

# Generation Next

Two decades ago, we predicted that the four athletes who appeared on our first cover would lead their sports into the next millennium. Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell and Lindros more than justified our faith. And, like us, they're not done yet. —STEVE WULF

## SEEMS LIKE YESTERDAY.

There they stand, four young men in black, posed against a white backdrop: Kobe, Alex, Kordell, Eric. Above their heads is a gold ESPN logo, and above that, at the top of the page, PREMIER ISSUE. The date in the lower left hand corner reads March 23, 1998. But it's the red cover billing on that very first issue that speaks the loudest: Next. With a period. End of sentence.

From the perspective of today, there is a bittersweet irony to that word. This is the last regular edition of *ESPN The Magazine*: October 2019. And while staff members past and present are naturally wistful about the end of an era, we're also grateful for the opportunity to have taken readers on a voyage around the sports world. In many respects, we're lucky: Back in the spring of '98, the futures of our Next Four were far more assured than ours was. Had you told those of us who were there for the launch that we wouldn't pull into port for another 21½ years, we would have thought you were crazy.

As for the four men we thought would lead their sports into the next millennium, well, they more than justified our faith, putting up numbers as oversized as we were and distilling the most from their careers. And since that was then and this is now, we asked the original Gen Next to take a look back at that first issue.

**"OH, MAN,** I have a full head of hair," Kobe Bryant says one morning from his offices at Granity Studios in Newport Beach, California. "And I like that I'm standing next to Alex. I only knew who Alex was at the time, but we became good friends over the years."

The profile of Bryant written by Tom Friend in that issue is prescient: "He is 19, and he has a book to read, and he has a BMW to drive, and he has a floppy hat to

wear, and he has a generation to carry, and, well, he wants the job."

That he did. Bryant won five NBA titles for the Lakers and two gold medals for Team USA, became the first guard in NBA history to play 20 seasons, made 18 All-Star teams, scored 81 points in a 2006 game against the Raptors and 33,643 for his career. He retired in 2016, which means he'll enter the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2020.

His life is not without fault. Depending on one's perspective, he has or has not paid an appropriate price for a well-documented transgression. But at the end of the day, he has two retired numbers (8 and 24), four daughters, ranging in age from 16 years to 3 months, a 2018 Oscar for Best Animated Short (*Dear Basketball*), an ongoing relationship with ESPN (the *Detail* series), as well as Kobe Inc. and Granity Studios, which is producing an animated series (*The Punies*) and publishing Young Adult novels. Oh, and he coaches his 13-year-old daughter Gigi's AAU basketball team.

In that original story, Bryant quotes the ancient philosopher Plutarch: "Those who are serious in ridiculous matters will be ridiculous in serious matters." Friend also describes Kobe getting out of his BMW

when he sees a kid with KB8 Adidas and telling him, "Nice sneakers, how's your game?"

That desire to reach out remains in evidence. "I'm tremendously proud of my basketball accomplishments," Bryant says. "I want to be remembered as a player who did everything he possibly could to succeed and ended up overachieving. But I want my true impact to be on the players of today. I hope they see me as a North Star."

Those who have seen Gigi play say she has the Mamba Mentality. "She has her heart set on UConn," Kobe says. "Geno Auriemma has been incredibly nice to her, and the players treat her like their little sister." But for now, Kobe's next order of business is to start editing the second book in Wesley King's Wizenard series, which is about a group of young basketball players who come under the spell of a mystical coach, Professor Ralabi Wizenard.

Each of the chapters in the first book, *Training Camp*, begins with one of Wizenard's Plutarchian proverbs. The one above Chapter 3 reads, "The past is a gift. It reminds you there is a future."

**IT'S AUG. 4,** and Alex Rodriguez has good reason to feel jet-lagged.

After working a game at Fenway Park the week before, he had flown to Israel with his fiancée for a concert Jennifer Lopez was giving in Tel Aviv—his fiancée and J-Lo being, of course, one and the same. "Not the usual way to go from Boston to New York," he says. "But what a fantastic trip."

Now sitting in the broadcast booth with daughters Natasha, 14, and Ella, 11, as he prepares to do this week's Red Sox-Yankees *Sunday Night Baseball* game from Yankee Stadium, A-Rod takes a look at that first cover. "Girls, look how skinny your father was." Natasha takes a photo of it with her





phone. When he leafs through the issue and sees who wrote his profile, he chuckles. "Timmy wrote this? I forgot."

The byline is that of Tim Kurkjian, who today provides commentary for *Monday Night Baseball*. They now have similar jobs on back-to-back nights, although Rodriguez has 696 more homers than Kurkjian. Here's what the latter wrote back then: "The date of birth must be a typo: 7/27/75. Someone who is so often compared to the best shortstops in history, who says all the right things, who does so many great things cannot possibly be only 22."

Rodriguez was only two years removed from perhaps the best major league season by a minor in history: .358, 36 homers and 123 RBIs. He would help revolutionize the shortstop position. "That's one of the things I'm proudest of," he says. "The three of us—Derek [Jeter], Nomar [Garcia] and myself—took the position even beyond what Ernie Banks and Cal Ripken had done."

As a shortstop for the Mariners and Rangers, and then a third baseman for the Yankees, Rodriguez was a 14-time All-Star, a three-time MVP and a World Series champion (2009). He finished his 22-year career with a .295 average, 2,086 RBIs, 3,115 hits and those 696 blasts. His numbers look an awful lot like those of Willie Mays.

But that won't be his baseball legacy and A-Rod knows it. It was not a life without fault: He will always have an asterisk around his neck for his use of performance-enhancing drugs, which led to his suspension for the 2014 season. Unless there's a dramatic, empathetic swing among Hall of Fame voters, Rodriguez will be shut out of Cooperstown, the way Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens and Mark McGwire have been.

"I made a terrible mistake," he says, "and I have to live with it. But I also have a wonderful opportunity to make amends, to show my girls you can learn from your mistakes. "Look at them, laughing over there. That's Next."

**KORDELL STEWART HAS** a few minutes before he heads off for practice. He is helping the quarterbacks at North Atlanta High School, where his son Syre is a junior. "He's Little Slash," Kordell says. "Cornerback/scatback. Playing quarterback would be a little too

much pressure for him and me, so we're not going down *that* road."

Stewart has always had a complicated love/hate relationship with the position. Even though the New Orleans native played quarterback for the University of Colorado, the Steelers drafted him in the second round in '95 with the intention of making him a wide receiver. But Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher noticed Stewart's arm and his running ability and his vision. He gifted him with the nickname Slash and then, before the '97 season, the QB job.

Kordell responded by leading the Steelers to an 11-5 regular-season record and the AFC championship game, throwing for 3,020 yards and becoming the first quarterback to run for two TDs and pass for three in the same game twice.

That's why he made that first cover, which he's looking at as we speak. "Kobe and A-Rod, wow. That's quite an honor," Stewart says.

"I'm not a hockey guy, so I don't know much about Eric Lindros. Goalie, right?" Uh,

wrong, but when told that Lindros was a forward who's in the Hockey Hall of Fame, Kordell says, "I didn't have their longevity, but I am proud of my role in the evolution of the quarterback. Look at all the mobile quarterbacks in the NFL now."

In the first issue, writer Rick Telander poses the question of why Stewart had to wait three seasons to become an NFL QB: "Who knows?" Stewart says now—as if we don't.

Stereotypes are even harder to outrun than opposing defenses, and they caught up to him the very next season, when the Steelers didn't make the playoffs. In *Truth*, Stewart's 2016 autobiography, he describes a particularly ugly scene after a game in Pittsburgh. "As I walked off the field and into the tunnel," he wrote, "someone threw a cup full of beer at my head that gushed into my eyes. I looked up. A man looked me dead in the eyes and yelled, 'N----!'"

Stewart walked away. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the Edgar Albert Guest poem "See It Through." He had memorized it growing up and took comfort in the words "You may fail, but you may conquer/ See it through!"

Three years later, he had his best season, throwing for 3,109 yards and rushing for 537 more as the Steelers went 13-3 in the regular

**Our first four have had notable second acts: Bryant as an author, Rodriguez an analyst, Stewart a high school coach and Lindros an advocate for concussion awareness.**

season and beat the Ravens 27-10 in their AFC divisional game. In the AFC championship game against New England, Stewart almost brought the Steelers back from a 21-3 deficit, but they lost 24-17 to the eventual Super Bowl XXXVI champs. "That hurt," he says. "The Super Bowl was in New Orleans. My father would have loved it."

That season was pretty much his last hurrah. He lost his job to Tommy Maddox the next year, then got actually slashed by the Steelers. Subsequent stints with the Bears and Ravens didn't work out. He became a football analyst, co-hosted a radio talk show, appeared with soon-to-be-ex-wife Portia Williams on *Platinum Weddings* and worked on his golf game.

In the summer of 2015, Stewart found himself at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton for the induction of friend and teammate Jerome Bettis. "I loved being a Steeler," he says, "but that weekend, I was reminded of what I didn't like about it. Dan Rooney, the Steelers' owner and a lovely man, was there, and I went over to him to pay my respects. He didn't recognize me at first, but then I bent down to his eye level. He smiled and said, 'Kordell! You know, if you had just stayed at wide receiver, you might be here too.'"

For now, Stewart is content tending to his business interests, raising his son as a single parent and teaching the high school QBs how to play the position. And now it's time to go to practice.

One more thing. Does he still remember the poem?

He laughs. "When you're up against a trouble ..." When he finishes 24 lines later with "See it through!" he laughs again and says, "How's that?"

#### "PRETTY GOOD COMPANY."

So says a 46-year-old father of three young children, who owns a lumber mill and still plays recreational hockey. He is sitting in the Toronto offices of the NHL Players' Association, for which he also works, and looking at the 25-year-old Eric Lindros. "Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell and me. I didn't realize the importance of the cover shoot at the time. What'd I know? I was just a kid from London, Ontario."

Lindros was actually the most established of the four. His nickname was "The Next One," a play on "The Great One," Wayne Gretzky. The pressure to be a superstar had started to build. As Dan Shaughnessy wrote in his Lindros profile, "The game is hard enough without folks carving your face into hockey's Mount Rushmore before you've skated a shift as a professional."

He was big and fast and something of a lightning rod, thanks to his refusal to play for the hapless Quebec Nordiques, who had drafted him in 1991. So they had to trade Lindros to Philadelphia, where he and his other Legion of Doom linemates (John LeClair and Mikael Renberg) became the most feared offensive force in hockey. Before he made our cover, he had already been named team captain ('94), won the Hart Trophy as league MVP ('95) and taken the Flyers to the '97 Stanley Cup Final, which they lost to the Red Wings.

But just as our first issue was going to press, Lindros was crossing the blue line in Pittsburgh when he glanced down after losing the puck in his skates and got blasted by defenseman Darius Kasparaitis. In the showers after the game, he became disoriented, thinking he had been traded.

Still, as great a player as he was, Lindros

**"I want my true impact to be on the players of today. I hope they see me as a North Star."**

KOBE BRYANT

might have a greater impact on the game now as an advocate for concussion awareness and safer play. "That's what I want my legacy to be," he says. "That's why I'd like to see body contact eliminated in hockey below the age of 15."

It took Lindros longer than it should have to get into the Hockey Hall of Fame, but he finally made it in 2016. "I'm fortunate beyond measure," he says. "I'm happier than I've ever been. [My wife] Kina and I have the kids, I get to work at the timber mill with my dad, and a few times a week I play shinny with a bunch of old pros at the local rink."

"And every time, I'm reminded of what a great sport hockey is. Without the hitting."

**AND SO WE** come to the end of our shift. After 7,837 days, 693 covers and countless moments of pride, we're putting the regular issue to bed for good. Granted, it's only the end *on paper*. We will continue to produce stories for ESPN's many platforms, scanning the horizon for our audience as we always have. Still, we wish to thank our readers, the powers-that-be that let us be, and the many talented people we've worked with over the years. We also need to express our gratitude to the many athletes who tolerated our requests and allowed us to bring them into your homes.

In *Dear Basketball*, Kobe says, "I'm ready to let you go," then counts down the final seconds on an animated scoreboard clock. That brings to mind the very real scoreboard we had when we published the magazine in New York. It was there to remind us of the time remaining before deadline. Five, four, three, two, one ...

Next. ■