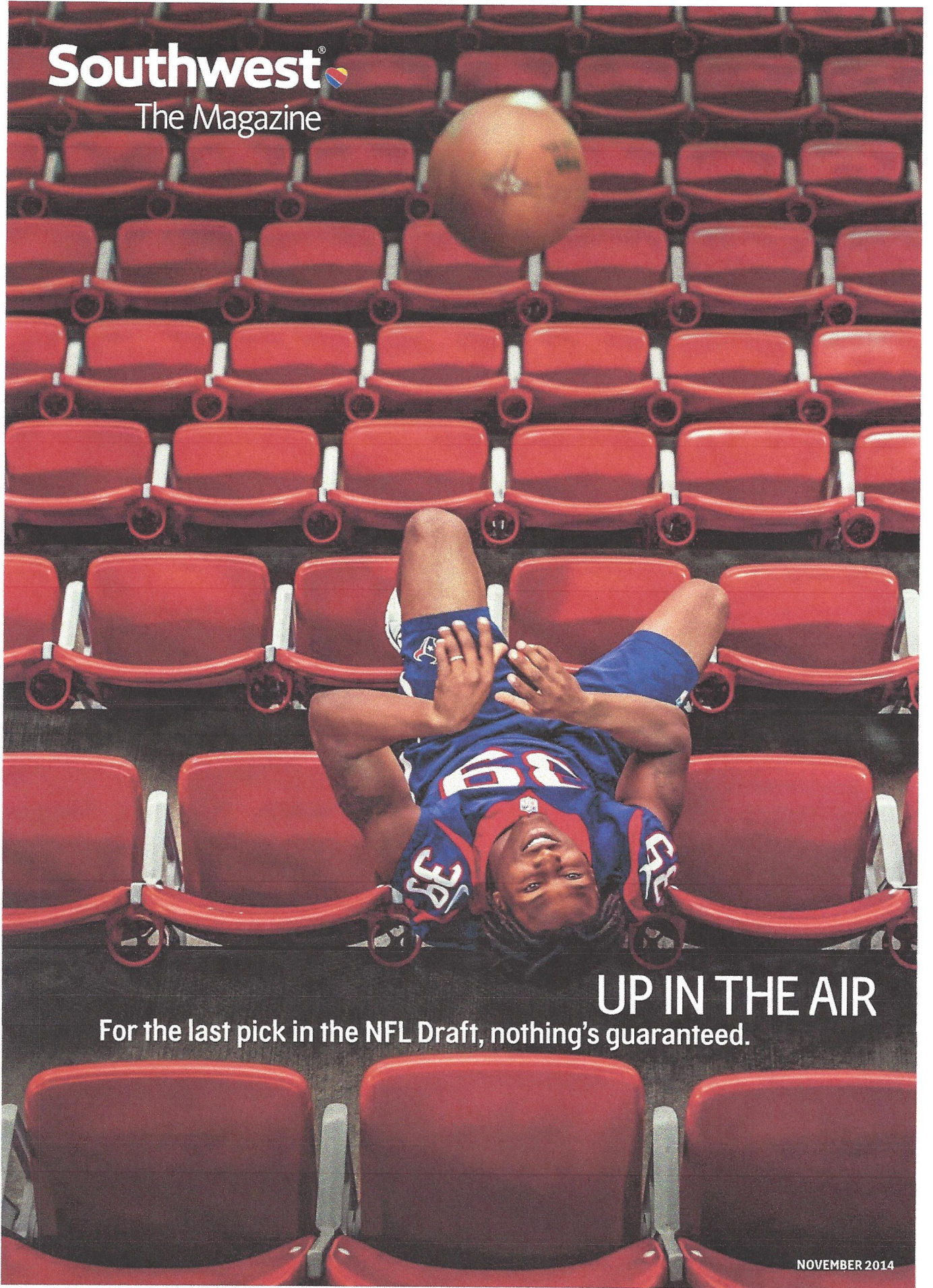
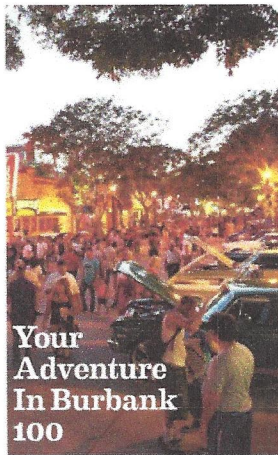
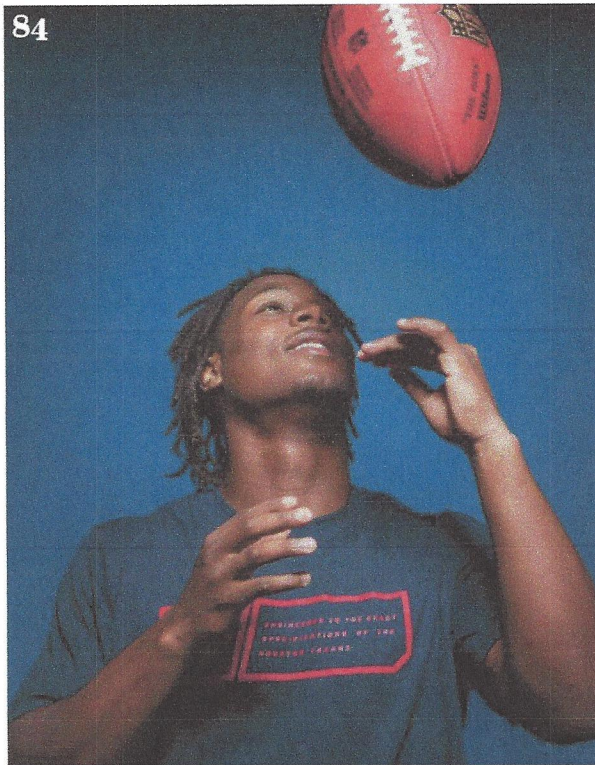
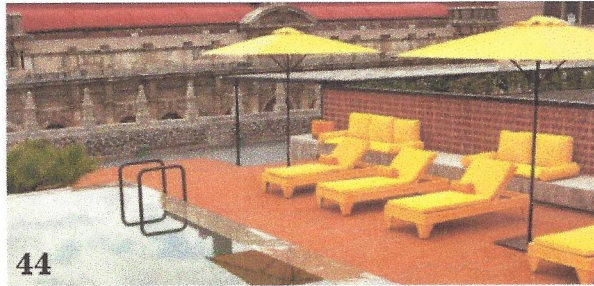


Southwest[®]
The Magazine



UP IN THE AIR

For the last pick in the NFL Draft, nothing's guaranteed.



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY UNDIENE PROHL/GRUPPO HABBITA (POOL), TODD SPOTH (LONNIE BALLENTINE), COURTESY OF VISIT BURBANK (CARS); ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEKS SEHNWALD (PEOPLE), STEFANIE PEPPER (TOY)



PICKED OFF Lonnie Ballentine shows there's glory in being picked last.

Dear Reader,

It was a rite of childhood—of mine, anyway. The pickup baseball captains take turns choosing their teams. They run through the athletic kids first and then select from the reasonably coordinated. Then one points at Billy Stewart, whose glasses tend to fall off when he tries to catch the ball. The other waves in an accident-prone kid called Chipper because of a mishap involving his teeth. Next up, a boy known only for his speed to the Good Humor truck. Finally it comes down to Fred Blackburne and me. Fred swings

a bat like a sleepwalker with a hammer. The captain weighs our respective liabilities—and picks Fred.

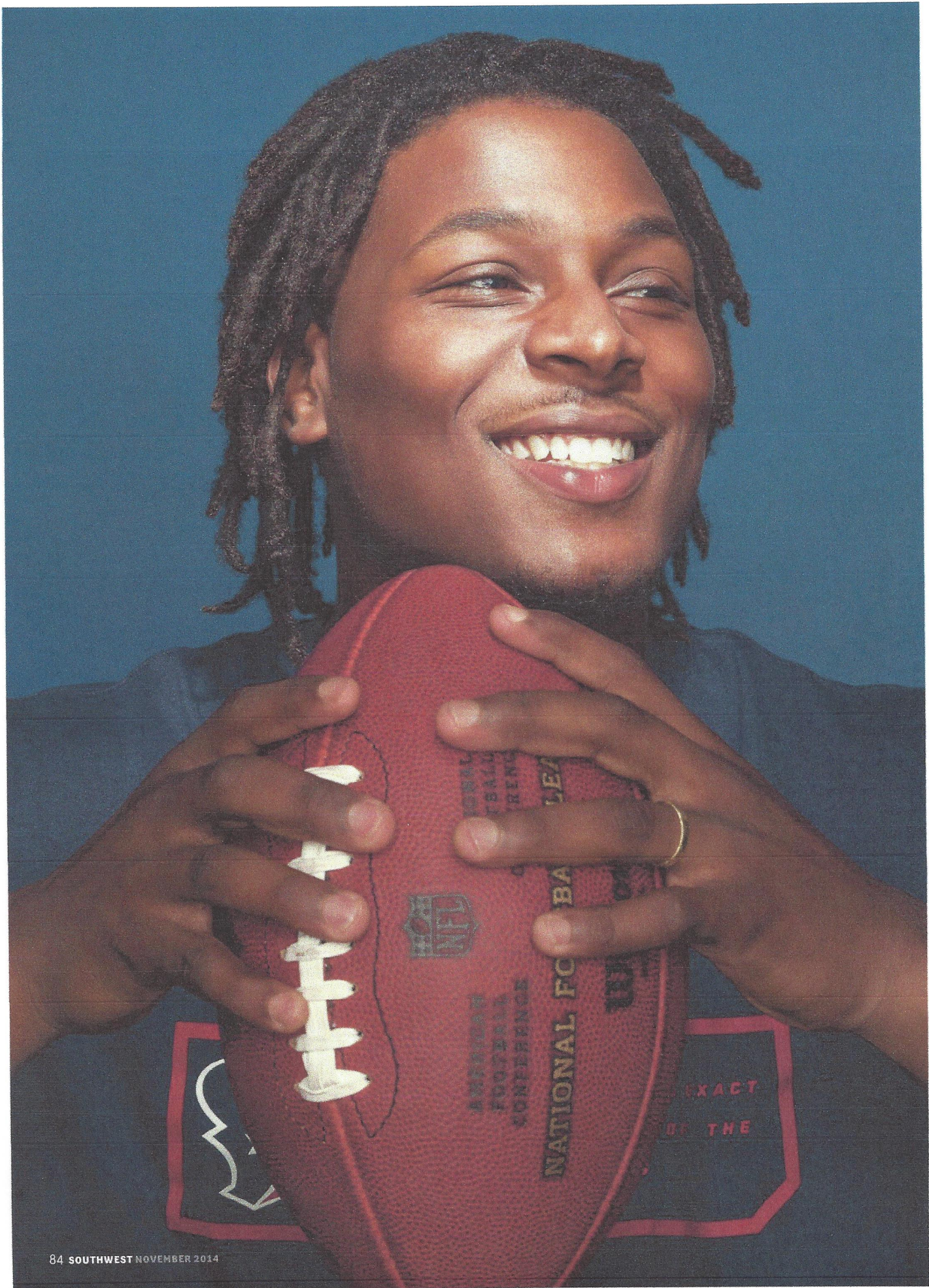
That scene, so common in my generation, seems rare in these days of organized sports and adult supervision. I'm not nostalgic (believe me), but I personally benefited from the humiliation. For one thing, I learned to avoid any sport that necessitates a ball.

On page 84 you'll find a great story about another Last Kid Picked: Lonnie Ballentine, chosen last in the NFL Draft and thus given the title "Mr. Irrelevant." It's one of sport's more ironic monikers, since being drafted at all means you're one of the truly elite. Still, I like the idea of celebrating the last pick. When Lonnie, a safety, intercepts his first pass, the triumph will seem that much sweeter.

I will know how he feels. My life is better for having been a Last Kid Picked, such as when I asked a beautiful resident of Washington, D.C., to marry me. She had dated men who were the professional equivalent of neighborhood team captains. And yet, 33 years ago this month, she picked me above them all and said yes.

Lonnie and I, and all the other Last Kids Picked out there, simply need to remember the old saying that inevitably proves true: The last shall be first.

—**Jay Heinrichs**
Editorial Director



WHAT'S IT LIKE
TO BE THE
FINAL PICK ON
STAGE? THE
THE BIGGEST
HOUSTON TEXANS'

**LONNIE
BALLENTINE**
HAS BEEN
PREPARING
FOR THIS
HIS WHOLE LIFE.

BY DAVID ECKSTEIN AND JK NICKELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD SPOTH

LAST MAN STANDING

M

MICHAEL CLEAR tossed the boy in the deep end of the pool and for two or three minutes let him struggle on his own. The boy's arms flapped and flailed above the water and below, churning up a tempest that threatened to suck him

under. Eyes wide open, taking in the whole world like he might leave it soon, just 7 years old.

Lonnie Ballentine had the eyes of his mother, a former pro basketball player who only had one child and so made sure she raised him just right. Everything transformed as Lonnie grew older, his body first stretching vertically and then thickening at the thighs, arms, and neck until his frame became a collection of finely sculpted muscles wrapped in a thin layer of skin. But the eyes were always the same, arced slivers like crescent moons beginning a new phase: hopeful and glowing but barely even fingernail-wide. When Lonnie smiled, his eyes seemed to vanish.

But now the whole of his eyes were visible, filled with water. Snot dribbled from his nose. Lonnie was always a quiet kid, and even now he didn't make a sound. Finally Michael—"Uncle Mike" to Lonnie—dove in and helped him to safety. After he calmed down, Mike explained it wasn't a prank.

This is what happens when you get hit from behind. You have to react. You always gotta be aware. Can't panic. One day you'll face a situation that you're not prepared to deal with. You gotta be ready.

O N MAY 8, 2014, the ESPN camera pans across a rowdy crowd at Radio City Music Hall in New York City and settles on a quartet of commentators: Jon Gruden, Chris Berman, Mel Kiper Jr., and Ray Lewis. The sea of blue screens surrounding them gives the impression they're broadcasting from an electronic aquarium. They begin by debating the primary question: Who will be the first pick of the NFL Draft?

The draft was the brainchild of Bert Bell. As co-owner of the Philadelphia Eagles during the league's infancy, he struggled to recruit top talent to his franchise and sought a way to increase parity in the league. The first draft, in 1935, occurred in January but was pushed back over time to allow for more scouting of prospects and, thanks to ESPN, eventually became a premier three-day TV event during the sporting calendar's late-spring doldrums.

Commissioner Roger Goodell strolls across the stage to kick off the affair. "With the first pick in the 2014 NFL Draft, the Houston Texans select Jadeveon Clowney." The defensive end from the University of South Carolina, exhaustively derided during his final college season for off-field antics, embraces his mom and greets the commissioner on stage. Attention then turns to the polarizing Heisman winner, Johnny Manziel, as he slips from the top 10, top 15, on past the Dallas Cowboys and their mercurial owner, Jerry Jones. Finally the Cleveland Browns snatch him up with the 22nd pick.

Lonnie Ballentine watches the drama from a Memphis hotel. He's rented a room for three days to be with his wife and two daughters. "I didn't want to be bothered," he says. "I just wanted it to be us."



LEFT: Lonnie (No. 4) at the University of Memphis, causing a fumble. ABOVE: Lonnie's lowly jersey hoisted for the final pick at the NFL Draft. RIGHT: Speaking at the Mr. Irrelevant banquet, which raises money for Special Olympics. RIGHT, ABOVE: With Paul Salata and the Lowsman trophy. FAR RIGHT: Lonnie (No. 39) doing speed drills at the Texans training camp.

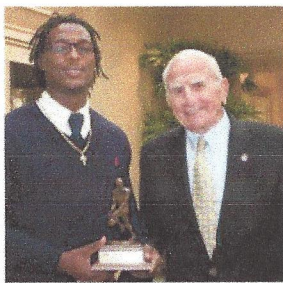
He'd performed well during his pro day at the University of Memphis and is optimistic. His extended family is planning a party the moment his name is announced. Teams begin calling in the third round, claiming they're about to pick him up. Instead he sinks further and further.

By day three he's angry and storms out of the room several times before lugging himself back. He watches every pick in anticipation. "I wouldn't wish that on anybody," he says. "It's a terrible feeling."

As the draft approaches its end, he phones his family and tells them to go home. There will be no party. The New York Giants call about a free-agent deal, and Lonnie resolves to make the best of it, but he switches over when someone else buzzes in. "This is Rick Smith with the Texans. We're going to take you."

He turns to the screen to watch a woman march to the podium in a tangerine-colored dress. "With the 256th pick in the 2014 NFL Draft, the Houston Texans select Lonnie Ballentine." She points to a navy blue jersey with the number 256 and "Mr. Irrelevant" inscribed on the back. That's Lonnie, living out the worst fear of every kid on every playground in America—the last pick.

Sure, getting picked at all is an achievement, but few players selected that late ever make a team roster. It's a long fall for a young phenom who was a blue-chip recruit and the kind of devoted teammate that high school coaches took to calling "my other son."



Every sport has its own stable of clichés about overcoming adversity, but football, more than any other, is a game in which you spend a lot of time getting up after being knocked down. An average NFL contest features nearly 150 plays, each one leaving in its wake a slew of men splayed across the turf.

Lonnie grew up wanting to play basketball like his mom, but after a series of obstacles that seemed certain to derail him, it seems that football was most fitting from the beginning.

CAMERON CLEAR, MIKE'S son, was there at the swimming pool that day. Mike and Sheila Smith, Lonnie's mom, graduated high school together and remained friends. They had kids at the same time. Sheila coached their peewee basketball teams. (She played in France and the WNBA after college.) Mike trained them like he did lots of Memphis kids, some of whom, like "Penny" Hardaway and Thaddeus Young, went on to NBA stardom. Ostensibly it was for sports; in truth, for other matters. "I know how important it is for a father to be in a kid's life," Mike says. "If they don't have that, we have to create something similar."

Lonnie's dad drove trucks for a living and only saw him on weekends. His mom worked long hours as a teacher and a coach, so at a young age Lonnie learned to care for himself—cooking, cleaning, washing clothes. But he wasn't alone.

Cameron, along with Sam Cage, Lonnie's older cousin, were like brothers to him. They went to pre-K together and played on the same basketball and baseball teams.



Lonnie was a cautious kid, shy unless you were part of his inner circle, but always fiercely competitive. Sam remembers staying up all night when he was 8: Lonnie wouldn't go inside until he beat him one-on-one in basketball. "Then when he beats you, you're never gonna hear the end of it," Sam says.

Lonnie and Cameron, now a 6-foot-6, 280-pound starting tight end at Texas A&M, were cut from their sixth-grade football team because they were too small.

In eighth grade he started displaying signs of defiance. The school dress code required shirts of specified colors: he showed up one day wearing bright orange. He refused to sit at the front of the classroom. Sheila never worried about him falling prey to peer pressure. "You really couldn't change his mind," she says. "Whatever he did, he was doing

"YOU GOTTA BE YOU AND LONNIE KNOWS WHO HE IS," MIKE SAYS.

himself." In truth, he was searching for his identity, just a boy tinkering with the boundaries of adulthood, and Sheila believed football could provide a structure for this examination. By then he'd grown.

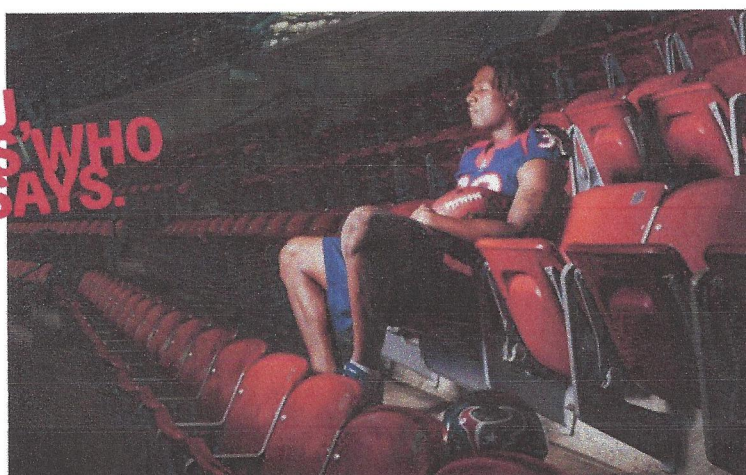
One day Thurston Rubin Sr., the varsity coach at Hamilton High School, attended Lonnie's football practice to watch the team's running back. Instead he was drawn to the tall kid who could backpedal and out-quick the shorter guys that typically thrive at the cornerback position. Lonnie was an enigma, "like if you saw a giraffe in the jungle running with the cheetahs," Rubin says.

Rubin convinced Sheila to send Lonnie to Hamilton. Lonnie hated the idea, cried every day for the first few weeks of practice. Then they faced national powerhouse South Panola High in a seven-on-seven tournament. Nobody could keep up with South Panola's star receiver. Coach Rubin turned to Lonnie, the lanky freshman, and gave him the assignment: *Stick with him, kid*. First play, the receiver jukes past him on a deep route, and it looks like Lonnie's beat. The quarterback drops a spiral right in the receiver's hands, but Lonnie somehow eats up the gap and swats the ball away. Rubin turned to his defensive coordinator. "We got something special here."

He started every game as a freshman, and people in Memphis started talking. College coaches began calling. He liked the attention, felt like he was making something of himself, and somewhere along the way fell in love with the game. The stature was nice, but he found something else there. Off the field he was still the soft-spoken, hum-

ble kid, but on the field he could become something else, inspired by the kind of camaraderie he'd experienced with his closest friends. "My favorite part of the game is when I see my teammates fired up, because I'm playing for them," he says.

Even in his freshman year, teammates considered him a leader—though an unconventional one. "He very rarely spoke, but when he did it meant something," Rubin says. There's a rare breed of leader, reserved by nature, who often goes unnoticed by coaches. But teammates always recognize them. When they're around the atmosphere changes: things just *feel* different. This was Lonnie. He was a get-there-early-and-stay-late kind



of guy, even if no one was watching. People gravitated toward him: his conviction was contagious. "You gotta be you, and Lonnie knows who he is," Mike says.

But there's another element of the game that Lonnie came to relish. His favorite subject was math, and if football didn't pan out he wanted to be a defense attorney. (In college he interned with The Justice Network.) His analytical mind flourished when it came to football, the most tactical of sports. Strategy is choreographed based on weeks of studying opponents on film, and it constantly evolves during the game. Each play involves dozens of reads depending on formation, down, distance, quarterback signals, even the alignment of a receiver's feet. "That's the beauty of this game," Lonnie says. "Once I know what they're doing, that's it."

There are elements you can predict and variables you can control.

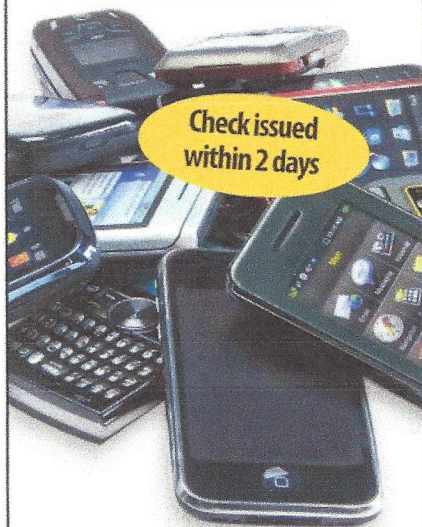
LONNIE'S JUNIOR YEAR, he's sitting in class and gets a text message from his girlfriend, Brittany. "I think I'm pregnant."

The two met at a basketball game as freshmen. She was cute and smart and dreamed of going to dental school. Lonnie fell hard but never predicted this. Not so

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soon. They don't tell their parents out of embarrassment. "I knew I was raised better," he says.

Six months later things come crashing down. Brittany decides she's got to tell her mom. Lonnie skips football practice and hunkers down at a friend's house, and Sheila gets a call from Brittany's mom to tell her what Lonnie never could—he couldn't bear to disappoint. Sheila comes pounding on the friend's door, and Lonnie hears her screaming from his upstairs hideaway. She drags him home and asks how he could possibly be so foolish. Not the pregnancy—that was a mistake—but hiding it is inexcusable. *You're putting Brittany and the baby in danger.* The families rally to support the young couple and the little one due in just three months time.

By now every major college in the country is calling: *How would you like to play football for the University of Big Time, son? How would you like to be a star?* He's grown to 6-foot-3 and wins a state title in track. Nick Saban, fresh off a national championship at Alabama, pays a visit. So does LSU, Tennessee, Ole Miss, and anyone else that thinks they have a shot at the kid—over 40 scholarship offers in total. The 16-year-old feels like he's struggling to stay above water.

Lonnie takes a hard look and settles on none of the above. The University of Memphis has one of the worst football teams in the nation, but Lonnie believes in Larry Porter, a local coach who aspires to turn the team around. The response to his decision is unanimous: *WHY?*

There's enough outcry that Lonnie wavers. He decommits from Memphis and resumes talking to the powerhouses. Rumors swirl that he's going to Tennessee. Then April 2, 2010, arrives, and Brittany goes into labor. There in the delivery room a gooey tumbleweed comes out screaming and opens her eyes all the way wide. Lonnie cradles baby Londyn, and everything changes. He's going

to Memphis. Final answer. And after three years of high school, he has the credits to graduate.

"He stepped up and actually became a parent at 16," Sheila says. "He didn't just father a child; he made a decision that was best for the kid."

HE BARELY TURNED 17 before playing his first college game, and the first two years were a struggle. The team was getting blown out every week, and the hype surrounding him in high school dissipated. "It was like falling off the face of the earth," Sheila says.

Still, he found joy in playing in front of his family, who often filled an entire section of the stadium for home games. "It's a great feeling, running out of the tunnel, looking up and seeing all your people there," he says.

Coach Porter was fired after Lonnie's sophomore season and replaced by Justin Fuente, the co-offensive coordinator at TCU. Player and coach clashed right away: Lonnie says they openly disliked one another. The tension erupted during a spring practice when Lonnie got blocked on a goal-line play and Fuente launched into a diatribe, accusing him of being soft. Lonnie walked out and considered transferring. For all the sacrifices that led him to play for his hometown school, it felt like an injustice.

He steeled himself and endured, but the biggest challenge was yet to come. He and Brittany had a second daughter, Laila, but she wasn't gaining the proper weight after two months. Lonnie was driving in the car when the doctor called to inform him she had Down syndrome. One month later his baby girl was hospitalized for a week for open-heart surgery. Lonnie slept at the hospital and left for brief stints during the day to prepare for an upcoming game. He found in her a strength he'd never known. No more excuses, and no more taking things for granted. "She makes you look at life differently," he says. "It definitely changed my view on things."

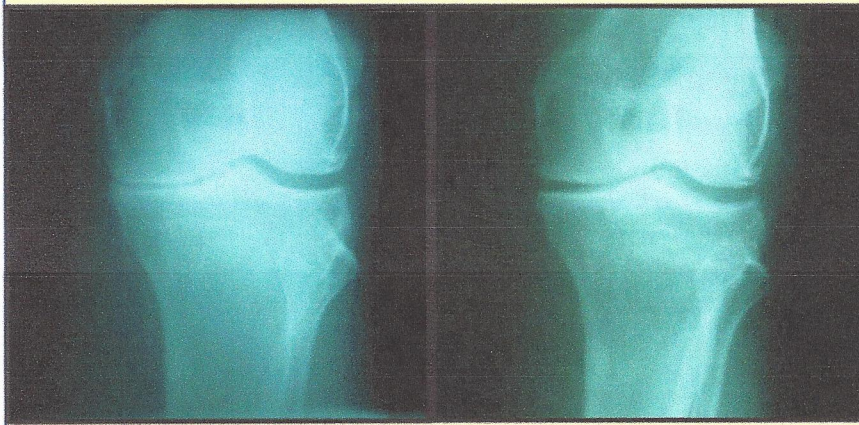
That year he was awarded the Iron Tiger, given to the team's hardest worker, and named All-Conference USA. Teammates leaned on him more than ever. His defensive backfield mate, Anthony Watson, a transfer from Blinn College, met Lonnie for the first time at a team gathering. Along with the other new arrivals, Anthony stood up and introduced himself.

Lonnie was the first to approach him afterward. "Whatever you need, you've got my number," Lonnie told him. "Call me anytime."

He eventually sat down with Fuente and thanked him for pushing him. "I don't know if I've ever seen somebody make as much emotional and physical progress as he made in the years we were here," Fuente says.

During his four years at Memphis he won a total of 10 games and played for two head coaches, four defensive coordinators, and four position coaches—not exactly the optimal structure to prepare for an NFL career. Despite the fact that he performed well when pro scouts visited campus, the chorus of doubters rose up once again. People in the community told him he would've been a first-round pick if he'd gone to Alabama. Instead, they said, he wouldn't be drafted at all.

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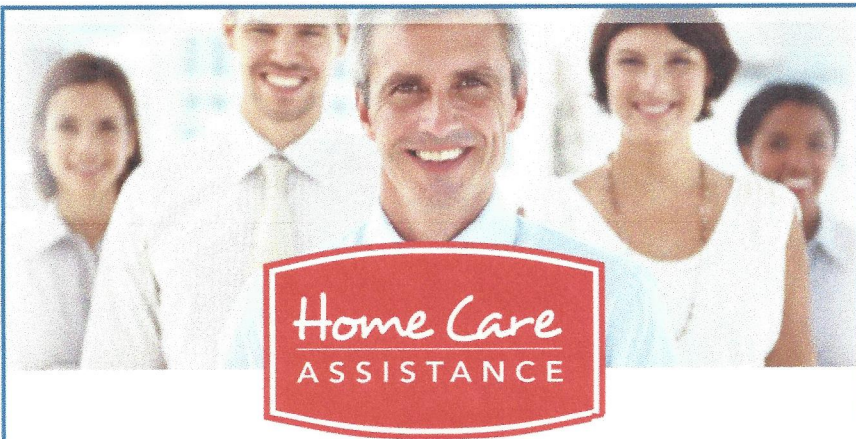
For more information and to read more on "The Knee Diaries", please visit www.arthritisusa.net or call (305) 866-8384, International: (305) 866-6995.

A TUESDAY AFTERNOON in July at John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California: A dozen people huddle near Baggage Carousel 1, wearing shirts with "Ballentine 256" emblazoned on the back. A few hold crudely drawn posters ("The Man. The Myth. The Legend." and "Touchdown!") while others unfurl a 10-foot banner: "Welcome Mr. Irrelevant."

Lonnie appears with his family, and the welcome party unleashes a roaring ruckus. A black minivan whisks the family away, needlessly escorted by a pair of cops on motorcycles. Lonnie is a celebrity, sort of.

Every year for nearly four decades, a troop of Orange County residents have thrown a weeklong, tongue-in-cheek bash for the last pick of the draft. Paul Salata, the 87-year-old leader of the group, had an undistinguished NFL career in the '40s and '50s but learned a few things along the way. "I sat on the bench enough to recognize it takes 50 guys," he says. He approached commissioner Pete Rozelle about celebrating the underdog, and Kelvin Kirk became the first Mr. Irrelevant in 1976.

That first evening Lonnie arrives at a Newport Beach barbecue aboard a 12-seat party bike peddled by a gaggle of pom-pom waving cheerleaders from nearby



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Costa Mesa High School. A band strikes up the Otis Redding classic “Hard to Handle,” and local mayor Rush Hill greets Lonnie as he sinks into an oversize beach chair. “Bonnie. It’s Bonnie, right? We’re here to celebrate you—whatever you’ve done.”

He’s presented with an inflatable raft filled with gifts that include a margarita machine and a surfboard with longhorns attached. A cowboy hat is placed atop his head, and he stumbles through a public lesson in the Texas Two-Step—an homage to his NFL destination.

The next morning he shows up early to a spin class and is led to his bike by Marisa Wayne, daughter of John Wayne. Alongside 40 Lululemon-clad women, he powers through a session to raise funds for Special Olympics Southern California. (The money raised by Irrelevant Week goes to the sports program; this year they hauled in over \$80,000.) Later that week he serves as honorary coach for a Special Olympics flag football game, and Lonnie’s all over the field slapping fives. His energy infects the crowd of 500; afterward fans stream out of the stands and encircle him seeking pictures and autographs. “They treated me like the first pick,” he says.

The festivities culminate in the grand ballroom of the Island Hotel. Newport Beach elite bid for golf excursions and high-end spirits at a silent auction. Lonnie and family enter to a standing ovation, and Lonnie takes a seat on stage. John Robinson, former head coach of the Los Angeles Rams, ribs a few attendees before turning to Lonnie. “You’re 6-foot-3, 218 pounds, and run a 4.3? You’re lying.” The crowd finds this hilarious.

Next up is agent Leigh Steinberg, the inspiration for *Jerry Maguire*. “Houston was very sorry last year. Have you been told that?” Former USC basketball coach

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Stan Morrison employs broken Spanish and warns Ballentine that he “no tiene un snowball’s chance in hell” of making the NFL. Dave Levy, onetime USC football assistant, takes a different tack: “Whether they draft you first or last, once you get to camp, all that counts is what you do.”

Lonnie is then presented the Lowsman Trophy—similar to the Heisman, except the bronze player is fumbling the ball off his knee.

THE HOUSTON TEXANS’ NRG Stadium sits just off the 610 Loop, south of downtown in a city built on a slab of concrete so expansive it feels like its own continental shelf. Massive panes of glass make up the facility’s outer walls, and when the sun hits just right it looks like a wall of water rising from the ground.

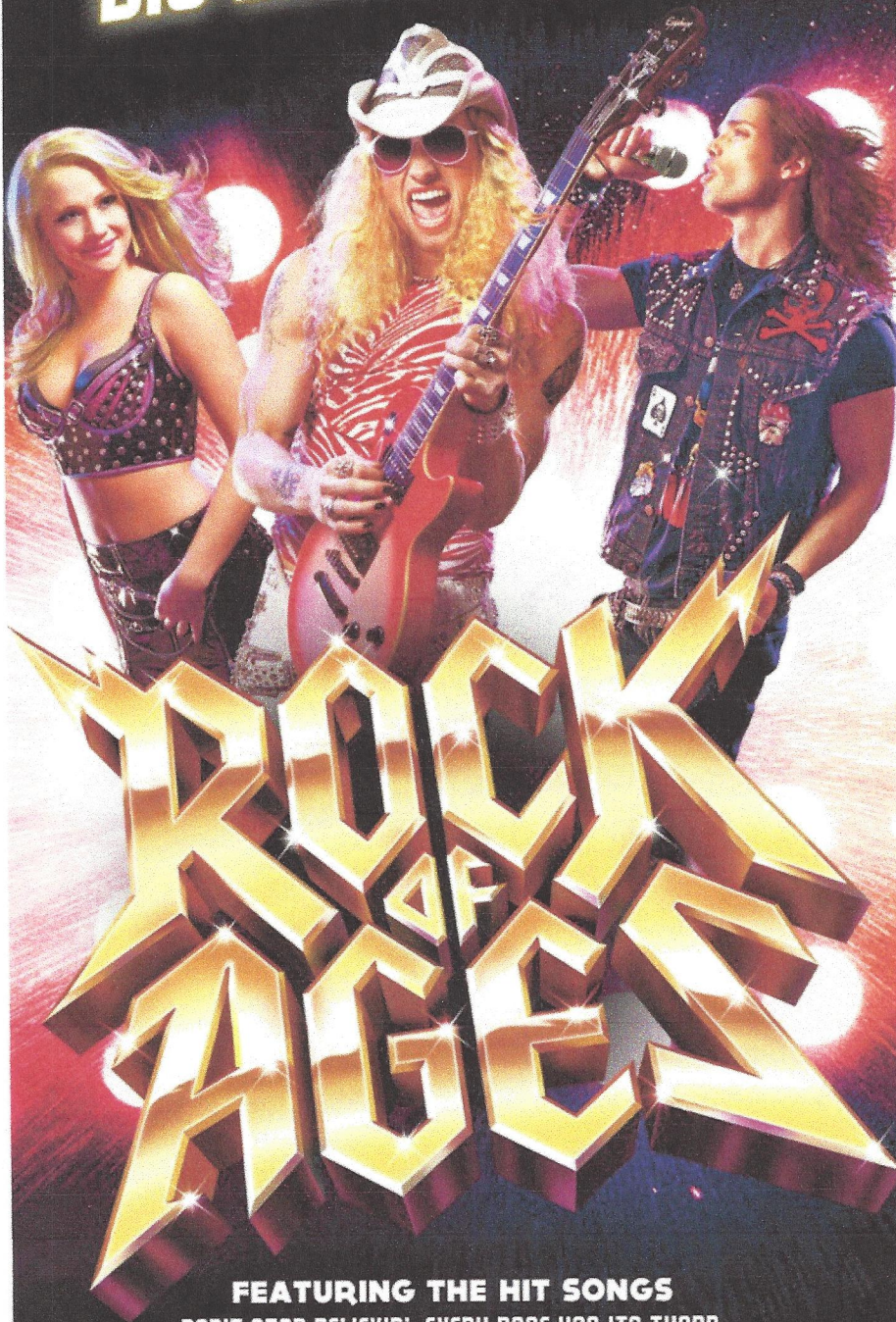
This is where Lonnie reported to training camp. But he never got the chance to put on pads. On the second day, while working on punt coverage, he planned to get off a block and felt his right hamstring pop. He collapsed and thought it was all over. *I’m gonna get out.*

A first-round draft choice would get the benefit of the doubt, but not the last pick. He waited a full week for news of what was next. Still attending team activities by day, at night the 21-year-old searched the Internet for next best options. He looked into law school and was too seized by panic to sleep.

Just before final cuts were announced he was called to the head coach’s office and knew the dream had come to an end. He packed his bag and made plans to drive home to Memphis that day, but Bill O’Brien delivered surprising news. *We want to keep you here. You’re the kind of guy we want in our locker room.*

They placed him on injured reserve for the season, a purgatory of irrelevancy where he’s part of the

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team but doesn't even suit up for practice. Next year he gets another shot, but until then he reports to the stadium for 10-hour workdays: rehabbing, running, lifting, and studying film.

What is it to be a professional athlete? Glitz and glamour and glory, big paydays and bigger parties? For Lonnie it means supporting his family. This year, there's no thrill or adrenaline. And next year he'll need to prove he's worth a roster spot, or else he's gone and the paychecks stop. "It's a real job," he says. "People don't understand that."

It's mid-September, lunch break in the Texans' locker room, and reporters swarm players like toddlers chasing a soccer ball, buzzing from one warm body to the next. Lonnie hangs in the corner wearing a gray Memphis hoodie. He's discussing barbecue, dry-rub Memphis style. "Gotta have it."

Teammate Tim Jamison prods him: "The best barbecue? It's mine. I make the best. Second best is Chicago. Sure ain't Memphis."

Lonnie recalls a Kansas City joint a friend once recommended. "They swore up and down it was gonna be so good. It was terrible."

"Tell you what man," Jamison says. "Probably tastes just as bad as that Memphis barbecue."

Lonnie laughs it off. He's really just talking about home. His family—wife, daughters, mom, aunt, and cousin Sam—are on their way from Memphis. He hasn't seen them in months, and he's prepping for a move to a house in the suburbs. It's got a nice backyard, so they'll put up a swing set for the girls. He's thinking of taking them out to the bowling alley—he's an avid bowler. And it's still hot in Houston, so maybe they'll check out the swimming pool.

David Eckstein is based in Los Angeles. He's written for Sports Illustrated, Wired, and Maxim.