



STEVE RUSHIN Air and Space

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Their Favorite Things

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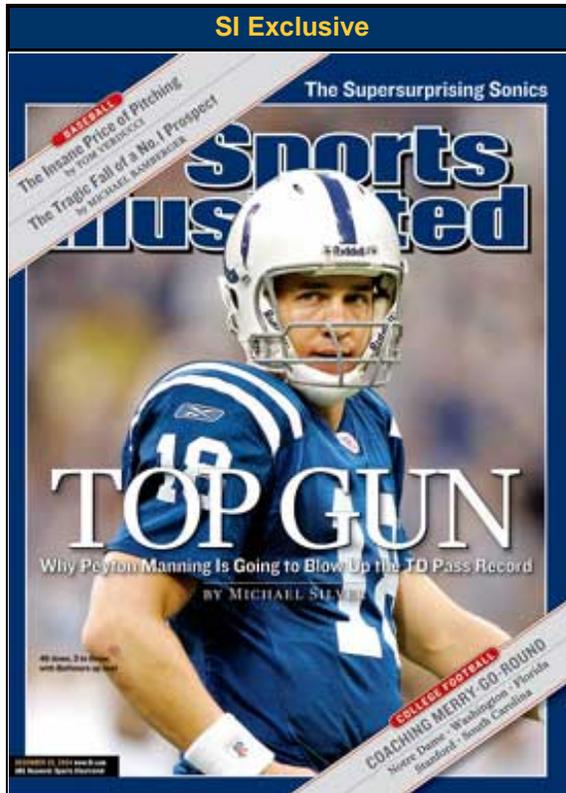
Like Charles Foster Kane and his sled, the athlete who has everything still remembers his favorite Christmas toy. Which is why Tiger Woods, with his Gulfstream V and his \$20 million yacht and his Swedish swimsuit-model wife, only ever really longed for Legos. "Space Legos," specifies Woods. "I was somewhere between five and nine. I got 'em from my mom and dad, but I really had to beg."

"What was *your* Rosebud?" we asked athletes. And they replied with Lincoln Logs, Tonka Toys and an epidemic of G.I. jonesing. For the Bus, it was a bike. "A BMX bike with mag wheels when I was 12," says Pittsburgh Steelers running back Jerome Bettis. "I'll never forget it. I loved that bike. It was under the tree on Christmas morning. I took it out in the snow."

"A Power Wheels Barbie convertible," says Seattle Storm guard Sue Bird, who this year won an Olympic gold medal and a WNBA championship but finds the Power Wheels jingle truly unforgettable: "*Pow-Pow-Power Wheels, now I'm driving for REAL!*"

When he was eight, Detroit Lions quarterback Joey Harrington awoke to find a new Nintendo system under the tree. "My brother and I played with that for literally 10 hours straight," he says. "You get up at six in the morning and go downstairs and run and open the Nintendo. 'Let's go play!' Later, at 8 p. m., our parents set a rule that we could only play an hour a day. But the funny thing is, when we went to bed, we'd hear the music downstairs from Super Mario Brothers. Then we'd wake up the next day, and my parents were like, 'We got to Level Two!'"

Some holiday gifts keep on giving, like the goalie pads Santa gave to Martin Brodeur. "At the time, I was crying because I didn't get as many toys as my



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brother," says the New Jersey Devils goaltender and 2004 Vezina Trophy winner. "Looking back, that was the best thing I ever got for Christmas."

Such sentiments are shared by Lamar Odom, who got a miniature dunking hoop when he was six. "It was a Dr. J Mini Jammer," says the instantly smitten Los Angeles Lakers forward. "It was meant to be. That's when I found my love, my lady, my first girlfriend."

When Phoenix Suns coach Mike D'Antoni was six, he got a new leather basketball. "My dad was a coach," D'Antoni says. "He probably stole it from his high school."

Some gifts were *re-gifts*, like the one Lakers forward Luke Walton can't forget no matter how hard he tries. "We got a lot of weird stuff," says Walton, son of eccentric Hall of Famer Bill Walton. "When you play in the NBA, you get a lot of free stuff, right? So my dad used to save all that stuff and wrap it up and give it to us. I remember this one time, I had this heavy box. It was sitting under the tree for a while, so I was all excited. I opened it, and it was a big box of PowerBars."

Some Kanes still have their Rosebuds. "What rocked my world was when I got the new Air Jordans in 1995, all patent-leather black," says Washington Wizards guard Gilbert Arenas. "I was 13. I still have them to this day -- untouched. Size 12. I haven't worn them yet. They were too pretty to wear." They remain at his father's house, still in the box.

And some Rosebuds break your heart. "The first time I really got a gift of any meaning was when I was nine," says Portland Trail Blazers guard Derek Anderson. "My uncle bought me a set of dress clothes -- slacks, shirt, jacket and shoes. I had never had nice clothes before. I practically wore them out, and not just on dress occasions. I wore them to school a lot, I was so proud."

"We didn't have much when I was little," says Vijay Singh. But now that he's the alltime single-season money winner on the PGA Tour, he collects priceless art -- in a manner of speaking. "The best things I've ever gotten have been hand-drawn cards from my son, Qass. There'd be a picture, you know, of a little man who didn't really look like a man, but it didn't matter. What mattered is they were from him. I still have a couple in my carry bag."

What's in *your* emotional carry bag? "Playskool basketball hoop," says Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. "Orange and blue with the white backboard."

"Big Wheel," says center Kris Draper of the Detroit Red Wings. "It was just sitting there [under the tree]. It was too big to wrap, and it just had a bow on it. I came downstairs, and it was beautiful." He was five.

Ever wish you were five again too? Or seven? Right wing Anson Carter wears a real NHL jersey for the Los Angeles Kings, but the sweater that gave him goose bumps was a replica jersey -- number 22 of the New York Islanders -- he got for his seventh Christmas. "To this day," says Carter, "of all the things I have bought or had given to me, that Mike Bossy jersey is my favorite."

How can that be? Easy. Now he plays for a living. But back then he was living for play.

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Sports Illustrated senior writer Steve Rushin pens the weekly Air and Space column in the magazine.

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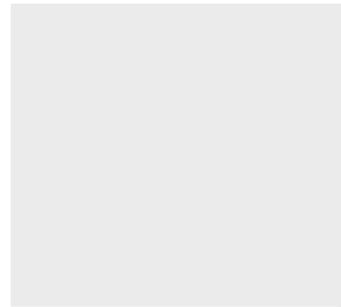


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