for her team and the league.

the biggest step up in player compensation in the history of professional sports,” she continues. The new deal included raising the salary cap from \$1.5 million to \$7 million (with the potential for annual adjustments), higher rookie contracts, and recognition payments for retired players, as well as a new revenue-sharing model that reportedly allows players to earn an average of about 20 percent of gross revenues. Figuring out the economics of it was the most complicated part of the agreement to settle on, Wu Tsai says: “We weren’t just negotiating salaries but renegotiating the entire economic model.”

ABOVE: NY LIBERTY/KEES. PREVIOUS SPREAD: PARADE; DAVID BECKER; BABY: STEPH CHAMBERS; AUBREY: DAVID DOW; ANGEL: GILBERT FLORES; BREANNA SHOOTING: ADAM HAGY. ALL VIA GETTY IMAGES.



Liberty games have become high-energy star-studded bangers, ring-led by the wildly popular mascot Ellie the Elephant. She's a dancing high-femme diva who oozes charisma, carries a Telfar, and does Fenty Beauty unboxing videos. "And elephants are matriarchal," says CEO Keia Clarke. "It's the women who lead."

big three will also aid the dream of creating a dynasty with generational impact: "When kids in school think about the WNBA, they see *our* logo in their head," Kolb said. "That's our goal.")

Elsewhere, Las Vegas Aces star A'ja Wilson—the four-time MVP who led her team to the 2025 championship, crushing the Liberty's dream of back-to-back wins—signed a three-year supermax contract that will see her earn \$1.4 million this season and, potentially, \$4.7 million or more by the end of it. And the biggest total deal in WNBA history has been signed by Aliyah Boston of the Indiana Fever—a four-year, \$6.3 million contract extension. Collier (of the Lynx) and Kelsey Mitchell (of the Fever) have also signed supermax contracts, part of a wave of record-setting deals.

A glitzy WNBA draft was also finally held on April 13 at the Shed at Hudson Yards, a sleek contemporary arts space in Manhattan. Number one pick Azzi Fudd (the reigning people's princess of women's basketball) glided her way through the night in three different looks and officially joined the Dallas Wings, the team that her partner, Paige Bueckers, also happens to play for, in a delightful twist. Thanks to the CBA, Fudd's rookie salary is \$500,000; by comparison, Bueckers, who was the number one overall pick in 2025, made less than \$79,000 in her first year.

Now that the most transformative deal in the history of the WNBA is done, the new era can take shape. Wu Tsai helped catalyze this tipping point, personally investing tons of money into a team whose toniest perk used to be an MTA pass for free subway rides. (And if a player got cut, management "wanted that pass back," cracked Sue Wicks, a '90s-era Liberty legend who was on the team's original roster in 1997 and made roughly \$38,000 her first year.) Wu Tsai has already made New York

see the world through seafoam-colored glasses. Now it's time to extend her billion-dollar vision to everybody else.

Wu Tsai has emerged as one of the most powerful figures in the WNBA, guiding and elevating her team in a way that other teams are still trying to emulate. But she didn't start out that way.

When the Tsais first began building out their sports portfolio, the couple were already sports fanatics, but they decided to take things a step further by investing in athletic franchises, a blue-chip asset. They took a baby step by investing in an indoor lacrosse team; Tsai played varsity at Yale. (All three Tsai children subsequently played college lacrosse.) Wu Tsai, meanwhile, grew up in Kansas and was a die-hard Jayhawks fan; March Madness was and is her favorite time of year. In 2018 she and Tsai paid a reported \$1 billion for a 49 percent share of the Brooklyn Nets, the NBA team that had moved to the Barclays Center just a few years prior, in 2012.

The following year they landed on a trio of opportunities, taking control of the Barclays Center, total ownership of the Nets, and, after light nudging by NBA commissioner Adam Silver, the Liberty. The women's team, which had started out playing games at Madison Square Garden, had been struggling. By that point, then owner James Dolan, the controversial businessman whose family has a controlling interest in the companies that oversee MSG and the New York Knicks, cast the team out of New York City and up to Westchester County Center, a microdome more suitable for high schoolers. (A net negative for the W as a whole, as rival teams would grumble that they "can't believe they're playing in this dump," CEO Clarke recalls.) Dolan had essentially given up on the franchise, admitting in a 2018

"Congratulations to @TheWNBPA on their historic labor agreement," New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani tweeted shortly after it was ratified, sharing a photo of himself alongside fan favorite Natasha Cloud.

The new CBA, which will last for seven years, couldn't have arrived at a more auspicious time, hinting at what the next chapter of the W might look like. The Liberty, for one, re-signed its big three players—Stewart, Jonquel Jones, and Sabrina Ionescu—to multiyear contracts. Stewart will make \$1.19 million this season, she said on her podcast. (The return of the

ELLIE: CATALINA FRAGOSO/GETTY IMAGES; CAITLIN: CLAIRE GUILLON/CAMERA PRESS/REXUS; ISABELLE AND NATASHA: YE FAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES; OPENING SPREAD: ANDREA CARDANI/GETTY IMAGES.

THE FRENCH

A photograph of a modern dining room. In the foreground, a white marble dining table with a gold-colored base is partially visible. On the table, there are two large, round, gold-colored vases. A person's legs, wearing blue jeans, are visible on the right side of the frame, resting on a patterned rug. In the background, a large, ornate gold-colored mirror hangs on a light blue wall, reflecting a large, dark, dome-shaped pendant light. The room is decorated with a dark wooden sideboard and a patterned rug.

Kylian Mbappé was crowned football's future king when he was just a teenager, but AIDAN MCLAUGHLIN meets the captain of Les Bleus at a turbulent time. He's weathered attacks on his French identity while serving as his nation's chief diplomat, endured criticism of his game while scoring goals by the hatful. He's on top of the world—and under unfathomable pressure. Everything is on the line at this summer's World Cup...

PHOTOGRAPHER ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

AMBASSADOR



**LIBERTÉ,
ÉGALITÉ, MBAPPÉ**

"We truly try to
fight this idea that a
footballer should
shut up and play."
Clothing by Dior;
watch by Hublot.
Fashion Editor:
Law Roach.



France's emissary to the world is sitting in a hotel suite flanked by a battalion of representatives, assistants, and thick-necked security guards. The 27-year-old is part of the national iconography, right up there with Veuve Clicquot and workers' strikes, and this swirling support system around him choreographs his every step. Right before our interview starts, a PR rep produces a timer and clicks it on. Kylian Mbappé lights up. He proceeds to deliver a statesman's assessment of the looming World Cup, one which could deliver him into the football pantheon.

"There is nothing greater than representing one's country," he says. "You enter into the galaxy of international players." He's stateside to play a few exhibition matches for the French national team, but today is nominally a day off, and so he's sat here in a hotel suite with me, surrounded by his little army, wearing a Marine Serre sweater, track pants, Dior sneakers, a pavé diamond bracelet, and a Hublot watch. France is among the favorites this summer, and he's considering the challenge. "It's difficult to be in a situation like ours, where everyone expects us to perform miracles," he says. "But miracles only happen on the pitch—we don't need to play the match before the match."

He is relentlessly composed. As I push the interview toward thornier subjects—wincing a bit as I press France's golden boy on racism in football and anxieties about the political climate in the United States—Mbappé remains stubbornly easygoing. Unflappable. He speaks French and Spanish and a good bit of English, but we're chatting in his native tongue.

Then: Time's up. The interview ends, and Mbappé is briskly presented with a pile of Real Madrid shirts to be signed. Next, he's whisked away to another suite for a photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz before he takes the elevator down to the lobby, where he shoots a video for *Vanity Fair*'s social accounts. He's meant to juggle the ball while answering breezy questions about his life, but the large gold buckle on his Dior loafers prevents us from seeing the true extent of his world-renowned skill. Then he dashes out for lunch with Les Bleus, the French national team, for which he now serves as captain.

A footballing prodigy since he was just a teenager, Mbappé rapidly emerged as a global superstar. Yet when we meet, his platinium career is in a crucible. It was once a foregone conclusion that he would succeed Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as the world's greatest player. For a time, perhaps he was. But the last few years have been—by his own lofty standards—more complicated.

It's been eight years since Mbappé made his World Cup debut as an electric wide forward who bashed in four goals in seven matches as France won the tournament for

just the second time in 88 years. He was 19. Four years later, in Qatar, Mbappé once again put on a master class and helped France reach the final, where they faced Messi's Argentina. The match is regarded by some as the best in World Cup history. For most of it, Mbappé was invisible. Argentina put away two goals to take a comfortable lead. France was finished.

Then, expiation in the 80th minute. Mbappé scored a penalty, followed 94 seconds later by something spectacular. He headed a lobbed ball down to France's Marcus Thuram, who chipped it over a defender into the path of Mbappé again, now 20 yards out, who vaulted his body into a volley that screamed past the Argentine keeper into the far side of the net. "Oh, wow!" bellowed announcer Peter Drury as Mbappé sprinted toward the crowd, roaring in triumph. "He is an awesome force of nature!" I remember watching the final in a French bar in New York. My cousin, a Parisian, wept.

France lost the final on penalties, but Mbappé scored a hat trick in a superhuman performance that cemented his legacy as a World Cup immortal. "The way he bestrode that stage like the colossus he is—it was, as a piece of humanity, just extraordinary," Drury says in an interview. "The extent to which he had the poise to live up to his billing was breathtaking." *L'Equipe*, which after the 2018 victory put the French team on its cover, this time featured a solo shot of Mbappé. The headline: "A King Without a Crown."

Four years later, it's a heartbreak he tries to not dwell on. "You have to move forward," he says. "You can't go back. We have to take that disappointment and transform it into motivation to try to truly change the course of history, and to give ourselves the opportunity to reach another final, which will be extremely difficult, and to try to bring back the third star."

Winning a World Cup—which earns the national team a star on its jerseys above the badge—requires more than skill. Even the favorites need a bit of luck. As captain, the expectations for Mbappé in particular are extraordinary. "This time, it's him that walks first onto the pitch with the armband," says Julien Laurens, a French football journalist and author of a new biography, *Kylian Mbappé*. "We expect back home that he will carry this team all the way. And that's also his expectation for himself."

On the pitch, Mbappé boasts a sublime combination of power and elegance. Perpetually arched forward, he looks as if he'd tip over onto his face if he weren't propelled by the awesome force of his legs. He likes to be just outside the penalty box, pushing the ball onto his right foot, glancing up at goal before curling the ball beyond the outstretched hand of the keeper and into the top corner. He likes charging straight at defenders, using his explosive speed to carve through the opposition like a Ducati weaving through traffic.

"He is just an extraordinary human frame," says Drury. "An almost perfect athlete in the sense that he is mightily strong, but on the other hand, there's something balletic about him as well. There's a lightness of touch. There's a kind of deftness, a subtlety about the way he moves."

For a young man of such extraordinary talent and accomplishment, Mbappé has stood out in his career for his disarming charm and maturity. There are detractors, those who say he plays selfishly and is prone to complaining when he doesn't get his way. It's a criticism he's faced all his life, from when he was a boy at Monaco and showed little interest in tracking back to defend.

"Some might say he's a bit arrogant at times," says Laurens. "I think he's just a born winner who is very confident in his own ability." **CONTINUED ON PAGE 136**

VISIBLE MAN

"He can't go to watch a movie at the cinema, because there would be rioting." Clothing and tie by Dior; shoes and socks by Nike; watch by Hublot.

HAIR: PRODUCTS BY KEVIN MURPHY; GROOMING: PRODUCTS BY SK-II; GROOMING: ALAN BEHAR; MOVEMENT DIRECTOR: JORGE DORSINVILLE; SET DESIGN: MARY HOWARD. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY AL STUDIOS AND DMV PRODUCTIONS. LOCATION: FAIRMONT. MEMBER OF ALL ACCOR. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.



UNTOLD STORIES

Every World Cup is the biggest event in human history. This summer, it's coming to North America. But down in Mexico this spring, as three nations fight for one ticket to the big show, FRANKLIN LEONARD finds far more than goals or red cards in the tales of Jamaica, New Caledonia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo





MEXICO CITY, 1986

Two of the most famous goals in football history will grace a single World Cup quarterfinal match. One man will score them both.

Four years prior, 649 Argentinian soldiers died during an undeclared war that the ruling military junta launched against the United Kingdom to claim a territory that Britain calls the Falkland Islands. Argentina calls them Las Islas Malvinas. The fighting ended 74 days after it began, and the Argentinian dictatorship fell 18 months after that, but the nation's grief has not receded.

In the 51st minute of the match, five-foot-five Diego Maradona runs in behind the English defense and rises up to pop the ball over English keeper Peter Shilton and into the net. The referee rules it a goal. It's only in replays that the truth becomes certain: He just punched the ball in with his hand! It's a mega-scandal, a footballing felony, but it's upstaged only four minutes later when Maradona scores again. He takes the ball in his own half and slaloms past five English defenders, chopping and weaving and dashing on by them to create the greatest goal of all time. Both strikes are critical as Argentina wins 2-1. A week later, the World Cup trophy is theirs.

After the match, Maradona calls the first of them, the scandal, La Mano de Dios. The Hand of God. At the time he denies any subtext, but years later he admitted the truth: "It was more than beating a football team, it was beating a whole country," he said. "In a way," he and his teammates "held the English players responsible for everything the Argentine people had suffered." He called the match "our revenge. It was reclaiming something of the Malvinas."

GUADALAJARA, 2026

The tight colonial grids of the city loosen into commercial strip malls and subdivisions, then elevated highways, and then, just before the Bosque La Primavera nature reserve, the white disk of an extraterrestrial spacecraft emerges from a low-slung, grass-covered volcano. It's the Estadio Akron, home of Chivas, Mexico's most popular football club if no longer its most successful. Founded by a Belgian immigrant in 1906, it has fielded only Mexican players since 1943, even as the league titles have dried up in recent decades. Still, the crowds are relentless. Guadalajara is a football city.

credited with miracles. Within two and a half, she was declared patron against lightning, storms, and epidemics. Mexico's first postindependence government gave her a military sash and named her La Generala. Every October 12, 3 million devotees walk nine kilometers from Guadalajara's Cathedral back to her home, a basilica in Zapopan that's eight kilometers east of the Estadio Akron. Mexico has embraced her with a fervor the Spanish never intended.

Football, too, was brought to colonies by conquerors, only to be embraced by the conquered and remade anew. The game carries the weight of wars unnamed, grief unprocessed, peace not made, faith still kept, and there is no greater stage for those stories than the World Cup. This summer the tournament returns to North America, and Guadalajara will add to its considerable football lore when this stadium hosts four more World Cup matches, including a heavyweight bout between Spain and its onetime colony Uruguay. This was home base for Pelé and the mystical Brazil 1970 squad, the site of major triumphs for the Mexican national team. It will soon become the only place, alongside Mexico City, to host matches at three different World Cups.

But before all that, before the 48 teams convene in North America and billions of viewers tune in, three teams from three different corners of the globe met here in March for the FIFA World Cup 2026 Play-Off Tournament. On the line was the last ticket to the main event three months later, and it would go to one of: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, absent from the World Cup for 52 years; Jamaica, absent for 28; or New Caledonia, a French territory in the South Pacific, population 290,000, with a team ranked 150th in the world.

For the players and coaches involved, it very likely would be the most important thing they'd accomplish in their lives. Whichever group earned the trip would bring with them all manner of riddles and contradictions, split identities and chosen loyalties, joy and ambition and fear of what their reception might be in the United States in particular. And then they'd play some football.

SILENCE

He won the World Cup playing for France, but Christian Karembeu grew up on Lifou, a coral island in New Caledonia's Loyalty archipelago, population roughly 3,000 at the time. Karembeu describes his youth as a time of clans, chieftains, shared food, shared labor, and stories of his great-grand-

**"WE HAD TO COME. WE HAVE TO WITNESS IT.
WE HAVE TO WITNESS IT."**

"That's part of our culture," a local journalist tells me. "It's football, and only football."

Nearly 500 years before, a Franciscan friar arrived in what is now the state of Jalisco carrying a 13-inch icon of the Virgin Mary that had been molded by Indigenous craftsmen from a paste of corn pith and orchid bulbs. The idol quickly became an unusually powerful evangelical tool. Within a century, she'd been

father's trip to Paris, where he "was received as a king, and so on."

When he was scouted at 17, Karembeu left for France too and went professional. He played at Nantes, then Sampdoria in Italy, and then he reached the summit with Spanish giants Real Madrid. He won the 1998 UEFA Champions League, the greatest prize in club football, and a few weeks later, he joined the French national team for a World Cup on home soil.

KAREMBEU: IMAGO/LACI PERENY; EARLE: EMPICS SPORT; "HAND OF GOD": BOB THOMAS/POPPERSTOCK.COM; BOTH: GETTY IMAGES; CADAMARTERI: ELOISA SANCHEZ/REUTERS; PREVIOUS SPREAD: MS/MIRROPIX/GETTY IMAGES.

Clockwise from top:
Christian Karembeu lifts
the World Cup trophy
for France; Robbie Earle
salutes in celebration
after scoring Jamaica's
first-ever World Cup
goal; Diego Maradona's
hand, God's vengeance;
Bailey Cadamarteri
scores for Jamaica.



Karembou's relationship with his football nationality was never simple: Before an international match, the anthems of each nation are played, and from his first match for Les Bleus six years earlier, he never sang along with "La Marseillaise."

"I know where I come from, and I wanted to stand with my ancestors. And for me, I could not sing that song," he explains. Karembou is Kanak, the Indigenous Melanesian people of New Caledonia. "I know it by heart, because we needed to know everything by heart—the story of Napoléon, the story of the Gauls, and so on. And it was never our stories, never our civilization, because we have our own culture. And for me, I needed to be silent, and therefore give a voice through my silence, give a voice to my people."

wait for an England call-up that never came. He celebrated the goal with "a bit of a salute to my dad," Earle tells me, to honor the sacrifice his parents made in leaving their homeland. It was also "a little bit of a salute back to the country, really, for giving me the opportunity."

Much of the current squad made the same choice: They're dual nationals who represented England or the United States at youth level before choosing Jamaica for their senior careers. Bobby De Cordova-Reid was born in Bristol. Demarai Gray began in Birmingham. Ian Fray grew up in Coconut Creek, Florida. Leon Bailey, meanwhile, went the other direction: Homegrown in Kingston, he made his name as a tricky and tempestuous winger at Aston Villa in England's Premier League.

"IT WAS NOT EASY TO KNOW ABOUT THAT STORY, THAT THEY WERE LIKE SAVAGES," KAREMBEU TOLD ME. "THEY WERE PARKED IN A ZOO. AS ANIMALS."

Still, he'd joined his teammates at their camp at Clairefontaine, prepared to represent France once again. He'd played three matches at the tournament by the time French author Didier Daeninckx contacted him with evidence that his great-grandfather William's 1931 trip to Paris had not been regal at all. He had been sent to feature in a human zoo at the Jardin d'Acclimatation. By one account, he was put in a "cannibal" exhibit.

"It was not easy to know about that story, that they were like savages," Karembou tells me. "They were parked in a zoo. As animals." Yet it "gave me more strength to show that I come from this part of the world, this island named New Caledonia."

Days later, Karembou started the World Cup final representing the country of his great-grandfather's zookeepers. It was the biggest match of his career. He helped deliver France its first-ever World Cup, and he lifted the trophy with a beaming smile on his face.

Twenty-seven years later, at the playoff draw ceremony, he drew the ball that sent New Caledonia to Guadalajara. "I was very proud to see the name of New Caledonia on this stage," he says, "proud to point again to where we come from, where we are." Qualification, he said, "will be bigger than what we have won with the French team." The island territory has never before qualified, and they'd be the lowest-ranked team ever to do so.

But first they'd have to get past Jamaica. He told me he'd watch the match from Paris, where he's visiting his daughter. Kickoff was at 4 a.m.

THE SECOND CATASTROPHE

Jamaica has been to the World Cup once, 28 years ago, and it remains a defining national memory. Robbie Earle scored their first-ever goal at the tournament after choosing to represent the island of his parents' birth rather than continue to

But talent on paper has never been Jamaica's problem. Storms seem to follow this football team, and sometimes they aren't metaphorical.

"Last year, I think we had two disasters," says coach Rudolph Speid. "There was a hurricane, Category 5, one of the strongest ever. It devastated almost half the island." He is referring to Hurricane Melissa in October, the strongest ever to hit Jamaica. "I think the next catastrophe for us was when we failed to qualify in November."

That's why the Jamaicans are here in Guadalajara: Despite a relatively easy qualifying path, they left it until the final match day and drew 0-0 at home with tiny Curaçao. Their guests, representing a nation of less than 200,000, went to the World Cup in their stead. "With all due respect," team captain Andre Blake tells me when I ask him about it, "that's in the past. Just looking forward."

Blake's team was shoved into this intercontinental playoff, one last chance to make it. Their head coach for qualifying, Steve McClaren, resigned immediately in disgrace, and Speid—a certified accountant who's coached in Jamaica's domestic league for more than a decade—took over. The meeting with New Caledonia would be his first competitive match for his nation.

JAMAICA VS. NEW CALEDONIA

David Guetta's "Titanium (Feat. Sia) (Alesso Remix)" is blasting down from the stratospheric canopy of the half-filled Estadio Akron. Millions are watching from the Caribbean and the South Pacific, but getting to Zapopan is a different matter. Instead, the crowd is mostly neutral tapatíos, locals from Guadalajara or surrounding Jalisco who just love their football.

They adopt New Caledonia immediately. Every foul won is celebrated like a goal. Whistles ring out when a call goes the

other way. Every time they cross into Jamaica's half: a collective intake of breath. But in the 18th minute, Bailey Cadamarteri scores for Jamaica. The stadium exhales. There will be no miracles today. Unless!

In the 32nd minute, Joseph Athale—who plays his club football for Tahiti United—shoots from his own half. Blake scrambles back to prevent the catastrophic, but the shot flies over the bar. The score holds through halftime. By the 63rd minute, the stadium is chanting, “¡Portero! ¡Portero! ¡Portero!” in honor of the New Caledonian keeper, Rocky Nyikeine. In the 88th, a shot that sends Jamaica's Blake flying across his goal at full stretch works the crowd into a frenzy. From the press box, the assembled masses are all bouncing bodies and jagged, remonstrating arms. As the 90th minute approaches, “¡Sí, se puede! ¡Sí, se puede!” rings out tens of thousands strong.

But New Caledonia can't. They never score. Boos drown out the final whistle as Jamaica scratches out a 1-0 win. Les Cagous—nicknamed for New Caledonia's endangered flightless national bird—are extinct.

In the tunnels beneath the stadium afterward, midfielder Jakob Jenö is one of the last out of the locker room. He plays his club football in Israel. His season with Hapoel Rishon LeZion has been suspended. He doesn't know where he'll be playing next. To be here at all, he drove from Tel Aviv to the Jordanian border when his flight was canceled due to the war in Iran. From the border, he took a taxi two hours to the Amman airport, where he flew to London, then Mexico City, then Guadalajara. Two years ago, he says, people only talked about New Caledonia, if they talked about it at all, in the context of the violence that broke out after the French parliament proposed changes to the territory's constitution that would give greater voting rights to French residents. “A lot of people died,” he says. “It's not an easy situation for our people. And to come here, to show the world—we don't just speak about the war. We can play.”

When I ask whether he and his teammates are aware that tens of thousands of Mexicans were rooting for them to deliver a miracle, he nods: “Maybe today not miracles, but a lot of signs.” Still: The New Caledonians were out. Jamaica would advance to face the Democratic Republic of the Congo for a place at the World Cup.

FIFTY-TWO YEARS

Thierry Tubajika is sitting at breakfast at the JW Marriott, waiting for his father on the morning of the match that will decide everything. He is 45 years old. He has never in his life seen his country in a World Cup.

It has been 52 years since anyone has. His 75-year-old father was a young man then, when the Democratic Republic of the Congo was called Zaire, and things did not go well at all. They failed to score a single goal and conceded 14, including 9 to Yugoslavia in a match that's still tied for the worst defeat in World Cup history.

Tubajika's father left Congo in 1985 for a PhD at LSU and has never returned. Forty-one years. He still watches the national team, and he still names Jean Kalala N'Tumba, the star striker from 1974, as the prototype for what the team needs now. Tubajika bought a ticket for him rather than for his own son, who's back home in Atlanta. Should they qualify, the Georgia capital will host DRC's group stage match with Uzbekistan, and Tubajika plans to make that a trigenational excursion.

The Congolese diaspora has arrived here from everywhere:

New York, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Charlotte, Boise, Buffalo, Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa, London, Liverpool, Paris. Pierre Tshamala is taking selfies outside the Estadio Akron the day before the match. He flew in from Michigan with his wife and son. “It's just like our backyard,” he says, meaning Guadalajara. “We had to come. We have to witness it. We have to witness it.”

They've even come from Kinshasa. Nyenemo Sanguma, a sitting parliamentarian from Sud-Ubangi, flew from DRC's capital to Accra, Ghana, from Accra to New York, from New York to Chicago—where he picked up his two sons, ages 10 and 8—and then to Guadalajara. What does 52 years feel like? To Sanguma, it's “like we don't matter. People get to be like, ‘Is that even a country? Do you guys exist?’”

“Our country was on the dark side for a long time. No sport, no...nothing. Politics messed up by the people,” says Lambion, an elder Congolese fan standing outside the JW Marriott the day before the match. “Congo is the most beautiful country in the world. People need to love the Congolese people instead of trying to destroy them because of our mineral resources.”

All but five of DRC's 25-man squad grew up in France, Belgium, England, or Switzerland. Cédric Bakambu was born in a Paris suburb and won the Under-19 European Championship with France. He had never been to Congo when he chose to represent the nation at age 24. He is 35 now. “Il y a plus de

**“THEY RULE US WITH
GUNS AND MACHINES,
BUT ON THE FIELD OF PLAY,
WHERE IT IS 11 MEN
AGAINST 11 MEN, WE
CAN SHOW THEM WHO IS
TRULY SUPERIOR.”**

temps passé que ce qui me reste,” he says. *More time behind me than I have left.* He has endured heartbreaking qualifying campaigns that ended in defeat to Tunisia, Morocco, and Senegal. But: “Whenever I score for my country, it genuinely feels like the first time.”

His Brussels-born teammate, Noah Sadiki, puts it simply: “Ton coeur te dit de le faire.” *Your heart tells you to do it.*

The day before the match, DRC president Félix Tshisekedi published a letter to the squad. He named 11 members of the last team to reach the promised land—“Kidumu, Kakoko, Kibonge, Mayanga, Kazadi, Bwanga, Lobilo, Mana, Ndaye Mulamba, Kembo, and Tshinabu”—and wrote: “Never forget that behind you, there is an entire people. There are children who dream as they watch you. There is our youth, searching for reasons to believe and to hope. There are also our fellow citizens being tested, notably in the east of our country, who will find a source of comfort, pride, and unity in your commitment.” CONTINUED ON PAGE 138

TRACK STAR

Lorenzo Bertelli doesn't think the Prada Group needs to become larger just to compete with French conglomerates like LVMH. "If we see the right opportunity we look at it, otherwise, no."

PRADA'S FORTUNATE SON

Before he joined the family business, Lorenzo Bertelli, son of Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, was a professional rally race car driver. Since his retirement, he's assumed his rightful position as heir to their throne, overseeing the Prada Group's highest-profile business moves. But he still indulges in his need for speed, and MARISA MELTZER goes along for a ride

PHOTOGRAPHER **JESPER D. LUND**





Four days before I went to northern Sweden to meet Lorenzo Bertelli, Prada Group chief marketing officer and son of Prada co-creative director Miuccia Prada and Prada Group board chairman Patrizio Bertelli, the Prada Group announced it was hiring Pieter Mulier from Alaïa as Versace's new chief creative officer. It was a bold move to hire the Belgian Mulier for a brand steeped in Italian DNA, signaling that, less than a year into acquiring Versace, Prada was not afraid of change. For his part, the heir apparent for CEO calls it "an instinctive decision," but here in Umeå he has other things on his mind: He is preparing for a race, Rally Sweden.

Before he joined the family business in 2017, Lorenzo was a professional race car driver with not a lot of real fashion industry experience. He looks exactly like how you'd imagine an Italian playboy looks, with tufts of gray in his thick, wavy hair and a strong nose like his mother's. He rides around his native Milan on a scooter and speaks English at a rapid clip, with luxuriously rolled *r*'s. He could have embarrassed the family with rakish antics or, once he made the leap into corporate life, been dismissed as a case of nepotism. But he turned out to be something else: really good at his jobs.

This morning he's taken just one business call, hopefully his last before race day, so he can focus. He's done this Swedish rally eight times. "It's fast because it has fewer corners and wider roads. Going the average speed is the same as a German highway, but in the countryside with ice." Outside, the twinkling college town is divided by a frozen river. It's so far north that sunset starts around 3:30 p.m., and everyone has apps to tell you if you can see the Northern Lights. We spend the day drinking coffee in a wood-paneled room, driving into the nearby wilderness, and walking in single-digit weather to see the country roads lined with pine trees where he is preparing to race. He tells me that he is not racing in an attempt to finish first. "Winning is impossible, I didn't race for the last two years, I'm being realistic. It's a detox from everyday stuff."

The everyday stuff includes much curiosity about the decision to acquire Versace, the high-profile departure of Dario Vitale there, and how Mulier came to be chosen as his replacement. The acquisition is seen as a move toward making the Prada Group larger to compete with the likes of the French conglomerates. Investors and analysts bring them ideas all the time. "They drop them on the table, see how we react, blah blah blah. The brands that are still not owned by Kering or LVMH that are meaningful in fashion. If we see the right opportunity, we look at it, otherwise, no," Bertelli says. I ask what sort of ideas. "Whatever you can imagine." He's being so deliberately vague that I ask the first and maybe strangest idea that comes to my head. A theme park? (Anyone who has visited a Prada café knows a Prada theme park would be a dream.) "Um, no, [but] always in our sector."

But then he also denies trying to mold Prada Group after the two French fashion conglomerates, contradicting himself a bit. "I don't have an objective to be as big as Kering or LVMH. It's to be successful at what we do. Growth is fundamental—if you don't have growth, you cannot execute nice things. Simple as that."

Versace was not a case of buying for the sake of it, but an opportunity to acquire a fashion house that is meaningful, doesn't fight for the same customers Prada already has, and was the right price. "The brand is much bigger than the business. It's a huge, incredible story, and the potential is so much bigger than the revenue that they are doing," he says. Versace, which was previously owned by the multinational company Capri Holdings, which owns Michael Kors, is now back in the hands of Italians at a time when two great Italian designers—Giorgio Armani and Valentino Garavani—have died in the last year. Bertelli doesn't want to reinvent the wheel. "Sometimes," he says, "a good dish needs just a bit of salt."

Vitale, who was Versace's creative director for a single, critically beloved spring 2026 collection, was not unknown to the Prada Group, as he had been at Miu Miu for more than 14 years. His departure from Miu Miu in January 2025 was perhaps seen as less than loyal. And the new owners wanted their own pick of creative director. "The stories that are around are quite public," Bertelli says. "Even before Dario left [Miu Miu], we tried to somehow communicate to him to wait three or four months, to see where it could have ended up. He's ambitious. He made up his mind, there was

nothing to do to stop him. I think at the end it was a successful journey for him."

Bad news and letting employees go is part of the job. "It's just business. It's much more difficult to talk about employees that are lower level in the organization of people. The biggest responsibility we have is the family of those thousands of people. But those managers on top, they will find another job."

When it was time to pick a successor, Prada Group's inner circle, including Bertelli and his parents, brainstormed, they looked at past shows, they talked to people close to Mulier. They talked to Donatella Versace, though Bertelli makes sure to note, "She was not involved with the choice." Nor was Prada's co-creative director Raf Simons, though he had previously worked with Mulier at Calvin Klein. What they wanted was someone with a clear idea of what Versace of today should look like and how to play with the boundaries of the identity of the brand. Bertelli finds rote sexuality, a flavor Versace is known for, "a bit reductive." But he was attracted to the way Mulier played with sexiness at Alaïa. "One of the reasons we chose him was because he knows how to work with the shapes of the body. You also need someone who can make a sellable product that people like to wear," Bertelli says, referring to Mulier's success with Alaïa ballet flats and its oblong Le Teckel bag. Mulier starts in July, and his first show, his menswear collection, will be presented in January. "We need to be strategic with what kind of message we want to give people," Bertelli says.

Prada's rise from small-time leather goods company to global recognition roughly followed Bertelli's childhood—he was born in 1988, and his mother showed her first women's ready-to-wear collection that year. Today, Prada Group is not just Prada and Miu Miu, but shoe companies Church's and Car Shoe, the sailing syndicate Luna Rossa, and most recently Versace, which it acquired for around \$1.4 billion in December. It also includes the Milan pastry shop Marchesi 1824, from which there is an array of cornettos on offer at the company's offices in Milan, just next to its modern art museum, Fondazione Prada.

When he was in grade school, Bertelli remembers carrying a Prada nylon backpack with a mix of colors on it, much to his chagrin. "I wanted the same backpack as everyone, the Eastpak, the Invicta," he says. He attended public schools his whole life, but people still knew who he was. "It

CHILDREN: PASCAL CHEVALIER. WITH PARENTS: SIMONA GRANATI/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES. FRONT ROW: COLLEEN BARRY/AP. PREVIOUS SPREAD: PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY SKARP PROJECTS. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.



ALL IN THE FAMILY

From top: Bertelli with his father, Patrizio, and brother, Giulio, in the family living room, photographed for the August 1997 *Vanity Fair*; Bertelli with his mother, Miuccia Prada, and his father in Paris in 2025; Bertelli, seated next to Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, at the Prada women's fall 2026 show. When asked about rubbing elbows with fraught characters from the political or tech worlds, he says, "Of course, that's part of my job, if I like it or not."

was not so easy. But I mean, it is what it is. There was a perception of me before even knowing me. You have to learn how to cope with that and stay with your real friends. I learned very quickly who to trust and who not to trust," he says. He's well aware of current discourse around privilege. "You have advantages, you have pressure, especially when you're a kid so very young. The problem is how you manage it."

Despite his parents having what he calls "just the right amount of strictness," he didn't always study, to the extent that he didn't pass his first year of secondary school when he was a teenager, roughly the equivalent of flunking freshman year of high school. "Failed, it sounds very harsh in English," he notes with a grimace. He repeated the year, got serious, and studied philosophy at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University in Milan. He maintains a preference for Kant, Plato, and Nietzsche. He interned in New York at *Interview* magazine. "Packing boxes, mostly," he says.

He never assumed he would join Prada Group. He has never been a fashion person. He doesn't live to dress himself. "I like clothes, but I'm very practical and sometimes I don't have the time to care too much about it." He thinks of himself as casual. As casually dressed as someone who wears Prada almost exclusively can be. His younger brother, Giulio, is directing films and has no plans to join him in the family business. "My parents always told me and my brother, do whatever you want," Bertelli says. For the first part of his life, that was rally, where teams race cars not on tracks but twisty, small roads on terrain like gravel and snow. His father, Patrizio, is a car collector, but Lorenzo was initially more into motorbikes. He played soccer and ice hockey. He started driving at 16 despite the fact that the legal driving age in Italy for cars is 18. "In the countryside," he protests. "Racing was a thing in the '90s in Europe, and I grew up with the legends of Subaru and Audi."

His first major race was in 2011 at the Rally Italia Sardegna. It's a race, with cars going 80 to 90 mph, but it's also a sport of endurance. "It's psychological because you're in the car for an entire day, dealing with ups and



downs of adrenaline.” There is a team made up of drivers from all over the world, speaking English, but that may be their second or third language. Clear communication about conditions like a puddle or a sharp turn was key. “All the stupid, banal issues of your life go out the window when you put on your helmet,” he says. When the races were over, he would read or sometimes do magic tricks with cards to decompress. (A strain of the theatrical runs in the family: Miuccia once trained as a mime.)

“In the beginning, I did it for fun, like everything should be, and then it became serious,” says Bertelli. But to be serious about being a professional rally driver meant being away from home about 200 days a year, waking up at 5 a.m. and going to sleep late. “I stopped when I was still improving, but being in the top 10 rally drivers in the world is quite remarkable.” He decided to stop the World Rally Championship tour. The last race before retirement from full-time racing was at Rally Argentina in 2017. His father came, as well as his closest friends from growing up—some of whom work in finance, medicine, and for a metal foundry—and they’d grill chorizo sausages on the side of the road and cheer him on.

He was relieved to spend more time in Milan, a city he describes as “a metropolis, but of human dimension.” He’s a bit cagey, or rather, unspecific about what exactly he does in his spare time beyond spending it

day. The real marriage is starting a family. Marriage, engagement, I don’t even find the difference. It doesn’t exist.” Their daughter was born in 2023. As for growing up Prada, he is figuring out how to tell her about his experience. “There will be plenty of time,” he says. He’s more focused on the small milestones, like when she’ll be old enough to learn to ice-skate.

I ask him what it is like to suddenly work with his parents. “How you can imagine,” he says with a sardonic note in his voice and running a hand through his hair. “Situations come up with business, family, and private life, and you make sure to keep the business outside, but sometimes, of course, you have a contamination of the two.” So what does he call his mother in meetings: Mama, Miuccia, Mrs. Prada? Or his dad? “I just don’t call them by their names.” He shrugs.

One of his first initiatives was the Re-Nylon campaign, replacing the kind of signature Prada nylon that was used in his childhood backpack with recycled ocean and fiber waste and fishing nets, often replicating cult bags from their early years, bringing in young customers. It’s part of what pushed Prada toward double-digit growth from 2021 to 2024, and 9 percent growth in 2025.

But the transition to working for the Prada Group wasn’t entirely seamless. The pressure was easy enough to manage, because for him, being a professional athlete was all about understanding how to cope with pressure. The problem was the

Prada stands for culture, and culture is such an important driver because it’s the tool that allows you to understand present times. Prada could be a political party. There are ideas behind it,” he says with a smile and adds, “That would be a stupid move. I could be as good as possible, but there are plenty of people who are going to say I’m rich and blah blah, fashion. I think it would not be credible at all, so it’s just a joke.”

Bertelli has had some form of public identity his whole life. He’s used to it, but it doesn’t mean he relishes it, he tells me when we first meet in January at Prada headquarters, a rambling former gin distillery transformed by the architect Rem Koolhaas into an industrial-style corporate campus. We’re in a conference room where he’s picking at a cornetto from Marchesi. His own modest office is just off the bullpen of the massive communications department, where the hum of seemingly hundreds of employees can be heard on the phone all day, but he seems to find all the action motivating rather than a distraction.

The men’s fall 2026 runway show had been the day before and memorably highlighted lived-in, imperfect details such as frayed cuffs and faded fabrics, making a statement about the humanness of clothes as they touch the body and wear with time. “Carrying impressions of life, they underscore the significance of duration. To remember is a sign of respect,” wrote Miuccia and Simons in the show’s press release.

“PRADA COULD BE A POLITICAL PARTY. THERE ARE IDEAS BEHIND IT,” HE SAYS WITH A SMILE AND ADDS, “THAT WOULD BE A STUPID MOVE.”

with friends and family, or really anything about his life outside of work. He will say that somewhere toward the end of his professional racing career, he fell in love. He met Elena Basile at an after-party a decade ago. He calls her his other half. She has worked for the eyewear brand Luxottica, but she’s a civilian. “Sometimes she comes to the show with me, so sometimes people take pictures with her, but we do our own normal lives outside of the business. Red carpets are only when I have to.” They are engaged, but they don’t have any plans for a wedding. “Maybe one

new normal of having a steady life. “I had a period that was very difficult for me when I stopped driving because I suddenly found out I was missing my adrenaline and actually became kind of a drag.”

There is plenty of adrenaline to mine on growing the family business, a public company that has a market capitalization of approximately \$12.5 billion. Bertelli has been a member of the board of directors since 2021. How he wants to define Prada for the future is a huge task. “I think

Bertelli does not design the clothes, but he attends all the Prada shows. He doesn’t watch from backstage but rather sits front and center. A month after I spoke to him, this time at the women’s fall 2026 show, he was seated next to Meta’s Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan. “Of course, that’s part of my job, if I like it or not.”

How they message their power, and their allegiances and affiliations, has become a mainstream conversation. Bertelli and his family have built extraordinary wealth and influence with Prada, but they



have chosen to position themselves in a different way from their cohort of fellow billionaires. For example, members of the family that owns LVMH, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Zuckerberg all attended the January 2025 inauguration of Donald Trump. Were you invited, or would you ever go to something like that? I ask. “No, I was not invited, of course, but I don’t think so. Honestly, politics is a double-sided blade. What I learned is not to get too involved. I think that is maybe the reason why we have not gone there. Not because either [president-elect] was a Democrat or a Republican,” he says.

Bertelli describes himself as center-left politically. “At a certain point, enough money is enough,” he says, which is a very different ethos than the ceaseless accumulation of wealth that so many bold-name billionaires of this era ascribe to. “I think today’s biggest problem in the West is inequality, and for me—someone that owns much more than others—giving very close to half your income to other people for me is fine, even if it’s a lot.”

The manner in which he talks about capitalism versus politics shows shades of his degree in philosophy. It’s theoretical. Capitalism, in Bertelli’s view, is about rapid growth. The job of politics is to regulate, or as he puts it, “to preserve the balance of the ecosystem.” In other words, it needs to happen, but it’s not the role of the private sector to do so. Similarly, he thinks technology needs to be regulated. “A weapon is a technology that has to be regulated. AI is technology that has to be regulated. Social networks are a technology that we’ve seen that now are more regulated compared to the past,” he says. “But politics is too slow in policing because the private sector grows faster, but the important thing is, at the end, the policies matter. Maybe we go too far on the policies in Europe. A society cannot be judged by just his capability of growing in terms of GDP. It’s

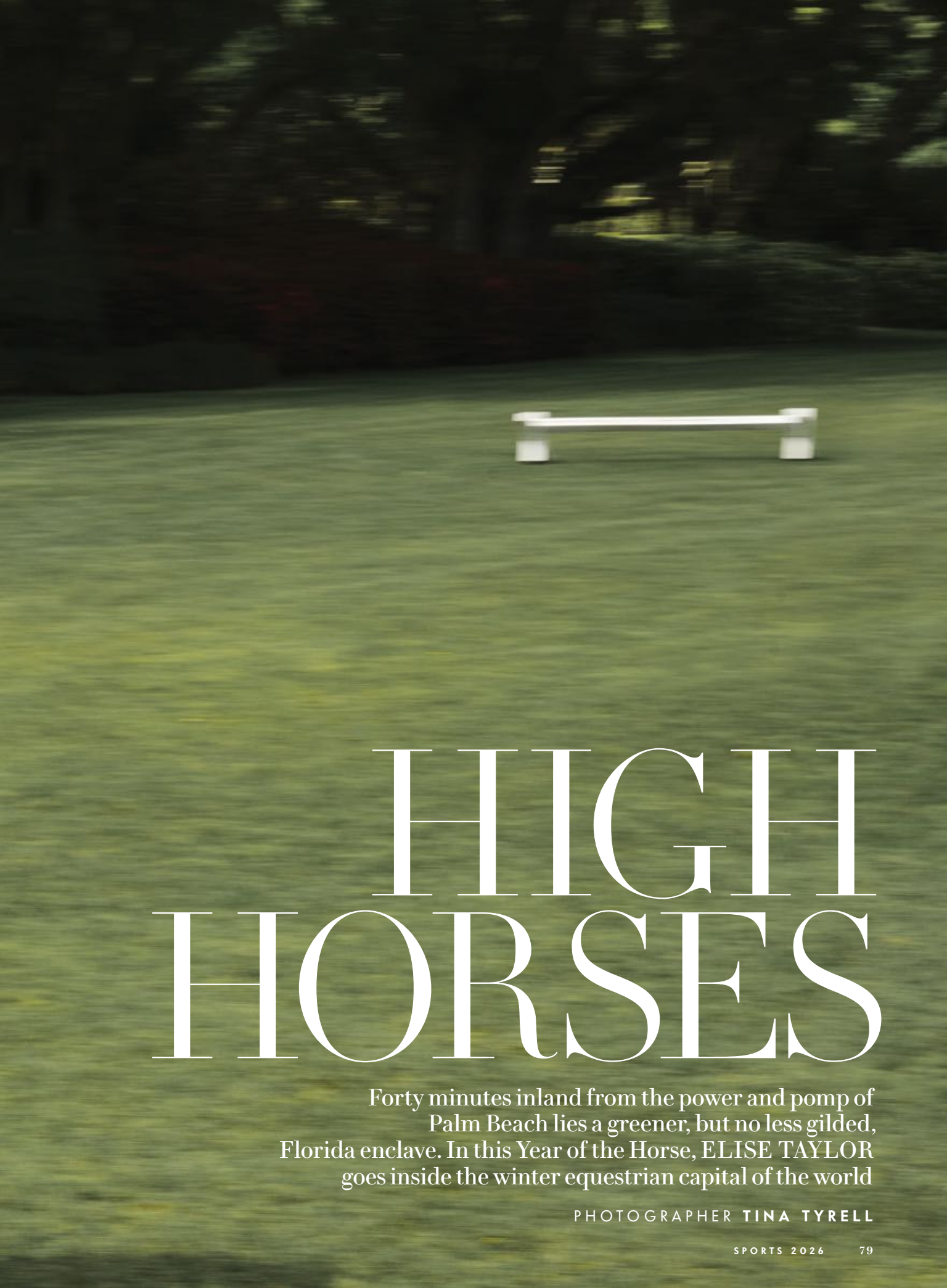
AWWWW, BEEP BEEP!

Bertelli has competed in the Rally Sweden race nine times. “I stopped when I was still improving, but being in the top 10 rally drivers in the world is quite remarkable,” he says.

about the quality of life, simple as that.”

Back in Umeå, I want to see if he will make good on his promise in Milan to perform a card trick for me. It is a silly and slightly eccentric skill for a fashion executive to have, let alone doing it in a tent where the rally teams were beginning to set up. We are surrounded by piles of wheels and people in giant parkas stopping to greet Bertelli after his absence from the racing scene. Before I leave him with his team, I ask him if he remembered his cards. He did and asks me to take one from his deck. I grab an eight of spades and, as instructed, don’t show it to him. He shuffles the deck, shows me a card. Is this it? No, I say. And it’s not this one? No. It’s this one? It is. I yelp in excitement. He isn’t done. He has me put it randomly back in the deck. He shows me the deck to prove that it doesn’t have anything sticky or rigged. “Opa,” he says with a flourish, and flips over the top card. It is mine, the eight of spades. He looks delighted. This is a man who is trying to pull off a lot of things at once and can still make time for a little flourish of humanity. **VF**





HIGH HORSES

Forty minutes inland from the power and pomp of Palm Beach lies a greener, but no less gilded, Florida enclave. In this Year of the Horse, ELISE TAYLOR goes inside the winter equestrian capital of the world

PHOTOGRAPHER TINA TYRELL



Last year, Kelly Killoren Bensimon, a former cast member of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, got a call from a Hollywood producer. He had an idea for a reality television show about Wellington—a village in Palm Beach County, Florida, known for its equestrian residents, from polo players to show jumpers to dressage riders. He knew Bensimon, an amateur show jumper herself, was “horse-world-adjacent.” Did she have any thoughts? Only a blunt one: “That’s never going to work,” Bensimon told him.

There are the worlds we live in, the worlds we wished we lived in, and the worlds we never even knew existed. For most of us, Wellington belongs to the last. In fact, if you ever randomly found yourself there—which is unlikely, as it’s smack-dab in the middle of swampland and 40 minutes inland from the ritzy, ocean-breezed boulevards of Palm Beach—you probably wouldn’t know it. There’s no main street, only a series of shopping centers with stores you could find in Anytown, USA: Lowe’s, TJ Maxx, Starbucks, Whole Foods. The nicest hotel is the three-star Hampton Inn & Suites.

Teen me was just jealous. One day I asked my father if I could try riding. He didn’t even look up from his newspaper: “No.” Who could blame him? Equestrianism—along with polo, skiing, and sailing—is one of the most expensive sports your kid can choose: You need not only to lease a horse but also to pay for the stable fees, the veterinary appointments, and the farrier care (not anyone can put a horseshoe on a hoof). And if I somehow got good enough to regularly compete, there’s flights and lodging—for me, a parent, and that hypothetical horse (or two or three, as they’re living creatures who need rest) too. “You have to have multiple horses. You have to have trainers. You have to fly to Europe. Your horse essentially gets a horsekeeper, a nanny, a bougie apartment, and an incredible professor—the trainers in Wellington are like Harvard [professors] in the world of academics. They are the best of the best,” says Bensimon.

Once you learn of Wellington, you may see subtle signs of it everywhere: Eve Jobs and Bella Hadid, posting on Instagram from Wellington after walking the runways of Paris. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, kissing at the Grand Champions Polo Club as his team won the Royal Salute Polo Challenge. Tabloid reports that Madonna wanted to buy a mansion in Wellington because, in her 40s, she had fallen in love with horses—even though she broke several bones in a 2005 riding accident.

A horsey history lesson: In 1951, an accountant and aviation enthusiast named Charles Wellington bought and drained 18,000 acres on the edge of the Everglades. He built a ranch as well as a landing strip for his planes. Nearly three decades—and multiple developers—later, much of Wellington’s original property was sold to a Chicago company called Gould Inc.

William Ylvisaker was an avid Yale-educated polo player amid the sport’s decline in the United States: Before World War II, many moneyed cavalry soldiers picked up polo for fun while in the service and continued to play it well after they left. As horses

“YOU HAVE TO HAVE MULTIPLE HORSES. YOU HAVE TO HAVE TRAINERS. YOU HAVE TO FLY TO EUROPE.”

Yet for a small, small circle—those on the elite international horse show circuit—Wellington isn’t a drive-through town. It’s a mecca.

Behind gates (and gates behind gates) are green, swamp-drained pastures housing mansions, polo fields, stables, and horses that can cost up to seven figures. They can be owned by wealthy people indulging in an expensive hobby or an Olympic athlete talented enough to make a living from this niche sport. “The Wellington world is a very insular, small world. It’s a very specific asset class—and people of ultrahigh net worth don’t want to have their asset class exposed,” Bensimon tells me from West Palm Beach, where she’s currently filming a forthcoming E! show, *The Golden Life*. “Who wants to have what they’re doing and how they’re doing it exposed on the world stage?”

It’s an awkward question for me, because, well, that was *exactly* what I was trying to do. Although *exposed* isn’t quite right—I wasn’t looking to stir up TV-worthy drama. But I was curious. I first heard of Wellington during my tony private school days in Greenwich, Connecticut. Several of my classmates disappeared on Fridays, getting an “excused absence” during the winters to head to Florida.

on the battlefield became obsolete as technology (and tanks) advanced, American polo was left with a serious pipeline problem. Ylvisaker had a *Field of Dreams* approach: He would build a world-class polo facility called the Palm Beach Polo & Country Club for the sport’s remaining enthusiasts and possibly inspire some new ones in the process.

Ylvisaker also brought another horseman into the fold: Gene Mische, a businessman who produced professional equestrian shows in Florida. In 1977 the first weeklong Winter Equestrian Festival was held. Over the decades, Wellington became the capital for every discipline of equestrian sports: not only polo and show jumping but also show hunting (where a rider is judged on a horse’s movement, style, manners, and jumping form) and dressage (which focuses on precise, fluid movements between horse and rider, giving it the nickname of horse ballet).

A 1981 ad in *Vogue* boasted about the luxury leisure lifestyle one could find in Wellington: “Come enjoy the ambience and hell-for-leather excitement—the fast horses, sparkling champagne, and scintillating people that surround the regal sport of polo. Come

HAIR PRODUCTS BY HAIR ATELIER (WESTMAN); MAKEUP PRODUCTS BY WESTMAN ATELIER (WESTMAN); VICTORIA BECKHAM BEAUTY (ALL OTHER WOMEN EXCEPT NEVILLES); GROOMING PRODUCTS BY BLEU DE CHANEL; HAIR, MAKEUP, AND GROOMING, NATASHA SMOE; PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY WYNN BURSON CATERON. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.



SEEN AND HERD

Clockwise from top left: awards at Double H Farm; on the grounds at Wellington International; a trailer for the Palm Beach International Academy; rider Eloise Eisner at Back Country Farm; Wellington International security guard Sam Alcide.









PONY TALES

A horse outfitted head to hoof in gear from Hermès Sellier at Rushy Marsh Farm in Wellington.

Opposite: rider Karen Polle; gear at Santa Rita Polo Farm. Clothing, belt, and bracelet by Hermès.

join counts and cowboys, princesses and playboys, all playing life to the hilt at America's most regal resort community."

It worked. Prince Charles came to play multiple times, even bringing along his young wife, Princess Diana, in 1985. (Ylvisaker reportedly offered the prince a home in Wellington as a wedding present, but the offer was never accepted. The villa was later purchased by Zsa Zsa Gabor.)

Today, show jumping is arguably Wellington's most visible sport. More than 300,000 spectators flock to town to watch more than 4,436 unique competitors from 55 countries compete in the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF), now a 13-week circuit. It culminates in the Rolex Finale Week, where the top-ranked riders in the world—meaning they and their horses can jump more than

"ONE KID'S ASKING YOU FOR A LIP GLOSS AND THE OTHER ONE NEEDS AN \$8,000 SADDLE."

five feet—compete for a million-dollar prize purse in the Rolex US Equestrian Open Grand Prix. There are no categories—in show jumping, men and women compete together.

Those at the five-star level are serious athletes. For the Rolex Grand Prix, the athletes and their horses leap through a track of 14 different obstacles—walls, gates, oxers, verticals, open water—without knocking anything over and in a set amount of time determined by the course designer. Or as Richard Vogel, the number three show jumper in the world and a Rolex testimonee (essentially a brand ambassador, the equivalent of getting sponsored by Nike as a basketball player), tells me: "Leave all the poles up and be faster than everyone else."

They also must do this with very little time to prepare: The athletes don't see the course until about an hour before they ride it, when they're allowed to do what's called a course walk. "If you want to compare with skiing—it's like a skier that doesn't know what downhill they'll need to ski down," Vogel says. Wellington is just a long stop on a full competition calendar that includes the FEI World Cup Finals (held this year in Fort Worth) and CHIO Aachen in Germany (considered the Wimbledon of show jumping).

The WEF has a \$536.2 million economic impact—more than the Miami Grand Prix (\$505 million). Most of that comes from what's described as horse expenditures: essentially, all costs associated with owning, caring for, and using a competition horse. And more than \$100 million of that comes from nonresident-specific expenditures. In addition, many participants move to Wellington for the whole three-month season to compete. As a result, a number of high-end neighborhoods, where homes mix with stables and polo fields, have been developed within Wellington: Palm Beach Polo is still considered the ritziest. But there's also Palm Beach Point, the Equestrian Club, and Grand Prix Village. Some of these homeowners are professional equestrians. Others are riders who just have expendable income and do the sport as a hobby, akin to skiing or golfing.

There's also another group that occupies Wellington: teen horse girls with professional equestrian dreams and their parents.



BRIDLE PARTY

Argentinian polo player Nacho Figueras (right), Delfina Blaquier (center), and family at Santa Rita Polo Farm in Wellington.





Those with enough capital often purchase homes or rent them for the season in an attempt to create some sort of domestic normalcy. Unlike my father, Alice + Olivia founder Stacey Bendet Eisner said yes to her daughter Eloise when, at 10 years old, she attended pony summer camp in Malibu. Little did Bendet Eisner know it would lead to her becoming a Wellington resident. Because it turned out Eloise was good with horses. Like, *really* good: She

THERE'S NO HORSE MORE REVERED IN WELLINGTON THAN GREYA, A MARE THAT BELONGS TO KENT FARRINGTON.

started winning junior jumping competitions. Then there was the social media of it all. Eloise amassed more than 30,000 followers posting videos of herself riding on TikTok. Bendet Eisner, who was not experienced with horses, suddenly found herself thrown into the surreal bubble of competitive equestrianism: “One kid’s asking you for a lip gloss and the other one needs an \$8,000 saddle,” she says. “You’re like, what?”

Gucci Westman’s daughter, Gray, rides at the same barn as Bendet Eisner and follows a similar program: remote schooling for the winter, riding during early mornings, studying and more riding in the afternoons, competing on weekends. Due to her daughter’s passion, the founder of Westman Atelier and her husband, Rag & Bone former co-chief executive officer David Neville, decided to relocate their family during competition season. Westman acknowledges that this all sounds “so privileged.” Yet she had also asked her parents to allow her to take an unusual route. “I wanted to become a makeup artist and go to makeup school in Paris so I didn’t waste my time if I wasn’t good at makeup,” she says. “I will never forget that feeling of them getting behind me in something that was not academic.” What Gray was asking for, she figured, wasn’t much different.

Just like most athletic hopefuls, most of those teens will not become professional equestrians. And the select few who do might not really make a living from it, spending much more than they make in an attempt to eke out a podium position. While in Wellington, the same juicy piece of horse gossip was repeated to me: A billionaire scion had spent something in the ballpark of \$10 million to \$12 million (the exact amount changed with the storyteller) on what they thought would be a winning horse. But the equestrian and the equine were like oil and water—“unrideable,” an amateur rider tells me in a hushed tone, like she was repeating the illicit details of a terrible crime.

As much as F1 needs an equally good driver and car, equestrian sports have two extremely important variables: the horse and the rider. And unlike in F1, the second piece of the puzzle is a living, breathing, intelligent animal with its own mind and moods. “There’s two athletes you need to train,” 34-year-old Jessica Springsteen, daughter of Bruce, tells me as we sit outside in the Florida humidity by the bougainvilleas at her barn.



HORSE PLAY

Clockwise from top left: Wellington International course designer Guilherme Jorge; rider Paisley Brawley; groomer Josie Eliasson at Jessica Springsteen's barn; show jumper Richard Vogel; Double H Farm; Joey Wölffer at Double H Farm; a rider on the Rolex US Open practice course. Vogel's watch by Rolex.







THE MANE EVENT
Kent Farrington at
KPF Stables in
Wellington before
winning the Rolex US
Equestrian Open
Grand Prix.
Watch by Rolex.



Springsteen is an accomplished professional athlete on the elite circuit: In 2021 she won a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics for team jumping on her stallion Don Juan van de Donkhoeve. She has seven horses in Wellington. Some she shows on. Others are in development: While Springsteen herself has the experience to guide a horse over jumps higher than five feet, she needs a horse that knows (and wants) to do so as well. That takes years of training. So while she's competing in Wellington, she and her team are also preparing her next generation of equines. Unlike most athletes, equestrians peak in their 40s and 50s. Springsteen has a long career ahead, which will require multiple top horses.

"It's so hard to describe—a feeling—you feel like they know what you're thinking before you even ask them to do it," Springsteen says when I ask her what makes a good horse. "I have one mare, Naomi. If I'm in the air over a jump and I think I'm turning right, she is already ahead of me. When you get to that moment with a horse where you feel like they're reading your mind and you're so in sync—that only comes from time, putting in the work day-to-day, and learning from each other."

There's no horse more revered in Wellington than Greya, a mare that belongs to Kent Farrington. Farrington is currently the number two rider in the world—a ranking that, as I sit down with him at his Palm Beach Point stable the morning of the Rolex Grand Prix, I learn, bothers him. He's normally number one. Greya, meanwhile, set the record last year for the most five-star Grand Prix wins, with seven in a single season.

Before my trip, I called a few of my (to borrow a term from that Hollywood producer) "horse-world-



BODIES,

BODIES,



Several dozen world-class athletes have spent the last four months in Abu Dhabi training to compete for millions of dollars in the Enhanced Games—a competition that is literally on steroids. And hormones. And Adderall. CLARA MOLOT talks to the people involved—and RFK Jr.—about the event that's backed by everyone from Peter Thiel and Donald Trump Jr. to Saudi royalty

BODIES

“Just outside this window, here’s the US base that they’re targeting,” says Ben Proud, the 31-year-old British swimmer and Olympian. He turns his video camera around to show me the night sky above Abu Dhabi, where he’s been watching Emirati defenses intercept Iranian missiles.

His phone dings each time one is incoming—an alert to stay inside. “This building used to be an air force base, so it’s very sturdy,” he says of the Erth hotel, where the athletes competing in the Enhanced Games are currently training. “If you’re inside, you’re away from the danger. Pretty much.”

Proud had anticipated hurdles, though not necessarily bombs, when he signed on to the controversial sporting event birthed in the Thiel-verse, backed by MAGA, and christened the “steroid Olympics” by the press. After a 12-year career, which culminated in a silver medal at the Paris Olympics, he’d become accustomed to being told that performance-enhancing drugs were illegal, dangerous, and immoral. Now Proud was about to try several of them. Doctors in Abu Dhabi would compose an individualized concoction of enhancement drugs for him and many of his fellow athletes, selecting from testosterone, anabolic steroids, growth factors like HGH and EPO, hormone and metabolic modulators, and stimulants like Adderall. (Because of an ongoing clinical trial, the Enhanced Games says the athletes cannot share exactly what they are taking.)

One year ago the Enhanced Games paid its first prize to the 32-year-old Bulgarian-born, Greek-raised swimmer Kristian Gkolomeev—\$1 million to break the then men’s 50-meter freestyle world record. (It has since been broken officially by Cameron McEvoy, who swam clean.) “I was swimming my whole life, and I haven’t made any money,” says Gkolomeev. He “would’ve needed around 10 careers” to earn what he made in a single race. He did so with the aid of both performance-enhancing drugs and a previously banned full-body polyurethane “supersuit,” which decreases drag and increases buoyancy. This year they’re upping the ante.

“I can show you a book of headlines from June of 2023” when the games were announced, says Aron D’Souza, Australian lawyer, serial entrepreneur, and Enhanced Games cofounder. “My favorite one is from *The Spectator*: ‘Why the Enhanced Games Won’t Work.’” It took time, but the Enhanced Games secured the funds as well as the political, social, and global influence to go from a fever dream to a reality. The easy part? Finding the athletes willing to move to Abu Dhabi and join an institutional review board–approved clinical trial. For those participating, this is all disarmingly straightforward: a calculation of risk and reward, a late-career pivot,

into the mainstream, German venture capitalist and Enhanced Games cofounder and executive chairman Christian Angermayer describes pulling it all off as a breeze. (In April, much to Angermayer’s excitement, President Donald Trump signed an executive order aimed at accelerating psychedelics research.) “Looking back over the last three years, I think this all went bigger, better than I would ever expected,” he says of the games.

But in the run-up to the competition, it’s become clear that something far more complex than extreme athletics is taking shape. The Enhanced Games is not just a rogue competition—it’s a node

in a rapidly expanding biohacking economy, where the same networks funding life-extension start-ups and experimental clinics are now underwriting a sporting spectacle and preparing to sell it back to viewers, who the game makers are betting are would-be consumers. The venture capitalists with the most money and the highest tolerance for risk are already rewriting the rules for the public too.



“I accept support from anyone who believes in superhumanity,” says D’Souza, who dreamed up the Enhanced Games between sets at Equinox Miami’s Brickell location, where he overheard two men talking about “being enhanced.” A few days later, he pitched the idea to Peter Thiel, the tech billionaire who had secretly funded D’Souza’s plan for the \$10 million

lawsuit on behalf of Hulk Hogan against Gawker Media, for publishing a video of him having sex. “I think I’m going to start a new version of the Olympics,” D’Souza confided to Thiel at a New Year’s dinner in 2022, “but you can use performance enhancements.”

“That’s pretty cool,” D’Souza remembers Thiel replying—enough of a green light for him to get to work. “Ideas are worthless,” he tells me. “It’s all about the execution.” Six months later, D’Souza brought his fellow Thielverse member, Christian Angermayer, on board to be his cofounder. “At the beginning,” Angermayer says, “we kind of wanted to be the bad boys.”

a chance, finally, to get paid—which, they say, made the potential hazards feel manageable. In a world where most Olympic athletes barely make enough money to survive, the Enhanced Games is offering hard, fast cash—a million dollars to break a world record, \$250,000 to win a race, plus paid-appearance opportunities and a base salary in the mid to high six figures—all for 12 weeks of workouts and supervised PEDs at a five-star Emirati resort. (Never mind the full-scale military conflict unfolding in their backyard.) The long-awaited competition takes place in Las Vegas on May 24.

Compared to some of his other ventures, including pushing to bring psychedelics

HAIR PRODUCTS BY L'ORÉAL PROFESSIONNEL; MAKEUP PRODUCTS BY HUDA BEAUTY; HAIR: MAKEUP; AND GROOMING: KALINA KOCEMBA. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY MMG ART PRODUCTION. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.







A self-proclaimed semi-libertarian who values self-sovereignty above all, Angermayer was immediately drawn to biohacking as a means of eliminating the “number one restriction in life,” which he says, “is aging and health.”

“I’m doing 250 milligrams of testosterone per week. I do tesamorelin [human growth hormone-releasing factor]. I do SS-31 [a mitochondria-targeting peptide]. I do a lot of red-light therapy. Obviously I do gym—because by the way, you need to work. I’m taking DHEA [hormone therapy]. I’m doing [the diabetes drug] Jardiance, which filters glucose. I do GLP-1s. These are the main things.” When I ask about a nightcap, he’s unamused. “I think alcohol is spiritually the devil and factually poison. Heroin is number two, then crack. And then at the very end, very, very low risk—LSD and mushrooms.”

At first the games were conceived as pure for-profit spectacle—revenue to be made through tickets, views, clicks, and advertising. Erected on the Las Vegas Strip, where athletes will compete for attention with UFC fights, the Jonas Brothers, hoards of magicians, and buzzing casinos, the games’ build-up-and-move-on infrastructure and a crowd including potential White House-adjacent VIPs and press gave the whole enterprise the air of a traveling circus.

Then, in November 2024, seated next to some of the Red Bull team on a flight to the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Qatar, D’Souza realized they were sitting on something far larger. “I thought to myself, Red Bull has the best business model in sports,” he says. “They’re not trying to sell media rights and ticket sales and sponsorships. They just have a product, and they use sports to exemplify that vision.” Then it clicked. “Red Bull makes you go faster. But what actually makes an athlete go faster? Pharmacological enhancements.”

Standing in their way were the International Olympic Committee, the World Anti-Doping Agency, and the US government—at least for a time. But the seed for the second prong of the Enhanced Games’ business had already been planted: Eventually, they’d be able to sell some

of the medications athletes took to go faster and get stronger alongside others that the games’ independent medical board has deemed insufficiently researched to administer to elite athletes at this time. “The previous administration almost had [the games] stopped in its tracks,” says Guido Piele, chairman of the Enhanced Games Independent Medical Commission, but a White House helmed by Trump and JD Vance—one of Thiel’s many mentees—seemed to feel differently.

Underneath it all is a MAGA mesh that binds this cast of characters. Donald Trump Jr.’s firm, 1789 Capital, is an investor in Enhanced. The United Arab

the experimental treatments beloved by the Silicon Valley set, including peptides.

Kennedy is pushing the FDA to reclassify 12 of the 19 restricted peptides, which would allow US companies—like Enhanced—to compound and sell them through legitimate domestic channels. When the Biden administration recategorized these peptides in 2023, citing “significant safety risks,” it “created this huge black market, billions of dollars,” Kennedy argues, fueled by the propulsion of biohacking from fringe to trending in Silicon Valley and across social media. “People are taking research and animal peptides that we have no idea where they’re coming

from,” he says, while dismissing the safety concerns flagged by Biden officials, which included immune reactions, pancreatitis, and accelerated growth of cancerous cells. It’s true that most compounded peptides are currently produced in China in labs built to animal-testing standards, not human ones, with little oversight and less accountability. Doctors I spoke to tell horror stories: “I had a patient who was about to use a peptide,” says Jordan Shlain, MD, founder of the concierge practice Private Medical. “I sent it to a lab. It had MDMA in it.” But Kennedy maintains that “as long as people are going to be taking [peptides], we should maximize the chance that people are getting what they are being sold and that they’re formulated in laboratories that FDA has inspected.” I can’t help but ask whether he considers himself a biohacker.

“I wouldn’t talk about my personal health choices,” he says. “And they do not inform this debate. . . . I think people can make their own choice.”

For its part, Enhanced has already gotten into the peptide market, offering FDA-approved GLP-1s, sermorelin for sleep, and GHK-Cu copper peptide “for the looksmaxxing era,” the site states. It also advertises its “stronger” and “longer” supplement blends—piles of white powder in metallic packaging screaming to be cut with a credit card. They are selling testosterone injections; low-dose tadalafil, the erectile dysfunction medication often playfully referred to as “the weekend” for a better



Emirates—which was chosen to host the clinical trial because the region has become a hub for longevity medicine research—is a frequent investor not only with Angermayer, but also in Trump Jr.’s defense and crypto dealings and with the US government itself: Trump recently secured an additional \$200 billion in new US-UAE deals on top of \$1.4 trillion already committed. “The Middle East,” says Angermayer, “is financially more supportive”—nodding to the backing of Saudi prince Khaled bin Alwaleed bin Talal Al Saud. And at the FDA, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s plan to Make America Healthy Again includes not just limiting vaccines but deregulating many of

pump at the gym; the very popular NAD+ injections for “cellular health” (though Ali Watson, of the longevity concierge clinic network LifeSpanMD, cautions, “If you are broken from your mitochondrial standpoint or energy standpoint, it’s like pouring water into a leaky sink”); and even estradiol female hormone therapy in pill, cream, and gel form. If Kennedy’s reclassification process goes to plan, BPC-157 (for tissue repair), Melanotan II (known as the “Barbie peptide” because it causes skin to tan without the sun), and the growth hormone-releasing ipamorelin could be some of Enhanced’s next bets.

By the time selling experimental and therapeutic peptides to people who had watched athletes on steroids race for a million dollars was no longer a fever dream but an approaching reality, D’Souza felt his work was done. An early-stage venture capitalist and self-described contrarian who prides himself on pushing the envelope, he stepped back from day-to-day operations once the games were no longer a fringe operation—now associated with a clinical trial and under SEC review for a potential stock listing. “I’ll admit, I’m not really that much of a sports fan,” he says. Thankfully, the new CEO and cofounder,

German tech and crypto investor Maximilian Martin, is, according to D’Souza, “a really passionate sports fan.” Where D’Souza wanted to supplant the world’s biggest showcase of athleticism, Martin envisions the Enhanced Games becoming for biotechnology what Formula 1 is to the automotive industry: a live testing ground for the most advanced performance technology on earth. He paints a picture of Eli Lilly sending one athlete, Johnson & Johnson sending another, Novo Nordisk a third, and so on.

“The technology that gets deployed on the racetrack today finds its way into your Corolla at some point,” says Matthew Scholz, CEO of longevity biotech startup Oisin Biotechnologies. In this vision, the athletes are both the test subjects and the proof of concept—human prototypes.

“Everyone’s looking for a spectacle,” says Shlain, who is less charmed by the

biohacking future Enhanced appears to be barreling toward. “You’ve got *The Hunger Games*, you’ve got *Squid Game*—and now you’ve got the Enhanced Games. We’re just lurching further and further toward the extreme. Whatever happened to hanging out with friends?”

Just a few weeks into their training and days before the athletes were going to start taking medications, Trump and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a massive air strike against Iran, wiping out the supreme leader and the majority of the country’s highest-ranking officials in Tehran, Abu Dhabi’s neighbor to the north. Within hours, Iran retaliated, striking back at the US and Israel’s allies in the region, including the United Arab Emirates.



“I’m not going to send [videos of missiles] to you,” says Proud, “because I’ll get arrested,” alluding to the apprehension of more than a hundred people in the UAE for filming and posting drone interceptions and therefore, according to the government, spreading “misleading” information. That shelter-in-place alert goes off in the first minutes of my conversation with 29-year-old sprinter Shania Collins too—she apologizes for the noise the same way she does when her laundry arrives. “Sometimes we hear the windows shaking,” says Gkolomeev, the swimmer. “It’s close by. It’s loud.”

DOPE OPERA

Enhanced Games athletes Mouhamadou Fall, Jasmine Abrams, Kristian Gkolomeev, Shania Collins, and Ben Proud, photographed in the United Arab Emirates, where they trained for 12 weeks with the aid of performance-enhancing drugs.

Fashion Editor: Daniel Negron.

“Wake up, missile, then another missile,” says 26-year-old British Irish swimmer Max McCusker with a smirk. “No, no—I’m kidding.” The missile interceptions, he explains, went from terrifying to unremarkable in roughly the same time it took him to settle into the rhythms of Enhanced life: luxurious buffet breakfasts, 7 a.m. swim practice, afternoon massages, and the occasional blood draw.

McCusker was at a pub when his fellow Irish professional swimmer Shane Ryan called to ask if he wanted in. “I was a broke,” he says, recalling how quickly he said yes. “I’d hit all my best times, qualified for the Olympics, done multiple world championships, multiple European championships—and I had no money.”

Two weeks into his regimen, he feels its effects: “I’m starting to have a chest,” he says, the Olympic rings tattooed across his forearm now sitting atop newly built muscle. His body fat has dropped from 11.8 percent to 7.5 percent in a matter of weeks. He describes it all with an almost breezy enthusiasm, as if discussing a new training block rather than a pharmacological overhaul.

Mouhamadou Fall, 34, one of 12 siblings in a Parisian family, is candid about the appeal.

A former soccer player who only took up running at 24, he made it to the Tokyo Olympics and was training for Paris when a suspension for drug contamination upended his plans. What followed was not just frustration with the ruling, he says, but with the system itself. “I meet one girl—I can’t sleep at her place because I have to log my location,” he says. “You don’t have freedom. It’s just too much.”

Gkolomeev describes a different kind of disillusionment—less about control, more about competition. “My whole life I was natural, and I knew I was competing with people who were not following the rules,” he says. “I knew that if I was doing what they were doing, I would’ve been the best. So I wanted to see my full potential.”

Collins arrived at the same conclusion, though from a more conflicted place. The daughter—almost too perfectly—of two Drug

LORD OF THE RING

Ukrainian boxer Oleksandr Usyk has won every major title in professional boxing without a single defeat. Amid a war, as ANNA ZOLOTARIOVA writes, he continues to prove that victories can be won despite adversity

“**T**here are 8 billion people on this planet, and yet I’m the undisputed world champion,” says Ukrainian boxer Oleksandr Usyk, the first and only athlete in the four-belt era to hold all four major titles (WBA, WBC, WBO, IBF) in both the cruiserweight and heavyweight divisions.

We meet in the locker room of a boxing club in Podil, Kyiv’s historic district, during one of the harshest winters the Ukrainian capital has faced since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion into the country. It’s freezing outside and the heat isn’t working; the lights are powered by a generator, the hum of which drowns out all the other sounds of the big city. Usyk brought his championship belts with him today, which he usually keeps at home in the same corner where the family shelters when the air raid sirens warning citizens of potential attacks go off. When we sit down, the 39-year-old boxer, who was born into a military family in Ukrainian Crimea, shows me the tattoo on his right arm: It’s the famed Motherland Monument with the Ukrainian trident on its shield. “I got this in 2010. It was my way of putting the idea of a shield with the Ukrainian coat of arms out into the universe.” (In August 2023, Soviet symbols were removed from the monument and replaced with Ukrainian ones, part of a larger effort to reclaim the country’s cultural identity.)

Usyk remembers being in London when the invasion began. The journey home had never felt so long. He enlisted in the territorial defense and turned down scheduled fights. He didn’t feel the need to return to the ring until soldiers themselves began asking him about upcoming fights. “I remember stumbling in the ring,” Usyk says of his comeback match six months later, in August 2022. “That moment I thought: Lord, please, not now.” He won that fight and later received a video of soldiers on the second line of defense in Donbas sharing the news of his victory with the troops on the front line. It was no longer just his. It belonged to all Ukrainians. “I felt again that I was doing something important,” he recalls.

Usyk admits that the final chapter of his boxing career is not far off, but he has no intention of staying idle. He wants to help talented young athletes reach their potential. “We have many strong, skilled young people in our country.” As our conversation comes to an end, he says: “In my prayers, I ask God for the strength to walk my path with dignity, if I am worthy of it. Ukrainians now share one wish: for the war and the suffering to end. Otherwise, my life is just fine. My dreams came true long ago.” **VF**



GROOMING: SASHA VETROVA, PRODUCTION: MARIA NIKOLAIENKO, MARINA SANDUGEL-SHYSHKINA, FASHION EDITOR: DAVID BRADSHAW



OUT OF THE BOX
"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" has become a personal motto for Usyk, who shares a birthday with Muhammad Ali. For Usyk's 18th birthday, his father gifted him a gold cross. "That chain would save me when we ran out of money. I would pawn it...and as soon as I managed to earn some money, I bought it back."



YOU'VE

Wildly expensive vehicles, famous fans, and a Netflix glow-up propelled Formula 1 from niche European import to full-blown American obsession. Photographer HAILUN MA documents the early season fervor at the 2026 Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai.

A FAST



GOT

CAR

Pierre Gasly is smiling. And why shouldn't he be? Sure, the French Formula 1 driver is under intense pressure to perform, with millions on the line each time he gets behind the wheel. He also deals with privacy intrusions—and the occasional journalist asking about his pre-race bathroom habits. “Right before, you see all 22 drivers running to the toilets,” says Gasly.

Despite the annoyances, the smile is genuine. When *Vanity Fair* caught up with Gasly after a sixth-place finish at the Chinese Grand Prix—his best result of the young 2026 season—the Alpine driver was asked how his life has changed since Formula 1 became an all-out international phenomenon. He flashed a cheeky grin and said, “I’m dating Kika Gomes”—proof that brevity is the soul of wit. A few years back, Gasly was explaining F1 to Americans whose interest in auto racing didn’t extend beyond NASCAR. Now he’s living a life where fashion houses come calling, Ryan Reynolds offers business advice, and his girlfriend happens to be a Portuguese model.

Just a decade ago, F1’s cultural footprint in America was thin, with US viewership averaging just 482,000 on linear television. The sport was largely dismissed by Americans as Euro-elitist entertainment—think Jean Girard in *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*.

But these days Formula 1 has gone mainstream. The 2025 movie *F1*, starring Brad Pitt, grossed nearly \$190 million domestically. Stephen Ross, majority owner of both the Miami Dolphins and the Miami Grand Prix, said his three-day F1 race sells more tickets than the Dolphins do in season tickets. Take a spin through New York City and you’ll see even art school Brooklynites wearing F1 jackets.

So, what changed? Two things. First, in 2017, Liberty Media acquired the racing series. Then it partnered with Netflix for a 10-part docuseries.

Formula 1: Drive to Survive debuted soon after, hooking fans by turning the paddock into something closer to *The Real Housewives* with faster cars, mixing racing drama—like the moment in season five when former Red Bull team principal Christian Horner snapped “change your fucking car” at Toto Wolff—with off-track spectacle: WAGs, private jets, and hotel suites. Cadillac driver Sergio “Checo” Pérez, who’s been racing in Formula 1 since before the Netflix era, says the difference between then and now is obvious. What was once, in McLaren driver Oscar Piastri’s words, “a pretty niche sport” has become “one of the biggest in the world.”

Nielsen Sports data shows that the series is attracting younger fans and women (in my case, at least one gay man), helping explain why Gasly, Pérez, and Piastri have become sex symbols.

Gasly seems faintly bewildered by the designation. “It’s not every day you get called that,” he says, laughing, before noting that his own self-image hasn’t exactly caught up with the headlines.

Pérez shrugs it off too. “I don’t feel that, myself,” he says. “I’m just a normal person.” (A normal person who spends his Sundays reaching top speeds of 200-plus mph while wearing flame-resistant underwear.)

Whether they buy it or not, the world now treats them like A-listers. “Dude, real pleasure,” Pitt said—the word *dude* carrying an unmistakable note of admiration—when he greeted Mercedes driver George Russell at the Times Square premiere of *F1*. Must be nice to see Tyler Durden geeking out over meeting you.

—MAXWELL ADLER





TEENAGE DREAM

At Shanghai, Mercedes driver Kimi Antonelli made history, becoming the youngest-ever pole-sitter at a Formula 1 race. The 19-year-old prodigy held off veterans including Lewis Hamilton, Charles Leclerc, and his Mercedes teammate George Russell at one of the racing series' most demanding circuits, signaling the arrival of a generational talent.

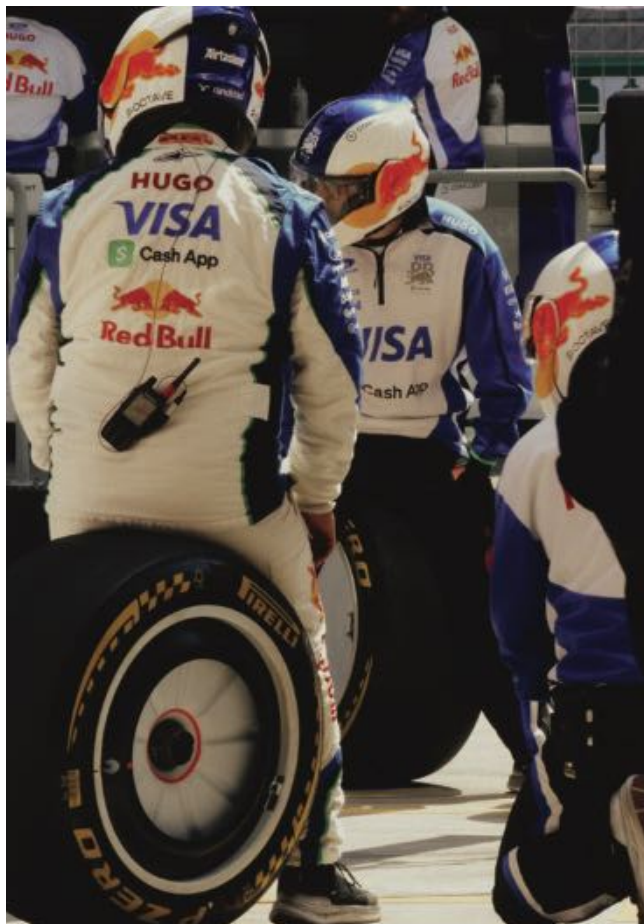




PHOTO FINISH

"It's pretty wild to see how much support there is—and even crazier when some of them are wearing my number or my name," says McLaren driver Oscar Piastri, one of Formula 1's rising stars. "A lot of people recognize me away from the track now, which is cool, but takes some getting used to."







BIG BRAKE

For all the apparent glamour, Pierre Gasly says the reality of race day is less *Drive to Survive* and more locker room: About 10 minutes before lights out, drivers sprint for the toilets before climbing into their cars—“a pretty funny time.”

Opposite: Before races, Sergio Pérez (bottom left) likes to keep it quiet—tuning out the noise to stay relaxed before the chaos begins.

REVOLUTIONARY
ROAD

Russell came within striking distance of his Mercedes teammate Antonelli at Shanghai, pushing him to the limit. In Formula 1, teammates are both allies and rivals—tasked with maximizing collective points while chasing their own victories. The Mercedes team sat atop the F1 Constructors' Championship after a one-two finish in Shanghai.







THE INVINCIBLE LINDSEY VONN

For the first time since her horrifying crash at the 2026 Olympics, the American skiing legend speaks to ELISE TAYLOR at length about what really happened at Milano Cortina, the five surgeries and paparazzi frenzies that followed, and whether this is really, truly the end





Lindsey Vonn has this recurring dream. She's back at the 2026 Milano Cortina Olympics in February, racing down the famous course of Olimpia delle Tofane, just as she has so many times before: Across her record-shattering two-decade career, Vonn's had 12 wins on that hill. She tucks and turns and carves going full speed—which, for Vonn, can be over 80 mph—until the finish line is in sight. She crosses it, triumphant.

Then she wakes up. To a reality where she did not.

Instead, she crashed 13 seconds into the race and shattered her tibia, fibula, and ankle in the process—injuries so severe that she spent weeks in the hospital and almost lost her left leg.

"I was number one in the world and potentially on my way to an Olympic medal," Vonn tells me. "Now I'm in a wheelchair."

She's lying on her couch in Park City, Utah, wearing an Under Armour sweatshirt, compression socks, and several bandages. She's not wearing any makeup except for eyelash extensions, a lingering beauty hallmark of a high-profile woman who needs to be camera-ready at all times.

She both does and doesn't know how it happened. Physically, she felt good, despite tearing the ACL in her left knee nine days prior during a World Cup race at Crans-Montana in the Swiss Alps. Mentally, she felt *great*: "I was in the exact mental state that I wanted to be in. I was ready to go," she says. In fact, she had a whole strategy planned out: On that early section of the course, there was a small lip before a gate. Usually, turning over it, you're pushed to the left. "It's called the drift," Vonn says.

Except she went over the lip too fast and pressured her outside ski too hard. The drift didn't happen. Instead, she stayed straight and her arm caught on the gate's pole. While many gates have breakaway flags—which would have allowed Vonn's arm to punch through the gate—this one didn't.

"It was a very, very small error. We're talking about a few centimeters," says her coach, Aksel Lund Svindal. "She paid a high price."

Vonn crashed. *Catastrophically* crashed. Her skis failed to pop off. They twisted and warped her body like a corkscrew as she

hurtled down the hill. When she finally skidded to a halt, the world heard her screams. They pierced the air with such force that they were picked up by the NBC broadcast.

"My leg was broken. My skis were still on. My leg was torqued, and I couldn't get my skis off. I couldn't move, and I was yelling for help," Vonn remembers.

Then, softly: "I just needed someone to take my skis off."

A helicopter airlifted her off the course as the world watched. It brought her to a tent on the side of the race course where Tom Hackett, the head physician for Team USA Ski and Snowboard, waited wearing a Gore-Tex bib.

The scene was a chaotic triage. Medical staff tried to wrangle Vonn out of her helmet, goggles, suit, and ski boots. She screamed out in distress. Fans swarmed the tent in an act of Olympic-level rubbernecking. "It was just an awful situation," says Hackett. He splinted her leg and got her back into the helicopter to fly to the official Olympic clinic in Cortina. When they arrived, Hackett had to be both doctor and security guard. "Paparazzi were bum-rushing the place, saying that they were friends and part of her PR team," he says.

At the clinic, they gave Vonn painkillers and put her into a CT scan. The medicine didn't last long. "Halfway through, I started sweating. I was just in such extreme pain. I screamed at the top of my lungs: *Get me out*. It just wouldn't dissipate. It wouldn't let up. It's seared into my brain," Vonn says, looking down at the floor.

The CT scan revealed that Vonn had a severe fracture in her left leg that required surgical stabilization. After a few calls, Hackett made the decision to transfer her to a hospital in Treviso, Italy. They arrived via helicopter 40 minutes later, but they had trouble landing. Paparazzi had swarmed the helipad.

"It had somehow leaked that that's where we were going," Hackett says. "Which was extraordinary. I didn't tell anybody."

The hospital quickly mobilized a team of 20 doctors and nurses to scrub in. The first surgery went great, Hackett says. Afterward, they moved Vonn into a room in the ICU. Hours went by. Vonn fell asleep. It was a Sunday night. Most of that team of doctors and nurses went home.

But then Vonn woke up. She started screaming again, even more bloodcurdling than before. Her leg had begun to swell and wouldn't stop. Hackett measured every few minutes. "It's getting worse, and she's not responding to monster amounts of fentanyl, morphine, oxycodone, like every narcotic you can imagine," he says.

He knew what this was: full-blown compartment syndrome, a dangerous condition where pressure mounts in the leg, restricting blood flow and causing widespread nerve damage.

"I'm sure you've seen hot dogs or brats on a grill. They get more and more swollen. Then all of a sudden, they burst. They crack. That's basically what happens with compartment syndrome," Hackett tells me. "There was a very significant chance that she was going to lose all function of her leg, if not the leg itself. Best-case scenario in those situations is you might keep your leg, but it's going to be useless."

OUT OF A DREAM

Lindsey Vonn was at the top of her game heading into the 2026 Games, with an eye on her fourth Olympic medal at age 41.

Then she crashed—catastrophically—and was at serious risk of losing her leg.

Previous spread: dress by Akris; watch by Rolex. Fashion Editor: Deborah Afshani.

HAIR: PRODUCTS BY SUTRA; BEAUTY: MAKEUP PRODUCTS BY YSL; BEAUTY: HAIR: LAURA POLKO; MAKEUP: KARAN MITCHELL; TAILOR: DAXTON PRICE; SET DESIGN: MELISSA MAE. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY STOWNS. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

Frantically, Hackett began to dial the numbers of the Italian doctors he met just hours before, trying to communicate in the little Italian he knows: “Shit. We got to get an OR team in.”

Eleven days after Vonn returned home to Park City, I’m standing on her doorstep. I drove through three different gates to get here. Vonn lives in a sprawling 15,000-square-foot home in a secluded, mountainous neighborhood. “I see more elk than people,” she says.

Usually at this time of the year, this place would be covered in snow, but Utah is experiencing its warmest winter on record. Instead of looking out onto a blanket of white across Vonn’s property, it’s just dirt as far as the eye can see.

A congenial house manager lets me in. She politely informs me that Vonn is finishing up some physical therapy. While we wait, would I like a tour?

Vonn’s one-year-old Cavalier King Charles spaniel, Chance, pitter-patters alongside us as she takes me around: to Vonn’s living room, with its floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the rugged, muddy landscape. To her kitchen, where there’s a feathered pink

A few minutes later, I’m back in her living room. Vonn rolls in in her wheelchair. It has a backpack attached to it. Inside is a cheesy Western romance—*Wild Eyes* by Elsie Silver—that she reads to kill time during her daily hyperbaric chamber sessions. “It’s an easy read,” she says, laughing. “Let’s just be clear about that.”

We don’t laugh much during our conversation. She’s finally off the painkillers, which has made her feel a lot better. (“At least I can hold a coherent conversation,” Vonn tells me.) But she’s still exhausted. She spends nearly all of her time in rehab.

Her physical therapist comes around 9 a.m. every day to work with her for two hours. At 1 p.m. she drives 30 minutes to a hyperbaric chamber, which she sits in for two hours. (Vonn struggles with this, as it reminds her of the CT scan.) Then she drives 30 minutes back to her house for the gym. On her Instagram, she recently posted a video of herself doing Russian twists with a weighted ball.

Because Vonn is not like us. No normal person would do Russian twists with a shattered left leg, a broken right ankle, and a torn left ACL. And no normal person—or even most professional athletes—would attempt to mount a professional comeback at age 41.

In February 2019, Vonn retired from skiing at age 33, riddled with chronic injuries. She thought her right knee had sustained irreversible damage. (On Instagram she called her body “broken beyond repair.”) She felt at peace doing so. At the time, she had

“I DON’T WANT PEOPLE TO HANG ON THIS CRASH AND BE REMEMBERED FOR THAT,” VONN SAYS.
“NO ONE REMEMBERS THAT I WAS WINNING.”

mask that was given to Vonn by her close friend Mariska Hargitay as a gag gift. (“When you leave the hospital,” Vonn says she told her, “no one will know it’s you.”) Finally, we get to her trophy case, which sits on the second floor of the modern mountain house.

Although *case* doesn’t really do it justice. It’s more like the library shelves at Alexandria, stretching almost the entire wall and requiring a built-in ladder to reach its top levels. Most are filled with Crystal Globes, the name for World Cup trophies. (Vonn has won 20 of them across multiple disciplines: four overall titles, eight downhill titles, five super-G titles, and three combined titles.) But mixed in among the professional accolades are deeply personal prizes, many of which she won as a young child growing up in Minnesota: a fifth-place slalom trophy at Afton Alps in 1992, which Vonn earned as a seven-year-old. An orange blimp—a Nickelodeon Kids’ Choice Award—for favorite female athlete. At the very center of it all is her 2010 gold medal from the Vancouver Olympic Games, where she was the first American woman in history to win downhill. But a small glass object sits in front of it, no taller than four inches. I peer closer: “Buck Hill Ski Racing Club. Most Improved. 1994,” reads the engraving. The 16-run Buck Hill in Burnsville, Minnesota, is the first slope Vonn ever skied.

the most World Cup wins (82) of any female skier in history. (That record has since been broken by Mikaela Shiffrin.) She has three Olympic medals, one gold and two bronze. She had lucrative brand partnerships. She had a legacy as one of the best speed skiers the world had ever seen. There was a soft California king bed of laurels for her to rest on.

“When I retired at 33, everyone was like, ‘Holy shit, you are so old,’” she says.

So she made a new life for herself. She got into tennis. She *really* got into business: She made early-stage investments into Beyond Meat, Just Egg, and Oura (a company which is now valued at \$11 billion). She became a co-owner of women’s soccer team Angel City FC. She founded her own production company, Après Productions, which coproduced a documentary on Picabo Street.

Vonn calls her postretirement life “amazing.” But it wasn’t skiing. “I think that’s probably my downfall,” she admits. “I like to challenge myself. And there’s no way that I’ll ever be challenged even remotely close in my life as I have been in skiing. That’ll always be my personal challenge: How do I find joy in regular things?”

Because there was one other thing she did in retirement: She

got a cutting-edge Mako partial knee replacement by acclaimed surgeon Martin Roche. After it healed, she got back onto the slopes, just for leisure. But that's when she realized something: The knee that'd ended her career no longer hurt. At all.

"I had gotten so used to not racing," she says. "But then the switch flipped back on: 'Oooh, I miss this.'"

Vonn remembers shooting back into consciousness. "Dr. Hackett was on my left. There were a bunch of doctors and nurses around me," she recalls. "He said, 'Don't worry, I'm going to save your leg. I got this. I'm scrubbing in.'"

They put her under anesthesia as Hackett performed a fasciotomy: limb-saving surgery that cuts into the connective tissue surrounding muscles to relieve dangerously high pressure. She awoke in the ICU with suction pumps attached to her legs, sucking out all the excess blood. A third surgery followed to close some incisions from the second, but not everything could be sewn up. So a few days later, she went back in for her fourth. "It was all about trying to save her skin and muscles, basically," Hackett says.

Vonn is so grateful for her doctors and nurses in Treviso, but she's still haunted by her stay. It was one thing to be in the most constant, excruciating pain, even under an extreme amount of medication. Then add in the realities of being in an ICU: Nurses woke her up every three hours, speaking a language she couldn't understand. She shared a room with other patients, with only a thin curtain dividing them as she experienced the near-amputation of her leg. The lights stayed on until 11 p.m., and the exit sign stayed on all night. "It took everything I had for it to not drive me insane," she says.

After the fourth surgery closed up Vonn's leg, Hackett cleared her to fly back to Vail, Colorado, on a transatlantic medevac. "I couldn't move out of my bed, let alone somehow manage to get on [a regular] airplane," she says. "I still had a catheter."

On February 20, Hackett performed a six-hour surgery at the acclaimed Steadman Clinic in Vail to actually fix the fracture: "The definitive, big-dog surgery," as he calls it. Finally, on March 1, almost a month after her crash in Cortina, Vonn returned home to Park City. Letters poured in from David Beckham, Jannik Sinner, Tom Brady, and even Prince William. ("The way you wrote about stepping into the starting gate with courage and no regrets says so much about your resilience," the royal wrote.) But the one that carried the most meaning was from Diane Sawyer: "You can't have courage and comfort at the same time."

When Vonn first started to think about getting back in the game, she studied women's ski races: "From what I observed, ski racing hadn't really changed since I left." She thought she could still compete, and in November 2024, she announced that she was coming back to professional skiing at 40 years old.

It made global headlines. By returning, Vonn joined a small cadre of professional athletes—Serena Williams, Roger Federer, Brady—who've attempted to compete at an elite level in their 40s. "Everyone thought I was crazy," she says. For a while, it looked

like she was. Her first few races were unremarkable. But then she started winning.

In December 2025, she won the downhill race at St. Moritz and became the oldest skier in history, male or female, to do so. A month later, she won again at Altenmarkt-Zauchensee, Austria. "She was in the fight to win every single race she did this winter," says Svindal.

By late January 2026, she was first in the downhill standings and had qualified for the Olympic Games. She wanted to do it in her 40s on the biggest stage. "I wanted to win the Olympics, and I wanted to win the downhill title, and I was on track to do both of those things."

Then Crans-Montana happened. Halfway down the slope, she crashed into a fence at 70 mph and tore her ACL.

Most people thought she'd be done, that she'd throw in the Olympic towel. Cortina was a mere nine days away. But Vonn refused to withdraw, even as critics on social media demanded she let another American replace her on the team—one who might have a better chance.

This confused Vonn. She believed she *was* the best chance.

"Everyone said it was reckless and I was taking a spot from somebody else and all this nonsense," she says. "I'm not crazy. I know what I can do and what I can't do."

Her physical therapist, Lindsay Winninger, thinks the criticism came from a general lack of understanding about elite athletes' bodies and how they handle injury. "Lindsey is in peak physical condition. She [was] in top shape going into those Olympic Games. When you tear your ACL, it isn't like you lose all of your strength, power, and cardio just overnight." Then there's the realities of downhill: It's not a sport like basketball, where you're constantly pivoting and jumping. She just needed to do a handful of clean turns.

Both Vonn and her coach tell me that the injury had nothing to do with her Olympic crash, despite the online speculation. (If you couldn't tell, Vonn reads her social media comments.) The thing that bothers her most, though, isn't what people say about her online, or the pain that she's in, or the long recovery she faces, where the fate of her body is still unclear. It's what people are going to remember.

"I don't want people to hang on this crash and be remembered for that," Vonn says. "What I did before the Olympics has never been done before. I was number one in the standings. No one remembers that I was winning."

Vonn has found it difficult to think about giving up her calling, a phenomenon familiar to most great athletes who all must give up their craft one day. "It's the feeling that no one cares," she says. "That the world keeps turning whether you're there or not."

I have to ask: Is she thinking about returning to skiing...again? She pauses. "I don't like to close the door on anything, because you just never know what's going to happen," she says. "I have no idea what my life will be like in two years or three years or four years. I could have two kids by then. I could have no kids and want to race again. I could live in Europe. I could be doing anything."

But there's hope, then there's reality. "It's hard to tell with this injury. It's so fucked up. I really feel like that was a horrible last run to end my career on." She trails off: "I only made it 13 seconds. But they were a *really* good 13 seconds." **VF**

STANDING TALL

Even after everything, all the horror and the pain, Vonn will not rule out a return to professional skiing.
Dress by Mōnot from FWRD; watch by Rolex.



A BIGGER SPLASH

Aidan Romain in 2025, playing in a Spanish championship with Club Natació Barcelona.



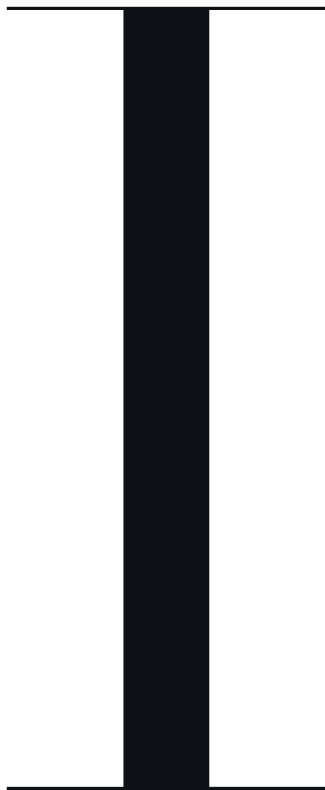
TROUBLE IN

Star water polo player Lucca van der Woude was arrested in 2024 after
Two years later, his former teammate Aidan Romain tells DEANNA KIZIS
which Romain says protected the white



THE WATER

being accused of sexual assault, rocking an elite Los Angeles community.
about his lawsuit against both Van der Woude and Harvard-Westlake School—
student who made his life unbearable



In February 2024, two historic storms hit Southern California back-to-back. There was so much flooding that the Pacific Coast Highway transformed into rivers of mud, and a man almost drowned in a tributary of the LA River while trying to save his dog. But when members of the Los Angeles Police Department strode onto the campus of Studio City's Harvard-Westlake School, the sun was glinting once again on the surface of its pool, a 50-meter beauty that had been shipped all the way from Italy.

They were there to arrest a water polo player, Lucca van der Woude. Even under normal circumstances, kids had their eye on the high school junior: He was a powerhouse player, over six feet, with big alpha energy. But now students *really* stared.

The news spread, quickly reaching Aidan Romain, a 16-year-old sophomore and a talented water polo player in his own right. The news made him anxious, so he called his mom: Did she know why Lucca was arrested? She said she didn't but reminded him that gossiping with other Harvard-Westlake students wasn't a good idea. Romain promised her that talking about Van der Woude was the last thing he wanted to do.

Until now. According to a civil suit Romain filed in Los Angeles Superior Court in February against the school; its president, Richard B. Commons; boys water polo program head Jack Grover; and Van der Woude, he was "sexually assaulted,

harassed, and humiliated primarily by three Harvard-Westlake water polo teammates—often in the presence of Harvard-Westlake agents and employees." The suit also claims that between August 2022 and January 2024, "Lucca van der Woude approached [him] from behind to ambush and digitally penetrate him," in the pool and elsewhere.

Another student, whom the suit calls Victim Two, was also assaulted by Van der Woude in the school pool. The suit accuses Van der Woude and another former student and water polo player, Connor Kim, of "whipping" Romain, a Black player, "in the weight room in a re-enactment of slavery" while they both said, "Get back to work!" The allegations come at a pivotal point for the elite private school and its community, which weathered a cluster of student suicides in 2023 that reportedly led a parent to take his own life.

In September, Van der Woude did not respond to an interview request. Instead, an attorney, Michael Artan, sent a letter to *Vanity Fair*'s parent company, Condé Nast, reading, in part, "Lucca denies all the allegations against him as we understand were made by the Romain team.... There have been no witnesses to these claims and there were no complaints for over 18 months." Regarding the civil suit, he says, "We do not intend to litigate this matter in the media. Mr. Van Der Woude's denials and other responses will be clear and unambiguous in his defense to the Complaint at hand."

Harvard-Westlake emailed the following statement: "Harvard-Westlake will not offer specific comment other than to say that it unequivocally disputes many of these allegations that mischaracterize facts and the school's actions. The school treated reports of inappropriate behavior in its water polo program with urgency and seriousness, promptly initiating an investigation and complying with its mandatory reporting obligations. The school also cooperated completely with law enforcement."

Grover did not respond to an interview request. Lillian Chu, a lawyer for Kim—who now plays water polo for Harvard University's team—issued the following statement to *Vanity Fair*: "The statements made in the complaint about Connor Kim are false. Although Connor is not a named defendant in this case, it's important to point out that these claims and the assertion that he admitted to wrongdoing are simply not true."

"This case is about a failure so fundamental, it cannot be explained away: A child was not protected when he should

have been," said Romain's attorney, Daniel Watkins. "Aidan's decision to speak the truth anyway is an act of rare courage—and it is that truth, not the institution, that will endure." The complaint demands a jury trial because, Romain and his parents say, he doesn't want what happened to him to happen to anyone else.

His story—reported through exclusive interviews with the Romain family, Victim Two and his father, and other school parents, along with texts and school communications—outlines how the family alleges an elite school operates when faced with claims that threaten its reputation and bottom line. The story also describes the everyday racial cruelty that Romain and Victim Two say they faced at a predominantly white private school.

More than two years after Van der Woude's arrest, Romain's father, Alex Romain, can't quite keep his composure when he talks about the day he found out what was happening to his son at Harvard-Westlake. "I was in shock that Aidan could have told people at the school and no one did anything," he says. "No one *said* anything. No one told us." I hand him a napkin, and he wipes his eyes. "We haven't really slept since October of 2023."

California is the epicenter of US water polo—more than 75 percent of the sport's high school players live in the state—and it reflects both the best and worst of SoCal's swim-and-surf culture. Picture the quintessential male surfer: He's tall and tan, with winglike deltoids and a casually individualistic mien. Some water polo players in Southern California look that way because they grew up that way, surfing the beaches of San Diego, Orange County, and Malibu before hitting the pool. But water polo has roots in the state's racial divides, from redlined neighborhoods to segregated swimming pools and beaches. And those laid-back surfers? Some are as sunny as a drive along the coast; others are aggressive, competitive, and deeply territorial.

Harvard-Westlake water polo players, in particular, breathe rarefied air. The high school overlooks Studio City and is dotted with white stucco and red-tiled roofs that are reminiscent of a Santa Barbara luxury hotel. According to *ProPublica*, the school has \$832 million in gross assets; per its

“THEY WEREN’T TRYING TO HIDE IT,” ROMAIN SAYS. “WHEN THE LIGHTS WOULD TURN OFF, THEY WOULD SAY, ‘WHERE’S ARBITRARY BLACK PERSON?’... IT WAS JUST STRAIGHT, BLATANT RACISM.”

student newspaper, it has an endowment of around \$250 million. And that pretty pool will soon have an even shinier companion: Charlie Munger, the former vice chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, was on the Harvard-Westlake board for 54 years and, before he died, helped the school buy a nearby public golf-and-tennis club. This fall the school will reportedly debut its \$200 million sports complex, with a brand-new aquatics center.

Such riches have long attracted Hollywood parents—Apple Martin, Lily Collins, Billie Lourd, and Chet Hanks all went to the school—and some of the unfamous kids who attend Harvard-Westlake live just as well. Romain’s mother, Melissa Romain, remembers the moment he asked her for \$200 so he could help buy one of his teammates a Gucci belt for his birthday. “I was just like, ‘Sweetie, I love you. But we’re not gonna do that,’ ” she says. “And, like, no judgment—I would love to have a Gucci belt.” (Full disclosure: I attended seventh and eighth grade at the Westlake School for Girls before it merged with the Harvard School for boys to become Harvard-Westlake in 1991.)

The school’s water polo program is considered competitive, but in the fall of 2022, the Wolverines were especially good: Ranked number three nationally, they had a new coach in Grover, a three-time NCAA national championship winner fresh off a stint as assistant water polo coach at UCLA. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, he’d inherited a bench stacked with talented players.

That roster included Romain, who wasn’t like a lot of the kids from Harvard-Westlake’s so-called water polo families. An A student from Washington, DC, with benevolently strict parents, he’s the son of first-generation Americans—Melissa’s parents are from Jamaica and Guatemala; Alex’s parents are from Haiti. Romain didn’t start playing water polo from the moment he could swim, which is what kids from water polo families do, nor

did the Romains spend his early years going to meets at the Los Angeles Premier Water Polo Club—which holds its practices at the Harvard-Westlake pool—so they could network with coaches and university scouts. Sources tell me that water polo families are an insular bunch; if their kids excel in the sport, they might one day swim their way into playing for top universities like Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton. Unlike more competitive and democratic sports like football and basketball, water polo is niche and relatively inaccessible. To water polo families, that’s considered a plus.

But Romain is genuinely talented. In 2022, Harvard-Westlake’s new coach christened him the school’s “golden freshman,” which made him the only 14-year-old on the varsity team. His parents were thrilled. “You know when somebody finds their thing in life?” Alex tells me at a restaurant in Downtown Los Angeles. “Water polo is Aidan’s *thing*.”

The celebration didn’t last. According to the complaint, Romain’s first varsity practice was also the first time Van der Woude assaulted him. Over Zoom, he tells me that he was eggbeating—water polo slang for treading water—when he felt someone grab one of his buttocks and insert a finger inside his anus. He jumped up and looked to see who was behind him. It was Van der Woude. “I was like, ‘Why did you do that? What are you doing?’ ” Romain says. “He just laughed.”

Other teammates were laughing too, he says, but because the water was up to his neck, he doesn’t know if they actually saw the incident. Either way, he says, it was clear to him that Van der Woude had social flex. Van der Woude’s mother, Nilda, was the team mom—which, the suit says, meant she handled logistics and communications with parents. “I guess I viewed him as untouchable,” Romain says.

Court documents say that Romain faced a barrage of racial harassment from

his teammates. Kim and Van der Woude “constantly dehumanized” him, he claimed, and they called him “ni,” a short form of the N-word. “This constant degradation—which occurred virtually every single day for five months—was a frequent reminder of Plaintiff’s status as an outcast on his own team,” the lawsuit says. The complaint also says that Kim and Van der Woude beat Romain in the gym with a sports-equipment-grade jump rope—eight times, by Romain’s calculations. “They weren’t trying to hide it,” Romain says. “When the lights would turn off, they would say, ‘Where’s Aidan?’ or ‘Where’s arbitrary Black person?’ ” He also alleged that they said he was going to be the team’s secret weapon at night games. “It was just straight, blatant racism,” he says.

Romain describes himself as nonconfrontational; he comes off as the kind of guy who was raised by parents who prize character over clout. His demeanor is thoughtful, his sentences measured. When he was a child, Melissa says, he was afraid to go out in public wearing a black hoodie. His parents have counseled him to avoid engaging if someone picks a fight, lest it make the situation worse. His height—Romain’s now six feet five—makes him a target, as does the color of his skin.

Romain says that he didn’t tell anyone what Van der Woude was allegedly doing—silence is common among sexual assault victims—including his parents. “I want to be an Olympian,” he says. “I want to play D1 in college. I want to play professionally in Europe. I didn’t think that I would be able to achieve any of my dreams if I wasn’t playing water polo at Harvard-Westlake. And so I thought that I just kind of had to endure it.”

The lawsuit says that during spring break of Romain’s freshman year, he and multiple members of the Harvard-Westlake team went with the Los Angeles Premier Water Polo Club to Spain, where they trained at Club Natació Barcelona. (The city is

PARENTS CAN'T HANDLE THEIR KIDS BEING DISCIPLINED: “THEY’LL CALL YOU A LIAR,” SAYS ONE FORMER HARVARD-WESTLAKE STAFFER.

considered a mecca for the sport.) He was on the team bus when a teammate allegedly started chanting the N-word at another Black player, whom the complaint identifies with the initials J.M. J.M. told the teammate to stop, but another player warned Romain and J.M. to keep quiet, adding that nobody would believe two Black players against the rest of the group. A chaperone then reached out toward J.M., “smacking him across the side of his head with considerable force,” says the filing, and threatening to get him ejected from the team if he didn’t shut up. “That was one of those moments where you almost feel like you’re in a movie,” Romain says. “Everything is in slow motion, like, what’s going on?”

On the trip, Harvard-Westlake athletic director Matt LaCour was acting as another chaperone and Grover was coaching because of their work with Los Angeles Premier. Romain alleges that LaCour asked him to tell them what happened on the bus and to demonstrate how J.M. was hit. “I didn’t want to do it because the whole team was watching me,” he says. “But they insisted.”

Afterward, according to the complaint, LaCour and Grover told him that they didn’t believe him—but the student in question later admitted to using the racial slur.

Melissa was also on the trip. After she heard about the incident, she approached Grover to tell him that she was concerned about Romain’s safety on the team. According to the complaint, Grover told her that he’d decided not to punish the player in question and that the player had said using the slur was “a joke,” and assured her he’d make sure Romain was safe, texting her, “my eyes are going to be on him.”

But Romain says the opposite happened: Because Grover didn’t impose disciplinary action, it was as though his teammates had permission to act out with impunity. “From that moment on, really, the team just hated me,” he says. “I already

didn’t feel safe on the team because of Lucca...and the whole culture that was there. But I went from not feeling safe to feeling actually *unsafe* on that team.”

There’s a saying in water polo: What happens under the water stays under the water. From the surface, players appear to be focused on the ball. Beneath, it’s a dogfight. TikTok is rife with underwater-cam videos showing players kicking, scratching, yanking at their opponents’ swimsuits, and trying to pull one another into the depths. Players boast about injuries and bloody noses on social media. Such high contact is not only normalized, it’s strategic.

“Many swimmers do not warm up to water polo for the very reasons animating this story—because of what happens underneath the water, and because there is so much touching in general,” says a former swim coach at an independent East Coast school. “As long as the official doesn’t see it, all is permissible, and so the skill set includes learning strategies to get away with things.”

Romain’s claims of racism at Harvard-Westlake also aren’t anything new. After George Floyd was killed by policeman Derek Chauvin in 2020, alumni and students from private schools on both coasts,

including Harvard-Westlake, created Instagram accounts where anonymous people of color vented their frustration with how they were treated. On @blackathw, a soccer player alleged his teammates called him an ape. As one of the account’s founders told the school’s student newspaper, “All Black people at Harvard-Westlake know that, at many times, it can feel very unwelcoming.” A parent who posted on the account directed at LA’s all-girls Marlborough School addressed the problem some parents say they face at private schools: “The parent community is racist, snobby, cliquey[,] the warm welcome is reserved for white people of wealth. The expectation is that we are on aid (and even if we are not) we must be humble and grateful, and not expect to have an equal voice or influence.”

Case in point: Melissa says she long suspected that a fellow parent thought Romain and his sister, who went to Harvard-Westlake’s lower school, were on scholarships. They weren’t; she’s worked as a consultant for performing arts centers, while Alex is a high-profile attorney who helped exonerate late senator Ted Stevens of corruption charges. “She’d make comments, and I was like, Melissa, be kind in your mind,” she says.

When said parent eventually visited their home, Melissa says, she was surprised to discover that the Romains lived in Bel Air. “She was like, ‘This is how you lived this whole time? You’ve been to my house! Why didn’t you tell me?’”

A vice principal at one Los Angeles school says that today’s elite institutions function like corporations. There are powerful boards that must be answered to and wealthy donors to prioritize. “Private schools are in the service industry,” another administrator says. “And the service better be first-class.” One teacher who worked at Harvard-Westlake tells me staff are under a lot of pressure to deliver a “VIP” experience for

SINK OR SWIM

Clockwise from top left: Harvard-Westlake’s Studio City campus, home of the prestigious institution’s high school; Romain in 2025, standing on the deck at Club Natació Barcelona, where he played during his first year in Barcelona; Romain at the 2025 Spanish national championships; Romain’s Harvard-Westlake home and away water polo caps; Romain, Melissa, and Romain’s sister during his recruiting visit in 2024.



A LEAGUE OF

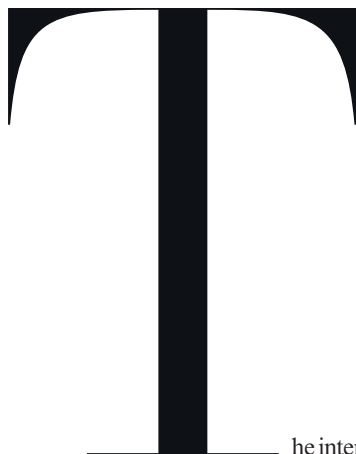


Whether in the arena or at the studio, athletes and artists have a shared reverence for discipline and physicality. NATE FREEMAN explores the symbiotic and sometimes creative relationships between these masters of craft

THEIR OWN

FIELD OF VISION
Carmelo Anthony,
the NBA All-Star and
art collector, visits
Rashid Johnson,
who has a basketball
hoop installed at the
studio just in case.





The interplay of art and sport has been around since, well, the advent of art, and sport. Cylinder seals from the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia, circa 2200 BC, depict, over and over again, men wrestling. Thousands of years later, the sculptures and marble reliefs in ancient Greece and Rome showed the demigods of the discus. Bruegel finished the magisterial *Children's Games* in 1560, and by the 1700s, George Stubbs was painting racehorses at Newmarket.

And yet when a young Matthew Barney opened his first solo show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in SoHo in 1991, the concept felt new again. Barney, a former high school football star who continued to play at Yale, muscled his way up and down the white cube, filming his body as he contorted himself; he bolted meat-claw hooks into the walls while strapped naked into an excruciating harness. It was art as sport, pure athletic display, and Barney was open about the fact that his primary inspiration came not from the conceptualists but from Jim Otto, the Hall of Fame center for the Oakland Raiders.

Fast-forward to two years ago, when Barney released *Drawing Restraint 28*, a film of artist Alex Katz not just as a painter but as an athlete. In the three-channel video, Katz, 98, uses his physical body in a concrete space, his outstretched, powerful arms punching up to certain parts of the canvas, his brush-stuck fingers making a detailed hot orange depiction of a road near his house in Maine. The nonagenarian in a studio gridiron is fighting a physical battle. Painting is a sport to be won.

Katz, a lifelong NBA fan, joins Bill Bradley, the former star of the Princeton basketball team and a two-time NBA champion with the New York Knicks, in a portrait by Joshua Woods. Bradley was performing miracles on the court in central Jersey back in the 1960s, right around when Katz was first making a name for himself in

BILL BRADLEY AND ALEX KATZ

In 1964, Alex Katz was a 37-year-old painter hitting his stride, with new work included in an epochal group show at the Museum of Modern Art. That same year, across the Hudson, Bill Bradley was reigning as the most famous young athlete in America, breaking records on the basketball team at Princeton. Through the decades, with Bradley serving as a US senator from New Jersey and Katz defining a new aesthetic of portraiture, they became friends, and are pictured here at Katz's SoHo studio.

Greenwich Village. They both went on to illustrious career heights afterward: the Senate for Bradley, the Guggenheim for Katz.

Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier spent time with the New York Liberty as part of her commission for the WNBA team's home at Barclays Center, getting to know players and their friends and family, photographing all of them for the project. Frazier worked especially closely with Betnijah Laney-Hamilton, creating a photo-based artwork that features Laney-Hamilton's mother, exploring the origin of her portmanteau first name.

Amar'e Stoudemire's sense of style both on and off the court made him a natural fit to explore the contemporary-art world while playing for the Knicks. One of the first studios he visited was that of Rob Pruitt, known for his Day-Glo depictions of panda bears and glitter-tinged paintings of polar bears, as well as his yearslong mission to paint a portrait of President Barack Obama every day during his two terms.

Rashid Johnson is also a sports mega-fan, still loyal to his hometown teams in Chicago, but he's found some new love for the New York Mets through his collaborative projects with the team owner, mega-collector Steve Cohen. Early in his career, Johnson struck up a friendship with Carmelo Anthony, around the time that Melo started visiting galleries on his days off from playing. The former Knick now occupies a home chock-full of masterworks.

Misty Copeland's been spending a lot of time at The Met, where she will serve on the host committee of this year's Met Gala—but she's also been spending a lot of time in artist studios and keeps certain friends installed in pride of place in her Upper West Side home. She's especially fond of Nathaniel Mary Quinn, whose work mirrors the physical poetry she perfected at the American Ballet Theatre, an attentiveness to the human body in all its forms and permutations.

And speaking of The Met, walk into the Roman sculpture wing and you'll see the marble statue of the Stephanos Athlete, one of the most famous depictions of a person of sports, featured prominently in America's art museum for more than 60 years, a sculpture that was the height of art-collecting chic among the Roman upper classes. It still holds an immense power, the artwork. When artists choose to depict the world of sports, it's for one reason: Game recognizes game. **VF**

(Previous spread)

CARMELO ANTHONY AND RASHID JOHNSON

No artist alive is more embedded in the NBA than Rashid Johnson. In December the Guggenheim honored Johnson at its annual gala—but also honored the league's commissioner, Adam Silver, with several star players in attendance. Carmelo Anthony, a hero to Knicks fans during his years playing at the Garden, also became a major New York collector. Years after connecting with Johnson early in his art-buying journey, Anthony stopped by Johnson's Bushwick studio to check out some new work and shoot hoops. Fashion Editor: Khalilah Beavers (Anthony).



NATHANIEL MARY QUINN AND MISTY COPELAND

There's perhaps no better painter of the body in motion right now than Nathaniel Mary Quinn. So it's natural that the nation's foremost ballet artist, Misty Copeland, is drawn to his works and installed one work on paper in her Upper West Side apartment. Quinn is a fan of Copeland as well, and on a recent visit to his Bedford-Stuyvesant studio, he picked up some brushes as she began a spontaneous dance. Fashion Editor: Karla Welch (Copeland).







AMAR'E STOUDEMIRE AND ROB PRUITT

When Amar'e Stoudemire first started collecting art, he was drawn to painter Rob Pruitt's unapologetically glittery visions. So Stoudemire did what he would do for anyone he admired: He invited Pruitt to watch him at work, courtside at a Knicks game. "After the game we became friends. He invited my family over to the studio. We painted, we talked, we had coffee," the athlete said in 2016. Since that first visit to the studio, Stoudemire has acquired several of Pruitt's paintings of pandas, some of which were gifts from the artist, and returned for a friendly game of chess.







BETNIJAH LANEY-HAMILTON AND LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

When the conceptual photo-based artist met the starting forward for the New York Liberty, they clicked immediately, and LaToya Ruby Frazier soon was interviewing Betnijah Laney-Hamilton's family for a series of works. According to the hoopster, there's plenty of overlap between their respective skill sets. "She's someone who's very passionate about their craft, which is in line with who we are as professional athletes," Laney-Hamilton said. "We're not artists per se, but we exhibit a lot of qualities that people can draw inspiration from." They posed together at Gladstone Gallery in New York's Chelsea.

HAIR PRODUCTS BY ORIBE (ANTHONY, JOHNSON), CURL QUEEN (COPELAND); GROOMING PRODUCTS BY ORVEDA (ANTHONY, JOHNSON); HAIR, JENNY SAUCE (ANTHONY, JOHNSON), NAI'VASHA (COPELAND); MAKEUP, VICTOR HENAO (COPELAND); GROOMING, JENNY SAUCE (ANTHONY, JOHNSON). PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY HALLE CHAPMAN-TAYLER. ARTWORKS: SEASCAPE SNAFU: 2026 © RASHID JOHNSON; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. LILLIES: © ALEX KATZ/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. WHITE SPECTRAL PORTAL & BLACK SPECTRAL PORTAL AND CHESS SET FOR EVE BABITZ AND MARCEL DUCHAMP: COURTESY OF ROB PRUITT AND 303 GALLERY. YOLANDA LANEY, KARIS MELO LANEY, BETNIJAH LANEY-HAMILTON, AND JESSIE JOY LANEY, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, FROM THE SERIES THE LIBERTY PORTRAITS: A MONUMENT TO THE 2024 CHAMPIONS (2024-2025); © LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

The WNBA



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61 interview with ESPN that he didn't "know how to be successful with the Liberty.... We've pumped tons of marketing dollars, we've done everything we can to make the team successful, and people don't come." By the time the Tsais were shopping for teams, Dolan had put the Liberty up for sale.

All told, this multipart investment reportedly cost the Tsais somewhere between \$3 billion and \$4 billion. (Per *Forbes*, the couple's combined net worth as of 2025 was \$11.4 billion.) Though she was a basketball fanatic, Wu Tsai knew less about the world of professional women's basketball at the start. But she quickly educated herself, in part by simply elevating the team's treatment to match that of the Nets. It was about "treating them like we invest in them; like we invest in the men's team," she says. "These women were underestimated, but they were undeniably world-class.... We gave these women resources that match their talent."

She earned the respect of the players by moving the team to Barclays, like the Nets, then getting personally involved in recruiting, convincing then two-time WNBA champion Stewart to join the team. The Tsais also personally matched some of the standard practices that male players enjoy in the NBA, including chartered flights for away games and a new \$80 million practice facility in Greenpoint that will open next year. Wu Tsai also founded the Wu Tsai Human Performance Alliance, a scientifically minded organization that aims, in part, to rectify a miserable statistic: Only 6 percent of sports science studies focus exclusively on female athletes. "Anything that has to do with player health and wellness was something that we wanted to invest in," she says.

Her other transformative influence was rethinking how Liberty games were presented. "Culturally, we just leaned into the borough of Brooklyn," she says of the strategy—which is to say, she and her team embraced its cool factor. Thanks to the initiative led by Clarke, Liberty games have

become high-energy star-studded bangers, ring-led by the wildly popular mascot Ellie the Elephant. She's a dancing high-femme diva who oozes charisma, carries a Telfar, and does Fenty Beauty unboxing videos, a fascinating case study in the different ways the Liberty holds cultural influence. "And elephants are matriarchal," says Clarke, who originated the concept for the mascot. "It's the women who lead."

Liberty home games are seismic and outrageously fun, embracing an exploding, diverse audience demographic while also proudly catering to a vocal base of queer fans cheering for the many out queer players in the W. It's a far cry from the early 2000s, when activist group Lesbians for Liberty staged a "kiss-in" at a Liberty game to protest what they saw as management's homophobic erasure of queer supporters, and when Wicks was the first, and for a while only, out queer player in the WNBA. "When I played at Madison Square Garden, that was a different crowd, a different energy," Wicks recalls. "It was totally different. Now we have this Brooklyn convergence of queer energy. That is the cultural shift that is different, that we've all been waiting for." Wicks, who goes to

added thrill to watch powerful athletes at the top of their game who also happen to have romantic subplots brimming beneath the surface.

For the Liberty, the emphasis on culture runs deep, led first and foremost by Wu Tsai. She personally commissioned the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier to take stunning portraits of the players and speaks proudly about the team's multiyear fashion partnership with Off-White; she is also commissioning artists Sarah Sze and Kam-bui Olujimi to adorn the Barclays entrance and adjoining plaza with museum-quality works. She served as an executive producer on the 2023 documentary *Unfinished Business*, which focused on the history of the Liberty, and is delving further into film this year, producing auteur Werner Herzog's upcoming drama *Bucking Fastard*, starring Rooney and Kate Mara. And yes, she plans to bring Herzog courtside to a Liberty game; Wu Tsai's guest at any given game is loosely strategic, usually someone she admires (like Tracee Ellis Ross or Shonda Rhimes, she tells me) or wants to work with, like Rae, with whom she was collaborating on a WNBA scripted series. "She's created a luxury experience

It was about "treating [the players] like we invest in them; like we invest in the men's team.... These women were underestimated, but they were undeniably world-class.... We gave these women resources that match their talent."

—CLARA WU TSAI

games whenever she can, says she had "a soul-lifting experience" the first time she went to Barclays.

Now fans can not only see their favorite players live freely but also follow their romantic lives. Power couples ball against each other on the court or support each other from the sidelines. Others have played on the same team, as with the Phoenix Mercury's Alyssa Thomas and DeWanna Bonner, or with Natasha Cloud and Isabelle Harrison, who were Liberty players together. It's a heady swirl of workplace drama, an

at the WNBA," Rae tells me. "She's made it a destination."

So what will it take to reach Wu Tsai's billion-dollar dream and thus widen the financial scope of the WNBA as a whole? The Liberty has recently been valued at \$450 million. The numbers have been crunched; at least internally, it's been deemed possible as long as the fan base continues to radically grow. In order to do that, at this stage, the team has to keep winning. The Liberty sought a repeat victory

in 2025 but was besieged by injuries and ultimately lost in the playoffs to the Mercury; Jones, the 2024 WNBA Finals MVP, injured her ankle and missed numerous games, while guard/forward Betnijah Laney-Hamilton suffered a knee injury. “I’ve never experienced that many injuries on a team before,” Jones reflects in a Zoom interview from the Bahamas, her home country, a few months after a successful ankle surgery. “When we’re healthy, we’re a different beast.”

Wu Tsai is eager to see the Liberty win it all and is proud that this era of the team will be “known for investment that changed the trajectory of, or set the standards for, what

June 2025, *Forbes* valued 12 of the existing franchises, on average, at \$272 million. (This excluded the Golden State Valkyries, then a newly launched expansion team that is expected to top lists in 2026.) Per that metric, Wu Tsai and her executive team have blown past expectations, building a franchise worth hundreds of millions in a relatively short amount of time. Her deep investment has put that 10-figure dream within range of her golden lasso. The saying goes that the first million is hard, but the second million is inevitable. But what about the first billion?

It wasn’t until 2013 that two NBA franchises, the Knicks and the Los Angeles

Meanwhile, more seasoned players like Ionescu still have yet to reach their prime, while veterans like Stewart and Wilson remain dominant, in total control of their otherworldly talent.

But it’s not just pure athleticism that is catapulting the league to new heights. It’s the personalities, building brands that people want to follow on and off the court, like Courtney Williams and Natissha Hiedeman, former teammates on the Lynx, nicknamed the Stud Budz. The duo developed a huge following across social media and have been profiled in *Vogue* thanks to their Twitch livestreams where they show behind-the-scenes glimpses of life in the W. Or take Clark, Bueckers, and the Atlanta Dream’s Angel Reese, who have amassed a collective 11.8 million followers on Instagram, underscoring social media’s role in the star-making machine of the WNBA. On the sartorial front, according to StockX, Ionescu and Wilson were among the top 10 WNBA or NBA athletes for sneaker sales in 2025. Reese strutted down the runway at last year’s Victoria’s Secret fashion show. Wilson also served on the host committee for the 2026 Met Gala, an opportunity usually reserved for A-list movie stars, singers, and fashion icons. The minting of so many fresh supernovas makes it clear that while the NBA built an infrastructure for American basketball, the W remade it in its own image, marketing a new set of athletic icons to a wider audience, stadiums full of people bearing shirts with the 2023-born slogan: “Everyone watches women’s sports.” And it’s true. Aside from the W’s rise, the National Women’s Soccer League saw a massive jump in viewership in 2025, while female athletes like Alysia Liu and the US women’s ice hockey team won gold and completely swept the narrative of the 2026 Winter Olympics. “We’re seeing growth in all of women’s sports,” Wu Tsai says. “The revenues are catching up with the value we’re seeing in the marketplace, in terms of audience engagement and TV ratings. Monetization is on us, now.”

All of this coalesces into a higher and higher valuation for the WNBA, a frisson of power and influence and athleticism. Wu Tsai’s race to build the first billion-dollar franchise hurtles ahead. For a businesswoman, who thinks in terms of marketplaces and hard numbers that operate as fact, there still remains a poetic purpose to these valuations: “It would really prove that women’s sports has arrived.” For many, it’s been there all along. **W**

“We’re seeing growth in all of women’s sports. The revenues are catching up in terms of audience engagement and TV ratings. Monetization is on us, now.”

—CLARA WU TSAI

other companies and teams think of what’s possible for the WNBA.” But she’s rooting for the forthcoming expansion teams too (the league’s newest teams are in Toronto and Portland, and franchises have been approved in Cleveland, Detroit, and Philadelphia), because in her assessment, more thriving WNBA teams will serve as the rising tide that will lift all boats—but especially her seafoam-colored boat. “If they’re successful, they will grow the fan base, which means they will grow viewership, and grow media revenues,” she says. “A successful expansion is really, really important.”

Another way of breaking down the importance of the expansion teams and thus the magnitude of Wu Tsai’s ultimate billion-dollar goal is to look at the NBA, which offers a sense of scale for how much money a league can generate. In 1949, the men’s league formally became known as the National Basketball Association, and it’s nearly three times as old as the women’s league; in its current incarnation, the NBA also has twice as many teams as the WNBA. Per CNBC, its 30 teams have an average value of \$5.52 billion.

The W, by comparison, now comprises 15 teams (expanding to 18 by 2030); in

Lakers, became the first basketball teams to be worth more than \$1 billion. It took the NBA multiple decades to hit the goal that Wu Tsai aims to hit in one. This era will, she hopes, be remembered as “a transformational time.” Based on all the evident markers, the Liberty as a franchise, and the WNBA as a whole, will continue to keep growing. “This,” Wu Tsai says, speaking of sustained growth, is what the Liberty needs to become a “multibillion-dollar business.”

Some cosmic events in the past few years have pushed the W forward and revealed a new set of possibilities: There was the sudden explosive success of rookie Caitlin Clark, the Iowa Hawkeyes star who became the highest scorer in NCAA Division I history (woman or man) in 2024. Her record-breaking talent made her an instant sports celebrity, drawing new viewers to women’s basketball. She went on to sign with the Fever and is singularly credited with boosting WNBA viewership that same year. (Though some of that viewership was loudly conservative and openly racist, valorizing the white player in a league that employs a higher percentage of primarily Black players.)

Kylian Mbappé



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64 Drury agrees: “It’s this extraordinary assurance, that poise he has, as if he just knows he belongs there.”

On the drive from Charles de Gaulle Airport into Paris, just off the highway, there’s an imposing mural of Mbappé. It’s a sign that you’re passing through Bondy, the Paris banlieue in the Seine-Saint-Denis department in which he was raised. Many French stars have come from this particular region of France, which is known as the mainland’s poorest.

Mbappé enjoyed a tranquil childhood thanks to a large and supportive family that immersed him in sport. His mother, Fayza, herself raised in Bondy by Algerian immigrant parents, was a top-level handball player. His father, Wilfrid, an immigrant from Cameroon, was a coach at the local football club AS Bondy. They lived in a modest apartment across the street from the stadium, where Mbappé, barely out of diapers, would follow his father around with a ball.

It was a childhood with one singular aim. “Wherever he was, he had to play,” says Laurens. “It was almost visceral. It was not just an obsession, it was a need.” He idolized Zinedine Zidane, the French maestro who led the team to glory in the 1998 World Cup the year Mbappé was born. When he was a child, the family lore goes, he asked a barber for Zidane’s haircut—nude on top and shorn close on the sides—when he was too young to understand that Zizou wasn’t balding by choice. “I was very young!” he protests when I bring this up. “It’s funny but it also shows the innocence of a child, to not understand that a man as well-known, as strong, could lose his hair.”

Mbappé was playing for Bondy at six years old. By the time he turned 12, word had spread among scouts throughout Europe about this magical little boy from the Paris suburbs. He soon fielded trial offers from major clubs, including Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain. Zidane flew his family

out to Spain’s capital, where he was working for Real Madrid, in an attempt to lure him there. His parents were careful in their management of his fledgling career, and they rejected offers from top clubs to allow for a more measured start closer to home.

“I think it was a normal childhood,” he says, describing his parents as “loving and attentive.” He left home young, moving to Monaco at the age of 14. “I didn’t really live much with my parents in my life,” he says. “That’s different, but it’s something I wanted.”

Mbappé never questioned what his future would hold. When he was six, he told anyone who would listen that he would play for PSG and Real Madrid, win a Ballon d’Or—awarded to the world’s best player—and take the World Cup with France. By the age of 19, he had achieved two of those goals.

After powering Monaco to its first Ligue 1 title in 17 years, he signed with PSG in a 180-million-euro deal that made him the most expensive teenager in history. In Paris, Mbappé was championed by French president Emmanuel Macron and beloved by the city, the hometown hero who restored glory to France and delivered the league title to the capital as a matter of routine. But after five years, he decided he was ready to move on. PSG fought to keep him, and the deal became a matter of national interest: Macron and one of his predecessors, Nicolas Sarkozy, made personal appeals for Mbappé to stay in Paris, and he did—for two more years.

But in 2024, he did sign with Real Madrid after a bitterly acrimonious exit from PSG. He sued the club for unpaid earnings, and a judge eventually ordered PSG to pay its ex-star 60 million euros. Since landing in Spain, he’s been the league’s top scorer two seasons in a row, but the team has failed to win any of the biggest trophies, and he’s fielded criticism from Spain’s ferocious newspapers that he’s too individualistic as a player. In his first season for the club, after missing two penalties in a row, he said his career was at “rock bottom.” And though he continues to find the back of the net with astounding ease, two of his childhood goals—the Champions League and the Ballon d’Or—remain stubbornly out of reach.

By now, no one doubts Mbappé’s ability to score. As he prepares for his third World Cup, he’s on track to break the all-time goals record at this famous tournament. The question is whether he can lead a team to glory as both star striker and young captain.

Three years after the World Cup of 2018, Mbappé missed a decisive penalty in the European Championship. France was eliminated. The racial abuse he endured afterward was so severe that he considered quitting the national team. It’s a dynamic that players of mixed identity so often face in France: They’re heroes when they win, totems of Gallic pride. When they lose, they are maligned as Africans with no business representing the country.

It was something the French team had to contend with even as it romped to victory in 1998. Jean-Marie Le Pen, then the leader of France’s far right, complained that the team included players of African heritage. Zidane, raised in a rough housing project in Marseille by Algerian-born parents, was a frequent target of this kind of sentiment, even as the win in 1998 promised the dawn of a new multicultural France. There is by now an extraordinary history of football stars born to immigrants who came to France from its former colonies. The team that will head to North America for the World Cup boasts at least a dozen players who are second-generation Frenchmen.

As a representative of France, Mbappé hasn’t shied away from speaking out about the political issues at the forefront of the game. When I ask about the attacks players sometimes face from the French public over their heritage, Mbappé is diplomatic: “Even before diving into that debate, I think it’s simply cultural,” he says. “We’re French! A French person loves to complain. A French person loves being unhappy. We’re just French. So French people judging French people—that’s what you get. A French person is happiest when they’re not happy, I believe. Because it’s true—we criticize everything. And I say *we* because I’m like that too!”

“But I think the generations coming up are trying to evolve this thinking in a way that is genuinely beginning to change,” he goes on. “And our goal—as well-known people, as people who most represent France around the world—is to try to give the best possible image of our country. Because we’re talking about a somewhat more negative, darker aspect, but I think we are a fantastic country that inspires the world and conveys enormous values and inspires through its culture. But it’s true that the French have tried to tear down all their players!”

Such candor is a quality that distinguishes French athletes from their American counterparts. For the French, the tricolor represents certain values that players on the national team feel compelled to

publicly affirm. On the eve of the Euros in 2024, when the far right threatened to take power in French elections, the team spoke out. Marcus Thuram was the most explicit, urging people to “fight daily” against the rise of the right-wing National Rally party. Mbappé called the success of the party “catastrophic” and warned, “The extremes are knocking at the doors of power.”

“It was something that shocked us,” Mbappé says of the election. “We are citizens, and we couldn’t just sit there and tell ourselves everything is going to be fine and go play. We truly try to fight this idea that a footballer should shut up and play.”

It was perhaps a sign of progress that in response, Jordan Bardella, the young leader of the National Rally, did not attack the team over the identity of its players like Le Pen but instead cast them as out of touch with average people. “When you have the luck to have a huge salary, be a multimillionaire, the chance to travel in a private jet,” he said, “I am a little annoyed to see these sports figures giving lessons to people who... struggle to make ends meet.”

“You can be a player, you can be an international star, but above all that, you are a citizen,” Mbappé tells me. “We are not disconnected from the world. We are not disconnected from what happens in our country. People sometimes think that because you have money, because you’re famous, that kind of problem doesn’t affect you. But it affects me, because I know what it means, and what kind of consequences it can have for my country when those kinds of people take control. So we are citizens. We have the right to give our opinion like anyone else.”

As an ambassador not just for France but for a coterie of brands that have inked lucrative deals with the young star, Mbappé is practiced. When I ask where he likes to spend his vacations, he first says, as if by reflex, “wherever there’s a Fairmont.” (The hotel chain is one of Mbappé’s many “partners.” He signed his first endorsement deal, with Nike, when he was eight years old.) There are 131 million people following his Instagram account, which offers a curated peek into his closely guarded personal life amidst an endless stream of sponsorships. There’s an ad for a \$2,200 espresso machine, ads for Nike boots, ads for noise-canceling headphones, ads for Hublot, ads for Oakley sunglasses, ads for the EA Sports games, ads for Dior. Football is a business, of course, and Mbappé is among the game’s most marketable

faces. Brand Mbappé is estimated to pull in \$30 million per year—on top of his salary from Madrid, pegged at around \$16 million annually, after a \$163 million signing bonus.

This man has scarcely known what it’s like to live outside of the public glare. “He knew from day one—even when he was really, really young—that if you become the best, that’s the life that you will have,” says Laurens. “Would he like to go and buy his baguettes in the boulangerie on a Sunday morning? Sure. But that’s never going to happen ever again. He would literally cause chaos. He can’t go to watch a movie at the cinema, because there would be rioting.”

The paparazzi have lately been tailing him around Paris in his Mini Cooper and on dates with his rumored girlfriend, Spanish actor Ester Expósito. The Spanish tabloids are relentless, which might explain Mbappé’s chosen domicile: an eight-bedroom fortress, sold to him by former Real Madrid player Gareth Bale, in Madrid’s exclusive and private La Finca neighbor-

see me again except on TV. So I try to have a little more empathy now, even if sometimes people push the limits.”

He cuts a more inconspicuous figure in the United States. Photos uploaded to his Instagram after our interview showed him zipping around Manhattan on an electric scooter, not a riot in sight. That may change this summer, when Mbappé returns for the World Cup with the chance to become a household name on these shores. There is a hum of anxiety around this tournament given the political climate in the United States, which is hosting alongside Canada and Mexico. But Mbappé isn’t worried—after all, he’s never played a World Cup in a host country burdened by ethics. (The last two editions were in Qatar and Russia.) “I don’t have the knowledge of what it takes to organize a World Cup,” he replies when I ask if there are concerns in France’s camp about coming to America. “If you asked me to organize a World Cup, it probably wouldn’t go well,” he says with

“You can be a player, you can be an international star, but above all that, you are a citizen. We are not disconnected from the world. We are not disconnected from what happens in our country.”

hood. The home boasts a seven-car garage, but when Mbappé bought the place, he didn’t know how to drive. He says he still gets nervous parking under the watchful glare of the paparazzi lenses.

“I’ll try to be positive,” Mbappé says when I ask about life as an international celebrity. “It’s cool. Of course, it’s hard, because you have this feeling of no longer belonging to yourself—of belonging to everyone. But at the same time, it’s a life we chose. Maybe not to this degree, but we chose it nonetheless. We signed up for this. And it’s difficult to focus on the negative when millions and millions and millions of people express their gratitude, their recognition, and their love. So I find it a little ungrateful to complain.

“I haven’t always handled this situation extremely well,” he adds, “because I became famous very young. And so I didn’t have the wisdom, the open-mindedness, or the empathy to sometimes put myself in people’s shoes and understand that sometimes they’ll only ever see me once—they’ll never

a laugh, adding: “If FIFA decides it should be held in the United States, they consider that everything is manageable and that it’s possible for us to come here.”

France is heading into the tournament strong. In friendlies, it bested Brazil thanks in part to a goal scored by Mbappé, who at one point outpaced Brazil’s back line to gather a forward pass before chipping the ball over the keeper into the back of the net. Days later, on a balmy afternoon at the Washington Commanders’ stadium, I watched as manager Didier Deschamps fielded a B team that handily dispatched Colombia. The stadium was packed with Colombian fans, who far outnumbered the French, and the crowd went wild when the South Americans got a goal back to make it 3-1. But the biggest cheer of the afternoon by far came in the 78th minute, when Mbappé, captain of France and envoy to the world, was subbed on to play the closing minutes. Whenever the ball reached his feet, the crowd held its breath, utterly transfixed. What would he do next? **VF**

World Cup



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 71 Axel Tuanzebe was born in Bunia, a city near the border with Uganda in that troubled east, but he was raised in Rochdale, England. He broke into professional football with Manchester United, and he still plays in the Premier League. But at the international level, he represents the DRC. He is about to have his moment.

THE WORLD IS WELCOME IN AMERICA

As these nations scrap to get to the World Cup this summer, they don't exactly know what they're in for. The competition's main host, the United States, is lashing out at the world, hunting conflict across three continents. Four countries that have qualified are facing full or partial travel bans from the USA, and fans from those nations will struggle to obtain visas to attend. There's a general vibe of hostility toward...everybody. "Follow your heart," sure, though if you choose to represent a European country, it might be a smoother ride through American customs.

But maybe this famous tournament can weather any storm. Benito Mussolini once played host, and so did that Argentinian military junta in 1978. Qatar swept away its pre-kickoff controversy to serve up one of the best tournaments ever in 2022. The World Cup was suspended due to World War II, but nothing else has derailed the staging of this event since 1930.

Maybe it's something about this game itself. Ferhat Abbas, the first postcolonial Algerian president, got his political training running a football team when his nation was under French control. "They rule us with guns and machines," he once said, "but on the field of play, where it is 11 men against 11 men, we can show them who is truly superior." The famed English striker and broadcaster Gary Lineker, who scored a life-changing hat trick at a World Cup in Mexico 40 years ago, put it to me more

gently: "We all get to lose our minds for a few weeks, forget about all the nonsense that's going on in the world, and focus on something truly important: a game where they kick a ball around for 90 minutes." They're both right.

CONGO VS. JAMAICA

The stadium is a third full at kickoff. It's Tuesday afternoon, three o'clock, and Guadalajara is a city that works. People have jobs. The resulting atmosphere suspends the two remaining contestants in a kind of footballing purgatory: Jamaica and the DRC are stuck in this nether space between a glorious summer and nothing at all. "Titanium" is blasting from the rafters again, and one thing is consistent from the first round to the final of this mini-tournament: The tapatíos have cast Jamaica as the villains.

In the fourth minute, Meschack Elia whips a ball across the box to Bakambu, eight yards from goal. He taps it in and trots toward the camera, shaking his finger. Casual. What we do. As though 52 years of waiting is already over, or as every Congolese says outside the stadium before the match: "It is ordained by God."

The flag goes up. Offside. The score remains 0-0. Boos—and the first of many "¡Culero!" chants directed at the Argentinian referee—rain down from the stands. On the sideline, DRC's French head coach Sébastien Desabre pulls at his wispy white hair. In the press box at halftime, Congolese journos exhort the team in French and Lingala, a Bantu language native to their homeland. All pretense of impartiality is gone.

The second half is tense, tight. In the 85th minute, another Congolese goal. Another flag. Offside. Desabre looks close to tears. Tens of thousands are now chanting, "Olé, olé, olé, olé—Congo, Congo," a call-and-response borrowed from a Belgian pop song adapted for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. No one in the stadium seems aware of the irony. And then the chant for New Caledonia, now directed at the Congolese: "¡Sí, se puede! ¡Sí, se puede!"

The 90 minutes are up. Extra time. The Congolese section has fallen almost entirely silent. The flags are not waving. The songs are not sung. In the 98th minute, Jamaica's Leon Bailey goes down. Boos, immediately. He gets up. More boos. Jamaica is content to take this to penalties. The crowd knows it and does not like it.

The 100th minute. A corner kick. The Congolese fans are standing because maybe standing can do something that sitting cannot. On set piece plays like this one, the DRC players speak only Lingala. No one else on the field can, and it's a distinct advantage. All of a sudden, one way or another, the ball is in the back of the net. Tuanzebe—born in Bunia, raised in Rochdale—is sprinting toward the corner flag, fists clenched at his waist, triumphant. Behind him, Bakambu's fists are raised as well, but he does not run. He walks. Slowly. Patiently. Toward Tuanzebe and the rest of the team that mobs him. Bakambu reaches him, lifts the younger man's chin, and hugs him. Tuanzebe buries his head in Bakambu's neck and pats his back repeatedly. It's the latter's last dance and the former's first goal for his country, the goal that might just change everything.

The Congolese fans are dancing in their corner of the stadium now. Desabre looks like he *really* might cry. At the final whistle, he falls to his knees and presses his forehead to the ground. His assistant coaches lift him, swarm him, and someone trips. The growing mob crashes toward the ground again. Those still standing take turns lifting each other in the air. Bakambu kneels alone near the center circle. Both hands cover his face.

Afterward, between the red walls of the press room beneath the stands, Tuanzebe reflects on "52 years. Can you even think about it? I can't imagine." Asked if he wants to go to Kinshasa to celebrate with the people: "Directly. Now." Bakambu, when it's his turn, is quieter: "On est sur la fin, mais c'est une belle fin." *We're nearing the end, but it's a beautiful end.*

Back at the JW Marriott, Nyenemo Sanguma is in the lobby. He has a flight to Chicago in the morning. He has to get his sons back to school. He regrets that he will not be in Kinshasa when the team lands. Like so many in the lobby, he speaks not of joy but relief. "This was like a painkiller for the Congolese, and it's going to help a lot," he says quietly. "I just can't wait for the Congolese, the people in Kinshasa, to welcome them."

In 1974, when the team came home from their first and only World Cup, no one met them at the airport. This time, they say the president has sent a plane. Sanguma shows me videos on his phone from the capital, where it's early morning and it's raining. The people are outside celebrating anyway, he says, in Kinshasa and "in Barumbu. In Bandalungwa. Everywhere. Everywhere." **VF**

Wellington



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 91 adjacent"

friends to talk about my agenda. Dropping Farrington's name was like telling a basketball fanatic I was interviewing LeBron James. He is the horse GOAT.

He and Greya's origin story is repeated to me like a Greek myth: Whereas other equestrians at his level wrote multimillion-dollar checks for their animals, Farrington bought Greya when she was young and unproven, before others perhaps realized the mare's potential to become one of the best jumping horses in the world.

When we meet, Farrington's on a tight schedule. He can give me and our photographer an hour, from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. At 10, he's giving a tour to Rolex VIPs. (Like Vogel and Springsteen, he is also associated with the watch brand.) Then he needs to prepare for the finals.

We walk around his vast, bucolic grounds deciding where to shoot. There's a horse walker, a merry-go-round-like machine to which horses are attached that leads them in a slow circle to warm them up. Standing by the practice ring is a forest green Rolex platform clock that casts a sundial-esque shadow on a basket weave brick path. Then there's the towering cream and brown wraparound barn. The warm-wooded stalls are so clean, spacious, and meticulously arranged with soft wood shavings that if Mary and Joseph stumbled upon them, they'd probably post up there even if there *was* room at the inn. A brown horse named Toulayna with a flower-shaped white spot on her head playfully sticks her muzzle out. I reach out to pet her—only to quickly retract. Is this one of those seven-figure horses? And if so...*is it okay to pet a seven-figure horse?*

Even this early, it's sweltering. Our makeup artist asks Farrington if he would like some powder as he wipes sweat off his brow. He shakes his head no, describing himself as more "American cowboy."

Farrington tells me how he got into riding: As a young boy in the Chicago area, he used to watch the carriages in the Lincoln

Park area. The stable that housed them offered basic riding lessons. Farrington asked his parents if he could sign up.

A trainer at the small stable quickly recognized Farrington's promise. He took him to a better-equipped stable out in the suburbs. The trainers there recognized the same thing. Soon he was allowed to borrow horses for competitions. "I got a lot of industry support, and my parents supported me as much as they could," Farrington says. "Most of my early horses were off the racetrack that weren't good enough to race. The very first horse my parents got, my mom traded two used laptops for. And that was kind of how I began that journey."

After the hour is up, I drive my Jeep off Farrington's gated grounds to the next stop: Rushy Marsh Farm, to meet Karen Polle, a sponsored Hermès partner rider and Yale and Stanford graduate. Palm Beach Point is both idyllic and unknowable—all I can see is the green of trees and the black of the road. All the homes and stables are tucked out of sight. Real estate listings show me what I can't see: \$27 million equestrian estates with single-family homes, pools, stables, gazebos, stick-and-ball fields (a polo term), and in one case, a dedicated dog room.

I whip around a corner only to hit the brakes. A giant shiny silver horse transport—essentially a tractor trailer with a stable in the back—is making a sweeping turn. I spy a yellow sign ahead: "Horses Have the Right of Way."

That night, 10,000 people gather in the stands at Wellington International for the Grand Prix. There are a variety of concession stands selling french fries and chips and guacamole, as well as bulgogi. Children hop on an actual merry-go-round. But the main attraction—other than the competition itself—is a pop-up Hermès Sellier store, housed in a white clapboard structure in front of a palm tree.

Inside, it's elbow-to-elbow. The top-selling items, a shop assistant tells me, are the saddle pads (which retail around \$700) and fly caps (\$315). After several minutes of browsing, I step back outside to make room for the serious shoppers.

I sit inside a VIP tent as the competition begins. There's idle chatter among the guests as they dine on oysters and lobster tails. No one seems to be doing that well. One jump in particular, a solid green wall, seems to be giving everyone trouble. It sends one rider-and-horse pair tumbling to the ground—an almost violent act that breaks the leisurely trance in the tent as several people scream. When Farrington

enters the ring on Greya, the whole stadium goes silent. They leap as one over everything in their path by what appears to be several inches. As they approach the wall, the woman behind me audibly winces in fear. Farrington and Greya clear that too, in one swift motion.

The pair decisively wins the Grand Prix that night. (Vogel comes in third.)

A Wellington reality television show never got off the ground, but the town might soon get the Hollywood treatment. In March the trade papers reported that Harry and Meghan, along with the creators of *The O.C.* and *Gossip Girl*, will be executive producers on a new drama series about polo players in Wellington.

And thanks to South Florida's population boom, real estate developers are descending on Wellington's pastures. Stephen Ross's Related Companies, which developed New York's Hudson Yards, has snapped up 71 acres. And Mark Bellissimo, the founder of Wellington Lifestyle Partners, is building a high-end commercial center that includes shops, restaurants, and a boutique hotel next to the festival's competition arenas. "They're bringing in landscape architecture from the Hamptons and buzzy architects, including one who did Pharrell Williams's Goodtime hotel in Miami. We have very efficient drive-in, get-what-you-need in Wellington—from Publix or the pharmacy around Wellington. But to go to the really nice places, boutiques and really nice restaurants that don't feel like you're in the middle of a shopping center, you have to drive to Palm Beach," says Bellissimo's daughter Paige, who is president at Wellington Lifestyle Partners. I make a joke about the Hampton Inn & Suites. "The most expensive Hampton Inn and Fairfield Inn in all the land," Paige replies. During the high season, she's seen the cost go up to \$800 per night.

Horse riding as a whole may be on the precipice of explosive popularity. Billionaire Frank McCourt—who once owned the Los Angeles Dodgers—recently founded the Premier Jumping League, a new equestrian series with a \$300 million prize pool that's set to begin in 2027 with competitions across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. McCourt partnered with the production company behind Netflix's *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* to film riders throughout the season. The wild, hushed world of Wellington may not be hidden behind those gates for long. **VE**

Enhanced Games



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99 Enforcement Administration officers in southern Maryland, she grew up acutely aware of both the risks of substances and the quiet prevalence of doping in elite sports.

"I always thought: If it was done properly, why be against it?" she says. "If it could be regulated—if it could be legal and done in a healthy way—why wouldn't we take advantage of science?" What bothered her, she insists, was never the drugs themselves but the dishonesty surrounding them. "It's the lying. The sneaking around. Transparency is huge to me."

She is also the only athlete I spoke with who described tangible side effects: a persistent heat, tightness in her chest, a restless agitation that translated into an almost compulsive drive to train. She names the longer-term risks without flinching—infertility, a deepening voice, physical changes she catalogs in the same matter-of-fact tone she uses for everything else.

For others, the decision came after something more abrupt. Jasmine Abrams, a 32-year-old Olympic sprinter who still holds Guyana's national record in the 100 meters, had already stepped away from track and field. She was four months into retirement when she was involved in a serious car crash. "It just made me rethink everything," she says. Three days later, she joined the Enhanced Games.

For the first time in her career, Abrams says, she can train without the constant pressure to survive financially. "I can solely be an athlete," she says—and in doing so finally find out what she's actually capable of.

Thirty-five-year-old Australian swimmer James Magnussen isn't so fazed by the whole thing. "I've put a lot worse in my body," he says. Last year, while working with Enhanced, he accidentally gained so much muscle (nearly 30 pounds) that he was actually sinking in the pool. This year he's going for a more subtle approach. "It's quite simple, to be honest," he says. "I'm really only using three different things," but he couldn't go into specifics.

Meanwhile, Hunter Armstrong, 25, is a different kind of test subject for the Enhanced Games. He is competing without drugs, hoping to make money and, in doing so, change the rules from the inside—proving that the Enhanced Games can coexist with traditional competition rather than replace it.

"I still love competing in World Aquatics events," he says. "It's always an honor to wear the flag. If I doped, I'd lose the opportunity to be on that podium, to hear my national anthem. Those aren't things I want to give up." The IOC and WADA are currently threatening that even if he competes without taking any drugs or supplements, Armstrong may never be allowed back into the world of traditional pro swimming. "We invite all our clean sport partners, including athletes, to join us in condemning this event regardless of its wealthy and influential supporters," says the WADA website. Armstrong is seeing if they're playing chicken.

"Anyone doing a peptide or joining the Enhanced Games is doing an *n*-of-one experiment," says Andrew Hessel, a synthetic biologist who has spent his career at the intersection of technology and human biology. "They are the guinea pig. I hugely support people's right to self-experiment—that's all our lives are. But many people don't appreciate the risks. And if they're doing this for longevity or health, I find the cognitive dissonance just crazy." The games holds that exact intellectual tension at its core. Its two prongs—spectacle and the sale of supplements and medicine—don't always parse. That's because not every biohacking measure is a longevity measure, and not every form of physical manipulation improves or extends life. Yet this is precisely the idea that the Enhanced Games is peddling—the fantasy that what Proud or Collins takes to break a world record, at a different dose, might make a man in his 70s more mobile, energized, and maybe even hotter.

A decade ago, looksmaxxing lived in the dark corners of incel message boards, where men swapped tips on biohacking their way to female attention. Now it's gone mainstream: Twenty-year-old Clavicular went viral for his hours-long livestreams where he explains how to "bone smash" (picture your cheekbones plus a hammer) for a chiseled jaw, shoot up testosterone to gain muscle, and snort meth to stay lean. He took it so far that he apparently overdosed

and is now trying to figure out how to keep livestreaming without the aid of drugs. He'll "either have to practice mogging sober," he said, "or just find a new form of content."

And then there's Elliot Roth, a member of the self-identified biohacking community Grinder (note: not Grindr) in San Francisco—the DIY body-modification subculture known for things like implanting chips beneath the skin that function like contactless credit cards—who calls me from a ferry crossing the Bay wearing thick white sunglasses and a gamer headset to talk about experimental gene therapies "that allow athletes to maintain muscle mass, accelerate healing, increase bone density, enhance metabolic function." He tells me to look up something called follistatin ("F-O-L-L-I-statin"), a therapy that supposedly blocks myostatin, the protein that limits muscle growth. "You'll see massive dogs, massive cows," he says. "The true Enhanced Games go beyond an injectable—into actually modifying your biology. There are people doing experimental gene therapy on themselves in Abu Dhabi."

I stop him, and clarify: "The same people? The athletes?"

"Probably. Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

He goes on to describe not the athletes but people he knows personally who are "dosing themselves with experimental gene therapies," including one that "allowed [a former colleague] to gain 3 kilos in his ass because that's the site he injected." When we get back to the athletes, he says, "You have your nutrition, your standard supplements, then the substances the IOC prohibits. And then there's the stuff that's new and emerging—that even the Olympic Committee doesn't know about and has no means of testing for. That's what we're really talking about." He leans in. "There are two things the very wealthy have been trying to escape. One is taxes—they've already done that. The next is death. Many of the technologies being used in the Enhanced Games are advents of extremely wealthy people spending enormous sums in strange clinics on therapies for themselves. The Enhanced Games is just the demonstration—the implementation—of what they've already done to their own bodies."

Roth was right about a lot of things but not the science. When I ask Pieves, he shakes his head and reads me the list of approved substances in the official protocol. (A spokesperson from the games says, "There is no experimental gene therapy going on at the Enhanced Games.")

What Roth was wrong about—that athletes are undergoing even newer and more extreme experimental treatments like gene therapies—encapsulated the seductive power of the biohacking world and its natural overlap with that of tech start-ups. Both spaces are fueled by the desire for “this magic thing that few people have access to,” says Russian venture capitalist Masha Bucher, who notes that biohackers and entrepreneurs are “curious, big-time risk takers, [and] trying to find the holy grail.” These are people, she says, who often believe in miracles, who want to go against the grain, and who have experienced the true power of risk.

For the entrepreneurs who made it big and have access to the funds to, as Roth says, solve everything except for the original human contract that we’re all going to die, medical tourism, fueled on the magic of the gatekept secrets of the fountain of youth, is a multibillion-dollar industry.

Many longevity doctors are less enchanted, underscoring time and again the lack of research, and the snake oil that fills the industry. “There’s a lot of experimental things that people are doing that might work, but I can tell you the story about the guy that injected some stem cells in his spine and got an abscess and almost fucking died,” says Shlain. “I can go on for every story that you hear in a chat group.”

“It’s a confirmation bias,” he continues. “Nobody goes in the group and says, ‘I did this and now I can’t fucking walk.’” For him and several of his peers, the Enhanced Games fits into that same experimental bucket that is nothing short of dangerous.

“There’s a whole society for longevity science that would run very far and very fast from the Enhanced Games,” says Shlain. He pauses. “That’s more of a carnival experiment.”

And it all almost works—except that no one knows what these enhancements will do to the body in 10, 20, or 50 years. “For [longevity influencer] Bryan Johnson to be proven correct will take 120 years. He has to become the longest-living human ever for his project to succeed,” says D’Souza of the tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist known for his extreme biohacking experiments. “For us to be proven successful takes nine and a half seconds—and it fits in a TikTok.”

If RFK Jr. has his way, by the time spectators file into the Enhanced Games stadium in Las Vegas, 12 of the 19 experimental peptides the games

might offer for sale will be on their way to being reclassified, allowing American pharmaceutical companies to make compounds and distribute them.

The timing couldn’t be better for Angermayer, Martin, and D’Souza. “They’ve seen how taking a very, let’s say measured, scientific, academically grounded approach has opened the door,” says D’Souza. “Secretary Kennedy has now talked about descheduling testosterone, about legalizing some peptides. And I think that’s on the back of the very serious work that our team has done.”

When I ask about the several studies that have shown that certain peptides can cause accelerated tumor growth, Kennedy tells me that “most [peptides] occur in the human body. So they don’t have a high risk profile,” though Shlain, the doctor, warns that “natural” doesn’t always mean “safe” when you’re injecting a molecule, even a naturally occurring

billed to permanently alter your immune system for the rest of your life,” which can also happen after any natural infection.

The athletes won’t be touching any of these experimental molecules during competition, and the reclassification will have to survive the scrutiny of the FDA expert advisory panel meeting that’s scheduled for July, but nevertheless, the games will serve as the best advertisement possible. “We said we [would] only use approved drugs, and that’s why peptides [and] stem cell therapies all fell out,” explains Piele. “My colleagues who are in the enhancement longevity world, they look at the drug protocol for Enhanced for the study, and they say, ‘Oh, my God, how boring.’”

“It’s true,” he says, “but this is the first study [on athletes], and there’s so much headwind for this type of studies that it would’ve been too far-fetched to go full in.”

That is to say there will be more, and they’re simply testing the waters. “This is

“It’s a confirmation bias. Nobody goes in the group and says, ‘I did this and now I can’t fucking walk.’... There’s a whole society for longevity science that would run very far and very fast from the Enhanced Games.... That’s more of a carnival experiment.”

—JORDAN SHLAIN, MD

one, into the body. “They said that it was immunosuppressive,” Kennedy continues. “They just slapped that label on everyone. And it was a lie. There was no science to support that.” This is a claim that Shlain says is “flatly incorrect,” arguing that “decades of peer-reviewed research have documented that certain neuropeptides act as growth factors for cancer cells, promoting proliferation, angiogenesis, and metastasis.” What’s more, “there is also a well-established body of literature on immunosuppressive peptides,” he says, noting that one of the most widely used immunosuppressive drugs, cyclosporine (for people who have organ transplants, for instance), is itself a peptide. “Peptides leave your system within 24 hours,” says Kennedy, glossing over examples like semaglutide, whose half-life is about a week, “whereas vaccines are intended and

really just a template,” says Piele, for how Enhanced can study particular peptides or stem cell therapies in the years to come.

That doesn’t mean, however, that Enhanced (or any other wellness company, for that matter) is going to wait for those studies to sell those reclassified peptides to their customers. Kennedy’s reclassification plan, he insists, is designed to dismantle the black market. The Enhanced Games will be there when he does, ready to swoop in and fill that void with a gleaming marketplace complete with Olympic athletes, broken records, and million-dollar bonuses.

When I ask Kennedy about his own peptide use, he tells me that he’s tried “certain peptides” but isn’t sure yet if they work. “Maybe that wound would’ve healed in a week even if I didn’t take them. I don’t know.” **VI**

Trouble in the Water



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 122 kids and their parents. A former Harvard-Westlake employee says that when he was working there, parents went ballistic if he tried to discipline their children. “They’ll defame you to whoever will listen,” he says. “They’ll call you a liar.”

It wasn’t until homecoming day of Romain’s sophomore year that Alex and Melissa heard anything more about the racial abuse their son says he was facing on the team. That’s when he told them about the litany of comments he’d endured. (To be clear, at that time he says he was still afraid to tell his parents about the alleged sexual assaults lest it lead to his being pulled off the team.)

The lawsuit outlines a gauntlet of subsequent emails and meetings between Alex, Melissa, Grover, head of athletics Terry Barnum, and Janine Jones, Harvard-Westlake’s assistant head of school for community and belonging, to “discuss the ongoing issues Plaintiff was facing on the water polo team and ways to ensure his safety and well-being.” At one meeting, Melissa says, Grover told the Romans that he’d asked his “professional coach” what to do. “Grover was like, ‘Well, my coach suggests that I get all the parents in the room and tell them that this is unacceptable and they have to stop or their kids are not going to play,’” Melissa says. But then, according to the complaint, Grover said, “Can you imagine how upset the parents would be if I raised this issue with them?” Alex and Melissa later tell me that they looked at each other, incredulous. “We were like, ‘We’d be fine with that,’” Melissa says. (Grover did not return a request for comment.)

In an October 17 email to Jones acquired by *Vanity Fair*, the Romans asked for her help. They also told her that Romain must not be interviewed by any coaches alone. But in another email sent that night, they said that Grover had pulled Romain aside after a practice and told him that Van der Woude and Kim “cannot relate to [his]

culture and don’t understand what it is like to be a Black water polo player.”

Nevertheless, the complaint says that Barnum “later told Plaintiff’s parents that he had met with Connor Kim and Lucca Van Der Woude, shown them the October 17, 2023 letter that Plaintiff’s parents had sent to Janine Jones (cataloging the racial abuse described above), and asked Connor Kim and Lucca Van Der Woude about each of the listed allegations. Barnum told Plaintiff’s parents that both *Connor Kim and Lucca Van Der Woude admitted to the acts listed in that October 17 letter.*”

The repercussions for Romain were swift and severe. He describes how, after meets, he saw pictures on social media of his teammates getting food without him. On the pool deck, players didn’t speak to him. In the pool, they yelled at him. After one particularly rough meet, Romain tells me, he left abruptly because team members had been screaming at him. In the car on the way home, he says, members of the team started messaging him in a text thread that included the coach and seemed like a setup.

“How can we trust you when you constantly disrespect us and never show up when we ask you for help?” one text said, chastising him for not staying to clean up. “Yeah Aidan we love you so much man but that wasn’t cool today,” texted another player. After dinner, Melissa and Alex could see Romain looking at his phone, distraught. “Do you see this?” he said. “Do you see how they talk to me?”

Romain’s parents allege that they too became personae non gratae. They also say that some parents seemed resentful when a college coach talked to Romain, and that players were no longer passing him the ball. “It was like they thought this Black kid was jumping the line, getting too much playing time, and getting too much attention in the water when the scouts were there, and they had a really big problem with that,” Melissa says.

According to the complaint, the Romans held more meetings with Grover in November 2023, begging him to address the team’s behavior. But, they say, Grover did nothing. “The problem is that our son said, ‘I would like not to be called a n-gger anymore,’” Alex says. “I think that’s an ugly word, but it needs to be said. Why didn’t the school say, ‘This is not how we are. This is not how we act’? They wanted to talk about the kids and not bring the parents into it. But the parents weren’t speaking to us. It was like, How dare your son ask to not be called a n-gger every day? How dare you?”

Romain’s lawsuit refers to policies outlined in Harvard-Westlake’s 2023–2024 Upper School Student/Parent Handbook, which says the school is “committed to a ‘working and educational environment that is free of harassment...discrimination, and retaliation,’ and explicitly prohibits ‘verbal, written, visual, and physical conduct’ of a harassing nature.” The suit also says that the handbook “pledges that all school employees ‘must report’ misconduct or harassment disclosures to the Head of the Upper School.”

But despite Harvard-Westlake’s policies, Melissa knew, she says, that Romain would face *some* racism at the school: “You have to expect that and have a plan for when that happens. You’re in a situation where you trust the people who have your kid in their care. But one thing that always grated me was they would say, ‘What do you think we should do in this situation?’ And I’d be like, ‘You’re the experts. What do *you* think you should do to change this situation, given the ideals you say your school lives by?’”

Things came to a head in mid-December. “On or about December 14, 2023,” the complaint says, “during a practice session at the Harvard-Westlake pool, Lucca Van Der Woude sexually assaulted a former water polo teammate, ‘Victim Two,’ by digitally penetrating him underwater.”

I interviewed Victim Two last summer. The son of a salesman, he lives in central Los Angeles, not Bel Air. His father says he and his wife were ecstatic when their son got admitted to Harvard-Westlake on a scholarship that covered a portion of the school’s tuition, which in 2025 was \$52,500. “It was a life changer for the family,” Victim Two’s dad says.

Victim Two tells me he quit the water polo team before the first game of his sophomore year. Van der Woude was assaulting him the same way he assaulted Romain, he says, while teammates mocked him in a Mexican accent. It pained him to stop playing because, like Romain, he wanted to play Division I in college and go to the Olympics. But later, he started to worry that he’d quit too soon.

Victim Two and Romain attended a water polo practice in mid-December 2023, the complaint says. They were in the pool when Van der Woude and his friends arrived. Victim Two described what happened next in an email reviewed by *Vanity Fair*, which he says was sent to upper school dean Sharon Cuseo and Barnum: “I was waiting for the

ball, and then suddenly someone under the water had fingered me,” he wrote. “I looked behind me, and that someone was Lucca Vanderwoude [sic].”

A scuffle between him and Van der Woude broke out, Victim Two says. Romain grabbed his friend to hold him back. The email continues: “I told [the other players] that Lucca had just fingered me, and they just kept laughing at me, and talking to me in a [M]exican accent saying... ‘Oh Foreal Man’... [T]hey even said ‘What the hell is [he] saying.’”

When he called his mom to tell her what happened, Victim Two says, he was so overwhelmed and angry that he cried. His attorney, Jessica Pride, says he intends to file a civil suit against the school.

The day after the incident, the complaint says, the following events transpired: Cuseo found Romain during a morning assembly and told him she wanted to speak with him. When they entered her office, dean of students Jordan Church and Victim Two were allegedly already there. Romain listened as Victim Two recounted how Van der Woude allegedly assaulted him. Victim Two “lamented that he was being vilified and accused of lying, and [he] insisted he was telling the truth.”

According to the complaint, Romain stepped in and did what he had been avoiding since he joined the varsity team, telling the deans that he believed Victim Two because Van der Woude had been doing the same thing to him for a long time.

Cuseo allegedly asked Romain and Victim Two to *further* explain what they were describing. So, Romain “grabbed a pillow from the couch in Dean Cuseo’s office, folded it in half, and inserted his finger into the crease to demonstrate clearly to [the deans] how Lucca van der Woude had sexually abused him.”

Romain tells me that when he left Cuseo’s office, it was like having to do a perp walk. He was besieged by students and tried to keep his head down as Van der Woude’s friends surrounded him. One student held up a cell phone to record. “Lucca didn’t do anything, right, Aidan?” they asked. “He didn’t do anything, right?”

But later that same day, according to the complaint, Cuseo met with both students again and told them that the school had interviewed four of the sophomores who were in the pool with them, and that they denied any assault occurred. Victim Two says he asked to look at security camera footage, to no avail. He was told that Harvard-Westlake couldn’t do anything more.

The next day, Victim Two’s parents say, they emailed the school his account of what had happened: “We would like to know what kind of investigation took place that was determined to reach this conclusion within 24 hours,” says an email they provided. “[B]ased on your mission statement and vision, how can this be addressed so that [our son] can feel a sense of belonging, equality, and inclusivity once again?”

Under California’s Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA), teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators are mandated reporters. When they are told of—or reasonably suspect—abuse, they are required to notify law enforcement and/or the hotline operated by child protective services. After Victim Two’s parents complained, his father says, the school reported the alleged assault, but, Romain’s lawsuit says, the school did *not*



A text allegedly sent by coach Jack Grover to Romain’s mother during the Los Angeles Premier trip to Barcelona in March 2023.

file a report about what happened to him. Regardless, Van der Woude remained on campus, where, Victim Two says, he acted as though nothing had happened.

Sometime in February, an anonymous caller reported Van der Woude to the police. He was arrested 11 weeks after Romain and Victim Two say they reported their assaults to the deans. The night of Van der Woude’s arrest, the Romans say, a detective with the LAPD called them to request an interview with their son. They were surprised when he insisted that he could only go before school; otherwise, he said, students might conclude that he was a snitch. The detective said they could meet at 6 a.m., when the precinct would be practically empty.

Walking into the station, Melissa and Romain stood out. She’s five feet two;

he’s more than a foot taller. It was obvious that they’d never been in a police precinct before, Melissa says. (“Even after all my years watching *SVU*, later, Alex and I were like, ‘Should we have hired an attorney?’”)

The detective began the interview by asking Romain general questions about the water polo team. Who was on it? Did he know Victim Two? Then she turned to the alleged incident. But as Romain responded to her questions, Melissa started to hear details she’d never heard before. When Romain told the detective what he had told the deans—that he believed Victim Two because he, too, had been sexually assaulted by a fellow water polo player—Melissa was shocked.

She says it felt like she left her body. Like she was suddenly watching the interview from the ceiling. While Romain spoke with the detective, he occasionally shot his mother worried glances. She says she responded with reassuring nods while thinking, Melissa, fix your face and let your son do what he needs to do.

In the parking lot, she says, she told her son that he had nothing to be ashamed of and that she was proud of him for telling the truth. Not knowing what to do next, Melissa dropped him off at school, then called Alex to tell him everything.

One of the core issues in the Romain case is the family’s claim that, despite the CANRA law, the school didn’t report Romain’s allegations to the authorities. The suit alleges that, as a result, “Lucca Van Der Woude digitally penetrated Plaintiff for the final time in approximately January 2024, as Plaintiff was walking up a flight of stairs on Harvard-Westlake’s campus on his way to his French III Honors class.”

The complaint also claims that Romain “found himself in a contentious situation when a teammate, B.B., entered the shower area and demanded access to his stall.” Romain said no, and B.B. “became incensed” and “proceeded to assault Plaintiff, grabbing him by the shoulder and delivering blows to his back, buttocks, and genitals. The attack escalated and the teammate forcefully grabbed Plaintiff’s penis while simultaneously striking him in the testicles.”

Harvard-Westlake retained Susan Oliver of Tyson & Mendes, a firm that sells itself on its website as specializing in helping clients avoid “nuclear verdicts” in high-stakes trials. In a June 2024 letter to Daniel Watkins, Romain’s attorney, she wrote, “While Harvard-Westlake is aware

Trouble in the Water

of an incident where Lucca was alleged to have sexually assaulted another water-polo player in December 2023, it was only via your correspondence that Harvard-Westlake was first advised, by anyone, that Aidan claims Lucca sexually assaulted him.” Oliver did not respond to interview requests nor to requests for comment regarding Romain’s filing.

I ask Victim Two if Romain told the deans while they were both in Cuseo’s office that Van der Woude sexually assaulted him. He doesn’t remember the exact time frame, he says, because the events in question occurred nearly two years earlier—but he corroborates Romain’s story. “Aidan just, like, comes in the office out of nowhere and just, like, echoes my words,” he says. “I hadn’t even talked to him [about Lucca] before that day.”

I ask him if “echoing his words” means that Romain told the deans he had also been sexually assaulted. “He came in and said exactly what I said,” Victim Two says. “So yeah.”

Romain says that he grew afraid of being framed in retribution after someone—he doesn’t know who—created a fake Instagram account in his name and tried to obtain nude pictures from his friends. Meanwhile, Melissa was fielding calls from fellow parents. “They were saying, ‘Hey, I struggled greatly [with] whether or not I should make this phone call, but I just came from this dinner party, and people are talking horribly about you guys,’” she says. “‘Saying that you have messed with the wrong people and that you’re going to be lucky if Aidan goes to the school. That, you know, your financial aid’”—financial aid her family wasn’t getting and didn’t need—“‘is being revoked and you need to worry about that.’”

Around the same time, Romain’s sister, who is two years younger than he is, called crying from her dean’s office. “She said, ‘Mommy’—and pardon my French—‘people [are] telling me that we’d fucked with the wrong people and that they’re going to take our house,’” Melissa says.

According to Pride, who says she’s represented scores of clients who have sued schools for mishandling students’ reports of sexual abuse, Romain’s and Victim Two’s experiences aren’t unusual. “You would think it’s the expensive private schools that have all the resources,

that have the best training,” she says. “In fact, I’ve found they’ve had the worst.”

Public schools are often represented by the same insurer, she says, which can offer them free access to mandated-reporter education while pressuring them to reduce claims. But in general, private schools can choose their own training program, and if they don’t accept federal funds, which many don’t, they’re not subject to Title IX.

“The law says, if you see something, you have to say something if it’s a reasonable suspicion of suspected child abuse,” Pride says. “You do not get to [just] do your own internal investigation and blah blah blah bullshit.” A school’s internal investigation can also be flawed. “If there’s allegations, right, they then maybe don’t do a good job. And if you don’t substantiate [the abuse], then you go, ‘Well, nothing happened. Let’s keep going. Let’s keep our heads in the sand.’”

Sources tell me that private schools can delay or deflect reports of sexual abuse, racism, and violence in the hope that families will remove their children, thus resolving the problem without exposure. It often happens that the burden is shifted onto the victim, says a swim coach who’s worked for independent schools. During the time of the suicides, a former school employee said that “Harvard-Westlake [was] very big on protecting their reputation. Huge.”

When Van der Woude was arrested on February 28, 2024, everything was out in the open, but not in a good way. “There were things [students] were saying, like, ‘Oh, like, they’re saying that you got fisted, or saying that you got raped, or just, like, these cruel, cruel rumors going around that I thought would never even go around,’” Victim Two says. A screenshot of a text that Romain sent to Melissa the following day reads, “Mom, I talked to Ms. Cuseo and [Victim Two] again today. Apparently everyone in the school knows. Literally.”

After the arrest, Harvard-Westlake banned Van der Woude from campus and forbade him from playing water polo for the school, says the suit. Water polo activities on campus were suspended until a third-party review could be completed. In an email sent to parents, Barnum wrote, “Harvard-Westlake is sympathetic to the range of emotions that our players and their families are experiencing...We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause and appreciate your patience as we work through this process.”

After reading the email, Alex says, “I thought, *What* range of emotions? Ours? When we just found out our son

was assaulted for 18 months? When you say you’re sympathetic to a range of emotions in a situation where at least two minors have been sexually assaulted by another person, it only confirms that your highest objective is not actually to protect all the minors in your care. Is there any other appropriate reaction other than outrage?”

According to the complaint, “*The Orange County Register* reported that on November 7, 2024, Lucca Van Der Woude ‘admitted in Los Angeles County Juvenile Division Court...to sexual penetration with a foreign object (digital penetration) against a minor’ as part of a plea agreement with prosecutors.” For reasons that were not explained to the Romans, they say, the district attorney’s office decided to drop the charge involving Romain while keeping the charge involving Victim Two as part of a plea agreement. But Van der Woude was issued a no-contact order, and Romain was invited by the court to read a victim impact statement during Van der Woude’s hearing. “We were on Zoom. Lucca was in court,” Alex says. “We could see him. He was very, let’s say, nonchalant.” Van der Woude was later ordered to pay Romain \$49,266 in restitution for an offense listed by the Los Angeles County Probation Department as “sexual penetration with a foreign object.”

After leaving Harvard-Westlake, Van der Woude transferred to Orange County’s Newport Harbor High School, where he played for the water polo team and was instrumental in helping it win the CIF Southern Section Open Division title. In 2024 he was named *The Orange County Register*’s water polo player of the year.

Van der Woude was offered a spot on the UCLA water polo team. But after the *Register* broke the story that Van der Woude had left Harvard-Westlake after his arrest, there was an uproar in the student newspaper. Van der Woude enrolled at Golden West College, a community college in Huntington Beach, where he’s reportedly on the water polo team.

The Romain family says their son is still experiencing the ramifications of his time at Harvard-Westlake. After withdrawing from the school, Romain, Melissa, and his sister relocated to Barcelona, where he could work with a top coach. He’s expected to graduate in June from an online school. Alex visits from Los Angeles whenever he can.

The Romans have submitted a report to the US Center for SafeSport, a nonprofit authorized by Congress in 2018 to protect

young athletes affiliated with US Olympic and Paralympic sports from abuse. According to sources and documents obtained by *Vanity Fair*, as of last April, SafeSport was investigating a complaint against Grover, who has been on the coaching staff of the USA Water Polo athlete development program. In response to an email request, SafeSport's communications manager said organization officials "do not speak to specific cases to maintain the integrity of the investigative process." The Romaines say that Romain and Van der Woude were in the pool together multiple times while at Olympic training camp events.

As of April, SafeSport was also conducting an investigation into Van der Woude; it has the authority to ban him from participating in future Olympic events. Alex says the family is awaiting its decision.

One of the many painful outcomes, Romain says, was that while his former teammates were admitted to play water polo at schools like Stanford, Harvard, and UCLA, he met with multiple Division I colleges only to find some of the coaches asking him to explain *his* actions at Harvard-Westlake. "All the schools I visited, I had to explain in detail what happened because they all had heard some form of lie about me, including that I had been arrested or I had ruined another player's life," he says. "After, I sent them my impact statement in the hopes that they would be more comfortable recruiting me."

Romain reluctantly decided to take a gap year. In August 2025, he started with the Spanish pro club CN Mataró, which makes him the youngest American player in the team's history. In February, he was at last able to verbally commit to an Ivy League school. He says he's "extremely excited" that he has a coach who is willing to believe in him.

But water polo is a small community, and, starting in the fall of 2027, he'll be back in the thick of it. Romain says he's unfazed. "The people who blame me for having been sexually assaulted and hate me

for standing up for myself will still do that," he says. "I am focusing on joy and all of the wonderful people who are supporting me."

Just after New Year's Day, I spoke with the Romaines over a Zoom call. They were gathered in their apartment in Barcelona, looking happy and relaxed. Both kids can speak Spanish now. They're hopeful about the future, though the past has left scars. Later, Alex tells me that Romain is working with a therapist to address what allegedly occurred while he was at Harvard-Westlake.

Victim Two says he is still playing water polo and processing his own disappointment. "Going into the school, I thought it was a diverse community and inclusive," he says. "Even the booklet I got before attending the school had all these words like *integrity, diversity, inclusiveness*.... But apparently, if you're [a] minority, you're not really viewed as [being as] valuable as others."

"I thought that there was somebody
at that place that would have my back," Romain says.
"But there wasn't.... It didn't get better for me."

He adds that if he had done what he and Romain allege Van der Woude did, he would have been kicked out of school or worse. "Arrested, put in jail, on the spot, no questions asked," he says. "That's how I feel."

While interviewing Victim Two and Romain, I'm struck by their idealism. Neither of them speaks the cynical language of lawsuits, reputation management, and retribution. Instead, they seem to be longing for a mea culpa from the school they loved. "I thought that there was somebody at that place that would have my back, that would care," Romain says. "But there

wasn't. There was no support. It didn't get better for me."

In September, Harvard-Westlake dropped from the 11th-best private high school in the country to number 40, according to Niche, a site that ranks K-12 schools and colleges. (Back in 2023, it was ranked number two.) Niche grades schools according to various factors, including the percentage of seniors who go on to attend four-year colleges, along with survey responses on school culture, diversity, and the overall experience of students and parents. The site releases some, but not all, survey results online.

In an interview with Harvard-Westlake's student paper, school president Commons said he was perplexed by the fact that the school now ranked 40th out of 1,708 schools on Niche's list of "best high schools for athletes in California." The website, he noted, "gives us A+ grades in every area but athletics. That's the real surprise, given that I think

our athletics program is broader and more excellent than nearly all the schools ranked ahead of us in the 'best private schools' ranking." He added, "I admit totally to the fact that it furrows my brow when we're not somewhere close to the top."

But then Commons heartened himself, telling a student reporter that Niche wasn't necessarily something one should take seriously. "We'll try to learn more and understand more about their criteria and figure out if there is something legitimate that we can improve as a school," he said, "or whether it's really just a random thing." ■

VANITY FAIR IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT © 2026 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME 68, NO. 5, VANITY FAIR (ISSN 0733-8899) is published eight times per year with issues in February, March, April/May, June, July/August, September, October/November, December/January by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, One World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Roger Lynch, Chief Executive Officer; Elizabeth Herbst-Brady, Chief Revenue Officer; Nick Hotzkin, Chief Financial Officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. (See DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to VANITY FAIR, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0617. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to VANITY FAIR, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0617, call 800-365-0635, or e-mail subscriptions@vfi.com. Please give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable, you are ever dissatisfied with your subscription, let us know. You will receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within eight weeks after receipt of order. Send all editorial, business, and production correspondence electronically to vfi@mail.vf.com. For reprints, please e-mail reprints@condenast.com or call Wright's Media, 877-652-5295. For reuse permissions, please e-mail contentlicensing@condenast.com or call 800-897-8666. Visit us online at www.vf.com. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit <https://subscribe.condenastdigital.com>. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0617 or call 800-365-0635.

VANITY FAIR IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY VANITY FAIR IN WRITING. MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND OTHER MATERIALS SUBMITTED MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY A SELF-ADDRESSED STAMPED ENVELOPE.



TONY HAWK

The skateboarding pioneer and Gen X icon, still shredding at the age of 58, would happily live out his days shooting the breeze with his growing brood—especially if one of them can locate his missing eyebrows

What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Being able to find contentment among chaos.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
My stubbornness. But I've managed to channel it mostly toward my skating.

What is your greatest extravagance?
My million-dollar half-pipe, worth every penny.

What is your favorite journey?
Going on adventures with our kids and/or grandchild.

Sometimes it's to a faraway land and sometimes it's in our own backyard.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
Idealism.

On what occasion do you lie?
To myself, when I think I can skate like I did 20 years ago. Uncle Rico vibes.

What do you dislike most about your appearance?
My eyebrows, which have been lost to multiple lacerations and stitches over the years. If anyone sees them on the bottom of a skate park bowl, please return them.

Which living person do you most despise?
The one causing traffic delays.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
"Living the dream!"
Which is mostly true, but I didn't realize the dream involves such little sleep.

What or who is the greatest love of your life?
My dearest Catherine and our collective brood.

Which talent would you most like to have?
To play multiple instruments or speak fluent French.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
My inability to skate switch. And my thunderous snoring (sorry, Cathy).

What do you consider your greatest achievement?
Turning my passion into a lifelong career while supporting my family, and helping to provide public skate parks across the world.

What is your most treasured possession?
My health, and my palate.

What are your favorite names?
Catherine, Riley, Frances, Spencer, Miles, Keegan, Calvin, Kady, Ronin, and Lola, our dog.

What is it that you most dislike?
Being late. And getting hurt doing easy tricks.

What is your most marked characteristic?
Reliability.

How would you like to die?
Old and without pain.

If you were to die and come back as a person or thing, what do you think it would be?
A specific bird of prey, one that I've shared a name with my entire life. It only seems fair. 

Easy to set up. Even easier to pay.

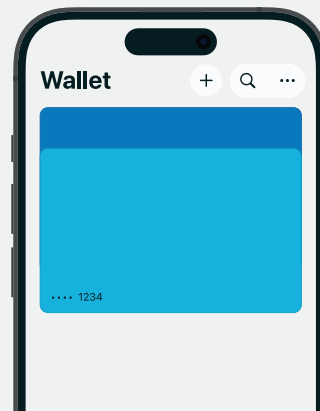
①

Open the Wallet app on iPhone.



②

Press 



③

Tap or scan to add your card.



Must have a supported card. Terms apply.



Pay anywhere there's a 



 Pay

Set up in seconds





Perlée
Watch

Van Cleef & Arpels

Haute Joaillerie, place Vendôme since 1906

