Generation Next

Two decades ago, we predicted that the four athletes who appeared on our first cover would lead the sport into the next millennium. Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell, and LeBron were 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, poised against a white backdrop: Kobe, A-Rod, Kordell, LeBron. 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 still red cover billing on that very first issue that sparks the loudest: Next. With a period. End of sentence.

From the perspective of today, there is a bit of irony in 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’ve been 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 21 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, put our perspective, he has or has not paid a 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 Pinups) 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 shoes, 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 achieving. 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. “Gigi’s Autumn 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 Wizarin series, which is about a group of young basketball players who come under the spell of a mystical coach, Professor Ro-lats Wizamard.

Each of the chapters in the first book, Frozen in Time, begins with one of Wizarin’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. 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 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 21 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, put
Playing quarterback would be a little too much pressure for him and me, so we're not going down that road.

Stewart had always had a complicated love/hate relationship with the position. Even though the New Orleans native played quarterback for the University of Colorado, the Showlers drafted him in the second round in 1991 with the intention of making him a wide receiver. But Pittsburgh coach Bill Cowher had seen Stewart's arm and running ability and his vision. He gifted him with the nickname Shuck and then, before the ’97 season, the QBJ.

Kordell responded by leading the Steelers to an 11-5 season record and the AFC championship game, throwing for 3,309 yards, 21 touchdowns and nine interceptions. He almost brought the Showlers back from a 21-3 deficit, but they lost 24-27 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 traded by the Showlers. Subsequent stints with the Bears and Ravens didn’t work out. He became a football analyst, co-hosted a radio talk show, appeared on several more talks with 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 former teammate Jerome Bettis. “I loved being a Steeler,” he says. “That weekend, I was reminded of what I didn’t like about Don Rooney. The Showlers’ 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 be eye level. He smiled and said, ‘Kordell! You know, if you had just stayed at the University of Colorado.’ I also have a sense of humor.

For Stewart, content is key to his business interests, raising his son as a single parent and running his foundation. He says, “I’m fortunate because I’m a great sport hockey is. Without the hitting.”

That was the first concussion. Over the next two seasons, he suffered at least four more. Flyer general manager Bobby Clarke accused him of being soft, but Lindros had every reason to be concerned. His younger brother, Brett, had quit the game after two seasons with the Islanders because of concussions. The end of Lindros’ Flyers career came in Game 7 of the 2000 Eastern Conference finals when Devils defenseman Scott Stevens used his left shoulder to blast Lindros in the head. As Lindros lay on the ice, true hockey fans began to realize that the game itself had to come to its senses.

After sitting out the next season, Lindros was traded to Philadelphia, where he and his other Legion of Doom teammates John LeClair and Mikael Renberg became the most feared offensive force in hockey. Before he made his return, he had already been named team captain (’94), won the Hart Trophy as league MVP (’97) 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 his stick in his backhand and his fellow defenseman Darius Kasparaitis. In the showmen after the game, he became disoriented, thinking he had been traded.

That might have a greater impact on the game now as an advocate for concussion awareness. The former Flyers center is also a Concussion Awareness Advocate and uses his legacy to be,” he says. “That’s why I’d like to see body contact eliminated in hockey before the age of 12.”

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.”

And so we come to the end of our shift. After 7,637 days, 893 covers and countless moments of pride, we’re putting the regular issue to bed for good. Granted, it’s only the end on papers. 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 all the talented people we’ve worked with over the years. We also need to express our gratitude to the children who tolerated our requests and allowed us to bring you this issue.

In our introduction, Kordell says, “I’m ready to let you go,” then counts down the final seconds on an animated scoreboard.

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...