



PRO / FILE



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Two years ago, **STUART HOLDEN** was considered one of the top young players in England. Now, after two season-ending injuries, he's preparing his greatest comeback yet: Bringing Bolton back to the Premier League.

BY **JOSH DEAN**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ANDREW HETHERINGTON**





UNBREAKABLE

**BROKEN EYE SOCKET**  
Hooligans, taxi line, Newcastle.

**BREAK AT THE END OF HIS FEMUR**  
Jonny Evans, sliding tackle at Old Trafford, 2011.

**WISDOM TEETH OUT**  
2004. Didn't stop him from hosting a party at his parents' house!

**PUNCTURED EAR DRUM**  
Holding breath under water too long trying to train to be a Navy SEAL, Texas, age 12.

**STRAINED VOCAL CHORDS**  
Attempting to be a part of the middle school choir, 6th grade.

**BROKEN LEG**  
Nigel de Jong, USA vs. Holland, Amsterdam Arena, 2010.

**BROKEN PINKY**  
Fell off the monkey bars trying to impress 4th grade crush. (She had blonde pig tails.)





BEGIN HERE

**“DO I EAT THE LAST PIECE?** I have to eat the last piece, right?”

Stuart Holden is looking down upon the last slice of his thin-crust pizza at a delicious but eccentric upscale pizza restaurant outside Wilmington, Delaware, called Pizza by Elizabeth. This is not because a woman named Elizabeth actually makes the pizzas. It’s because every pizza is named for a famous Elizabeth (or at least a marginally famous one: for example, Hasselbeck) and served in a garishly decorated room that could have been art directed by Liberace. A gigantic silkscreen portrait of Liz Taylor hangs over our table and the room thrums with the chatter of ladies who drive Jaguars and drink chardonnay for lunch.

“You can’t leave one piece,” says Holden’s girlfriend, Karalyn West, who, despite being a beautiful and fit model, actually eats meals.

“And I worked out today,” Holden says, raising both arms to flex.

West shakes her head, slightly embarrassed but mostly amused. “He flexes at every meal,” she says. “I said just last night that we can’t go out to eat without you flexing your muscles. And you’re doing it again!” She chuckles. “I’m going to start keeping a tally.”

Holden smirks. “Someone ordered the mussels!”

Given his current circumstances, there is no reason that Holden should be so cheerful. Tomorrow, he will celebrate his 27<sup>th</sup> birthday in Wilmington, a city of moderate size in a state best known for being lax about taxes. It is not his home, nor his place of employment, and yet Holden, one of America’s most promising soccer talents, has spent

more than a year shuttling from various corporate apartments to a clinic in the basement of a Jewish community center, where slow white men go to play basketball after work. Instead of basking in the adulation of supporters of his club, Bolton Wanderers, who have created songs in his honor, Holden has spent literally hundreds of hours riding stationary bicycles, balancing on stability balls, and walking while affixed to oversized rubber bands held by James “Hash” Hashimoto, the former head trainer for the U.S. Men’s National Team and a man whose magic touch is the reason Holden could probably now qualify for residency in the state of Delaware.

### Bolton need not worry about HOLDEN’S RESOLVE.

He works out with Hash five and sometimes six days a week, usually twice a day.

“I joke sometimes that we should just buy a nice house out here,” Holden says after dinner, while driving through Wilmington’s leafy west suburbs in the latest of the cars he rents by the month. (This one: a VW Touareg. “I got upgraded!” Holden brags.) West is riding shotgun. Around us is rolling hill country, a land of 18<sup>th</sup> century homes ringed by fieldstone walls that corral horses nibbling at field greens. In other words, totally idyllic terrain if not for the fact that it is *suburban Delaware*.

“And I smack him when he says that,” West answers. “Seriously.”

Holden chuckles, because he loves a joke, and because he feels the same way. No one wants to leave Delaware more than him. He knows that every day he spends here is one

day lost from his extraordinarily promising career, and a step more distant from the minds of both his club manager, Owen Coyle, and Jürgen Klinsmann, the cheerful German who is currently overhauling the U.S. national team. But Holden will be here among the mini-malls, sharing swimming-pool lanes with grandmothers, until Hash tells him it’s time to go, and in the meantime he’ll make the most of it, because that’s what Stuart Holden, incessantly happy Texan of Scottish origin, always does.

Highlights of his current recreational life include devouring TV dramas (“I’ve seen basically every show on Netflix”); talking for hours on Skype with his brother, who lives in the apartment the two nominally still share in Manchester, England; and Dollar Dog Night at the home of the Single-A minor

league baseball club the Wilmington Blue Rocks. On his last outing there with West—whose arrival at the onset of summer certainly brightened things—Holden took a dramatic swerve from the strict diet that keeps him in the skinniest possible jeans and ate three of those hot dogs, as well as chicken fingers, fries, and some Dippin’ Dots ice cream. He has been known to watch Bolton matches at a local pub, occasionally teasing fans at the bar who don’t recognize him via Twitter, where his rollicking persona has attracted 277,000 followers and inspired a joke account called Stu Holden’s Hair. (Description: “I am Stu Holden’s hair and I am full of secrets.”) He even made a series of web shorts, filmed and edited by West, and featuring, amid

many workout scenes, awkward dancing, corny jokes, and cooking demos), to entertain himself and give fans a window into his current world. (The series was called “No Holden Back” and aired on the YouTube Channel, KickTV.)

But mostly, he works out with Hash.

Hash, pronounced “Hosh,” is a quiet, friendly, seemingly unflappable trainer and physical therapist who worked four World Cups (1994-2006) with the national team before settling down in Delaware, where he’s now married with an infant daughter and a booming PT practice. He is no longer an official employee of Team USA, but remains close with the current trainer (a protégé) and many of the players. He is still the guy many of them seek out after injuries, because he is impossible not to like and is very good at his job.

Holden first came to Hash’s clinic in 2009 to visit his good friend and former roommate Charlie Davies, who spent nearly a year there recuperating from the car accident that almost killed him.

“I guess that was the kiss of death,” Holden jokes, because less than two years later, he broke his leg and became a patient himself. Holden’s team didn’t necessarily love the idea of shipping him home to rehab, but Bolton honored his wishes and sent him on his way. “It’s a give and take,” Holden says, noting that he’s in regular contact with his coaches and physios back in England. (Hash also sends weekly status updates.) When dealing with lengthy rehab, a frustrating process at best, “It’s important to be where you’re comfortable.”

Ain’t that the truth. Because of some setbacks, Holden returned last fall for a second, even longer stint in PT, and has now been in Wilmington so long that, earlier this summer, he broke Davies’ record for the most days spent in Hash’s care. “The unenviable record,” Holden says, with a smile that feels, for the first time, a little forced. “I think if I got married in the next few months, Hash would



Holden's girlfriend, Karalyn West, shows him red.

be pushing for groomsmen.”

Bolton need not worry about Holden's resolve. He works out with Hash five and sometimes six days a week, usually twice a day, and often goes to the gym to work on upper body fitness or his core on mornings when PT sessions aren't scheduled. It is, to be certain, a lonely and tedious life, and one of the few things that bums

Holden out is thinking about his teammates practicing or playing. “It feels too far away to be here,” he admits. “You miss the camaraderie. You miss all the inside jokes. But it feels too close when you're back.” He says that Bolton's gym has a huge glass wall overlooking the training ground, and it's very hard to be riding the bike while teammates scrimmage outside. “I'm a

bit of a jokester and prankster. I miss being part of a team.” Either way, he says, “It's just lonely.”

● **STUART HOLDEN** doesn't feel sorry for himself because that's a waste of time. Feeling sorry for yourself doesn't speed healing. Feeling sorry for yourself only keeps you tethered to things you can't change. Holden understands that

injuries are part of the game, even if his own injuries seem particularly cruel and unlucky. Exhibit A: a random and unprovoked punch to the face in a late-night Newcastle taxi line broke his eye socket and ruined his trial with the English club Sunderland before it started. He was 19 and had just turned pro after playing two years at Clemson.

From there, Holden, who was born in Scotland but grew up in Houston, returned to the U.S. and signed with his hometown club, the Dynamo, for the whopping sum of \$30,000. He spent the next two years as the energy guy, coming off the bench at the end of games for a team that had won consecutive MLS Cups. Then an injury to starting midfielder Brad Davis opened the door. “That's sometimes what it takes,” Holden says, over a coffee, which he seems to always be drinking and which cannot be discounted as a factor in his relentlessly sunny disposition. “Look at all the guys getting a chance because I got hurt.”

Once embedded in the starting line-up, Holden became one of MLS's top attacking midfielders and turned down numerous offers to renegotiate his four-year contract for a fairer sum. “I wanted to play out the deal and go to Europe and make it where people said I wouldn't be good enough.” So he just kept cashing those small checks and renting out rooms in his townhouse to teammates who were even broker than him—one of them was making \$11,000 a year (“I felt bad asking him for rent.”)—while waiting for someone in England to come calling.

When his contract finally expired, Holden turned down a “good offer, one I thought about hard” from MLS and left on a free transfer for a six-month trial with Bolton. They made him no promises. For three months, he didn't even dress. He got his first chance in a Carling Cup game against Tottenham in which the manager sat many of his starters. Bolton was hammered on the road, 4-0, but Holden played “unbelievably, out of my skin,” he says.

This was a Wednesday. On Friday, Coyle called him into his office and asked how his legs felt. Holden was excited, because he was sure he'd at last earned the right to sit on the bench. “So, I said they felt good,” he recalls. “Inside, I'm thinking, ‘I'm tired as shit.’ I hadn't played in four

months.” But he was asked to start, went the full 90, and was named Man of the Match in his first game on home turf. The fans loved him.

A week later, Holden was called up for a U.S. National Team friendly against Holland, one of the final spring tune-ups for the 2010 World Cup. Coach Bob Bradley had made it clear that Holden was a critical piece of his midfield, and he started him against the world’s third-ranked team. Early in the first half, Holden went for a loose ball, and Dutch enforcer Nigel de Jong did what a player nicknamed “the Lawnmower” does—made a reckless and violent tackle and broke Holden’s leg.

Just like that, his week-old starting job for Bolton was in jeopardy, as was the World Cup. “I had played two games,” Holden said. “I was thinking, ‘Here we go again.’” But those two games had made an impression and Coyle called him the next day to say that Bolton was not only going to honor its commitment and pick up Holden’s option, but wanted to sign him to a longer contract. He was safe—but he wouldn’t be playing again for a long time.

If you troll enough American soccer coverage online, you’ll find in the comments a quiet but recurring narrative claiming that Holden is injury prone. This really pisses him off. “I hate that tag,” he says. Injury prone suggests someone cannot

League, thanks in large part to Holden, a box-to-box center-mid who both attacked and defended. (He was among the EPL’s leaders in passes completed and ranked second overall in tackles.) With 19 minutes to go in a 0-0 tie against Manchester United, Holden made a play for a loose ball just outside the United goal box. At precisely the same time, United defender Jonny Evans, whom Holden diplomatically refers to as a “hard-nosed player,” slid in studs-up. The collision between Evans’ cleats and Holden’s knee was sickening; Holden immediately collapsed. Evans’ cleat had torn a hole in his flesh so deep that it exposed both ligament and bone. “I remember just sitting there holding the skin closed thinking, ‘I can’t believe I’m lying here on the turf at Old Trafford and I can see my bone,’” he says. “I still see that moment in my head.”

Holden thought the injury looked worse than it actually was. “I thought it just needed to be stitched up,” he says, “[and that] I was gonna have a sweet scar. That wasn’t the case, unfortunately.”

The next morning, Bolton’s team doctor showed up unannounced at Holden’s apartment. *This can’t be good*, he thought. And it wasn’t.

**“I can’t believe I’m lying here on the turf at Old Trafford and I CAN SEE MY BONE,” he says. “I still see that moment in my head.”**

stay healthy due to the fallibility of his body. It’s a label you could fairly apply to Grant Hill, for instance, or José Reyes. Holden, on the other hand, has just been unlucky—and historically so.

There was the punch. And then de Jong. And then after he’d regained his health in record time to make Bradley’s roster for the South African World Cup, and after he followed that with a Bolton campaign so good that London’s *Guardian* newspaper named him the Premier League’s best overall player at midseason in December 2010—then came Jonny Evans.

March 19, 2011. Bolton was sitting in fifth place, within striking distance of a spot in the Champions

While the physical appearance of the injury was awful enough, the damage inside was worse. The doctor, Holden says, “was nearly in tears” while explaining that he’d suffered an extremely rare break at the end of his femur—what his surgeon later called “a one in a million injury” that was going to cost him six to nine months of intensive rehab. “I think I’m a case study now,” Holden jokes, showing off scars on both the front and back of his knee. “At least I’m famous for something.”

After absorbing his fate, Holden flew back to the U.S. to see Hash for the first time. He spent four months, alone, working out and returning to an empty apartment.

Once his strength was back, Holden returned to Bolton, played three reserve matches and then rejoined the first team for a match against Aston Villa. He played 90 minutes and was named Man of the Match but his knee hurt the whole time. Injured parts often ache even after they’re no longer injured—there’s muscle pain to deal with, and scar tissue to break—so Holden wasn’t sure “if this was normal pain, or something else.” But the next day he could barely walk.

He had a screw in his knee from the first surgery that needed to be removed anyway, so he traveled to London and was put under thinking it was just a routine procedure that would cost him six weeks at worst. He woke up to horrible news. The surgeon had found additional damage to the broken leg, and further repair was required. He’d had microfracture surgery, and the recovery he faced could take up to a year.

For a week, Holden wallowed. He knew how tedious physical therapy was, how long it would be before he could play again. Even for the sport’s happiest man, this was a blow. “That week I was pretty bummed out,” he recalls. “I’d just said to my brother how awesome it felt to play—how hard the rehab was and how I didn’t know if I could go through it again. And then, literally, it happened.” He smiles. “Did I jinx myself or what?”

**HOLDEN DROPS** a set of dumbbells and sits on a weight bench during his morning workout at the Hockessin Athletic Club, a gargantuan facility that houses Hash’s newest clinic. He pulls out his phone and searches for a clip of club and country highlights that Bolton’s video department put together for him and that he watches often, especially if he is feeling down, or really missing the game, or just needing to get pumped up. It is set to music, and I watch his face light up at the sight of himself passing and tackling and scoring. “That was Haiti,” he says, as the on-screen Holden blasts a shot into the upper corner from outside the penalty box. “My

first goal for the U.S.”

This summer, much of the talk in U.S. soccer was about the future of Clint Dempsey. The American star had emerged as one of the best players in England while Holden was in Wilmington, and everyone, Dempsey included, seemed to want to see him move to a top team that would play in the Champions League. Holden said as much himself, when he popped by the BBC’s *Football Focus* last April for a sit-down interview. “I think he could play at a very big team,” he tells me. “I’m a big fan of Clint, both as a person and a player.” (The two are both Texans; Dempsey comes from the small town of Nacogdoches. “He keeps inviting me to go to Nacogdoches to go fishing,” Holden jokes. “I’m like, ‘Let’s go fishing somewhere cool instead.’”)

I ask if playing at Europe’s top level is a goal of his too.

“I want to do all that, but I’ll take it one step at a time,” he answers. “Even my friends are like, ‘When are you back playing? When will you do this or that?’ I don’t care about any of that, I just want to play soccer. That’s all I’m worried about. I have huge ambitions, but I’m a realist. I can dream all I want, but if I don’t go back and play well at Bolton I’m not going to do anything. I just want to play and see where it takes me.”

I’d seen Holden in New York about a month prior, when he’d come up to “coach” in Steve Nash’s annual charity soccer game and spend some rare time with other professional players. He was still walking with a bit of a limp. In Wilmington, though, he is walking smoothly and confidently. He is, he says, doing some light running and was dying to get back to England. (The latest rumors are saying October.)

Even on days when Holden feels great, Hash is extremely careful to temper his enthusiasm. (“This type of injury takes time,” Hash



## The Audacity of Hope



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equally non-PC. Brandi was Hope before Hope was Hope. Nicknamed “Hollywood” by her teammates because of her love of the spotlight, Brandi was the eyebrow-raiser, the wave-maker, the one who took off her clothes before it was standard practice for female soccer players to take their clothes off. In the final chapter of her book, Solo elaborates on her gripe against Chastain, insulting another member of the old guard in the process: “Everything Brandi says seems to have a direct correlation to her playing days... ‘When I played with Carla Overbeck...’ she will say again and again. I’m not sure that many of our new fans have any idea who Carla Overbeck was. It seems to be a continuation of that long-running theme: The ‘99 team [being] unwilling to recognize that times have changed.”

I am one fan who does know who Carla Overbeck is: She coached me when I was a member of the women’s varsity team at Duke. Every interaction we had with her confirmed what we’d suspected when we watched her on TV: With her deadpan sense of humor and unthinking confidence, she was the epitome of cool. On a handful of occasions, I got to play against her—she was visibly pregnant with her second child at the time, but she was still on a different plane of talent than any defender I’ve ever encountered.

Solo’s comment that the current batch is “much more athletically skilled” is an audacious one. When I ask Dorrance which U.S. team he thinks is better, he starts scribbling down names at each position, comparing the team player-to-player. It’s a tough call—as debatable as asking whether Kobe, Durant, and LeBron could beat the Dream Team. His answer: The ‘99 team was better defensively, while the current team is more of a threat offensively.

Solo alleges that the ‘99ers are “clinging to their glory days” and unwilling to accept the arrival of the new team, but a quick look at their activities suggests that what the old team is actually doing is using their past successes to impact the future. Julie Foudy served as president of the Women’s Sports Foundation and currently runs a leadership academy. The Mia Hamm Foundation raises funds and awareness for bone marrow cancer. Carla Overbeck, Joy Fawcett, Tiffany Milbrett, Brianna Scurry, Cindy Parlow, and Kristine Lilly are all coaching the new generation of women’s players and actively rooting for the current one. As Lilly wrote on her blog, “When the U.S. women won the Gold medal versus Brazil, I wept too.”

**THERE IS PLENTY TO LOVE** about our current women’s team. We’ve got players who don’t just serve up cliché-ridden sound bites: Commenting on the Japan-U.S. rematch in the Olympic gold-medal game, Wambach said on NBCSN, “This game means I won’t be upset for the rest of my life.” We’ve got players who are downright funny: Anyone would want to get a beer with Megan Rapinoe, the platinum-blonde, recently-out midfielder known for cre-

ative goal-scoring celebrations. Sydney Leroux, baby of the team, is similarly unconstrained—her Twitter profile reads, “I kick balls for a living.”

Without a doubt, they’re an alluring bunch. But perhaps the biggest difference between then and now is that now, the allure is beside the point.

In order for the world to pay attention in 1999, a female athlete had to be a role model loved by everyone. In 2012, she doesn’t. And that may be a weird form of social progress. At the 2011 World Cup and 2012 Summer Olympics, the looks and personalities and human interest stories were eclipsed by the excitement on the field. *Grantland* writer Brian Phillips offers the following description of the current team: “If you like your sports wild, a little rude, and punctuated by massive heart attacks, the USWNT is as pure a drug as you are likely to find on this earth.” And this is more true of Solo than any other player.

Shaka Hislop, Trinidadian goalkeeper, once said: “Goalkeepers are remembered for their mistakes.” In years to come, some people will remember Solo for the apparent mistakes she made off the field—for running her mouth and for disrespecting the women who came before. Others will remember these things not as mistakes but as the necessary roughness of a brave, brazen leader. For now, it doesn’t matter. On the field, she is superb—and enthralling to watch. And we may be at a point where that is enough. 🇺🇸

## Unbreakable



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later tells me. “The hardest thing is how slow you have to take it.”) For every intense day, Hash makes sure a quieter one follows. When he senses Holden’s mood dipping, he often plays his wildcard, grabbing a soccer ball and taking Holden outside to juggle.

“I’ve learned with this one not to put a target on myself” Holden says, as he reclines on a table waiting for Hash to feed him the day’s exercises. In the background, the U.S. women are playing their first knockout game of the Olympics. Earlier that day, Holden had tweeted a good luck message to Megan Rapinoe, the tousle-haired blonde who Holden jokingly refers to as “my twin.” Twitter, it often seems, is Holden’s soapbox, although instead of speechifying, he tends to do stand-up. In England, he was a Twitter gremlin, bonding with club supporters, and teasing opponents and teammates, but in Delaware he’s taken to the air even more frequently, and Twitter has provided an extremely useful lifeline. It allows him to tease active players (Jack Wilshere, Joey Barton) and connect with fans via messages that are alternately observational (@stuholden *David Silva has turned into my favorite player for Spain... movement, vision, touch, etc. joy to watch2*), critical (@stuholden *OK was going to leave it but these commentators for GoTV are AWFUL. Ruined a dramatic and exciting final for me*) and ridiculous (@stuholden *Have you ever sat on the can so long ur butt goes numb? #reallifeproblems*). Of course, even he has his limits. “He’s got a screw loose, man,” he says of manic serial-tweeter Joey Barton. “He just became too much

for me on Twitter. I wish there was a mute button—because there’s some people I want to unfollow but who get so offended.”

Of late, many messages have come in from supporters across the pond begging him to come back to England and help Bolton return to the Premier League. Holden hears them, but is careful to make no promises. On his last birthday, in 2011, he tweeted that he’d just run on grass and that it was the perfect present, which the British media proceeded to interpret and broadcast as “Stuart Holden is back in training!” His manager wasn’t happy.

“Everything is good and going well, but I can’t push it. My knee tells me how fast I can go,” he says. “I don’t like getting everyone else’s hopes up, or my own. I don’t want to say I’ll be back in a month and find out in a month it’ll be another month.”

Still waiting at the gym, Holden kills time watching the game and gossiping with some junior therapists until Hash finally escapes from a marathon conference call. He is wearing a large brace on one knee and has surgery of his own scheduled for September—I joke that he should have Holden oversee his PT.

“He’s had enough, he could do it,” Hash replies with a laugh, as he grabs Holden’s leg and begins checking his range of motion. “If there’s any non-PT I’d trust to do it, it’s him.”

Satisfied that Holden’s knee is up for some work, he prescribes a set of gumball tosses, which require Holden to stand with each leg on a separate nubby boob of rubber and catch medicine balls tossed at him by a PT. After a warm-up, he begins to catch and throw while balanced on a single leg, switching often.

“Wow,” exclaims the PT. “Is that the bad leg?” “There is no bad leg,” Holden says. “There’s good and better.”

**IT’S HARD** to watch the U.S. National Team play and not imagine what it could be with Stuart Holden in the midfield. In Michael Bradley, Clint Dempsey, and Landon Donovan, the team has three of the greatest field players Team USA has ever produced, all of them in their primes at the same time. Holden, during that one golden year at Bolton, looked set to be the fourth. Where he would slot in now doesn’t matter. His inclusion, in whatever way, would certainly make the team better.

Because of his commitment to rehab, Holden recovered from his first broken leg (de Jong edition) in time to make the trip to South Africa for the 2010 World Cup. He wasn’t fully back to game fitness, but it seemed that then-coach Bob Bradley included him simply because, as has been observed by many coaches and teammates, just having Stuart Holden around makes a team stronger.

“I don’t piss and moan,” is how Holden assesses his attitude. “I have a good time even when I’m not playing. The World Cup was a top-three soccer experience of my life and I only played six minutes.”

It’s clear that Holden really misses the national team, to the extent that he tries *not* to watch its games. “I won’t start watching, but I’ll be reading updates on Twitter and I think, ‘Shit, I should turn it on,’” he says. “So I turn it on and I watch the whole game.” He says it’s especially hard because he’s tied into the team’s social media, and often sees messages pinging back and forth between players organizing plans to meet for pre- and post-game dinners.

Holden has yet to play a game in the Klinsmann era, and he knows that the same situation that exists between him and Bolton exists between him and the USMNT. Until he’s healthy and playing, he’s not useful, and to hold a spot or plan for his return would be pointless. And yet, when Holden returned

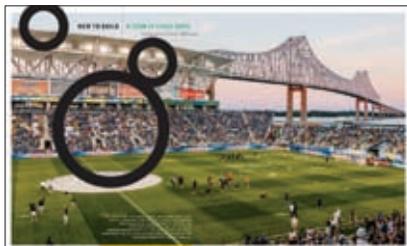


to Bolton for those three reserve games, Klinsmann flew in to watch, and later invited him to the January camp in California to participate in some workouts and meet the new coaching staff. “That was pretty cool,” Holden says. He’s excited about what he’s seen so far of Klinsmann and his system.

Of late, Holden has learned to stop reading the English press, which has more than once reported that he was back training in Bolton. With the team’s personnel decisions beyond his control, he’s taking charge of his Wilmington routine: Wake, workout, repeat. If people choose to dismiss him or forget about him, that’s okay. For the time being, being ignored may even be preferable: It keeps uncontrollable distractions out of his hair. But it also provides motivation that he will draw upon when the time comes.

Bolton, he knows, has signed two center mids. “I welcome the competition,” he says. “I welcome people to write me off, to say I won’t come back. Because I know I’ll be on that plane to Brazil [for the World Cup]. If I do well with Bolton I’ll be on the national team. They go together. Jürgen’s not gonna call me up just because of what I used to be.”

### How to Build a Team in Three Days



and Jay de Merit are nullifying the threat of the giant Lukaku.

After the game I grab John Hackworth and ask him about so many creative players dropping deep, and he laughs: “I thought we had four defensive midfielders at one point—you looked at Ozzie (Alonso) and Ozzie was trying to get out of the way! Because Dero and Henry and Beckham were all coming back. But at the same time, to have those kinds of players on the field and wanting the ball, that’s what you want.”

It works. First blood goes to the All-Stars, whose midfield movement for the first half-hour has been somewhat unorthodox, what with so many leaders on the field, but consistently clever. Their first goal, poached by Wondolowski, comes through the combination of licensed roaming from their midfielders and the balls they practiced placing between the keeper and the defense—Chelsea’s Achilles heel. But the All-Stars don’t have things all their own way in the first half. Midway through the first period, Collin barges headlong into the back of Essien and both men are briefly knocked out cold. When Collin re-enters the game, Terry easily climbs above him to head Chelsea level from a corner, and it becomes clear he’ll have to come out. This turns out to be the only deviation from the gameplan.

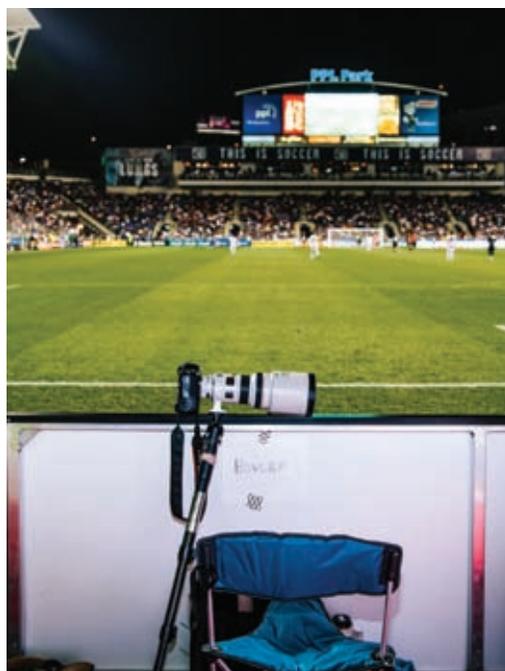
After halftime, only 10 or 15 minutes pass before some of the major players come out, and as soon as Henry leaves the field, Lampard puts Chelsea ahead 2-1. Both Hackworth and Ashton later acknowledge a little sinking of hearts after that goal, but they are both adamant that they always felt the changes they were making would bring them chances to score in a close game—and so it proved. “He was wanting to keep going,” says Ashton when asked about keeping Beckham in the game past the 70-minute

mark. And in the 72nd minute, a sublime crossfield ball from Beckham finds De Rosario, who goes past his man to deliver another deadly All-Star cut-back pass—this one teed up for his D.C. United clubmate Pontius to slot home, much to the delight of their coaches. (Ashton on Dero: “His record is something ridiculous: Every time he has an assist, his team wins something like 80 percent of the time.”) Then, with injury time kicking in, the All-Stars ping some neat P.S.G.-style triangles of their own around the midfield. They end with Beckerman pushing a beautiful first-touch pass to Johnson, who’s already turning for goal. His shot deflects off Luiz and up and over the stranded Turnbull for the fifth and final goal of the game. It’s not elegant, but it’s a winner.

It doesn’t take long for the measuring-up to begin: Alexi Lalas begins the ESPN postgame show declaring the victory a “statement game.” Was it? Maybe. It was a good win, regardless of the stakes or missing starters (and Chelsea started with a strong team). The All-Stars played and won with three goals from open play against the European champions. But at the moment, it hardly matters. As the players run the gauntlet of the media zone for their coaches, there’s a party for both sets of fans in full swing in a marquee by the Delaware River.

In the days after the game, Olsen’s arrival will prove to be one of the main storylines. He is modest in the aftermath—“I didn’t coach at all this week”—but he’s selling himself short. He gave his players the right balance of template and freedom to compete and win. What’s been apparent through these three days is his sensitivity to the needs and natures of players in a week like this. “I think Ben is a rising star,” nine-time All-Star Donovan is later quoted as saying. “I think his demeanor is great, I think his attitude with the guys is great. He’s assertive, but he’s respectful, and I think D.C. got a good one.”

As far as the broader questions and stories go, it’s hard to say. Even as I try to make sense of the game from an American perspective, my British press colleagues are drawing conclusions about which Chelsea players will make the playing squad this year, who’s set for loan, and the obvious problems with their defense this pre-season. In their version, MLS loss is already a footnote. I think of a quote from a Richard Ford character: “Two people don’t see the same landscape.”



At best, what contests like the All-Star Game offer, with their invitation to compare relative progress, is one inescapable conclusion, regardless of the score: Change at the structural level of sports tends to happen at a glacial pace. Yet it happens nevertheless. The morning after the game, taking a cab to the train station, my Moroccan cabbie hears my strange accent and wants to know where I’m from. I do my party trick of naming cities—Belfast, Sunderland, Manchester, New York—and am rewarded with the best piece of cab dialogue I’ve ever had: “Sunderland? Chamakh should have gone there—more minutes. New York? You know (Mehdi) Ballouchy? We’re here.”

Hearing someone casually, and without prompting, offer me a reference that encompasses what would once have been impossibly disparate and parochial experiences reminds me of the quantum leap the cultural aspects of soccer have taken in the digital age. It’s dizzying. Living through these changes, they’re hard to fully comprehend, but watching the All-Stars beat Chelsea, knowing that each player would immediately head back to their own more-or-less-celebrated local concerns, was one of those moments when I came face-to-face with global trajectories of sport and culture that are self-evidently converging rather than diverging.

So the question perhaps is not what can be done in three days, but what the glimpses offered in those three days suggest about the years to come.

### 700 Miles of Misadventure with El Kartel



as we get closer I start to wonder if we’re going to, like, rumble or something. *Barras bravas* are often at war. Postgame fights between El Kartel and a team called Santos have devolved into rock-throwing riots. Yet there’s no apparent enmity between El Kartel and the Monterey group. We’re offered beer as soon as we step inside. Everyone wants to hear stories about cadavers and bullets and torsos hanging from bridges. We’re respected, it seems, for living in the world’s murder capital. And maybe because our team poses no threat.

The clubhouse is furnished with a couple ratty couches. Blue walls host old posters of Rayados greats, none of whom I recognize. A dented VCR unspools last season’s championship game. Outside, on a vacant lot, kids in jeans and canvas sneakers kick a ball. It’s a mellow vibe, a lot more laid-back than I’d expected. I drink my free Carta Blanca and watch the game on television for a while, wondering what’s next. When it becomes clear everyone is content to chill, I distribute a round of fist bumps, thank our hosts for the beer, and break away, back to the city.

It’s still early evening. The sun has not yet set. I walk down cobblestone streets hemmed in by *colonia* buildings painted mango and pink. Ornate iron bars protect and perhaps even improve the glass windows of cafés and boutique clothing stores. Bartenders post fliers outside rock clubs still several hours from opening. I step inside a gallery to find a collection of pop art that I enjoy, even if it is a little too similar to Roy

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