

The Best AMERICAN SPORTS WRITING™ 2014

Edited and with an Introduction
by Christopher McDougall

Glenn Stout, *Series Editor*



A Mariner Original

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Foreword

THERE ARE MANY WAYS to measure the impact or success of a book. In these metric-driven times, the temptation is to reduce everything to data—sales figures, “starred” reviews, Facebook shares, etc. Even the fact that this is the 24th edition since the series launched in 1991 says something about its value.

Still, for this book, a collection of stories, perhaps the best measure is the stories inspired by *The Best American Sports Writing* itself. For me at least, that measure helps justify the work that goes into putting it together every year.

To be clear, I am not referring to the *writing* the book has inspired, although it is certainly true that it has done so, serving as some motivation for a generation of sportswriters. I mean instead the stories that contributors and readers have told me about the book, the personal stories about the role it has come to play in their lives.

In addition to my duties as series editor of this annual collection and as the author of the occasional book, for the past few years I have also served as editor of the longform journalism page for SBNation.com. As I acquire and then edit stories for the site, I have had the opportunity to talk with and work with hundreds of writers; I find these interactions incredibly rewarding and gratifying—as much so at times as I find writing myself. At some point, most of these writers tell me what this book has meant to their career or to their development as a writer. It’s something that is always nice to hear, and when I speak with the contributors to this book, they often tell me the same thing.

Given that I’ve been doing this since 1991, I am older than many contributors and almost all the writers I work with. I have become accustomed to hearing someone say, “I’ve been reading this book my whole life.” Until recently, however, that statement was usually hyperbole.

Not anymore. Earlier this year, as I discussed a story with a younger writer, he blurted out that he found working with me “surreal.” I laughed aloud and asked him why. In all seriousness, he told me that he had been reading this book his entire life. I paused, then asked him his age. When he told me, I did the math—not only was he correct, but in fact the first edition of this book predated his appearance on the planet by several years. In fact, I suspect that when he was first old enough to read this book, he was already 12 or 15 years behind. Reality, it seems, has more than caught up with flattery.

I also occasionally correspond on a variety of other matters with writers, including many *BASW* contributors. In one email exchange with a writer whom I’ve been happy to include in these pages more than once, he told me that the first thing anyone sees when they enter his house is his collection of *The Best American Sports Writing*. I think I responded with some quick quip—my series collection is in the basement, buried on a shelf in my terminally messy office under other books. He soon sent me another email with the subject line “What It Means.”

Attached was a photograph. I clicked it open, and sure enough, on a set of shelves that appeared custom-made, was a complete stack of *The Best American Sports Writing*, 1991 through 2013, flanked by the books of writing legends such as Frank DeFord and Jim Murray.

But it’s not just what books mean to my colleagues and other writers that matters. There’s also the way books can connect readers and bring people together. My only disappointment with the growing trend to read books and stories on tablets and phones is that it is no longer possible to eavesdrop on what people are reading in public places, to find kindred minds by way of a book or magazine cover.

Years ago, I once traveled the country by train, a nearly monthlong trip that took me from Boston south through New York and Washington to New Orleans, then up to St. Louis to visit family before heading southwest and up the West Coast to Los Angeles and San Francisco, where I pillaged the

bookstores. I returned by way of Portland and Seattle before heading east—a marathon journey home after a more meandering start. But I had a bag full of new books, and as the Rockies gave way to the Great Plains and then the Great North Woods, I read my way back across the country.

Somewhere north of Chicago, on the fourth day since my last shower, someone tapped me on the back. Another passenger had seen what I was reading and wanted to talk. By the time we reached Boston a day and a half later, we were already friends, probably the most memorable part of an 8,000-mile journey across some 30 states.

A onetime *BASW* contributor told me a similar story about this book and the role it played in a friendship of his. He and his best friend from college had something of a mercurial relationship. A few years after graduating, they had a falling-out, stopped talking, and lost touch with each other. One day his former friend was killing time at a bookstore, not really looking for anything but just browsing, and he picked up a copy of this book. He absently thumbed through the pages, and when his eyes landed on the contributor's name, he yelled out in surprise, "Hey, I know this guy!" He was so surprised and excited that he grabbed several strangers and just had to show them that he knew one of the contributors: "My best friend from college wrote this!!!"

That gave him an excuse to reconnect. He called the contributor, told him about finding his story in this book, and they started talking again. They have remained close ever since, a friendship saved by the power and reach of words—and a little help from *The Best American Sports Writing*.

Then there was the time I accepted an invitation to speak. When I arrived and met the man who had invited me, we started chatting. He was a teacher, he said, and knew of me primarily from this book. He told me that when he got the book each fall he would set it aside without even cracking it open, waiting for a snow day. Then, on that special day in the late fall or early winter when he would get the call informing him that school was canceled, he knew it was time. As the snow fell he would settle into a comfortable chair, open the book, and spend his unscheduled holiday sinking into its pages. Now, when the phone rings in my house with news of a snow day or I sit as the snow falls reading through submissions, I think of him.

I could go on, but of all the stories this book has inspired I do have a favorite. A longtime reader of this title was on a bus—or perhaps a subway train, I can't recall—when a young person saw him carrying this book and struck up a conversation. As they chatted this reader mentioned that he was a sportswriter. The younger person, as yet undecided on a career, liked to write, liked sports, and grew curious. So he asked the sportswriter how one becomes a working writer, what courses to take and what to read—all the things young writers worry about. The sportswriter did his best to answer, but they soon arrived at the next stop. It was time to part ways, and he knew he had not answered all the young man's questions.

Then he remembered that he was carrying this book. As they parted he simply handed the young writer-to-be his copy of *The Best American Sports Writing*. "Just read this," he said.

I like to think it helped a young writer get off to a good start. One day I hope to hear the rest of that story, perhaps even in this book.

Each year I read every issue of hundreds of sports and general interest magazines in search of writing that might merit inclusion in *The Best American Sports Writing*. I also write or email the editors of many hundreds of newspapers and magazines and request submissions, and I send email notices to hundreds of readers and writers whose addresses I have accumulated over the years. I search for writing all over the Internet and make regular stops at online sources like Sportsdesk.org, Gangrey.com, Byliner.com, Longreads.com, Longform.org, Nieman.org, and other sites where notable sports writing is highlighted or discussed. Still, I also encourage everyone—readers and writers, friends and family, editors and enemies—to send me stories they believe should appear in this

volume. Writers in particular are encouraged to submit—do not be shy about sending me either your own work or the work of those you admire.

Each submission to the upcoming edition must be made according to the following criteria. Each story

- must be column-length or longer.
- must have been published in 2014.
- must not be a reprint or book excerpt.
- must have been published in the United States or Canada.
- must be received by February 1, 2015.

All submissions from either print or online publications must be made in hard copy and should include the name of the author, the date of publication, and the publication name and address. Photocopies, tear sheets, or clean copies are fine. Readable reductions to 8½-by-11 are preferred. Newspaper stories should be submitted with either the original newspaper copy of the piece or a photocopy of the piece as originally published—not a printout of the web version. Individuals and publications should please use common sense when submitting multiple stories. I receive a heavy volume of material, so no submissions can be returned or acknowledged; it is also inappropriate for me to comment on or critique any submission. Magazines that want to be absolutely certain their contributions are considered are advised to provide a complimentary subscription to the address list below. Those that already do so should extend the subscription for another year.

All submissions must be made by U.S. mail—weather conditions in midwinter here at BASW headquarters often keep me from receiving UPS or FedEx submissions. Electronic submissions by any means, whether email or Twitter or URLs, and pdfs or other electronic documents are not acceptable. Only some form of hard copy, please. The February 1 deadline is real, and work received after that date may not be considered.

Please submit either an original or a clear paper copy of each story, including publication name, author, and the date the story appeared, to:

Glenn Stout
PO Box 549
Alburgh, VT 05440

All submissions from me to the guest editor are made blindly, not identified by source or author.

Those with questions or comments may contact me at basweditor@yahoo.com. Copies of previous editions of this book can be ordered through most bookstores or online book dealers. An index of stories that have appeared in this series can be found at my website, glennstout.net, as can full instructions on how to submit a story. For updated information, readers and writers are also encouraged to join the *Best American Sports Writing* group on Facebook or to follow me on Twitter [@GlennStout](https://twitter.com/GlennStout).

Thanks to guest editor Christopher McDougall for his attentiveness, to Michael Everett, Joel Reese, Wright Thompson, and Jon Gold for sharing their BASW stories with me, and to everyone at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for supporting this book. My thanks also go to Siobhan and Saorla for stumbling over the occasional carton of submissions and not complaining too much. And to the writers collected within, I hope this book helps you find more stories.

GLENN STOUT
Alburgh, Vermont

Introduction

DEATH-ROW CELLS have better natural light than the Rite Aid in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where you can only glimpse the sky through the sad slit of a window above the checkout counter. That's where I was gazing one afternoon when two bodies suddenly sailed past.

These guys had to be six feet in the air, flying by one after the other like they'd been slung out of a catapult. Moments later they reappeared outside the glass doors, this time swinging through the railings of the handicapped ramp. By the time I got to the cash register, I'd watched them hurdle, vault, tightrope-walk, and otherwise wring a crazy amount of movement out of those blue bars. I hurried outside to catch them, but they weren't leaving any time soon. "You start practicing parkour, one told me, "and whole nights disappear."

Technically, he was talking about *l'art du déplacement*, more universally known by the funkified version of its other name, *parcours*—French for "obstacle course." Parkour was born in the late 1980s when a band of mixed-race kids living on the outskirts of Paris got tired of being roughed up by bullies. Together, they created their own "training method for warriors," as cofounder David Belle would explain. The original parkour tribe didn't mind mentoring other true believers who were willing to submit to their punishing tutorials, but otherwise they had just about zero interest in sharing their skill with the rest of the world. They detested the idea of competition and produced no training videos or instruction books. Until very recently, you had only two choices if you wanted to learn parkour: go to France or try your luck with YouTube.

Not surprisingly, the two guys I met in the Rite Aid parking lot got their start on the YouTube route. They studied videos of other self-taught parkour disciples and broke down lightning-quick sequences frame by frame, into individual moves. Like the original parkour crew, they were using their own bodies to discover the most animal-efficient way to fly over, around, and under the hard edges of the city landscape the way monkeys tumble through the trees.

"I got into it because I was so fat," Neal Schaeffer told me. He'd begun partying after high school and by age 20 had bloated up from 175 pounds to 240. One afternoon he was in the park watching some strangers "Kong-vault" picnic tables—they'd charge a table, plant their hands, and shoot both feet through their arms like gorillas and fly off the other side—and Neal was talked into giving it a try. Neal was shocked to discover that even out of shape, once he got over his fear he could master skills that at first looked impossible.

Well, maybe not *master*. "You're on this endless trajectory where you're always getting better, but it's never good enough," Neal explained. "That's what's so exciting. As soon as you land one jump, you can't wait to try it again. You're always looking for ways to make it cleaner, stronger, flow into your next move." Neal became a member of a local parkour tribe that likes to train after midnight, when the city is all theirs. Whenever a police car prowls by, they drop to the ground and bang out push-ups. "No matter what time it is, no one bothers you when you're exercising." Within a year, Neal was so fit and trim he was able to scramble to the roof of a three-story building and hang off the flagpole like Spider-Man. *You're back*, he told himself.

Neal still doesn't rank his skills on the level of Andy Keller, a recent college grad who returned to Lancaster to rejoin his local parkour homies. You can tell within about 90 seconds of meeting Andy that he'd probably be superb at any sport he tried. He's strong and graceful, with a swimmer's broad back and enough bad-assery, as I witnessed firsthand the day we met, to bust out a back flip in the middle of a crowded coffee shop because his buddy dared him. I'd come to see him because of a theory I was looking into that the sports that truly evolved from human survival were the ones with the smallest performance gap between men and women. Logically, anything our ancestors relied on to

stay alive would be activities that both men and women, old and young alike, would be good at. Endurance sports fit the bill, as 64-year-old Diana Nyad demonstrated when she became the first person to ever swim from Cuba to Florida without a shark cage. And what about parkour? With its emphasis on agility, control, and creativity, was it the tightest link we have in sports to our evolutionary past?

Andy agreed to show me the ropes. Which is how, a few days later, I found myself facing a six-foot high brick wall outside a bank during the lunch-hour rush on the busiest street in Lancaster. “You’ve got to learn to shut out distractions,” Andy said. “Forget who’s watching you. Forget where you are. Just focus, and go.” Then he broke into a sprint, hitting the wall full speed. He ran right up the bricks grabbing for the top and vaulting over. As he trotted back, he was met with applause. An audience had formed, blocking the sidewalk.

“Impressive, isn’t he?” I said to the guy beside me.

“I knew he’d make it,” the man responded. “I’m waiting to see if *you* do.”

Nosy Guy just bugged me at the time, but later—much later, when I was sitting in the middle of dozens of great sports stories from the past year and trying to put my finger on what connected them—I thought back to the way he’d watched me bang the tar out of my knees that afternoon and realized I was kind of glad he’d been there. In his own way, Nosy Guy is what sports writing is all about. Our games are at their best when they’re shared, when electricity jumps from the player on the field to the fan in the stands and a connection is sparked between what you see and what you believe you can do yourself.

That’s what happened to me when I came across David Merrill’s wonderful story “The One-Legged Wrestler Who Conquered His Sport, Then Left It Behind” and Amanda Hess’s “You Can Only Hope to Contain Them,” her so-smart (and superbly titled) piece on, arguably, the most important breakthrough in athletic equipment of our lifetime: the sports bra. I felt the shock; the spark crackled between my life and two worlds I knew nothing about. I’d never imagined what it would be like to kneel on a mat with one leg and hope I could somehow burst up and around and take down someone with all limbs attached. Deep-diving into that experience through Merrill’s reporting made me think that maybe, you know, scuffing myself up on a brick wall to learn parkour wasn’t much to whine about after all. And wow! To reach the peak of collegiate wrestling despite that handicap and then suddenly walk away because . . . well, dig in for yourself and find out.

Likewise with breasts. I didn’t know Amanda Hess’s writing before coming across this piece, but I’m on high alert from now on. What remains with you after you’ve read it isn’t even her light-touch storytelling and ability to pull up just the right tales to bring her point to life, but the gratitude you feel whenever someone opens your eyes so that you see things differently from then on. When I finished reading the stories nominated for this year’s collection, I was so blown away I went online to announce, “I’ll stack *Best American Sports Writing 2014* against any *Best American* anything of any year.” I’d never known I could feel sympathy for such devils as Don King, a criminal cage fighter, and bull sharks. Until Don Van Natta Jr. unearthed secrets from a generation ago, I had no idea that Bobb Riggs loved Billie Jean King. Truly loved her.

Did you? Well, strap in. You have no idea what you’re about to discover.

CHRISTOPHER MCDUGAN

The Gangster in the Huddle

FROM ROLLING STONE

THE FIRST TEXT pinged him around nine that Sunday night: *I'm coming to grab that tonight, you gon b around? I need dat and we could step for a little again.* For Odin Lloyd, this was bang-up news, proof that his luck had turned around. Aaron Hernandez, the Pro Bowl tight end of the New England Patriots was coming by later to scoop him up for another five-star debauch, just 36 hours after he'd taken Lloyd out for the wildest ride of his life. All night Friday, they'd kicked it at Rumor, popping bottles and pulling models up the steps of the VIP section of the Boston theater district's hottest club. "Shit was crazy," Lloyd told friends the next day at his niece's dance recital. "The girls were off the chain. We smoked that super-duper and Aaron dropped 10 G's like it was nothing. We kept rolling past daw at his big-ass mansion, then he tossed me the keys to his Suburban."

Big doings for a semipro football player and underemployed landscape helper, though there too fortune smiled on Lloyd, 27. He'd just gotten word that he'd have shifts all week, his first steady hours in some time. And now he was about to burn it down again with Hernandez, the \$40 million man with the restless streak and a bottomless taste for chronic. The problem, Lloyd said, was it didn't end there with Hernandez and his how-high crew: "Them boys is into way worse shit than herb."

How much worse? About as bad as it gets, say longtime family friends. In exclusive conversations with *Rolling Stone*, those friends, who insisted they not be named, say Hernandez was using the maniacal drug angel dust, had fallen in with a crew of gangsters and convinced himself that his life was in danger, carrying a gun wherever he went. Sources close to the tight end add that throughout the spring, when players are expected to be preparing themselves for the marathon NFL season, Hernandez had missed workouts and sessions with a rehab trainer and had been told by his head coach Bill Belichick, that he was one misstep from being cut.

But training camp was six weeks away, and Hernandez wasn't one to heed a warning. He went on hitting the clubs with his boys, including Lloyd, who was dating his fiancée's sister. That Sunday, Lloyd's best friend urged him to stay home, saying he needed his sleep for the week ahead. Lloyd had already been up all weekend—he'd taken his friends clubbing Saturday night in Hernandez's black Suburban. Hernandez wouldn't hear it, though; he kept texting Lloyd. *Aite, where?* Lloyd relented, ignoring his friend. *It don't matter but imma hit you,* said Hernandez at 9:39. *If my phone dies imma hit u when I charge it.*

Tonight, though, wouldn't be anything like Friday. All weekend, Hernandez had been stewing in his 7,000-square-foot mansion 45 minutes outside Boston in North Attleborough, not far from Gillette Stadium, where the Patriots play, fixated on something that happened in the club two nights earlier. Per a close friend of Lloyd's, they'd been getting buzzed in VIP when Lloyd saw two of his cousins downstairs. He went to hug them up and buy them drinks when one of them, a West Indian with dreads, started pointing and mean-mugging Hernandez. "I don't like that nigger, he's one of them funny people," said the cousin. "Stop pointing, that's my boy," said Lloyd of Hernandez. "You're gonna start some shit 'tween me and him." "Well, I don't want you with him, he's a punk," said Lloyd's cousin, jabbing his finger again in Hernandez's direction.

When Lloyd went back upstairs, Hernandez was enraged. Club security cameras allegedly captured the two men squabbling, showing Hernandez, six-two and a rippled 250, facing off with the five-eleven Lloyd. The friends stopped short of throwing punches, though cameras mounted outside the club show the argument resuming in the street.

Most people, even self-important stars blowing thousands on bottle-shaped women, might have simmered down about now. But the 23-year-old Aaron Hernandez wasn't like most people; for ages, he hadn't even been like himself. The sweet, goofy kid from Bristol, Connecticut, with the klieg-light smile and ex-thug dad who'd turned his life around to raise two phenom sons—*that* Aaron Hernandez had barely been heard from in the seven hard years since his father was snatched away, killed in his prime by a medical error that left his boys soul-sick and lost. Once in a great while, the good Aaron would surface, phoning one of his college coaches to tell him he loved him and to talk to the man's kids for hours, or stopping Robert Kraft, the Patriots' owner, to kiss him on the cheek and thank him damply. There was such hunger in that kid for a father's hand, and such greatness itching to get out, that coach after coach had covered for him whenever the bad Aaron showed—the violent, furious kid who was dangerous to all, most particularly, it seems, to his friends.

And so, two days after the spat with Lloyd, he was nursing his rubbed-raw grievance. "You can't trust anyone anymore!" he's heard screaming on the footage of his home-security system. Sometime that night, he reached out to a couple of Bristol goons, Ernest Wallace and Carlos Ortiz—two stumblebum crooks with long sheets of priors and no job or fixed address to lay their heads—and ordered them to take the two-hour drive to Boston on the double, telling one of them, *Hurry ur ass up here, nigga*.

Around 1:10 A.M., Hernandez set off with Wallace and Ortiz in a rented Nissan Altima to pick up Odin Lloyd. Hernandez's security cams show him with what looks like a Glock .45 in hand, pacing in his living room. On the 30-mile drive to Fayston Street, a war-zone block in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, where Lloyd lived with his mother and younger sister (he'd been forced to move home after losing his job at the local utility company), the three men stopped to buy a pack of blue cotton-candy Bubblicious and a cheap cigar, the type used to roll blunts. Usually, that was Lloyd's job—Hernandez fondly called him the Bluntmaster. Making do without him, they got to Lloyd's house at 2:33 A.M., where a surveillance camera posted across the street showed Lloyd getting into the backseat of the Nissan. It fast became clear to Lloyd, though, that this wouldn't be a night of hot-sheet fun. He began firing texts off to his sister, sending distress flares every few minutes. *U saw who I'm with . . . Nfl . . . just so u know . . .*

The last one reached her at 3:23 A.M. Minutes later, Lloyd got out of the car in an industrial park in North Attleborough. He seemed to know what was coming, but decided to make a stand: the driver's side mirror of the Nissan was broken off, a sign that he might have gone down swinging. On a sand-and-gravel patch, Lloyd raised his arms in defense of the first shot, and was then hit in the back twice as he turned away and fell to the ground. The gunman pumped two more rounds into his chest for good measure. The next day, cops lifted tire tracks near the body that matched the Nissan. Tracing the car back to the rental agency, police would eventually recover a .45 shell case and a wad of cotton-candy Bubblicious. And though Hernandez would monkey with his home-security system, getting rid of six hours of key recordings, and smash up the cell phone he'd turn in to cops, he'd neglect to scrub all the data they contained, handing police a honeypot of incriminating evidence.

They'll need every bit of it to convict Hernandez of murder and send him away for life. Both on the field and off, he's been hell to bring down; the man has a genius for breaking loose. According to several experts, he might just do it again, make one last run to daylight around the edge.

There have been 47 arrests of NFL players since the end of the last regular season: bar brawls, cars wrecked, spouses shoved or beaten. Violence travels; it follows these men home, where far too many learn they have no kill switch. But there's the sociopathy of a savage game, and then there's Aaron Hernandez. Since 2007, he's been charged with, or linked to, the shootings of six people in four incidents. Three of the victims were gruesomely murdered. One survivor, a former friend named

Alexander Bradley, has had multiple operations and lost his right eye. The other two survivors were shot in their car outside a Gainesville, Florida, bar after an altercation involving Hernandez and two of his teammates his freshman year at the University of Florida. While in Gainesville, he sucker-punched a guy and shattered the fellow's eardrum, and reportedly failed multiple drug tests, though he was suspended only once for those offenses. He posed for selfies in the mirror while (a) wielding a .45 and (b) swathed from head to toe in Bloods regalia, and threatened to "fuck up" Wes Welker, his Pro Bowl teammate, just days after being drafted by the Patriots. (Welker, a veteran, had refused to help the rookie operate the replay machine.) Since high school, he's scourged his skin with a scree of tattoos. Writ large on his left arm: HATE ME NOW. On the meat of his right hand, just above the knuckles: the word BLOOD in bright-red scrawl.

Of all the questions raised by the murder of Lloyd, two enigmas underpin the others: How did a kid so rich in gifts and honors—the most celebrated son in the history of Bristol—grow into such a murderously angry man? And why does Bristol, the town that time forgot, keep landing in the middle of this lurid story?

This city of 60,000 was always a sweet, sleepy place to buy a house, raise children, and send them elsewhere. The locals built firearms and doorbells in the plants here, then car parts and mainsprings for clocks. The population spiked in the decades after D-Day—vets moving in to take factory jobs and rent small pillbox homes on the west side of town. No one got rich or stuck around for college, but it was heaven to be a 12-year-old here: manicured ball fields, Boys Club summers, a sky-blue pool in every park.

Aaron's father, Dennis, ruled those fields before his son followed in his footsteps. In the '70s and '80s, Dennis and his twin brother, David, became local sports heroes. Enormous for their age and fast and tough, they took to football straightaway and were happier running through, than around, you. They'd be three-sport stars in high school and draw scouts to their games, though as good as they were at football, they were better in street fights, say friends: nobody fucked with the Hernandez boys.

"They were the roughest kids by far in Guinea Alley," says Eddy Fortier, who went to Bristol Central with them in the '70s and is a former youth counselor. "They had to be tough—they were about the only Puerto Ricans in an Irish-Italian town," says Fortier's brother, Gary, a reformed ex-con who's now a painter and assistant pastor at a Bristol church.

Dennis, in particular, was built for big things. A larger-than-life charmer with a maitre d's flair and a habit of hugging everyone he met, he was called "The King" in his glory days and owned the back pages of the *Bristol Press*. An All-Everything tailback, he was the rare kid from Bristol to get a full-ride offer to the University of Connecticut, the state's only Division I football program. (David, a wide receiver, got one too.) Alas, Dennis was no angel: he loved to drink and get high, and had lousy taste in friends, which did him in. His best buddy was a teammate, Rocco Testa, who fancied himself mobster-in-training. "Rocco and his uncle did burglaries together, broke into houses here in town," says Detective Sergeant John Sassu of the Bristol Police Department, who also went to high school with the twins. "He got Dennis and David in it before the three of them went to UConn, then more so after they all dropped out."

The twins were pinched for small-change crimes—assault and petty larceny—in the decade after they both left UConn. As late as 1990, Dennis was busted for burglary, though neither brother seems to have done prison time. Friends say they also occasionally smoked crack, beat up dealers for drugs and cash, and bet way over their heads on sports. As for their pal Testa, he was caught in the act while robbing a house with his uncle, who shot and killed a cop while they tried to escape. "The rumor on the street was Dennis and David were there too," says Sassu, "but we couldn't make the case."

Either way, parenthood seemed to scare the twins straight. Both became fathers, found steady work, and had no further truck with Bristol cops. (Neither David nor anyone else in the Hernandez family

returned phone calls seeking comment.) Dennis married Terri Valentine, a school secretary in Bristol and got a job on the custodial staff at the other of the town's two high schools, Bristol Eastern. They bought a small cottage on Greystone Avenue and produced two wildly gifted sons: DJ, now 27 and an assistant football coach at the University of Iowa, and Aaron, three years younger but bigger and faster, the apogee of the family's genetics.

Each surpassed his father, both on the field and off, in part because Dennis took elaborate pains to keep them on the straight and narrow. Dennis built a gym in the family basement, paved a chunk of the backyard over for a half-court and staged three-on-three tourneys there, and peppered the boys with can-do slogans, burning them in through repetition. "Some do, some don't," he was always telling them. "If it is to be, it is up to me," went another. He was bent on getting his sons to do everything right, whether it was making the proper blitz read or handing homework in on time, perhaps because he'd squandered his own chance.

DJ seemed his natural heir—the star passer and guard at Bristol Central who played three years of quarterback at UConn and made the dean's list two years running—until Aaron blew by him on the rail. A huge-for-high-school tight end with wideout speed and a pair of glue-trap hands, he posted the kind of numbers you never see in Northeast states: 1,800 yards and 24 touchdowns in a season, almost 400 yards receiving in a single game, and 12 sacks and three forced fumbles as a part-time blitzer, winning Defensive Player of the Year honors his junior year in 2005. His great asset, besides his hands, which were strong as clamps, was the gift scouts call escapability; he couldn't be brought down after the catch. He was too big and too fast, and he used his free arm well to shed tacklers. You had to gang up or pin him against the sideline, and even then he'd wriggle out for more yards. "Best athlete this city's ever produced, and a more polite, humble kid you couldn't find," says Bob Montgomery, a columnist for the *Press* and the town's official historian. "He'd be in here with his father being interviewed as Athlete of the Week, and there was never any swagger or street stuff from him, just 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir,' and 'Thank you.'"

"Part of Aaron's problem is, he never got no street sense; Dennis sheltered them from that life with all his might," says Gary Fortier. "He was the perfect dad: he went to every scrimmage, and got 'em up at dawn to work out," says Brandon Beam, an insurance agent in Southington who played against Aaron in practice each day as a cornerback for Bristol Central. A middle-class, mixed-race kid (mom Italian; dad Puerto Rican), Aaron had little trouble fitting into suburban Bristol. "He didn't speak Spanish and had no tattoos," says Jordan Carello, a Bristol football teammate who recently worked at the Doubletree hotel in town. "He was so focused on his body that he barely partied, maybe snuck a little weed here and there. But we all did that, 'cause our parents were always home. If we wanted to drink on weekends, we had to run out to someone's car."

His high school friends describe Aaron as an overgrown goof who was always trolling for laughs. "The guy would do anything to crack us up," says Beam. "Stuff his lunch in his mouth in a single bite or take a booger that was hanging out and eat that shit." That was Hernandez: physically older than everyone else, but socially about five years younger. Friends say DJ was fiercely protective of his happy-go-lucky lug of a kid brother and taught him what hard work really looked like. They'd be out running suicides in the dead of summer, and rising early to do squats in the basement. "Aaron was driven by DJ, who was like his second dad," says Beam. "He really wanted to make Dennis happy."

It was a very different story with his mother, Terri. "She was good about schoolwork and that sort of stuff," says a friend of the family, "but she brought drama into that house—starting with the bust for taking bets." In 2001, when Aaron was 12, Terri was arrested in a statewide sting for booking bets on sports. The matter was handled quietly and she did no time, but she cast shame on the boys and drew a rift with Aaron that deepened over the next several years. Friends say Terri had begun cheating on Dennis with a physically abusive coke dealer named Jeffrey Cummings, who was married to Dennis'

niece, Tanya Cummings.

Terri's relationship with Cummings, whose nickname is Meathead, was a bottomless source of grief for the sons. There was an ugly spectacle in the stands at a UConn game, says a family friend. Terri, on hand to watch DJ play, was angrily confronted by her niece and slapped in the face. The aftermath, says the friend, "hurt Aaron bad and broke his heart."

He might have held it together, or handled the fallout better, if Dennis had been around to see him through it. But in January 2006, Dennis checked himself in for a hernia repair at a local hospital. Something happened on the table, though, and he contracted an infection; two days later, he was dead. He was 49, in otherwise splendid health, and beloved by virtually everyone in town. His funeral, at the Church of St. Matthew, was like an affair of state: 1,500 mourners packed the biggest church in Bristol, and hundreds more waited to view the body. DJ was inconsolable, sobbing over the casket, but Aaron, 16 and shocked beyond tears, sat stone-faced. Friends tried to console him or draw him out; instead, he locked down, going mum. "He'd open up the tiniest bit, then say nothing for weeks, like it was a sign of weakness to be sad," says Beam. "His brother was at college, and the only other person he would really talk to was the one who was taken away."

Heartsick and furious, Aaron seemed to implode. "He would rebel," Terri told *USA Today* in an interview three years later. "He wasn't the same kid, the way he spoke to me. The shock of losing his dad, there was so much anger." Small wonder there: she moved Cummings into the house she shared with Aaron, and married him when his divorce from Tanya was final.

To no one's great surprise, cops soon fielded phone calls that Cummings was abusing Terri. "We responded to that address on more than one occasion," says Detective Lieutenant Kevin Morrell of the Bristol PD. In June 2010, Cummings got drunk one night and flew into a rage. Grabbing a knife from the kitchen, he slashed Terri's face and body before she fled to her neighbors next door. Cops arrested Cummings in the yard and charged him with assault and sent him to prison for two years. Terri divorced him that year, but took him back, say friends, when he was released in 2012. At last report, they had split for good; she currently lives alone on Greystone Avenue, though she hasn't been seen there much since Lloyd's murder. It bears noting that she's the rare-bird NFL mother whose son didn't buy her a big house when he got drafted.

With Cummings around, Aaron began getting scarce, spending a lot of time with family across town, in a roughneck stretch called Lake Avenue. This was the Bristol version of downward mobility: a hop from the hot plate to the fire. His father's brother-in-law, Uncle Tito, had a house up the block from the projects, where he lived with his grown daughter Tanya—the woman Cummings had ditched to be with Terri. Aaron and Tanya, first cousins bonded by loss, drew close very quickly, friends say. (He has the name of her son—Jano—tattooed on his chest, and has supported them both financially since college.) Among the dubious people hanging around the house were goons like Ernest Wallace and T. L. Singleton, an older-but-not-wiser drug dealer who'd been in and out of prison since the '90s. Singleton would wind up marrying Tanya and siring a child with her after Cummings left. Along with fringe hustlers like Carlos Ortiz, the angel-dust tweaker, they filled the heart-size hole Dennis left, bolstering Aaron with bromides about family love and vowing that they'd always have his back—which is another way of saying they sunk their claws in. Their motives couldn't have been plainer if they'd hung them in neon: here was a kid with can't-miss skills, a malleable man-child who'd be rich one day and fly them out of the hood in his G-5. All they had to do was get him high and gas his head to inflame his sense of grievance at life's unfairness.

From middle school, Hernandez had his sights set on UConn, and committed there as a star at Bristol Central. It had been Dennis's dream to see his boys play there together, having quit the school himself after a couple of years and gone home with his tail between his legs. But then Dennis died, making a

jumble of things, and the world came courting his younger son. Enter the University of Florida and the messiah, Urban Meyer, who persuaded Hernandez to renege on UConn and come to Gainesville. It seemed a gift from on high: a championship program in a Bible Belt town with a deeply pious coach and devout assistants. Meyer had a rep for reforming players who'd had trouble elsewhere with the law. And he tried, God knows, to convert Hernandez; did everything short of an exorcism. "But there only so much you can do in three years," says John Hevesy, Hernandez's position coach with the Gators and now a coach at Mississippi State. "Bristol had him for 17 before he came to us. In the end I guess, that trumped what we put in."

Hernandez left home in January 2007, taking early graduation to enroll at Florida and be eligible for spring football. But he was miserable and overmatched his first year there and told friends on the phone he wanted to quit. Meyer brought him in for face-to-face meetings, reading Scripture in his office each morning. He assigned Mike and Maurkice Pouncey, twin All-American linemen, to babysit Hernandez, and detailed Tim Tebow, the truest of believers, to be his life instructor. But even Tebow couldn't save him from himself once Hernandez got a few beers in his system. The pair went out that April to a bar near campus, where the underage Hernandez had an argument with a waiter and punched him in the head as he walked away. Michael Taphorn suffered a ruptured eardrum, but didn't press charges on Hernandez, telling the cops he was talking to Florida coaches, according to a police report. The matter seems to have been settled quietly out of court, which was fine with Gainesville cops and the DA. They treated the punch-out as a juvie offense, giving Hernandez a deferred prosecution on the hush.

"We didn't hear that story till much, much later—the police didn't file a report," says a local reporter who was covering the team. As a sophomore, Hernandez was benched for the season opener, meaning he'd likely failed drug tests over the summer. But Meyer denied it, saying he "wasn't ready to play," again giving cover for bad behavior. "Meyer kept us at such a distance," says the reporter, "or flat-out lied, that we couldn't verify a pot suspension."

Hernandez would fail other drug tests, according to reports, and should have faced bans for up to half a season, per school regulations. Instead, he didn't miss a single snap, though he was seen hanging out with a crew of thugs at a local bar. One of them was Bristol pal Ernest Wallace, who came down to Florida, says a friend, to be "Aaron's muscle."

"I never saw him with them, but misery attracts misery: there's vultures waiting to swoop," says Coach Hevesy, who did everything he could to protect Hernandez. He brought him home for meals twice a week, took him deep-sea fishing, and treated him like the oldest of his three kids. "He played video games with my son, and my daughter wore his jersey to sleep. But whenever he left campus, he'd come back different. That's when the problems happened."

Those problems didn't hinder his development, however. He was the rare college freshman who outworked upperclassmen, training by himself even before the gym opened, doing kick-flips off the wall of his dorm. As a sophomore, he became a starter and Tebow's third-down outlet, leading the team in catches in the national championship win in 2008, the school's second title in three years. "You see his athleticism and explosiveness, and as an athlete, it's incredible," said Tebow. By 20, Hernandez was a first-team All-American and winner of the 2009 John Mackey Award as the country's top tight end. He could have written his own ticket if he'd kept his nose clean: been a high-first-rounder in the 2010 NFL draft and pulled an eight-figure bonus to sign. Instead, he cemented his don't-touch rep by getting embroiled in a shooting outside a bar. "He was out with the Pounceys and [ex-Gator safety] Reggie Nelson, and some guys tried to snatch a chain off one of the Pounceys," says the local reporter. "The guys drive off, then stop at a light, and someone gets out of a car and shoots into their car through the passenger window. One victim described the shooter as possibly Hispanic or Hawaiian, with lots of tattoos on his arms." The Pounceys were questioned as witnesses to the crime,

but Hernandez invoked his right to counsel and never gave a statement, most odd since he was also called as a witness. ~~No charges have ever been filed, and the case is still open. Again, he walked away unscathed: he wasn't even named in the police report. In hindsight, it might have been the worst thing for him. He seems to have concluded, with an abundance of probable cause, that he was untouchable.~~

In April 2010, a few months before the NFL draft, Hernandez sat down and composed a letter, or had his agent at Athletes First do so for him. (The firm is a top-tier NFL shop, repping Ray Lewis, Aaron Rodgers, and Clay Matthews, among others.) It was a Hail Mary pass to 32 teams, asking them to spike their bad reports and pick a dope-smoking, hair-trigger hothead. “My coaches have told you that nobody worked harder than me,” he wrote. “The only X-factor is concerns about my use of recreational drugs. To address that, I am putting my money where my mouth is” by offering to take eight drug tests during the season and to return a portion of his paycheck if found dirty. This was both delusional and an empty vow: the players’ union would block even one extra test and any attempt to pay back guaranteed money. After seeing his predraft psychological report, where he received the lowest possible score, 1 out of 10, in the category of “social maturity” and which also noted that he enjoyed “living on the edge of acceptable behavior,” a handful of teams pulled him off their boards and 25 others let him sink like a stone on draft day, April 24. Only one team took the bait, burning a midround pick on a guy with “character issues”: the stoop-to-conquer Patriots of Bill Belichick.

Time was, the Pats were the Tiffany franchise, a team of such sterling moral repute that they cut a player right after they drafted him, having learned he had a history of assaulting women. But Belichick, the winner of three Super Bowl titles and grand wizard of the greatest show on turf, had decided long before he got to New England that such niceties were beneath him. Over a decade, he’d been aggregating power unto himself, becoming the Chief Decider on personnel matters. He signed so many players bearing red flags they could have marched in Moscow’s May Day parade (Randy Moss, Donte Stallworth, et al.), and began drafting kids with hectic pasts, assuming the team’s vets would police them. Some of this was arrogance, some of it need: when you’re picking from the bottom of the deck each spring, you’re apt to shave some corners to land talent.

Hence, Hernandez, who’d make the Pro Bowl one season later on an NFL-minimum salary. Such was his immediate impact, in fact, that the Patriots rewrote the book on tight-end play. In 2011, the tandem of Hernandez and Rob Gronkowski blew away the league marks for most combined yards, catches, and touchdowns at the position, pushing the records far out of reach. It was a wrinkle opponents hadn’t seen before and were helpless to defend: two hybrid tight ends who could overpower safeties and outrun any linebacker in coverage. Belichick signed both to big extensions years before their rookie deals expired, giving Hernandez \$40 million and Gronkowski \$54 million, while stiffing Wes Welker, the slot receiver.

Like most of Belichick’s recent gestures, this would come back to burn him—he’d lose Gronkowski and Hernandez to injuries. But the seeds of the fiasco were sown years earlier, when Belichick replaced the Pats’ security chief with a tech-smart Brit named Mark Briggs. The NFL and its teams spend millions each year employing a web of former cops and ex-FBI agents to keep an eye on players and their posses. For decades, the Patriots relied on a homegrown crew of retired state troopers to do surveillance. Whenever a player popped up where he didn’t belong—a strip joint in Southie or a weed spot in Brockton—Frank Mendes, the team security chief from 1990 to 2003 and a former state trooper himself, would get a call from his cop or statie friends, whether they were on payroll or not. “I’d have known within a half-hour if Hernandez had gotten in trouble with police,” he says, “and told Belichick and he’d do whatever.” But when Belichick hired Briggs, who’d managed security at London’s Wembley Stadium and had limited street associates in the States, the tips from cops and troopers dried up. “The Patriots aren’t receptive to those kind of calls,” says a law enforcement

official who knows the team and dislikes Briggs. "It's not a friendly environment to call over."

In his first remarks after Odin Lloyd's murder, Robert Kraft described himself as "duped" by Hernandez, saying he'd had no knowledge of his troubles. That is arrant nonsense: every team knew him as a badly damaged kid with a circle of dangerous friends and a substance problem. Once a Patriot, Hernandez practically ran up a banner that said STOP ME! I'M OUT OF CONTROL! He'd get high all the time driving away from games, say friends of the family, "smoking three or four blunts" in the ride back to his place. He avoided all contact with teammates after practice, even among the guys in his position group, which is unheard of in the league. Since his arrest, several Patriots have called him a "loner," saying, "No one hung with him." Retired lineman Matt Light went a step further, telling the *Dayton Daily News* that he "never believed in anything Hernandez stood for."

Instead of teammates, Hernandez built a cohort of thugs, bringing stone-cold gangsters over to the house to play pool, smoke chronic, and carouse. "One of his uncles went to Boston to talk to him, and these scary-looking dudes are hanging out in his game room," says a friend. "They wouldn't say hi or shake his hand, and when he brought it up to Aaron, he laughed him off."

There's broad agreement that the problem snowballed once Hernandez signed his megadeal last summer (\$40 million over a five-year term, including the largest signing bonus, \$12.5 million, ever given to a tight end). In an alleged letter to a supporter from jail, he acknowledged that he "fell off especially after making all that money," though he added, with the diplomacy of a preschool kid, that "all the people who turned on me will feel like crap" when they hear "not guilty."

But even before fixing his name to the deal, Hernandez raised the stakes on bad behavior. Six weeks earlier, at a Boston club called Cure Lounge, he and his crew got into a scrap with some men from Cape Verde, a bar brawl that bred two murders, police suspect. Afterward, a few blocks from the club a silver Toyota 4Runner with license plates from Rhode Island pulled up beside the sedan carrying the Cape Verdean men. A gun came out the window of the Toyota, spraying the sedan. Safiro Furtado and Daniel Abreu were killed by the barrage. The Toyota sped off and went missing for months, despite a statewide search by Boston cops. It turned up a year later, undriven and caked in dust, in the garage of Hernandez's Uncle Tito back in Bristol.

Hernandez had a dismal season, hobbled by an ankle sprain that cost him six games and about half his yardage from 2011. Then, a week after the Patriots' loss to the Baltimore Ravens in the AFC Championship game, he and a friend named Alexander Bradley were pulled over by a state trooper on Boston's Southeast Expressway, going 105 miles per hour. Bradley, who was behind the wheel, was charged with driving under the influence and speeding, but once again Hernandez (who stuck his head out the window and said, "Trooper, I'm Aaron Hernandez—it's okay") walked away with no summons or team-imposed fine. Weeks later, driving from a strip club in Miami, he allegedly shot Bradley in the face, then dumped him, badly hurt and bleeding but alive, in an alley north of the city. (Bradley, keeping it gangsta, declined to tell cops who had shot him and where. No street code says you can't get paid for it, though; he's filed suit against Hernandez in civil court.) Then, months after that, Hernandez and his crew got in a beef outside a nightclub in Rhode Island. Someone matching Ernest Wallace's description pulled a .22, then ditched it beneath a car. Police traced the piece to a Florida gun shop near Wallace's parents' house, where a second .22 had been purchased that would later turn up in the woods near Hernandez's mansion in the wake of the murder.

By now, even Hernandez seems to have sensed that he was wildly off course. According to a source close to Hernandez, he flew to the NFL Combine in Indianapolis this past February and confided to Belichick that his life was in danger. Hernandez was trying to break away from the gangsters he'd befriended. He worried "they were actually trying to kill him," says the source. Hernandez began arming himself, stashing a rifle in his gym bag and installing a 14-camera security system at his

mansion. “He was very paranoid, but was that because of his addictions or because he was trying to leave the gang?”

This past spring he skipped out on team training drills, going to California to rehab an aching shoulder and take a much-needed break from New England. But while out there, according to the source, he blew off sessions with his therapist, Alex Guerrero, and stood up Tom Brady, who was running a camp for Pats receivers. Worse, the police were called out to his Hermosa Beach rental on March 25, summoned by his fiancée, Shayanna Jenkins, after a loud dispute during which Hernandez put his fist through a window. No arrest was made, but word got back to Belichick, who exploded and tendered notice: any more disruptions and he’d be traded or cut at the end of the 2013 season.

Mortified, Hernandez returned to Boston; Belichick, per a close Hernandez associate, had told him to lay low, rent a safe house for a while. In May, he leased a condo in Franklin, Massachusetts, that Carlos Ortiz referred to as the “flophouse,” 12 miles from his mansion in North Attleborough. Wallace moved in there, telling neighbors his name was “George,” and drove Hernandez to and from team workouts. Neighbors described them as “quiet” or absent, until the day after Lloyd’s shooting, when Wallace and Ortiz camped out there before taking off in a rented Chrysler for Bristol, according to a statement Ortiz gave cops.

En route, said Ortiz, Wallace claimed Hernandez had shot and killed Lloyd. Of course, Ortiz also said he’d stayed in the backseat and couldn’t say exactly what happened, a contention everyone but his government-appointed lawyer laughs at. The dust-addled Ortiz, the only one of the three men not indicted, is now the star witness in the case against Hernandez, and his account is probably worthless if he takes the stand. Meanwhile, Hernandez is paying a team of strong lawyers to defend him in his first-degree murder and weapons charges, and there’s speculation he’s paying the legal bills for Wallace, who is being charged as an accessory. It will shock no one if Aaron Hernandez tries to save himself by turning on his friend Ortiz. He and Wallace could tell the same story in court: that it was Ortiz who shot Lloyd out of misplaced panic, and that all they’d meant to do was rough him up.

Whatever went down in that industrial park, Hernandez’s motive remains unclear. Had Lloyd, one of the few people Hernandez hung with who wasn’t mobbed up or in the drug game, done something else that night to set him off? Did Hernandez mistake Lloyd’s West Indian cousins for some of the Cape Verdeans he’d come to blows with? Or did the argument begin as one thing and end as another, broadening into a beef over drugs and money, as was widely conjectured?

“Don’t matter what it’s about: Aaron’s out of his mind,” says one friend of the family. “He’s been twisted on dust now for more than a year, which is when all of this crazy shit started.”

The friend has an intimate knowledge of the player’s family and his thug-life cohorts from Bristol. He also knows plenty about angel dust, or phencyclidine, the scourge of the 1970s. Before crack came along in the mid-’80s, dust was the madman’s drug of choice. First marketed in the ’50s as a surgical anesthetic, it was banned for its psych-ward side effects: mania, delirium, violent hallucinations. Cops shake their heads in awe at the crazy-making powers of dust: “Kids fighting four of us and running naked down the street because their body temp is going through the roof,” says Morrell, the Bristol detective. For his department, alas, dust isn’t a dead letter; it’s still one of the drugs of abuse in Hernandez’s hometown. “We have been experiencing a resurgence in the use of angel dust. We deal with it all the time.”

As befits a crime studded with gross stupidities—killing Lloyd minutes from Hernandez’s house, drawing a bread-crumbs trail of texts and calls to the victim’s cell, then leaving that phone on the dead man’s body for the cops to find—the story ends with an idiot run by Wallace and Ortiz. They would lead cops back to Uncle Tito’s house in Bristol—the very place from which Hernandez’s life vectored off course—leaving evidence out for the cops to bag up. Ortiz was picked up a week later, while Wallace had the sense to leave the state, at least, fleeing to Georgia, then Miramar, Florida, where he

was arrested; Tanya Cummings-Singleton bought him a bus ride with her credit card. She, meanwhile, sits in jail for contempt and accessory charges, having refused to testify to the grand jury weighing murder charges against Hernandez. Her husband, T. L., was being sought by cops in connection with the double killing of the Cape Verdean men last July. But before detectives could come to take him in for questioning, he hopped into his car and took off with a former girlfriend sitting beside him. Hitting a curve at high speed, T. L. made no attempt to brake; he jumped the curb and flew 100 feet into a wall of a country club. The woman survived, but T. L. was killed on impact—a loose end neatly knotted; an accomplice who'd never flip.

And so here we are now, a year out from trial, and the open-and-shut case against Aaron Hernandez probably won't be as easy to prosecute as it seems. Without the gun used in the shooting, a persuasive motive, or a witness to the crime and its planning, the state's chances of winning a conviction on murder in the first will depend entirely on circumstantial evidence. There's no shortage of that, of course, and much of it is compelling: the security tape seems to show Hernandez with the black .45 the night of the crime; the videotapes that track his car's movements, from the time he picked up Lloyd at his house in Boston to the second they entered the industrial park before the shooting; the shell casing recovered from the rental car that matched the ones found beside Lloyd.

To undercut the damning evidence, Hernandez may have to take the stand and provide an explanation, says Gerry Leone, the former district attorney of Middlesex County, Massachusetts, who convicted Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, among other high-profile cases. "You put him on if your defense case hinges on something that can only come from him"—for instance, the claim that he always carried a gun when leaving the house, protection from the gangsters who wanted him dead, and that it was Ortiz, not Hernandez, who pulled the trigger after a botched attempt to scare Lloyd. "If he says he was shocked by the shooting and only agreed to scare him, that might get him off," says renowned Boston attorney Anthony Cardinale, who repped John Gotti and other mobsters and has taught at Harvard Law School. "It's not a crime to be there if you had no reason to expect that someone would be shot."

A bigger problem for the prosecution is the all-or-nothing charge they've levied against Hernandez. In deciding to try him for murder in the first, they'll be asking jurors to send a young man to prison for the rest of his life, no parole. "In these cases, juries think that reasonable doubt means no doubt at all," says Cardinale. "If the defense can create even the slightest crack, he may walk like George Zimmerman walked—probably guilty, but the DA overcharged."

So call him stupid or sloppy or a menace to society, Hernandez keeps catching the breaks. He's gotten rich running to daylight after being hemmed in, shedding tacklers and accusers to escape. If he eludes pursuit again, there will be blame to go around, but no one can claim they didn't see it coming. He's been getting away with murder, figuratively, if not literally, his whole life.

The One-Legged Wrestler Who Conquered His Sport, Then Left It Behind

FROM DEADSPIN.COM

THE FIRST MATCH of the last tournament of Anthony Robles's wrestling career began with his dropping to the mat in a tripod—two hands and a knee. There was no other limb to use; Robles had been born without a right leg, and now the bottom of his maroon-and-gold Arizona State University singlet hung shriveled and slack on that side. His opponent in the 125-pound weight class, a Virginia sophomore named Matt Snyder, loomed over him, twice his height, even in a wrestler's crouch.

It was March 2011, and Robles was in Philadelphia for the NCAA Division I championships, college wrestling's preeminent tournament. As a sophomore, he had finished an auspicious fourth; the next year, he had slipped to seventh. Now, as a senior, he was the top seed—a first for a one-legged wrestler. His remarkable achievement had drawn a throng of reporters to the pre-tournament press conference, where, to widespread bewilderment, Robles had announced that he would retire from wrestling at the end of the championships. He would not compete internationally. He would not try out for the London Olympics. He would become a motivational speaker, he had told the baffled reporters and fans before him, and turn his back on wrestling at the moment he had come to dominate it.

Snyder circled. Robles pawed his opponent's head, then shot forward, viperlike, at Snyder's legs. There was no time to sprawl away. In an instant, Robles took Snyder down and began shifting side to side, looking for an opportunity to lever him onto his back. Seconds later, he found it. Securing Snyder's hands and hips, Robles rolled across his own back, creating such torque that Snyder was forced to give up his position or risk serious injury. Snyder yielded, and Robles flipped him.

The crowd erupted as Robles held his man inverted, watching the referee count off points. Robles let Snyder right himself, then turned him again. And again and again and again. In the second period, with the score 17–1, the ref waved off the match—a technical fall, like a TKO in boxing, saving the loser needless pain and humiliation.

"He just completely dominated me," Snyder said later. "I was like, 'This isn't fair.'"

Something amazing would unfold over the next few days: a one-legged man would climb to the pinnacle of a sport that selects for such anatomical homogeneity that competitors of different weight classes frequently look like Russian nesting dolls of one another. What Robles accomplished that weekend in Philadelphia was unprecedented in his sport, perhaps in any sport. But what he planned to do afterward left everyone just as dumbstruck. Why was he walking away?

The first time I met Anthony Robles—and nearly every time after—he was intercepted by a fan. We had arranged an interview at a Sheraton in St. Louis, where he was in town to provide color commentary for ESPN during the 2012 Division I championships. Robles loped into the hotel lobby with a pair of aluminum crutches—powerfully built with a handsome, gap-toothed grin that faintly recalled a young Mike Tyson.

I turned to greet him, and as I did an enormous man stepped between us. Four-time Super Bowl champion linebacker Matt Millen wanted to introduce himself to Robles and, not surprisingly, I couldn't get around him. Fifteen minutes passed. At last, Robles looked over to his agent, Gary Lewis, who maneuvered me between his client and Millen. Each man, the wrestler and the linebacker, extended a beefy hand in my direction.

It was a daunting decision. Wrestlers are known for their prodigious hand strength. Oklahoma alumnus Danny Hodge can still crush an apple in one hand at the age of 80. But Robles's grip is

fearsome even by wrestling standards. Opponents have rarely been able to pry it off with one hand, and ~~only sometimes with two. Many have ended up surrendering to his hold and have focused instead~~ on limiting the damage he could do with it. “I couldn’t even think of breaking his lock,” one candid victim told me.

I opted for the evil I didn’t know and tentatively placed my hand in Millen’s massive paw. He squeezed it, hard, and when he finally returned it to me intact, I felt as if I had gotten away with something splendid and improbable, like a deer bolting free of an anaconda’s coil. Then I turned to Robles, whose handshake turned out to be restrained, even gentle. I wondered at this as we ducked into the hotel’s sticky-floored lounge, which was not due to open for several hours, and where I imagined his fans wouldn’t find us.

Twenty minutes later, a middle-aged man with a Negro League baseball jersey peered into the darkened banquet where I was interviewing Robles. He was missing a number of teeth, and he looked like he hadn’t been eating well. “Man! Man!” he cried out when he discovered the person he had come looking for, and fell sobbing into Robles’s arms. “You’re a good brother! You’re a good brother!” the man said, over and over again. Robles held him, and they talked for what seemed like a long time.

After the man left, blubbing an apology for interrupting, I asked Robles if he knew who he was. Robles said no. I asked if that kind of thing had happened before. Robles looked at me evenly. “It happens a lot,” he said.

Later that day, while Robles, Lewis, and I were walking the concession-stand loop of the stadium, a staffer stopped Lewis to ask if he needed a wheelchair for—pointing at Robles, on his crutches—“that one.” Robles demurred so generously that the staffer smiled with the satisfaction of someone who has just discharged an important civic duty.

Wrestling has barely changed since it was practiced in ancient Babylon, and one of the axiomatic truths of the sport is (or was) that success depends on a pair of strong, flexible legs. From my own high school experience, I learned that a wrestler can compensate for minor physical idiosyncrasies—torso that is too long, say, or arms that don’t straighten all the way. But to excel at the Division I level, you need legs like a Clydesdale’s.

Yet Robles, in his senior year at ASU, carved through the opposition like Sherman through Georgia. He was so good, in fact, that a contingent of wrestling fans declared his missing leg to be an unfair *advantage*. Most wrestlers outside the Corn Belt train and compete in near-obscurity, but like a gambler who wins too much at the blackjack table, Robles had become too dominant not to be an object of scrutiny and suspicion.

He can carry more muscle in his torso, the brief against him went. *He can get so low you can’t shoot under him*. And the ultimate reversal: *It’s unfair that he has just one leg for opponents to attack*.

Did Robles win in spite of his one-leggedness, or because of it? It’s an ungracious question, but it deserves consideration.

For some differently shaped athletes, the matter is testable. When Oscar Pistorius, the South African double-amputee sprinter now accused of murdering his girlfriend, moved from Paralympic competition to able-bodied races, he underwent intensive biomechanical evaluation to determine whether his artificial legs were inherently faster than flesh-and-blood ones. Treadmills and stopwatches found no advantage, and he was cleared to compete. In his case, the question of fairness was simply a question of physics.

Wrestling is more complex. Where the outcome of a sprint is dictated by a single variable—speed—wrestling matches turn on an interaction of factors, including flexibility, timing, strength, endurance, and countless others.

Robles was at a marked disadvantage on one of the most influential of these dimensions. His balance is awful when he stands without support. A stiff shove sends him toppling like a tower of blocks, hence his dropping into a tripod whenever possible during a match. But wrestling demands a certain amount of time upright. When an opponent stood from the bottom position, Robles had to stand too, to prevent his man from escaping. This left him in the precarious situation of simultaneously leaning on his opponent for support and trying to lift and hurl him back to the mat. When the roles were reversed and Robles began on bottom, it was difficult for him to stand with his opponent clinging to his back. Similarly, the need to keep one leg under him compromised his ability to trip opponents, a common takedown finish.

Strength also figures importantly in a wrestler's likelihood of winning, and is largely a function of his weight. For an ordinary person, one leg takes up about 16 percent of his total body weight, which would give Robles the frame of someone weighing 150 pounds. In fact, he is even stronger than the math would predict, able to bench-press more than 300 pounds and knock out 100 pull-ups in two minutes. A lifetime on crutches has given him tremendous grip strength, which he used in the neutral or both-men-standing, position to tie up opponents' hands and wrists, preventing them from initiating an attack. Down on the mat, his grip helped him jerk their arms from under them, secure their wrists fast, and wrench them onto their backs. On the occasions that he found himself in the bottom position he broke the top man's hold and smartly shucked him off.

At five-foot-eight, Robles is also one to three inches taller than most 125-pounders. This gave him reach advantage and allowed him to create of himself an extended lever arm for "tilts," high-scoring moves that use concentrated torque to briefly expose an opponent's back to the mat.

But perhaps the greatest tactical advantage of Robles's having just one leg was that he had just one leg. This meant, yes, only one leg to defend against attack, but more importantly it meant a profound change in the way other wrestlers related to his body, and consequently the way they experienced the unfolding of a match. They became discombobulated, groping for a part of him that wasn't there. Strangely, they were the ones knocked off balance.

The day Robles entered the world, doctors whisked him from the delivery room, to spare his mother, 16 years old and single, the shock of seeing her one-legged child. He was what's known as a congenital amputee, and the cause of his condition remains unknown. When the doctors finally returned him to his mother, she looked her boy over carefully and predicted that the smooth declivity where his right leg should have been marked the end of her freedom forever.

Three years later, another doctor thought Robles would walk better with a prosthesis and fitted him with a heavy artificial leg. The boy promptly took it off when he got home and hid it behind a piece of furniture. At five, he shinnied 50 feet up a pole outside his house.

But if Robles was willful and assured by nature, a childhood of being stared at and taunted eventually saddled him with terrible self-consciousness. "I wanted to fit in so badly," he later said of his elementary and junior high school years. "For a while I tried to hide . . . to be camouflaged." But the bullies were not put off, and Robles gave up trying to disguise his differences.

And then a new idea began to crystallize along the margins of his awareness. What if, instead of trying to conceal his deformity, Robles were to put it on display? Perhaps by making himself as visible and vulnerable as possible, he could face—and even one day move past—the shame he felt about his body.

So in the ninth grade, about a decade later than most eventual champions, Robles pulled on a singlet and competed in his first wrestling match. He got off to a dismal start. Many of his early outings ended with Robles getting pinned to the jeers of hostile crowds. Worse still were the patronizing, after-match kudos for trying in spite of the obvious. At the end of his first season, Robles was last in

the city of Mesa, Arizona, an area not known for great wrestling.

Watching Robles rule the NCAA championships eight years later, many believed that he had always been on an inexorable path to glory. He seemed simply *too good* for it ever to have been otherwise. The problem with this logic, however, is that it only works in hindsight. In the ninth grade, Robles was a miserable wrestler. Virtually nothing about him portended a champion. He was not born into a wrestling dynasty or raised in one of the handful of states where the sport still rivals football in popularity. He was 10 pounds underweight, even in the lightest weight class. He finished half his matches on his back.

What Robles did accomplish in that first season was largely psychological. Standing nearly naked in front of his peers started him, as he had hoped it would, on a long march back to feeling comfortable with his body and his identity, a feeling he had not known since he was a toddler. “Wrestling helped me come out of my shell,” Robles has said. “It forced me to say, ‘This is who I am.’” If it seems paradoxical that this metamorphosis began with Robles’s being repeatedly trounced by his opponents, it may have been that he was learning to substitute the punishments they dispensed for the ones a self-reproving teenager inflicts on himself. Life is full of abuses, Robles knew, even at 14—the trick is to find the ones that offer the promise of redress.

After his first year of wrestling, nobody thought Robles stood a chance against most two-legged opponents, except Robles himself, who decided the expedient thing to do was to make the sport *more* difficult for himself. He asked the best wrestler on the team, a 152-pounder named Chris Freije, if they could train together over the summer. Freije agreed, but his interpretation of “training” turned out to be closer to most people’s definition of cruelty. With a 50-pound advantage on his new apprentice, Freije pummeled Robles every day, often reducing him to tears. Robles had said he wanted no allowances for his weight, inexperience, or disability, and Freije, with a mix of stewardship and sadism, took him at his word. “He liked to be mean,” Robles told me.

Freije smacked Robles in the head and had him push cars over speed bumps in the withering midday Arizona heat. On the mat, he was even more punishing. Robles admired Freije immensely, but he needed to find a way to protect his psyche and his body, fast.

One day, Robles tried a radical change in his stance. Instead of balancing on one leg, he dropped to the mat, on two hands and a knee. Suddenly, with his lowered center of gravity, Freije could barely budge him. And by tucking his leg under his haunches, Robles substantially reduced his exposure to attack.

With his defense transformed, he turned to offense, mastering a series of tilts. By stringing together a few of these, including one he invented himself, Robles discovered he could rack up a dozen points in a single period.

Wrestling offers little room for revolutionary change. There is hardly any equipment to overhaul or reengineer. The principal aim of the modern wrestler is what it’s always been, to drive his opponent from his feet to the ground. When a major innovation arrives, as it does maybe once in a generation, one of two things happens. Either a reliable countermove is developed and the innovation is consigned to a footnote in the sport’s history, or the innovator catapults his own career, and sometimes those of many others.

There was no countermove for Robles’s discoveries. In his sophomore year, his second season of wrestling, he used his lowered stance and his arsenal of tilts to rise from last place in the city of Mesa to sixth in the entire state of Arizona. Then he really started improving. As a junior and senior, Robles went 96–0, crowning his high school career with a national championship.

Becoming a national champion on less than four years’ experience is an extraordinary accomplishment, and Robles figured it put him in position to realize a fantasy he had nurtured

throughout high school: to wrestle for the University of Iowa, one of the most storied and successful athletic programs anywhere in the NCAA. With two undefeated seasons and a national title behind him, he finally indulged in the conscious belief that he would soon wear Iowa's black and gold.

Only Iowa never called. And neither did Oklahoma State or Columbia, his second and third choice. Only two middling Division I programs offered Robles the scholarship his family needed to afford college: Arizona State and Drexel. Robles was crushed. Rumors circulated that he was considered too small to win at the D1 level; that coaches shrank from the challenge of working with his unusual body and style; and that prospective teammates complained that if they were to train with him, they might become adept at wrestling a one-legged opponent, but ill prepared for the two-legged competition they would face on match days. Robles looked like a gamble at best, a liability at worst. In the end, his mother urged him to go to Drexel because the school's offer covered room and board. Robles chose ASU to stay close to his family and took a night job washing airplanes to make up the scholarship difference.

By the end of his college freshman season, Robles was already one of the best wrestlers on the Arizona State team. The next two years, he won All-American honors by finishing in the top eight at the national tournament. Yet he still wasn't wrestling up to his full potential. Unforeseen events kept him distracted. In his freshman year, the ASU athletic department dropped its wrestling program after the Board of Regents cut the university's budget by \$26 million. Robles considered transferring, but didn't know where to go, and the program was eventually reinstated. A year later, his stepfather, Ron Robles, abandoned his mother, Judy, and left for California with another woman.

Ron, Judy, and Anthony had become a family when Anthony was two. Since then, Ron and Judy had had four other children together. Anthony never met his biological father, and always longed to be accepted by Ron, whose last name he'd chosen to take. "I don't call him my stepdad," he told me. "I don't think of him as my stepdad. He's my dad. And I really looked up to him."

Sometimes the elder Robles reciprocated with a queer sort of affection, as when he took the boy to a tattoo parlor so they could get the same guardian angel imprinted on their bodies. It was an ironic choice: there was little Anthony Robles needed more protection from than his stepfather. Both Anthony and Judy told me that Ron criticized his stepson mercilessly, and sometimes physically abused Judy in his presence.

Judy said Ron couldn't forgive her son the color of his skin—Anthony's biological father is black—or forgive her the love she feels for Anthony. For Ron, she believes, these were intolerable, living reminders that he had to share her with other men.

Still, for all the tumult when he was home, Ron's leaving devastated Judy. In addition to losing her husband, she had no income, four children to feed, and a mortgage to pay. She fell into depression and took to her bed. The bank began arrangements to foreclose on her house.

Until then, wrestling had been Anthony's respite from a noxious home life—"my sanctuary," he called it—and even the indignities he suffered in his first season were preferable to the ones his stepfather delivered, because there was always something to be done about the former. Losses, no matter how ugly, could be avenged. Ron Robles could not be made to love.

But Ron's leaving and the gloom that hung over Judy were too much. Even Anthony, unremittingly positive until now, started to despair. He told his mother he couldn't keep his mind on the mat, and he offered to quit college and take a job to help out.

Judy knew her son dreamed of becoming an NCAA champion, and seeing his willingness to give up that possibility inspired her to get out of bed. She told him to stay in school. She sold her blood to get enough money to feed the family. Eventually, she got a job working at ASU.

Anthony returned to wrestling with a ferocious determination to make good on his mother's

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