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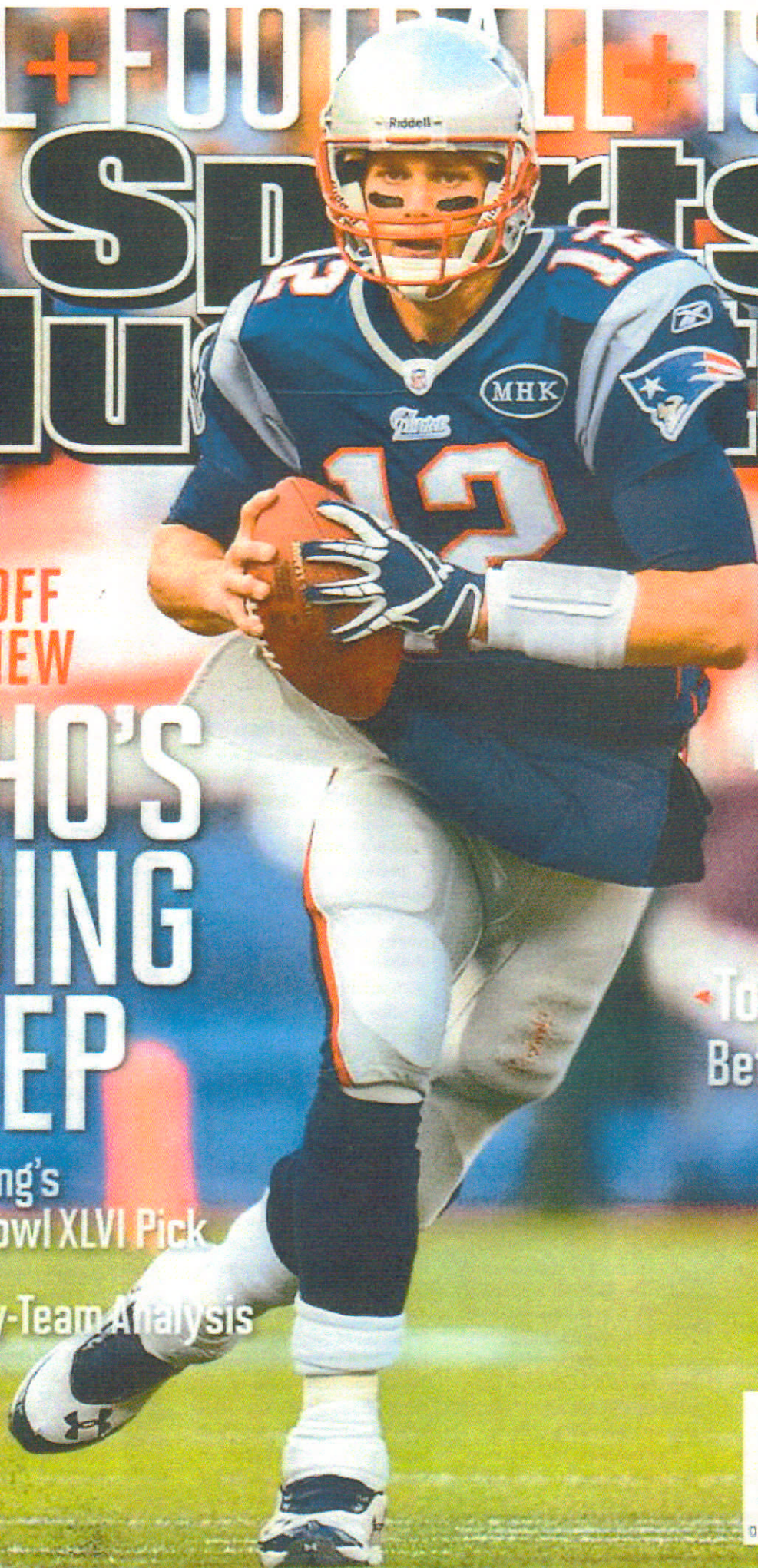
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Timeless

The NBA unveils a Christmas classic

When the NBA tipped off on Dec. 25, after a 149-day lockout, TV viewers were presented with a gift sure to melt even the most Scroogelian hoops fan's heart. TNT's coverage opened with a one-minute, 53-second montage of game footage that, *Forrest Gump*-like, put the stars of NBA past and present together on the same court. There was Larry Bird feeding a wide-open Ray Allen. Kobe Bryant fast-breaking with Magic Johnson. Michael Jordan fist-bumping



Derrick Rose. The spot, set to *Live Forever* by Drew Holcomb and The Neighbors and entitled *NBA Forever*, made the impossible appear thrillingly real.

"People needed something to feel good about the NBA, and they found [it] in this piece, which was an unintended side effect," says Drew Watkins, the creative director at Turner Sports, whose team produced the spot. "We just wanted to do something unique."

Pulling that off required three weeks of round-the-clock work—the color of some uniforms had to be changed frame by frame, for example—and the spot wasn't wrapped until 9 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

"Had you seen the piece a week before it aired, you would have laughed," Watkins says. "But it all came together." Kind of like the NBA season itself. —Matt Gagne

"We're like the Israelites. After 40 years we're just finding our way."

CHRIS DEL CONTE (TCU) athletic director, on his school's exodus from the Mountain West to the Big East before being realigned to the Big 12 over the past two years.



THEY SAID IT



TECHNOLOGY

Visions of Perfection

A new training tool has athletes sporting specs to reach their peak performance

In 2008, his third year in the NFL, Packers receiver Greg Jennings dropped a whopping eight passes, tied for seventh most in the league

and putting him in the company of such notorious butterfingers as Braylon Edwards and Terrell Owens. But those days are long gone. Jennings has brought that number down in each of the past three seasons, and in '11 he counted only three that got away, an improvement he attributes

in part to a new form of sensory performance training that helps him hone his focus, reaction time and decision making.

The system, developed by Nike's training division, begins

with a visit to a touch-screen kiosk (essentially a hyperintense video game unit, used above by the Lions' Ndamukong Suh) that tests and tracks visual and sensory performance skills, from depth perception to reaction time.



THE EYES HAVE IT
Suh (top) taps into his senses while Jennings takes the glasses for a field test.

That information then provides the framework for a custom-designed on-field training program, as each piece of sensory data defines an individual player's deficiencies and training needs. "We

want to quantify everything," explains Paul Winsper, a Nike performance director. "Every step and every drop of sweat."

The sweating that starts in the kiosk moves to the practice

field, where players don plastic eyewear with liquid-crystal display lenses, dubbed Vapor Strobes, that flash microscopic electric charges, blocking vision in 100-millisecond patterns. As players run drills, the lenses flicker between clear and opaque, the distractions forcing each athlete to anticipate what is coming and focus on his task, whether it be a running back finding an open hole, a quarterback spotting a free receiver or a wideout guiding the ball into his hands.

A recent Duke University study found that the stroboscopic training improves motion detection and central attention, helping boost visual perception. By taking away partial vision with eight levels of obstruction and varying speeds and modes, the strobes build muscle memory—essentially a high-tech football version of a weighted bat.

In effect, "by giving them less information, we force athletes to utilize what we give them more efficiently," says Dr. Alan Reichow, Nike's lead sensory performance researcher. "[It's] essentially stress training on the sensory system."

For Jennings, who uses the strobes pre- and postpractice in a medley of ball-catching drills, the training has sharpened his in-game focus dramatically. "You can see the ball a little better and react quicker," he says.

Jennings has even persuaded the rest of Green Bay's receiving corps to don the eyewear for workouts. The result? In the 2011 regular season the unit's frequency of dropped catchable balls stood at 7.8%, down from 10.9%—second worst in the NFL—in Jennings's '06 rookie season. And really, who's to argue with a Packers receiver this year? —Tim Newcomb