

THE RIFLE

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The Rifle

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For Gentlemen Who Notice Details Others Miss

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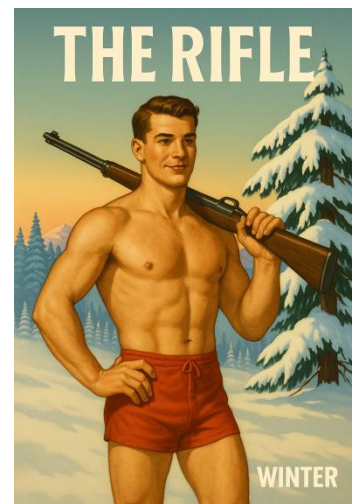
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"On the longest night, the hunter keeps vigil. The turning of the year marks not an ending, but a patient beginning." Anon

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HOW A MAN PREPARES FOR WINTER

A Practical Guide for the Gentleman of the Solstice Season

By R.H. Dorrance — Field Editor, *THE RIFLE*

Winter does not arrive all at once. It creeps in — first on the breath of dawn, then in the hush over the mountains, and finally in the steady fall of snow that makes a man understand how small he is, and how much he must respect the season.

A gentleman does not fear winter. He prepares for it.

Below are the essentials every man should see to before the Solstice settles in, whether he keeps a cabin in the hills, a farmhouse on the ridge, or a modest city home warmed by the hum of a radiator. Winter rewards the prepared, and punishes the careless.

I. CLOTHING FOR THE SERIOUS COLD

Mid-century men understood the truth: winter is conquered before you step outside.

Flannel First

A good flannel shirt, thick enough to stand on its own, is the backbone of winter layering. Worn close to the skin, it traps warmth without smothering.

Wool Next

A man invests in wool:

- wool socks
- wool trousers
- wool sweater
- wool coat

Cotton freezes.

Wool keeps a man alive.

A Proper Coat

A winter coat should not merely look warm — it must *be* warm. The coat that has carried you the last four winters is the coat you trust. Shun the new until it proves itself.

Boots That Understand Snow

A proper winter boot is heavy enough to grip the earth, tall enough to fend off drifts, and lined well enough that your toes never forget you care about them.

Lace them tight. Winter respects discipline.

II. THE MAN AND HIS FIRE

Stocking the Woodpile

A winter gentleman stacks his firewood early and stacks it high. Twelve cords for a cabin is comfortable; anything less risks cold nights and regret.

Tools in Order

A sharp axe, a steady splitting maul, and gloves without holes.

A man who chops wood warms himself twice: once in the work, and once in the fire.

The Science of the Hearth

Open the flue.
Check the draw.
Sweep out ash.
A fire is a companion that demands respect.

III. CARE OF THE RIFLE

Cold-Weather Oiling

A rifle stiffens in the cold just like a man's hands.
Use a light oil; wipe the barrel clean; keep the action smooth.

Sight in Before the Storms

Winter light changes everything — the color of the sky, the outline of the ridge, the way snow steals contrast from the world. Re-sight your rifle in early December.

Never Store a Cold Rifle Indoors

Condensation is the winter enemy no one teaches boys about.
Let the rifle warm slowly in the mudroom or porch before bringing it near the stove.

IV. THE DOG AT YOUR SIDE

A winter dog is a partner, not an accessory. His instincts will outrun yours, and his senses will read the cold long before you feel it. A gentleman gives him heavier meals, clears the snow from his coat, and makes space for him near the fire when the day's work is done.

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But proper winter care of a dog deserves more than a few lines.

For a full guide to feeding, watering, paw care, frostbite, and the dog's role in winter travel, see "*The Dog in Winter*" on page XX.

Paw Care

Snow and ice can cut pads. A simple balm, rubbed in after evening feeding, prevents half the trouble winter can bring.

Signals in the Snow

A good dog reads the cold better than a man ever will. Trust him.
If he slows, heads for the cabin, or refuses the trail, pay attention.

V. THE WINTER MINDSET

Rise Early

Winter light is short. A man who wants to hunt, chop, mend, or travel must use what daylight there is.

Accept the Quiet

Winter teaches patience. The world moves slower, and the man who fights it exhausts himself.

Solitude Is Not Loneliness

There is honor in the winter silence.
In the creak of branches, the whisper of snow, the breathing of the dog by your side. A man who learns to sit with the cold learns to sit with himself.

VI. A GENTLEMAN'S WINTER

Winter demands preparation, but it rewards the prepared with:

- crisp mornings
- strong fires
- honest labor
- sincere rest
- the company of loyal dogs
- and the rare beauty only cold can carve

A man who respects the season walks into December not as prey, but as partner.

He is steady.

He is warm.

He is ready.

And winter, in its quiet wisdom, respects him for it.

Quiet Customs for the Longest Night of the Year

By Henry Lowell, Home & Lodge Columnist, THE RIFLE

There is no evening in the winter calendar quite like the Solstice. The world outside holds its breath under the weight of the longest night, and a gentleman's cabin becomes a refuge of warmth, order, and good sense.

A fire is not merely heat — it is a ritual. And a man who keeps company with flame keeps company with tradition.

Below are the timeless customs that have warmed lodges, farms, and winter cabins for generations.

I. THE FIRST DUTY: TENDING THE FIRE

A Solstice fire is not rushed.

A man begins with:

- a bed of split pine,
- two sturdy logs of seasoned hardwood,
- a match struck with intention,
- and patience enough to let the flame find its shape.

A well-built fire teaches steadiness.

You do not force it; you guide it.

II. THE COMFORTS OF THE EVENING

The Solstice Cup

Every lodge has its own recipe, but a gentleman keeps it simple:

- strong black coffee,
- or a tin mug of hot cocoa,
- or cider warmed over low flame with a stick of cinnamon.

Whatever the drink, it should warm the hands before it warms the body.

The Chair by the Hearth

A good fireside chair is wide enough for a winter coat to hang over the back, and deep enough that a man can settle in without feeling the need to rise again soon.

Leather is ideal. Wool is noble.
Either is proper company.

III. THE TIDYING OF GEAR

Long nights afford quiet work.

Boots

Pre-warm them by the stove.
Never too close.
A gentleman respects the leather that carries him.

Rifle

Check the action, wipe the metal, and let the stock dry evenly.
There is no finer place to mend gear than by a steady flame.

Gloves & Woolens

Laid out near the hearth, they dry slow and true.
Wet wool can sour a night; dry wool freshens it.

IV. THE DOG'S PLACE

A winter dog knows where to be:
curled at his master's feet,
head rising every so often at the crackle of wood.

It is his right to sleep there.
A man makes space for loyalty.

If frost clings to his coat, brush it gently.
If he sighs heavily, let him rest.
Winter gives no creature more than it demands.

V. THE SILENCE MEN KEEP

There is a particular quiet on the Solstice —
a quiet that does not ask for company,
only appreciation.

A gentleman observes:

- the shadow of the flame,
- the sound of wind working the rafters,
- the shifting glow of embers,
- the steady breath of the dog beside him.

This is the evening when a man remembers
what the world used to ask of him,
and what it still does.

VI. THE LAST LOG OF THE NIGHT

Tradition says a man adds one final log just
before he sleeps,
placed gently on the embers.

Not to blaze —
but to glow.

It is a promise to himself that he will rise in
the morning
to tend the world again.

THE SOLSTICE FIRE

In a season of noise and hurry,
the Solstice invites a return to the oldest ritual:

A man, a dog,
a lodge in winter,
and a fire lit with purpose.

Simple things,
kept well,
keep a man steady through the cold.





The Dog in Winter

The dog in winter must be cared for with the same sense of responsibility a man gives to his equipment, his fire, and his own well-being. A good dog is more than company in cold weather; he is direction, warmth, warning, and loyalty. Winter places demands on him that are often overlooked, and a gentleman prepares for the season by knowing how to meet those needs.

A working dog burns more calories in winter, and his ration should be increased slightly to keep strength and warmth. A heavier meal with a bit more fat helps him maintain stamina on the trail or in deep snow. Water must always be provided in liquid form. Snow will not keep a dog properly hydrated and chills his core, so a bowl of room-temperature water should be kept in the cabin. Outdoors, water freezes faster than a man expects, and a thirsty dog tires easily.

Paw care is essential in winter. Ice, packed snow, and salt can crack pads or make a dog limp just when he needs his strength. After a long day out, a dog should be brought near the fire, his pads checked, and a light balm or grease rubbed in to keep them supple. Ice should be cleared from between the toes. This simple ritual prevents most winter trouble. A dog's sleeping place should provide warmth without danger. A folded wool blanket near the stove is usually enough. Heat that is too close can dry the skin, so distance should be comfortable rather than direct. Outdoor kennels must be lined with straw and turned away from the prevailing wind.

Cold sharpens a dog's senses but also tests them. Frostbite begins quietly, often in the ears or nose, and shows in pale skin or stiffness. Hesitation on the trail means something, and a man should pay attention. A dog rarely signals without reason. In the evening, a dog earns his place by the fire. Brushing frost from his coat, checking his paws, offering water, and placing a steady hand on his side is not sentimentality but sound winter care. In the long nights and deep cold, the bond between man and dog strengthens most naturally through simple responsibility. A man who cares for his dog in winter will find loyalty, endurance, and companionship that carry him through the season with more heart than he could muster alone.



The Snowbound

Solstice Story

The storm began just after dusk, a slow thickening of flakes that turned into a curtain of white across the ridge. By the time he reached the cabin, the wind was moving in long steady pushes, the kind that rattle the shutters and make a man understand he will not be traveling any farther tonight. He brushed the snow from his coat, knocked his boots against the porch rail, and let the dog slip past him through the door. Inside, the cabin was cold but still familiar, the kind of cold that means only one thing needs doing. He set down the rifle, hung his coat on the peg, and went straight to the stove. A handful of kindling, a match, and a slow-building flame brought back the comfort the place usually kept ready for him.

The dog circled the hearth twice and dropped onto the rug with a low sigh. It was a sound the man had heard a hundred times after long days outdoors, but it carried more weight tonight. Storms have a way of settling into a man's bones and reminding him how far he is from the rest of the world. He added a log to the fire and rubbed warmth back into his hands. The storm outside thickened, steady and unhurried, and the windows faded to nothing but white.

He took inventory of the cabin. Wood stacked high beside the stove. Coffee tin half full, a loaf of bread wrapped in cloth. Enough tinned meat for several days. There was no worry here, no danger in being held in place for a night. Snowbound is not the same as stranded. A man who prepares for winter knows the difference.

He sat in his chair, leaned back, and listened to the wind. It came in long low gusts that made the rafters answer with a quiet creak. The dog lifted his head once, then settled again, content to wait out the night beside the fire. The man reached down and ran a hand along the dog's back, feeling the warmth beneath the thick winter coat.

There was a peace in nights like this, a steadiness that came only when the world slowed him down. No rifle shots, no trails to follow, no chores that could not wait. The storm gave him permission to sit, to breathe, to let the silence of winter speak for itself. He brewed a pot of strong coffee and poured a cup, letting the steam rise against the cold that still clung to him. He sipped slowly, watching the fire settle into its evening rhythm.

Hours passed this way, the night deepening without notice. The storm hammered the ridge but the cabin held firm, solid and warm in the glow of the stove. At some point he realized he had not spoken a word since the wind began. He did not need to. The dog's breathing, the crackle of the fire, and the slow steady fall of snow outside filled the space better than talk could. Solitude, he thought, had its own companionship.

Near midnight the fire burned low, and he added one last log, placing it gently on the embers. The dog stirred, lifted his head, and then fell back to sleep. The man stood, stretched the tightness out of his shoulders, and looked once more out the window, nothing but white and darkness. The storm had not eased, but he felt no restlessness. There were worse places to be held than a warm cabin with a loyal dog and the longest night of the year to keep him company.

He banked the fire, dimmed the lamp, and lay down on the cot with the blankets pulled high. The storm outside roared against the walls, but sleep came easily. Winter, he knew, was not an enemy. It was an old teacher. And on nights like this, it taught a man how to be still.

The Winter Safety PSA

Most winter accidents occur not through storms or wildlife but through a man's own carelessness. Cold weather demands respect, and the season punishes those who underestimate it. A gentleman prepares for winter with the same seriousness he brings to his work, his rifle, and his responsibilities. This notice has been issued to remind men of the dangers that winter brings and the steps required to meet them safely.

Proper clothing is the first defense against cold. A man must dress in layers, beginning with warm wool close to the body and adding heavier garments as needed. Cotton offers comfort but little protection and becomes dangerous when wet. Frostbite begins quietly, often in the fingers, ears, and face, and should not be ignored. Numbness is the first sign, and shaking it off is not a remedy. Once sensation fades, tissue damage begins.

Travel in snow is slower and more exhausting than men expect. A short walk on a summer trail can become an hour-long struggle in deep drifts. A man must pace himself, rest when winded, and avoid sweating. Sweat becomes cold quickly and can strip the body of heat faster than the

wind itself. Winter demands steady movement, not speed.

A man must never venture outside without telling someone where he is going, even if the destination is close. Sudden storms, shifting winds, or a simple misstep can leave a man disoriented. A snow-covered landscape hides landmarks and distorts distances. Many winter deaths occur within a short distance of shelter, often because the victim underestimated how easily the world can vanish in falling snow.

Fire safety is equally important. A stove or lantern must be kept in good repair, with vents open and flues clear. Carbon monoxide is invisible and odorless. A man who burns fuel in a closed cabin risks poisoning himself in his sleep. Fresh air must always be allowed into the room, even on the coldest nights. Wood should be dry, stacked properly, and never placed too close to the stove. Sparks can start a fire that consumes a cabin faster than a man can react.

Alcohol does not warm the body. It dulls judgment and slows reaction. A man who drinks heavily in cold weather puts himself at risk, especially if he leaves the cabin. Many winter fatalities begin with a poor decision made under the influence, often one that seemed harmless at the time.

A dog can sense danger long before a man does. If a dog hesitates, refuses the trail, or turns back toward home, a man should pay attention. Animals recognize shifts in weather, unstable ice, and hidden hazards with far greater accuracy than humans do.

Ice on lakes and rivers must never be trusted on appearance alone. Early ice is thin. Late ice is unpredictable. A man should avoid crossing frozen water unless he knows its

thickness and stability beyond doubt. Many drownings occur within yards of the bank. Cold water disables the body within seconds.

Winter is not the enemy. It is a season with rules, and those who follow them come

through safely, those who do not face the consequences that arrive without warning and are offered no second chance. A gentleman prepares for winter with respect, caution, and good sense. His life, and the wellbeing of those who rely on him, depends on it.

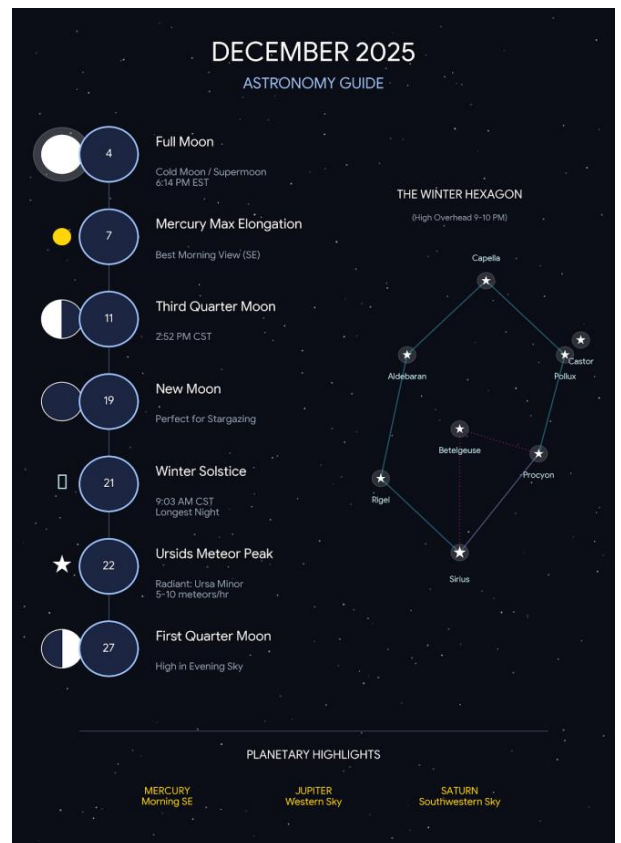
BEARSKIN HOODIE



COMFORTABLE

The Winter Solstice

The Solstice morning has a light that belongs to no other day of the year. It rises slowly over the snow, casting long blue shadows across the ridge and catching the frost on every branch. A man standing in that light feels small and steady, aware of the cold but not afraid of it. The dog beside him lifts his head to the wind, listening to things a man cannot hear. Together they wait, not for game or work, but for the stillness itself. Winter holds a silence that asks for respect, and a man who has lived enough seasons knows how rare that silence is. This moment belongs to the two of them alone, with the world wide and white before them, and the year turning quietly behind. It is the longest night's first gift, the calm strength of a winter dawn.







Bachelor Farmers Christmas Stollen (Makes 2 loaves)

Ingredients:

Fruit Mix:

- 1 cup golden raisins
- 1 cup dark raisins or currants
- 1/2 cup chopped candied citrus peel or dried apricots
- 1/3 cup rum, brandy, or orange juice
- Zest of 1 lemon
- Zest of 1 orange

Dough:

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 packet (2 1/4 tsp) active dry yeast
- 3/4 cup warm milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 cup softened butter
- 1 cup chopped almonds

Optional:

- 1/2 cup marzipan for center

Finishing:

- 1/4 cup melted butter
- Powdered sugar

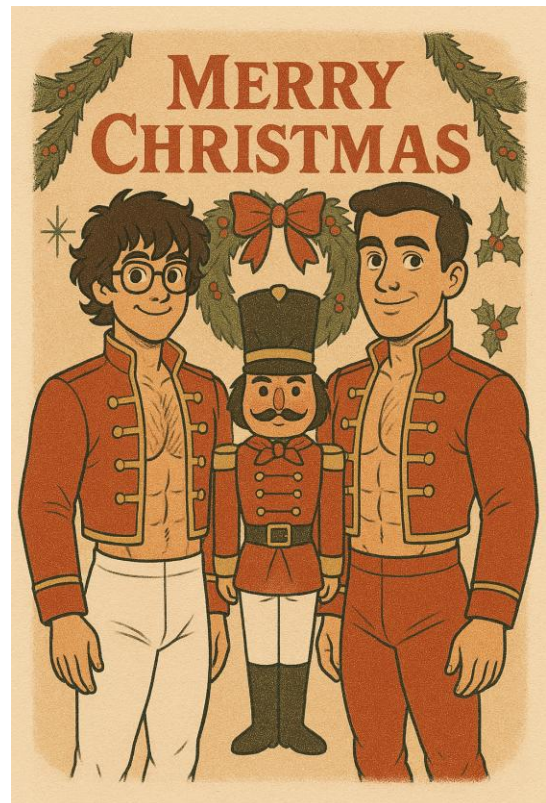
Instructions:

1. Combine raisins, peel, lemon zest, orange zest, and rum or juice. Cover and soak 4–24 hours.
2. In a large bowl, mix flour, sugar, salt, and yeast. Add warm milk, eggs, vanilla, almond extract, and butter. Mix to form a soft dough.

3. Knead 5–7 minutes until smooth. Drain fruit and knead fruit and almonds into the dough.
4. Cover and let rise 1 to 1 1/2 hours until puffy.
5. Divide dough in half. Shape each piece into an oval. Fold one side 2/3 over the other to form the traditional Stollen shape. If using marzipan, place a strip in the center before folding.
6. Let rise 30–45 minutes.
7. Bake at 350°F (175°C) for 30–40 minutes until golden brown.
8. Brush hot loaves with melted butter and coat generously with powdered sugar. Cool completely and dust again.
9. Wrap tightly in foil and let rest 2–5 days for best flavor.

Notes:

Use dried cherries to give a Midwestern twist. Stollen improves with age and keeps well wrapped at room temperature.!



JUMP *at the* **SOCK HOP!**



Tune in to
20thCenturyTunes.com
for rockin' 50s & 60s oldies!





THE CALL OF THE JUNGLE KING

America's First Beefcake and the Men Who Watched in Silence

By *H.H. Kendrick, Senior Culture Editor*
THE RIFLE

In 1937, in darkened movie theaters across America, a sound echoed that would become one of the most recognizable calls in cinema history. Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan yell, that distinctive chest-pounding ululation somewhere between triumph and wilderness, brought audiences flooding back week after week to watch the jungle king swing through the trees of an MGM soundstage Africa. But it was not the call that kept them returning. It was him. It was the body, bronzed and powerful, clad in nothing more than a leather loincloth that revealed far more than it concealed. It was the swimmer's build in absolute peak form, the broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, the natural athleticism of an Olympic champion translated into the visual language of Hollywood adventure. Johnny Weissmuller was not merely playing Tarzan; he was becoming America's first socially acceptable beefcake, and in doing so, he opened a door that generations of men would quietly, gratefully walk through.

Before Weissmuller, leading men wore suits. They inhabited drawing rooms and offices, city streets and elegant homes. Their bodies were mysteries beneath layers of tailored

cloth, their physicality suggested rather than displayed. When Johnny Weissmuller stripped down to that loincloth in 1932's *Tarzan the Ape Man*, something fundamental shifted in American visual culture. Here was a man whose body was the story, whose physique was not incidental to his role but central to it. He was not a gentleman forced by circumstance to remove his shirt; he was a creature of the jungle, a man raised by apes, a being for whom clothing itself was the aberration. The jungle setting provided perfect permission. This was not civilization; this was something primal, something outside the usual rules. If Tarzan wore almost nothing, it was because he knew nothing else. If the camera lingered on his torso as he dove into rivers, climbed vines, wrestled lions, and rescued Jane, it was merely documenting the natural habitat of a magnificent specimen.

Weissmuller brought legitimacy to the role that no actor before him could have provided. He was not merely handsome or well-built; he was authentic. Five Olympic gold medals, 52 world records, the greatest swimmer of his generation, when audiences watched him move through water with effortless grace, they were watching genuine athletic mastery. There was nothing artificial about his physique. This was not theatrical padding or clever costuming; this was what a body looked like when it had been trained to perfection through years of competitive swimming. The shoulders were broad because they needed to be for the butterfly stroke. The chest was deep because it housed the lung capacity of a champion. The waist was trim because every excess ounce had been burned away in training. By 1937, five years into his film career, Weissmuller was in his absolute prime, 33 years old and maintaining the conditioning that had made him legendary in the pool. The camera loved him, and so did the audience.

What the audience could not openly acknowledge, what could not be printed in fan

magazines or discussed in polite company, was why some viewers found Tarzan so compelling. The adventure was thrilling, certainly. The romance with Jane was suitable for family entertainment. The exotic animals and jungle perils provided excitement. But for a significant portion of the audience, the real draw was Johnny himself. They came to watch him move, to see that body in action from every angle, to experience two hours of visual access to male physical beauty that existed nowhere else in their lives. And the beauty of it, the genius of the entire arrangement, was that no one could question why they were there. It was just a movie. It was just entertainment. It was just Tarzan.

Hollywood understood what it had. The studios were not naive about their audience, and neither were the theater owners who programmed their screens week after week. They recognized that male beauty sold tickets, and they kept the pipeline full. Johnny Weissmuller was not an anomaly; he was the beginning of a system. The jungle adventure became a reliable genre specifically because it justified male near-nudity in a way that other settings could not. But the studios expanded their offerings, recognizing that different packages could deliver the same essential product. Randolph Scott became the masculine ideal in westerns throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, his rugged handsomeness and cowboy physique on regular display in river-bathing scenes that had nothing to do with plot and everything to do with audience service. Clark Gable, the King of Hollywood himself, caused a sensation in 1934 when he removed his shirt in *It Happened One Night* and revealed he wore no undershirt beneath; the scene reportedly crashed undershirt sales because American men wanted to emulate his raw masculinity, but it also gave audiences permission to look at one of the most desirable men in cinema.

Rock Hudson's career represents perhaps the cruellest irony of this entire system. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Hudson was sold to America as the ultimate heterosexual romantic leading man, tall and handsome and impossibly charming opposite Doris Day in wholesome bedroom farces. He was the fantasy boyfriend, the ideal husband, the man women supposedly wanted and men supposedly wanted to be. Everyone in Hollywood knew he was gay. His marriage to Phyllis Gates was a studio arrangement, a carefully constructed cover. The audience could not know, must not know, because the revelation would have destroyed him. When Rock Hudson died of AIDS in 1985, it became one of the first moments when mainstream America had to confront the reality that their heroes, their fantasy objects, might have been living entirely different lives than the ones packaged for public consumption. But in those dark theaters of the 1950s, gay men watched Rock Hudson with entirely different desires than the official narrative acknowledged, and the studios took their money while simultaneously ensuring that Hudson himself could never live honestly.

This was the reality for actors between the 1920s and 1970s. Being discovered as gay meant immediate career death. Studios included morality clauses in contracts that could terminate employment for conduct deemed inappropriate or scandalous. Publicity departments worked overtime creating fake romances, arranging dates with starlets, manufacturing narratives about confirmed bachelors seeking the right girl to settle down with. Studio fixers actively covered up any hint of homosexuality, paying off potential exposés, threatening journalists, ensuring that the fantasy remained intact. Exposure meant more than lost roles; it meant potential arrest under sodomy laws, institutionalization, chemical castration, lobotomy. The closet was not a choice; it was survival. The actors on

screen, the very men that closeted gay viewers came to watch, were often themselves trapped in the same system of fear and enforced silence.

We take it for granted now that an actor can be openly gay and continue working, even flourish. Neil Patrick Harris, Matt Bomer, Luke Evans, Jonathan Bailey, Colman Domingo; these men have built successful careers while living openly. Some are cast specifically in romantic or physically appealing roles because they are talented and attractive, and their sexuality is simply a fact rather than a disqualification. When an actor announces he is gay in 2025, it barely registers as news. But this normalization is shockingly recent. In the 1990s, coming out was still risky. In the 2000s, it was becoming safer but remained a calculated decision. Only in the 2010s and 2020s has it become largely unremarkable. We are one generation, sometimes less, removed from career-ending exposure. The freedoms we now take for granted was purchased with decades of hiding, lying, and fear.

For the men in those audiences between the 1930s and 1960s, the stakes were equally high. This was not simply a matter of personal preference or private taste. In the decades before Stonewall, before gay liberation, before the gradual acceptance that began in the 1990s, being identified as homosexual could destroy a life. Sodomy laws made same-sex activity illegal in every state. Police conducted raids on bars and private homes. Men were arrested, their names published in newspapers, their employers notified. Conviction could mean prison. In some cases, it meant court-ordered psychiatric treatment, including electroshock therapy, chemical castration, and lobotomy. Employment was lost. Families disowned their own. Violence was common and rarely prosecuted. A man who desired other men learned very quickly that discretion was not optional; it was the only path to survival.

The movie theater became a sanctuary precisely because it offered plausible deniability. A man could sit in the darkness surrounded by families, couples, groups of friends, and for two hours, he could look at Johnny Weissmuller without anyone questioning why he was there. He could watch Randolph Scott bathe in a river. He could see Clark Gable's bare chest. He could admire Rock Hudson's romantic appeal. If anyone asked, and no one did, he liked adventure stories. He enjoyed westerns. He appreciated good acting. The unspoken agreement held firm because it benefited everyone. The studios made money. The theaters filled seats. The respectable cover remained intact. And in that darkness, something happened that could not safely happen anywhere else in a man's life. He could look. He could admire. He could desire. He could experience, for a brief window, what it felt like to see male beauty openly displayed and celebrated, even if he could never openly acknowledge why it mattered to him.

Some men became regulars, Tarzan enthusiasts who saw every film multiple times. They collected lobby cards and publicity stills, building private archives of permissible imagery that could be explained as simple fandom. By the 1940s and 1950s, some men had drawers full of such photographs, entire collections that represented something they could never name. The physique magazines began appearing around this time, publications like *Physique Pictorial* and those from the Athletic Model Guild, sold ostensibly as health and fitness journals or art photography collections. They had to be purchased discreetly and kept hidden. If discovered, they required explanation: an interest in bodybuilding, an appreciation for classical form, a dedication to physical culture. The magazines existed in a legal gray area, technically permissible but socially suspect. They served the same function as the Tarzan films but required more courage to obtain

because they left a paper trail, evidence that could be discovered.

As cinema evolved and television brought entertainment into the home, the discreet viewer needed new sources for the images that sustained him. The magazine industry stepped in, understanding as theaters once did exactly what their customer base desired. *Men's Health* launched in 1987 and exploded through the 1990s, providing what amounted to legitimized physique photography wrapped in articles about fitness and nutrition. *Sports Illustrated* had pioneered the swimsuit issue decades earlier, and while primarily focused on women, the magazine's regular coverage of male athletes provided another acceptable avenue. *GQ* and *Esquire* used fashion as permission to showcase attractive men in various states of undress. Bodybuilding magazines proliferated, offering increasingly explicit photography under the banner of athletic achievement. Each publication provided the same essential service: a legitimate reason to look at attractive male bodies.

The barbershop became its own kind of theater. The magazine rack held respectable publications up front, *Life* and *Reader's Digest* and *Taste of Home*, the ones you could flip through openly while waiting for your haircut. But tucked behind them, sometimes partially hidden, were the others. *Men's Health* with its cover models defined abs. Muscle magazines with competitive bodybuilders, *GQ* with fashion spreads that seemed more interested in the model than the clothing. A man could reach for one, thumb through it casually, take in the images quickly before putting it back. The barber never commented. The other customers never asked. Everyone maintained the fiction that these were just magazines about health and fitness and style, even though everyone understood they served another purpose entirely.

The publishers were not naive. They knew exactly what they were selling and to whom. Straight men wanted to see idealized male bodies for aspiration and comparison, to understand what peak physical condition looked like, to have benchmarks for their own fitness goals. Gay men wanted to see attractive men for reasons they might still not be able to articulate openly. Women wanted to see attractive men for their own appreciation and fantasy. All three audiences could be served simultaneously with the right editorial framing. The workout routine accompanying the photograph provided cover. The nutrition advice justified the shirtless cover model. The fashion tips explained why the male model was photographed in minimal clothing. But the real product, the thing that moved magazines off shelves and into homes, was the photography itself.

This system of permission and plausible deniability persisted through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Abercrombie & Fitch catalogs became legendary for their black-and-white photography of male models in various states of undress, ostensibly selling clothing but obviously selling something else entirely. Calvin Klein advertisements put male models in underwear on billboards in major cities, making male beauty unavoidable and mainstream. The rise of superhero films in the 2000s created a new expectation that leading men would have visibly muscular physiques, with shirtless training montages and costume designs that emphasized every muscle. Each step moved the culture incrementally toward a place where male beauty could be openly celebrated rather than furtively consumed.

The internet changed everything. Suddenly, the images did not have to be purchased in public, carried home, hidden in drawers, and explained if discovered. Privacy became absolute. A man could look at whatever he wanted without the magazine rack, without

the barbershop, without the darkened theater. The plausible deniability was no longer necessary because there were no witnesses requiring an explanation. Social media accelerated this transformation. Instagram made the male physique omnipresent. Fitness influencers built careers on posting photographs of their bodies. Actors openly discussed their training regimens for roles and posted shirtless progress photos. The thirst tweet became a recognized form of online expression. Lists of attractive men proliferated across websites and magazines without shame or justification. Male beauty was not just accepted; it was expected, celebrated, commodified, and openly desired.

We have arrived at a place where a man can follow male fitness accounts on Instagram, openly admire actors and athletes, discuss which superhero has the best physique, and experience none of the fear that governed his grandfather's life. The discrete viewer of 1937 who returned week after week to watch Johnny Weissmuller swing through the jungle would be astonished by what we now take for granted. He hid behind adventure stories and legitimate appreciation for athleticism. He collected photographs in secret. He lived with the constant awareness that exposure could cost him everything. His grandson scrolls through Instagram without a second thought, double-taps a shirtless photo, leaves a comment calling someone attractive, and experiences no consequences whatsoever.

The lineage is direct. Johnny Weissmuller in his loincloth gave permission for the physique magazines. The physique magazines gave permission for *Men's Health*. *Men's Health* gave permission for Calvin Klein billboards. Calvin Klein gave permission for superhero films. Superhero films gave permission for Instagram fitness culture. Each step built on the last, each generation pushing slightly further toward open celebration of male beauty until we arrived at our current moment

where the very concept of justification seems quaint.

But we should not forget what it cost to get here. The actors who could not live honestly, the viewers who watched in fear, the magazines hidden behind other magazines, the careful explanations and plausible denials, these were the realities of the age. The system that profited from desire while criminalizing it, that sold beauty while destroying anyone who embodied it too honestly. It was a sign of the times when actors like Rock Hudson dying of AIDS while much of America still believed he had been the straight romantic hero they had seen on screen. And further we recall the countless men who never got to live openly, who died in the closet, who spent entire lives hiding fundamental truths about themselves because the cost of honesty was simply too high.

Johnny Weissmuller died in 1984, a year before Rock Hudson, long retired from the screen that had made him famous. He had given audiences two decades of Tarzan films and adventure serials, had been the definitive jungle hero for an entire generation. He could not have known, standing on that soundstage in his loincloth in 1932, what he was beginning. He was making adventure films. He was capitalizing on his Olympic fame. He was building a career in Hollywood. But he was also, inadvertently, creating a permission structure that would serve desperate men for decades. He was opening a door that would eventually lead to freedom, even though that freedom was still half a century away.

From the magazine rack at the barbershop, tucked behind *Taste of Home* or *Life*, barely visible unless you knew to look for it, to the infinite accessibility of the internet where no image requires justification and no desire needs a cover story, the journey has been long. It has been painful. It has been purchased with the suffering of men who

could not live as themselves, who existed in the margins of a culture that desired them while despising them. But it has arrived, finally, at a place where the discrete viewer's grandson can be simply a viewer, where admiration requires no elaborate excuse, where beauty can be celebrated openly.

Thanks, Johnny, for your work. You swung through those jungle vines in 1937 and gave a generation of men permission to look. You probably never understood why some of them kept coming back, why your films meant more to them than adventure and excitement, why that loincloth and that yell became cultural touchstones that outlasted almost everything else from that era. But they did.

DECIPHER THE WINTER SOLSTICE WISDOM

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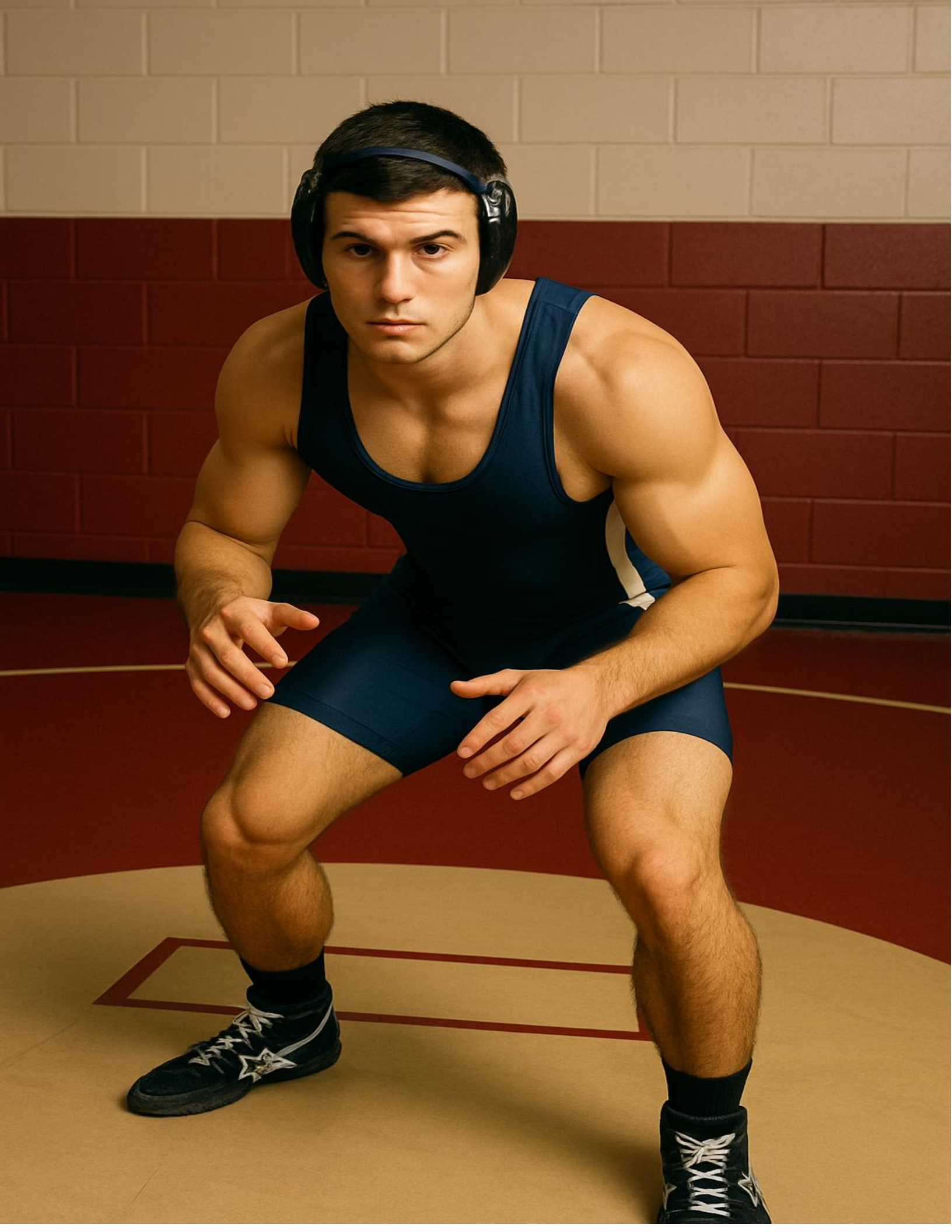
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And the freedom we have now to openly celebrate male beauty, to admire without fear, to desire without hiding, began in that darkened theater when you let out that famous call and a man sitting in the shadows allowed himself, just for a moment, to look without shame.

That was your work. That was your legacy. And we are grateful.

H.H. Kendrick is Senior Culture Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the evolution of male beauty in American visual culture.

Answer on cover page



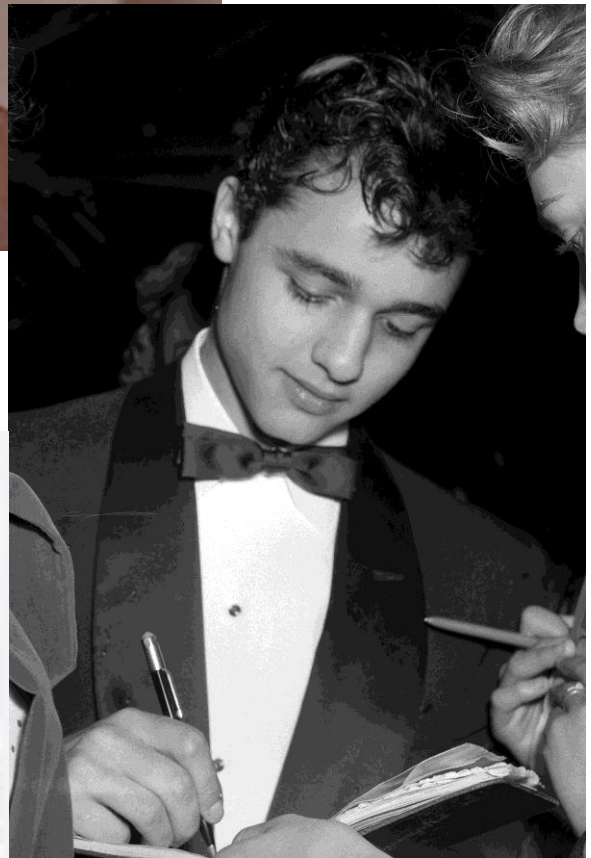
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 YULETIDE



From the Staff of
THE RIFLE
HAPPY NEW
YEAR 2026





THE BEAUTY WHO STEPPED INTO THE LIGHT

Sal Mineo and the Price of Living Openly

By H.H. Kendrick, Senior Culture Editor *THE RIFLE*

On the night of February 12, 1976, Sal Mineo returned to his West Hollywood apartment after a rehearsal. He was 37 years old, still handsome though no longer the impossibly beautiful teenager who had stolen scenes in *Rebel Without a Cause* twenty years earlier. He parked his car in the carport behind his building on Holloway Drive, gathered his belongings, and walked toward his door. A man emerged from the shadows. There was a brief struggle. A single knife wound to the chest. Sal collapsed in the alley and bled to death before help could arrive. The murder was initially assumed to be a hate crime, an attack on a gay man in a neighborhood where such violence was not uncommon. Later, police arrested Lionel Ray Williams, who claimed it was a random robbery. The truth probably lies somewhere between those two explanations, but the essential fact remains unchanged, Sal Mineo, one of the most beautiful and talented actors of his generation, died violently in an alley at an age when he should have been entering his prime. His death marked the end of a journey that began in the Bronx, where Salvatore Mineo Jr. was born in 1939 to Sicilian immigrants. He was a difficult child, prone to trouble, until someone recognized that his energy and intensity might translate to performance. At eight years old, he was cast in the national tour of *The King and I*. By his teenage years, he was in Hollywood, and in 1955, at just sixteen, he played Plato in *Rebel Without a*

Cause opposite James Dean and Natalie Wood. The role earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor, making him one of the youngest nominees in Academy Award history. His performance was extraordinary, not despite his youth but because of it. He brought a raw vulnerability to Plato, a desperate need for connection and belonging that felt achingly real. Audiences responded to that vulnerability, to those enormous dark eyes that seemed to hold more emotion than a teenage boy should be capable of expressing.

What they were responding to, though many could not name it at the time, was queerness. Plato's devotion to Jim Stark, played by Dean, was not merely friendship or hero worship. It was longing. It was desire. It was a young man desperate for affection from someone who understood him. The film never made this explicitly could not be made in 1955, but it was there in every glance, every line reading, and every moment Sal was on screen. He was playing gay subtext before such a thing had a name, and

he was doing it with such honesty that it made him both compelling and dangerous.

Hollywood was drawn to that quality even as it feared what it represented.

He was nominated for another Oscar five years later for *Exodus*, playing Dov Landau, a concentration camp survivor who becomes an Israeli freedom fighter. Again, he brought intensity and vulnerability in equal measure. He was twenty-one years old and had two Oscar nominations. He seemed destined for a long, successful career as one of Hollywood's most talented character actors. He worked steadily through the early 1960s, appearing in films like *The Longest Day* (1962), where he played Private C. Martini in that massive ensemble war picture. He was beautiful, talented, and bankable. Then, gradually, the roles began to dry up.

Part of this was the inevitable aging out of ingenue roles. Hollywood has always been cruel to actors who built their careers on youthful beauty, and Sal was no exception. But part of it was something else, something that his peers understood even if the public did not yet have language for. Sal Mineo was gay, and as the 1960s progressed and he moved into his twenties and thirties, he was becoming less willing to hide it. He was not loudly, publicly out in the way we understand that term today. There were no press conferences or magazine interviews where he declared his sexuality. But he was living more openly, dating men, being seen in gay bars and clubs, existing in West Hollywood's gay community without the elaborate cover stories that other actors maintained. For the mid-1970s, this was relatively brave. It was also career suicide.

Tab Hunter, his contemporary and fellow teen idol, stayed deeply closeted throughout his career. Tab was the all-American boy, blond and wholesome, the kind of young man parents wanted their daughters to bring home. He dated women publicly, maintained the fiction of heterosexuality with studio-arranged relationships, and did not come out until his 2005 autobiography, *Tab Hunter Confidential*. He lived to be 86 years old, dying peacefully

in 2018, having survived the closet and emerged on the other side to tell his story. Anthony Perkins, another beautiful young actor of that era whose sensitivity and intensity made him both compelling and suspect, married a woman and had children while maintaining relationships with men throughout his life. He died of AIDS in 1992 at age 60, never having publicly acknowledged his sexuality during his lifetime. Both Tab and Tony chose survival through concealment. Sal chose something different, and it cost him.

By the early 1970s, Sal's film work had become sporadic and increasingly marginal. He turned to theater, directing and starring in productions that allowed him more creative control and less dependence on Hollywood's gatekeepers. In 1975, he starred in and directed *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead* in San Francisco, a play with explicitly gay themes. He was good in it. Critics praised his work. But it was not the kind of project that would revive a film career or restore him to the A-list. It was the work of an actor who had been marginalized, who was finding new venues because the old ones had

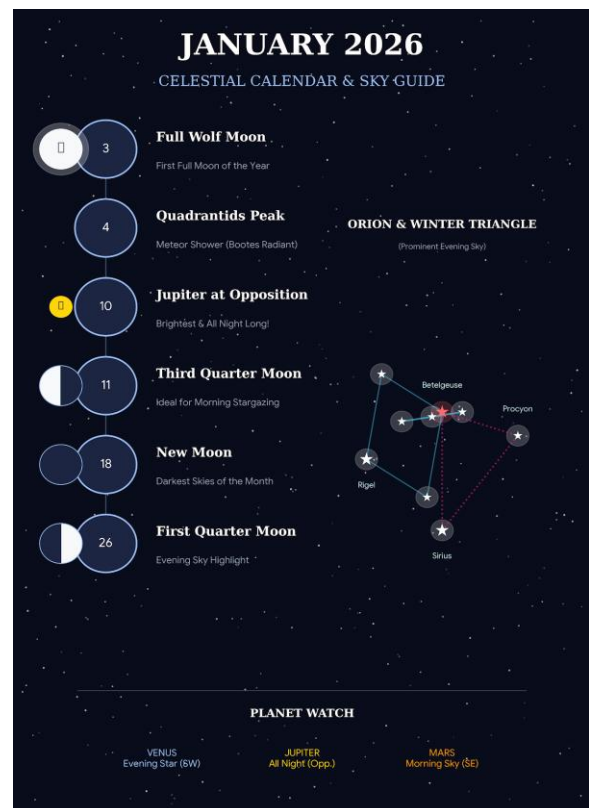
closed to him. He was living in West Hollywood, a neighborhood that was increasingly becoming a center of gay life in Los Angeles. He was not hiding. He was not pretending. He was living as himself in a world that was not yet safe for men who did so.

The murder, when it came, seemed to confirm everyone's worst fears. A gay man, living openly in a gay neighborhood, killed in an alley at night. The initial assumption was that it was a hate crime, that Sal had been targeted specifically because of who he was. The gay community in Los Angeles mourned him not just as a talented actor but as a martyr, someone who had paid the ultimate price for refusing to hide. When Lionel Ray Williams was eventually arrested and claimed it was a random robbery, that he had not known who Sal was and had simply needed money, it complicated the narrative. Perhaps it was not a hate crime in the technical sense. Perhaps Sal was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the vulnerability was real. Men who lived openly as gay in the 1970s were at risk in ways that closeted men were not. They could not retreat into respectability when danger threatened. They could not claim the protection of heterosexual privilege. Sal's openness, his refusal to maintain the elaborate fiction that had preserved Tab Hunter's and Anthony Perkins's careers, left him exposed in multiple senses of the word.

There is something unbearably sad about the trajectory of Sal Mineo's career and life. He was so talented, so beautiful, and so capable of extraordinary emotional honesty in his performances. At sixteen, he could hold his own against James Dean. At twenty-one, he could make a concentration camp survivor's trauma feel viscerally real. He should have had decades more work, should have aged into character roles and supporting parts that showcased his talent and intensity. Instead, he aged out of the industry's willingness to employ him, turned to smaller venues, and died violently in an alley before he reached forty. The waste is staggering. The cruelty is

obvious. But there is also something worth acknowledging in the choice he made to live more honestly than many of his peers.

We look back now from a time when actors can be openly gay and continue working, when coming out is often career-neutral or even career-positive, when the closet is no longer mandatory for survival. It is easy to forget how recent this freedom is, how many men lived and died in the years before it became possible. Sal Mineo existed in the space between two eras. He was too late to accept the complete concealment that men like Rock Hudson maintained, but too early to benefit from the acceptance that would come decades after his death. He tried to live as himself in a world that was not ready for that honesty, and the world punished him for it, first by withdrawing opportunities and eventually, perhaps, by taking his life. The discrete viewer who sat in the darkness in 1955 watching *Rebel Without a Cause*, who responded to Sal's vulnerability and beauty and barely understood why, could not have imagined what would happen to that beautiful boy. He could not have known that twenty years later, Sal would



be dead in an alley, killed in the kind of neighborhood where men went specifically because they could be themselves. The journey from the movie theater to West Hollywood was supposed to be a journey toward freedom. For Sal Mineo, it became a journey toward exposure and violence. He stepped into the light, and the light consumed him.

There is a photograph of Sal from around 1960, right after his second Oscar nomination. He is strikingly handsome, his dark hair perfectly styled, his eyes looking directly at the camera with an intensity that seems to dare the viewer to look away. He is wearing a suit, projecting the kind of masculine respectability that Hollywood demanded of its young male stars. But there is something else in that gaze, something that suggests he already knew the suit was a costume, that the respectability was a performance that the real Sal was something Hollywood could not quite package or contain. That knowledge, that refusal to fully perform the role assigned to him, made him extraordinary as an actor and vulnerable as a man. He gave audiences access to emotional truth in his performances precisely because he could not fully hide his own. And when he stopped trying to hide it off screen as well, the industry that had celebrated his honesty as an actor rejected him as a person.

We owe Sal Mineo the acknowledgment that his choice to live more openly was an act of courage, even if it was also an act that contributed to his marginalization and possible death. We owe him the recognition that the freedom we now experience, the ability to admire male beauty without elaborate justifications and to live as gay men without constant fear, was purchased in part with the

lives of men like him who refused to hide even when hiding was the only safe option. Tab Hunter survived by staying in the closet for decades. Anthony Perkins survived slightly less long by maintaining the fiction of heterosexual marriage. Sal Mineo died at 37, having tried to live more honestly than either of them. The unfairness of that calculation is obvious. The courage required to make the choice he made should also be obvious.

On February 12, 1976, a beautiful, talented man bled to death in a West Hollywood alley. He had been one of the most promising actors of his generation. He had brought emotional truth to roles that could have been merely sentimental. He had refused to hide who he was when hiding would have been safer and probably more profitable. And he died violently, suddenly; before he had finished the work he was capable of doing. We remember him now not just for the performances he gave but for the price he paid for trying to live openly in a world that was not yet ready to let him do so safely. The discrete viewer of 1955 who watched him in *Rebel Without a Cause* has become, fifty years later, someone who can openly mourn Sal Mineo as both an artist and a gay man. That freedom exists because men like Sal refused to stay hidden, even when refusal cost them everything. Rest in peace, Sal, you deserved better than you got. We all do.

H.H. Kendrick is Senior Culture Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the evolution of male beauty in American visual culture.

THE NEW 1956 DYNOVOLT

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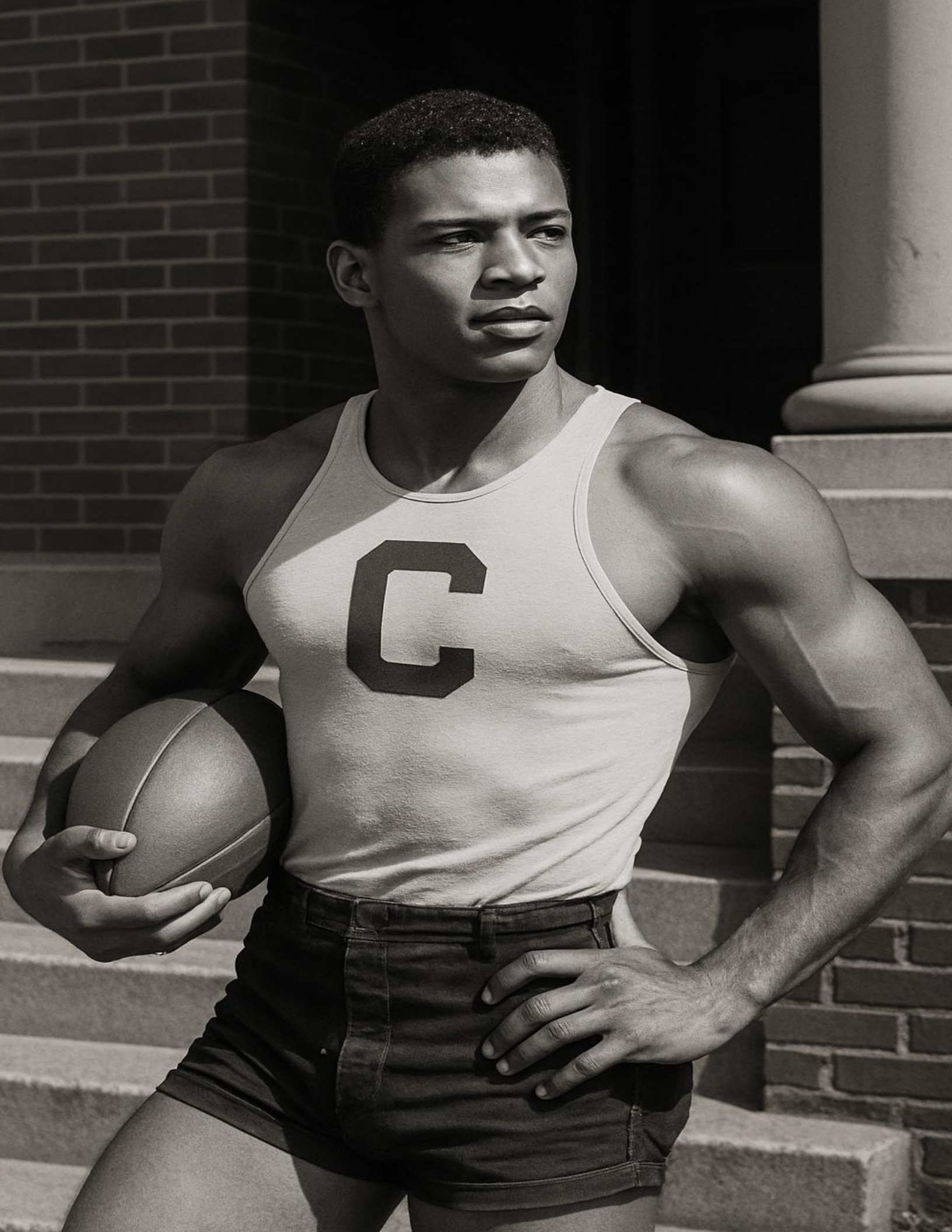


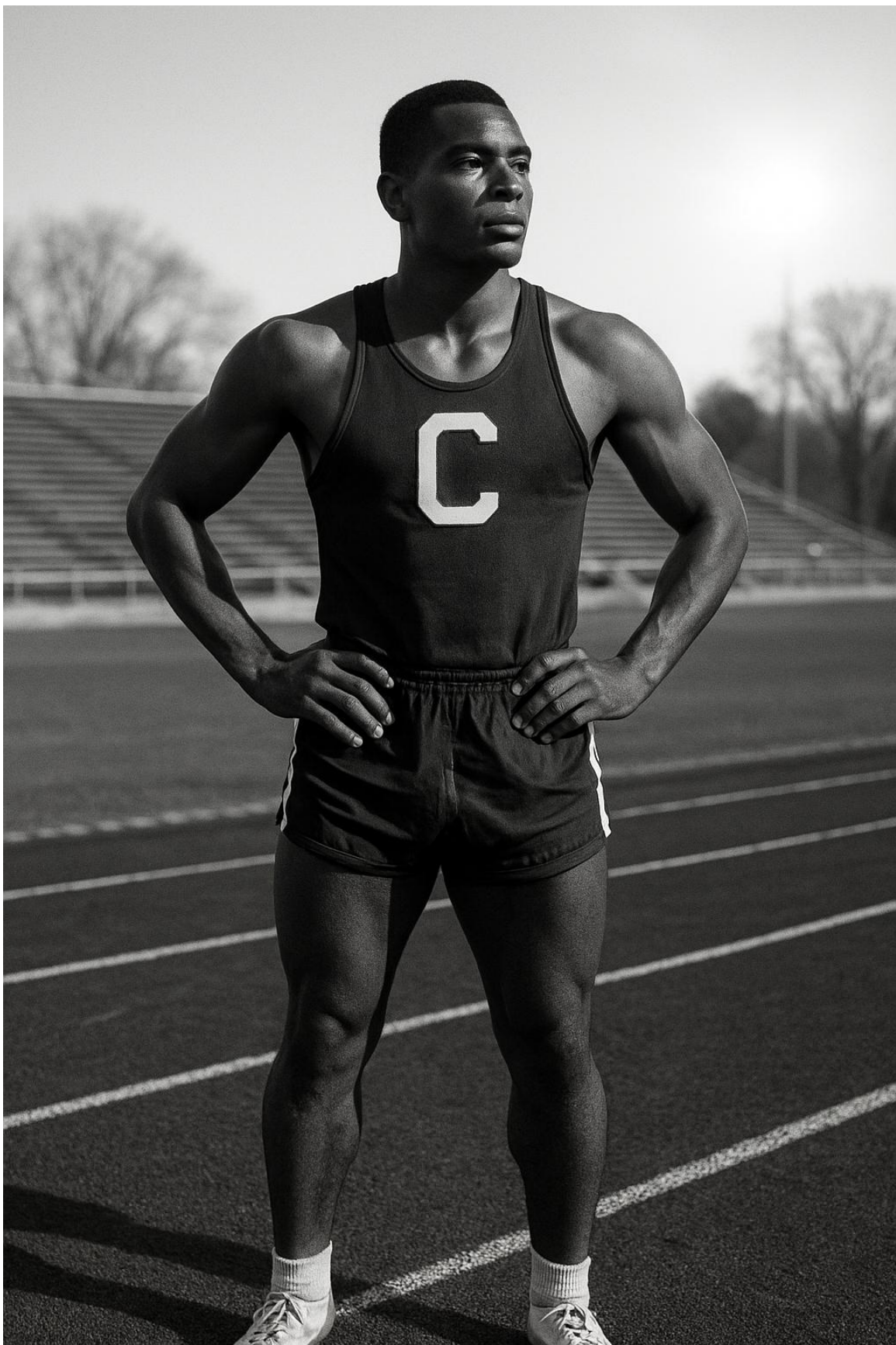
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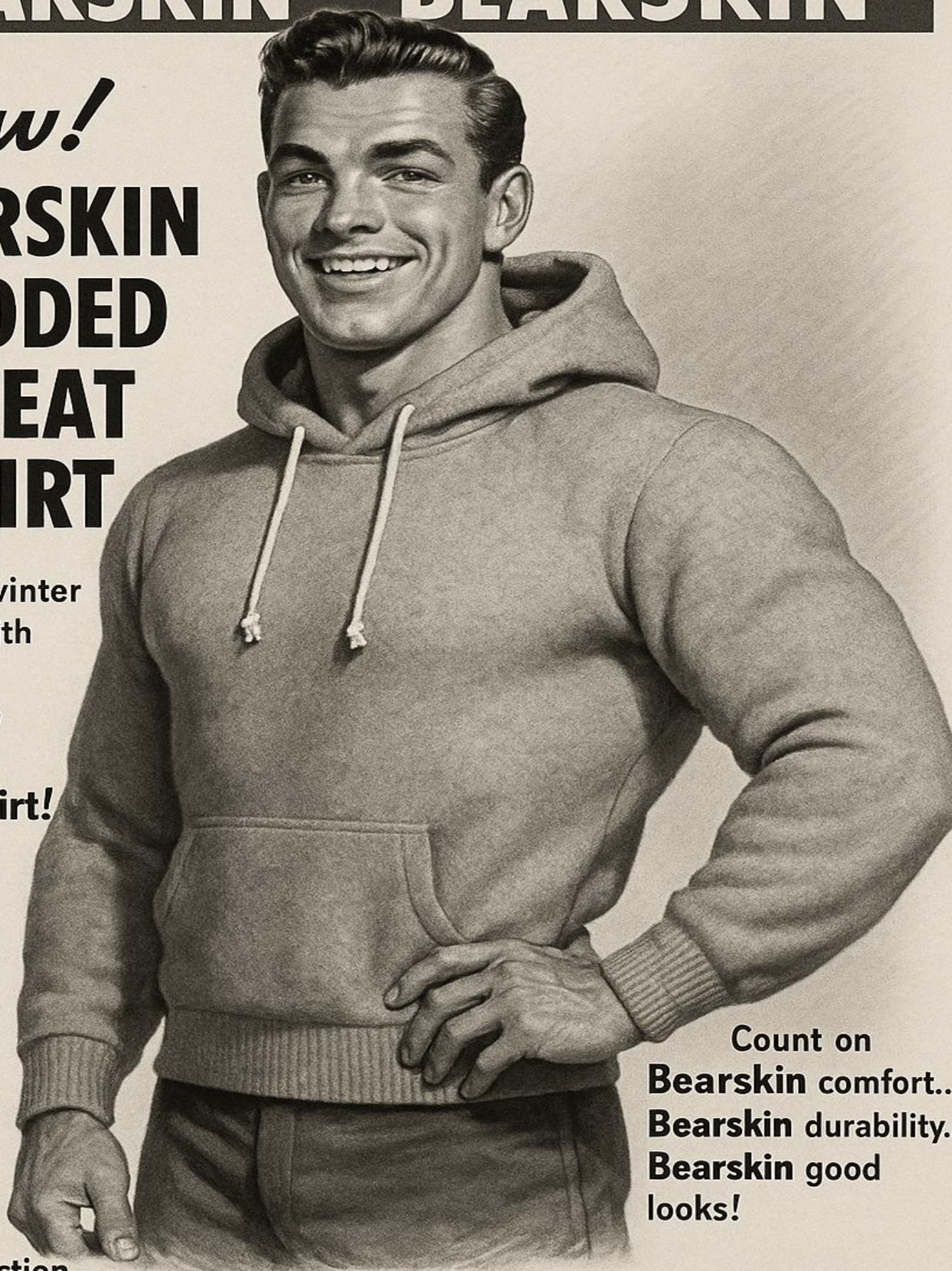


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January Short: The Dark Days and Keeping It Up

E Ville, sports Ed

January has a way of narrowing a man's world. The days are short, the mornings cold, and the familiar roads lose their shape beneath ice and shadow. It is too easy, in this season, to drift. A man wakes before dawn, steps outside, and feels the weight of winter on his shoulders. The year ahead asks much of him, but January asks first that he simply endure.

Yet there is a kind of health that belongs only to these dark days. A man does not stay well by wishing for spring; he stays well by respecting winter. He keeps a discipline, quiet and steady, like the slow fire he feeds each morning. A walk taken in cold air, even a short one, straightens the mind. A set of exercises done in the dim light before

breakfast steadies the body and mind. He does not need to build himself anew; he only needs to keep himself from fading.

There is no shame in the slower pace of January. A man's strength is not proven by how loudly he moves, but by how faithfully he keeps to the simple rituals that keep him upright. Eat well. Sleep enough. Step out into the daylight whenever it appears, even if only for a few minutes. Keep the tools in order. Keep the rooms aired. Keep the body moving so the mind does not stiffen.

A man finds, often to his quiet surprise, that the work he does in these short, heavy days becomes the foundation for all the brighter ones that follow. To keep healthy in January is not to chase vigor, but to guard it. The dark will lift, as it always does, and the man who tended himself through winter will meet the longer days with a steadier step.



A Gentleman's Winter Health Checklist

A short, reliable list for the dark days of the year:

- Step outside every day, even for a minute
- Keep shoulders and back warm; protect the lungs in deep cold
- Stretch before bed and after waking
- Eat heavier in the morning, lighter at night
- Drink warm water or tea; do not wait until you feel thirsty
- Keep the rooms aired, even briefly
- Let the fire burn clean—no smoke, no smolder
- Walk the perimeter of your property once a day
- Do not sit too long in silence; speak a word just to hear your own voice
- Keep one small task you finish every day, no matter what

A man does not need perfection in January, only rhythm. The light will return soon enough.





MLK Day

Introduction: His Struggle and His Legacy

January carries a weight all its own. It is a month of long shadows and quiet reckonings, a time when a man takes measure of what he stands for. It is fitting that this month bears the remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a man whose courage did not shout, but steadied itself like winter light across a frozen field. His struggle was not a single march or speech, but a long road of exhaustion, danger, and conviction. He faced hatred without surrender, disappointment without bitterness, and violence without abandoning the belief that men could still live together in dignity.

Dr. King's legacy is not only the victories carved into law, but the example he set for the private citizen: the call to stand upright when others bend, to speak plainly when silence would be easier, and to refuse to return harm for harm. His work reminds us that strength is not noise, and that a man's character is proven by what he endures without losing his humanity.

We honor him not by rewriting his story into something neat and painless, but by remembering the hardship it cost him, and the courage it demanded of others who stood beside him. Each January, in the coldest days of the year, we pause to acknowledge a man who carried the heat of conscience into some of the darkest corners of American life. His struggle continues to shape the road ahead, and his legacy invites each of us to walk it with the same quiet resolve.

Reflection: What a Man Learns From Dr. King

A man does not have to lead marches or stand before crowds to learn from Dr. King. Most of us live our lives far from any pulpit or headline, carrying our responsibilities in smaller rooms and quieter hours. But the lessons he left behind reach even the most ordinary of days.

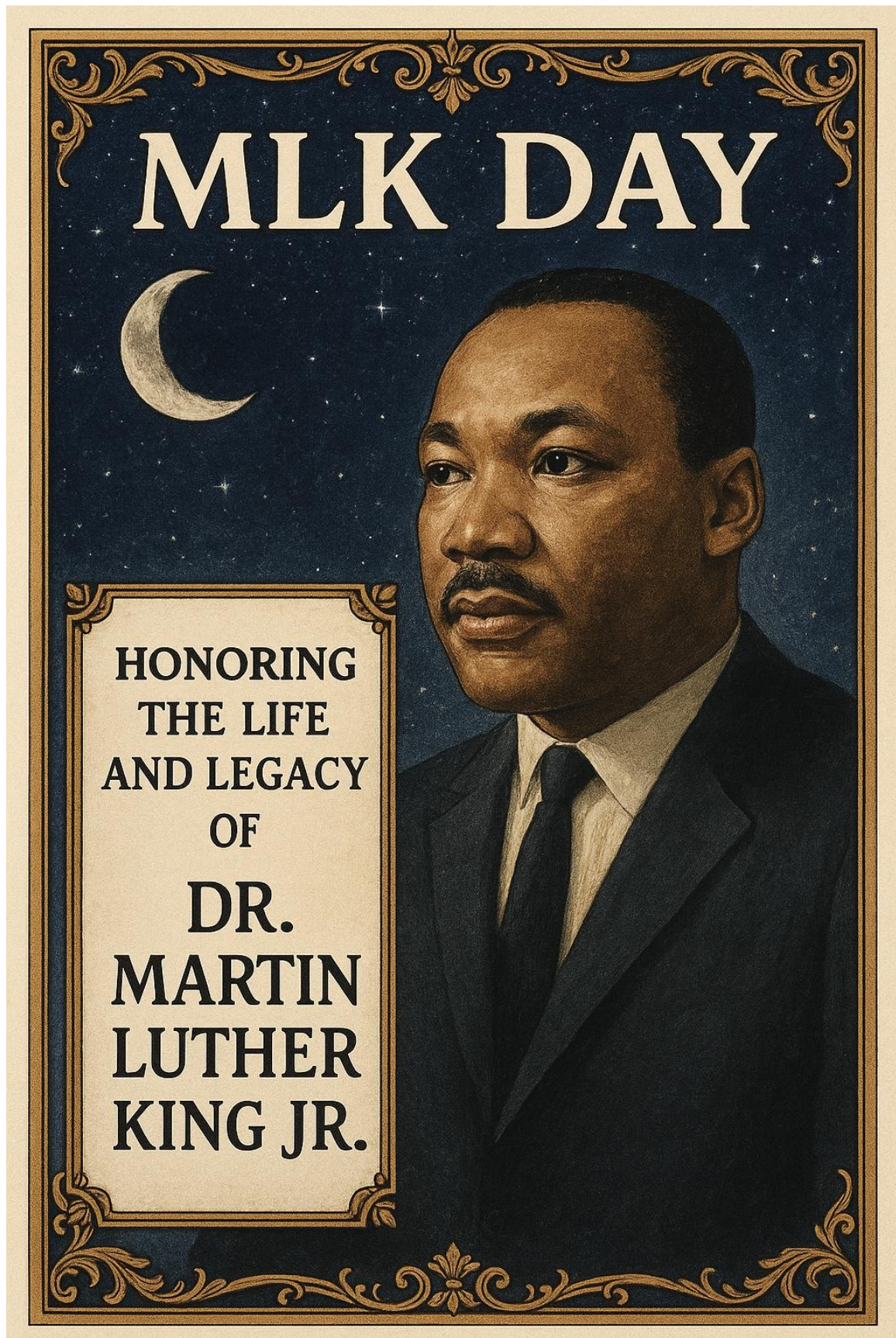
A man learns, first, that courage is rarely dramatic. It is the decision to keep speaking when the world grows tired of hearing the truth. It is the refusal to surrender one's dignity, even when surrounded by voices determined to strip it away. Dr. King showed that strength is not measured in victories alone, but in the willingness to stand firm when no victory is promised.

A man also learns that bitterness is a weight. It slows the step and clouds the mind. King

endured threats, insults, jail cells, and the endless strain of disappointment, yet he refused to let hatred set the terms of his life. He chose a harder road—the one where a man keeps his humanity even in the face of those who have abandoned theirs.

Finally, a man learns that legacy does not belong only to those who make history. It belongs also to those who carry forward the habits of justice in their own small spheres. A father who teaches his sons to treat others with respect, a neighbor who stands with someone who stands alone, a worker who tells the truth when it costs him something—these are not grand gestures, but they are the bricks out of which a better world is built.

Dr. King's life reminds us that the measure of a man is not found in the comfort he enjoys, but in the burdens he accepts with clear eyes and a steady heart. If January is a month for reflection, then there is no better time to take stock of the kind of men we hope to be—quietly brave, quietly honest, quietly resolved to leave the world better than we found it.





JESSE OWENS: THE MAN WHO OUTRAN A LIE

*Feature Article for The Rifle — January
Edition*

There are men whose greatness is loud, brash, and impossible to ignore. And then there are the quiet ones, the kind who go about their work with so much steadiness that the world does not realize what has happened until the race is already over. Jesse Owens belonged to the second kind. A man who ran without theatrics, who carried his dignity without needing to display it, and who in one extraordinary summer in 1936 did more to expose the absurdity of a hateful ideology than any speech or sermon ever could.

He arrived in Berlin as a young man, slight of frame, polite in manner, hardly the picture of the conquering hero the newspapers would later paint. The American team lodged in a village dressed up for propaganda, while the stadium itself—vast, uniform, and imposing—stood like a monument not to sport but to spectacle. Germany was already tightening its grip on its own people, and the regime intended to use the Games to present a world of perfect order. They expected their athletes to dominate. They expected their narrative to hold.

They did not expect Jesse Owens.

What happened on that track is often told in numbers: four gold medals set and tied world records, a performance unmatched before or since. But numbers alone do not explain why the story has lasted. Owens

won with a kind of calm excellence that feels almost unthinkable now. He did not pump his fists or roar at the crowd. He lifted his face to the sky, breathed once, and accepted victory the way a craftsman accepts a completed piece of work—aware of the labor, grateful for the moment, but never boastful.

In the stands sat the architects of a doctrine built on the belief that men could be arranged by worth. Owens did not defeat that doctrine with speeches. He defeated it with his legs, his lungs, and his refusal to treat the lie as anything but air behind him. Each stride he took down the straightaway was an argument. Each medal placed around his neck was a visible crack in the illusion the regime had tried to cast over the world. One man, moving at full speed, had undone years of bluster.

But what makes Owens remarkable is not only what he accomplished abroad, but how he bore himself once he returned home. America had cheered for him in Berlin. It admired him in victory. But when the songs faded and the ship reached shore, he stepped back into a nation still segregated, still suspicious, and still unwilling to see a Black man as simply an American hero. He was asked to appear, but rarely asked to lead. He was celebrated, but not invited through the same doors as the men who delivered speeches in his name.

Many men would have grown bitter at that hypocrisy. Owens did not. He carried his disappointment the way he carried his medals—with an honest, unembellished dignity. He believed in the promise of his country even when the country failed to keep its promises to him. He once noted, with quiet clarity, that “it takes a lot of courage to be a certain kind of man.” And perhaps that was the truest measure of him:

the courage to remain whole in a world that tried, again and again, to divide him.

As the years passed, younger athletes looked to him not only for inspiration but for instruction. He traveled, he spoke, he encouraged discipline and fairness in youth athletics. He showed boys of every color that excellence was not a gift handed down, but a practice built from sweat and steadiness. He showed them that victory meant little unless a man knew how to lose without losing himself.

And as America slowly struggled toward greater justice, Owens remained one of its clearest reminders that progress is not the work of a single moment but the accumulation of many small acts of courage. His victories in Berlin had been loud, undeniable, and impossible for the world to ignore. But the courage he displayed after the cheers faded—the courage to keep walking upright, to treat others with dignity, to believe in hope when hope seemed undeserved—may have been greater still.

Jesse Owens died in 1980, long after the stadium had quieted and long after the newspapers had yellowed. But his story has not faded. It remains because it reveals something essential about a man's struggle against the lies of his time. Owens did not run to make a point; he ran because he loved the work. But in doing so, he proved a point so powerful that even the loudest tyrants could not drown it out.

In January, when the days are short and a man's resolve is tested by cold and doubt, it is worth remembering him. Not just the medals, not just the record book, but the way he held his head, the way he stepped to the line, the way he carried the weight placed upon him with a grace that still humbles us. There are few men who can claim to have changed history simply by doing what they were born to do.

Jesse Owens did. He outran more than his competitors. He outran a lie. And the world, for one shining moment, saw the truth move at full speed.

Five Moments from the 1936 Games

1. The stadium in Berlin held more than one hundred thousand spectators, its stone walls and towering arches designed as much for intimidation as for sport. When Owens stepped onto the track, he entered not only a competition but a stage built to project political power. His calm presence in that place became its own quiet defiance.
2. In the long jump preliminaries, Owens fouled his first two attempts and stood one misstep away from elimination. The German jumper, Luz Long, approached him calmly and offered advice on how to adjust his mark. Owens qualified easily on the next attempt and later won gold; Long took silver. Their sportsmanship, captured in a few frames of film, remains one of the lasting images of the Games.
3. Owens's victory in the 100 meters was decisive, though the crowd's applause was uneasy. It was the first crack in the host nation's expectations. As Owens crossed the line, shoulders relaxed and expression unchanged, the roar was less celebration than acknowledgment: the race had been won cleanly, undeniably, beyond the reach of any narrative.
4. In the 200 meters, he accelerated through the curve with a smoothness that astonished observers. The time he set would stand for twenty years. There was no drama in his running, no flourish. He simply moved faster than the world thought possible, and

did it with the ease of a man completing a familiar task.

5. The 4x100 relay, run late in the Games, was the final blow to the myth of Aryan superiority. Owens anchored the American team, taking the baton with a lead and widening it with every stride. When he crossed the line, winning his fourth gold, even the most resolute propagandists could not disguise the truth. Excellence had spoken for itself, and the stadium, for a brief moment, recognized it.

Luz Long: The Man Who Chose Sportsmanship Over Spectacle

In every great story there is a figure who steps quietly into the frame and changes the meaning of the moment. At the 1936 Games in Berlin, that figure was Carl Ludwig “Luz” Long, a German long jumper with a proud stride, an easy smile, and the kind of dignity that ignores the demands of the crowd.

Long was everything the host nation wanted in an athlete: tall, blond, educated, and gifted. He moved with a natural grace that made him a favorite long before the competition began. Yet for all the pressure placed upon him to play the part assigned to him, Long carried himself as something rarer than a symbol. He carried himself as a man.

He watched Jesse Owens foul twice in the preliminaries, and saw that the American needed only one clean jump to move forward. What happened next has been told and retold, but its simplicity gives it weight. Long approached Owens and suggested he start his run from a safer mark. There were no cameras close enough to catch the full exchange, and no officials prepared to intervene. It was just one athlete offering help to another in the middle of the most politicized arena in the world.

Owens qualified on his next attempt. Long congratulated him with a firm handshake.

And when Owens later won the gold medal, Long walked beside him down the track, arm in arm, smiling for the crowd. It was a photograph the regime never wanted, but could not prevent.

Their friendship did not end in the stadium. They wrote to each other for years afterward, even as the world darkened again and Germany prepared for war. Long served as a paratrooper and was later killed in Sicily in 1943. Shortly before his death, he sent Owens a letter asking him to find his son one day, “and tell him what times were like, and what we tried to do.”

Owens kept that promise.

What makes Luz Long unforgettable is not only his talent, but the choice he made at a moment when every force around him urged something smaller. He chose fairness when the world demanded spectacle. He chose character when the world demanded compliance. He offered help to a man he was expected to defeat, and honor to a man he was expected to resent.

There are victories measured in medals, and there are victories measured in the way a man conducts himself when no one is certain of the outcome. Luz Long did not win the competition that day, but he won something larger: the respect of the man who beat him, and the admiration of generations who saw in him a rare kind of courage.

In a stadium designed to celebrate a hierarchy of worth, Luz Long proved that true worth reveals itself in the simplest act: extending a hand when others look away.





OATMEAL



**THE BREAKFAST OF
MEN WHO KNOW BETTER**



Things to Remember on Those Below-Zero Nights

When the temperature falls past zero and keeps on falling, a man begins to measure the night in smaller, quieter ways. The world outside grows sharp and distant. The windowpanes shudder. The boards creak as though the cabin itself is settling deeper into winter. These are the hours when a man learns again what matters, and what must be tended.

Remember the fire.

A good fire is more than heat; it is assurance. Feed it patiently. Let the logs catch and settle. A restless fire wastes itself quickly, but a steady one will hold through the long hours. Sit with it a moment. Let your breath slow to match its rhythm.

Remember the air.

Cold weather tempts a man to seal every crack, but even the tightest cabin needs a little fresh draft. Lift a window a finger's width, just enough to keep the place honest. Warm, still air may comfort, but it grows heavy if it cannot move.

Remember the water.

Nothing freezes faster than the things you forget. Keep a pot near the stove, full enough to drink from and warm enough to keep the body steady. Winter thirst is deceptive. Drink before you grow parched.

Remember the tools.

A lantern filled. A knife sharpened. A coat hung where it can be reached without thought. A man does not prepare for trouble because he expects it, but because winter respects only the prepared.

Remember the quiet.

There is a certain depth to January silence—an old, weighty kind of stillness that reminds a man how small the world can become. Do not fear it. Listen to it. In that quiet, the mind straightens itself out.

Remember the dog, if you have one.

Cold nights draw animals close, not from weakness but from wisdom. They know the value of warmth and the truth of companionship. A dog at your feet is a reminder that strength is not always loud.

Remember yourself.

In deep winter, a man's doubts speak louder than usual. Do not give them the floor. Tend your fire, tend your body, and tend your thoughts. Even in the coldest month, a man carries enough warmth to see himself through.

And finally—

Remember that dawn always comes. It may arrive slow, pale, and grudging, but it comes all the same. Below-zero nights test a man, but they also refine him. If you rise with the morning, steady and unbroken, you have already won more than the night tried to take.

**HELLO
FEBRUARY**



**WINTER
CARNIVAL
1956**

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: THE ONES WE REMEMBER

By THE RIFLE Editorial Board

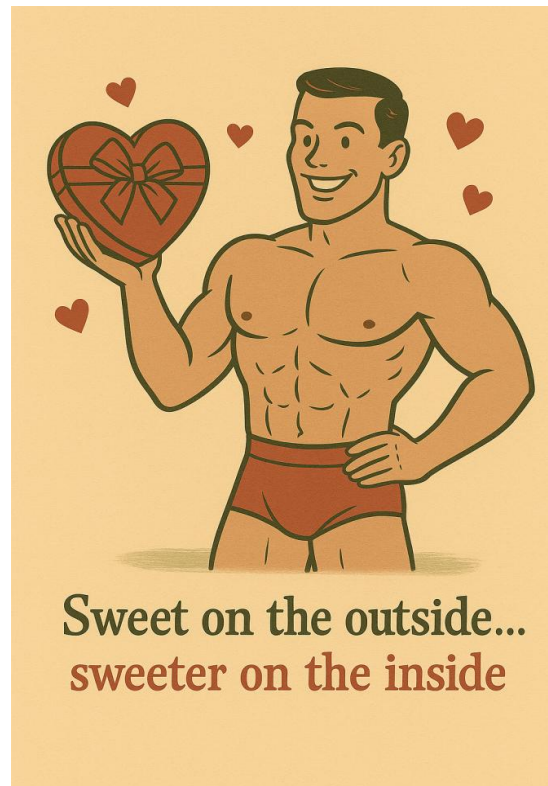
February asks us to remember, and memory is a difficult responsibility. There are not enough pages in this magazine—not enough pages in any magazine—to properly acknowledge the contributions of Black Americans to the arts, sciences, medicine, military service, and the daily work of keeping this country alive and honest. We cannot name every nurse who saved lives, every musician who mended broken hearts, every teacher who opened minds, every soldier who defended freedoms they themselves were denied. The debt is too large, and the space too small.

What we can do is offer a few names, a few stories, a few moments of recognition. In the pages that follow, you will meet Billy Strayhorn, who composed beauty while remaining invisible. Johnny Mathis, who gave the world a voice of romance while hiding his own truth. Cab Calloway, who made joy look effortless even when the world demanded he perform it under impossible conditions. Ella Fitzgerald, whose voice needed no explanation and whose dignity never wavered and Sarah Vaughan, who made every note count and demanded excellence from herself and everyone around her, Ben Vereen, who danced through tragedy and came back stronger.

These six do not represent all of Black history. They represent six lives worth studying, six examples of talent meeting adversity and refusing to surrender. They sang, they danced, they composed, they endured. They made American culture richer, even when American culture did not fully recognize or reward them. They left behind work that will outlast all of us.

February is short, and so is this introduction. We cannot say everything that should be said. We cannot thank everyone who deserves thanks. But we can do this: we can tell these stories with honesty and respect. We can recognize greatness when we see it. And we can remember that the music still plays, the voices still echo, and the work these artists did continue to shape the world we live in.

This is not enough. It is only what we have space to offer. But it is offered with gratitude, with respect, and with the knowledge that memory, however incomplete, matters. Thank you.



BILLY STRAYHORN: THE MAN WHO COMPOSED IN THE SHADOWS

(1915-1967)

By **H.H. Kendrick, Senior Culture Editor**
— **THE RIFLE**

There are partnerships in music that the world remembers by a single name, and in doing so, erases half the genius that made the sound possible. Duke Ellington's orchestra defined an era, shaped American music, and gave the world compositions so elegant they seemed to arrive fully formed. What the world did not see, standing just behind Duke's shoulder in every photograph and every performance, was the man who wrote many of those compositions. His name was Billy Strayhorn, and he was content—or convinced himself he was content—to let the world believe the music came from Duke alone.

He met Ellington in 1938, a young man of twenty-three with a song in his pocket and a quiet determination that belied his slight frame. The song was "Lush Life," a meditation on loneliness and longing so sophisticated it seemed impossible that someone barely out of his teens could have written it. Ellington recognized immediately what he had found. Within months, Billy Strayhorn was part of the Ellington organization, and within a year, he had

become something more—Duke's arranger, his collaborator, his confidant, and eventually, his lover.

The relationship between them was never publicly acknowledged, could not be in the 1940s and 50s when both men's careers depended on respectability. Duke maintained marriages and public romances with women. Billy remained "the friend," "the associate," "the arranger." But within the jazz world, among the musicians who traveled together and lived in close quarters on endless tours, the truth was understood and quietly accepted. Billy and Duke shared hotel rooms, shared meals, shared a creative partnership so intertwined that it became impossible to say where one man's work ended and the other's began.

Billy composed "Take the A Train," the song that became the Ellington orchestra's signature theme, the piece that opened every performance and defined the band's sound for decades. He wrote it in 1939, capturing the energy and optimism of New York with a melody so infectious it became synonymous with the city itself. He also wrote "Chelsea Bridge," "Satin Doll," and countless arrangements that turned Duke's ideas into the sophisticated swing that made the orchestra legendary. Yet when the songs were published, Duke's name appeared on the credits, and Billy's contributions were absorbed into the larger Ellington catalogue.

To the outside world, this looked like exploitation. A younger man, talented and essential, allowing an older, more famous man to take credit for his work. But the truth was more complicated. Billy chose this arrangement. He preferred the background. He disliked the public performance aspect of music, the glad-handing and self-promotion that Duke excelled at. What Billy wanted was to write, to arrange, to create beauty,

and to be close to the man he loved. The erasure was the price he paid for proximity.

Their relationship was not without strain. Duke's need for public adoration and his romantic entanglements with women created tensions that Billy absorbed with quiet dignity. Duke's occasional indifference to Billy's need for recognition wounded him, though he rarely complained. Yet the music they made together was extraordinary, a genuine collaboration that produced some of the most enduring compositions in American jazz. When they worked together, hunched over a piano in a hotel room or a studio, the rest of the world fell away, and what remained was two men who understood each other completely.

Billy lived openly as a gay man within the jazz community, as openly as any man could in that era. He had relationships, maintained a home in New York, and surrounded himself with friends who knew and accepted him. He did not hide, but neither did he draw attention to himself. He existed in the space between visibility and invisibility, present but unnamed, essential but uncredited.

By the 1960s, his health began to fail. Esophageal cancer, likely worsened by years of smoking and drinking, slowly stole his strength. Duke, who had taken Billy's presence for granted for nearly thirty years, was devastated as he watched his partner decline. In May 1967, Billy Strayhorn died at the age of fifty-one. Duke Ellington, normally a man of supreme control and composure, wept openly at the funeral. He recorded an entire album in Billy's memory, "...And His Mother Called Him Bill," performing Billy's compositions with a tenderness that revealed, for anyone listening closely, the depth of what he had lost.

The question that haunts Billy Strayhorn's story is whether Duke used him or loved him, whether the arrangement that kept Billy in the shadows was protection or exploitation. The answer, almost certainly, is both. Duke needed Billy—needed his compositions, his arrangements, his steadying presence—and in needing him, kept him close. But in keeping him close, Duke also kept him hidden, allowing the world to believe that the genius was Duke's alone. Billy accepted this bargain because it gave him the life he wanted: the ability to create music, to live with some degree of openness among people who knew him, and to remain near the man he loved.

There is a photograph of the two of them from the early 1950s, standing side by side at a piano. Duke's hand rests on Billy's shoulder, and both men are smiling, their heads bent toward the music in front of them. It is an image of partnership, of affection, of shared purpose. To anyone who did not know the full story, it might look like simple friendship or professional respect. To those who understood, it was a glimpse of something deeper—a love that could not be named publicly but was expressed every time their music played.

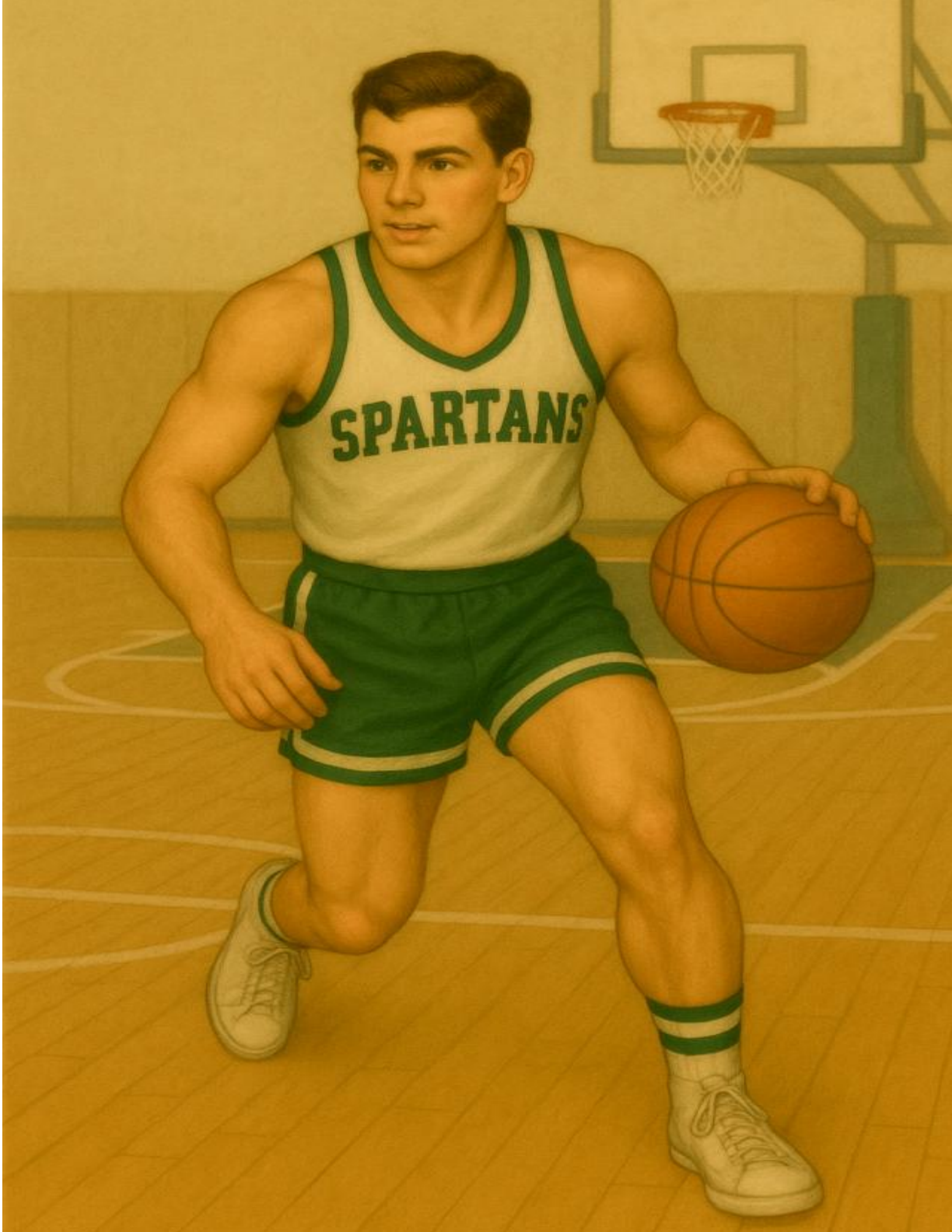
Billy Strayhorn deserved more recognition in his lifetime. He deserved credit on the compositions that bore only Duke's name. He deserved the world to know what he had created. But what he wanted most, it seems, was to make beautiful music and to be close to the man he loved, even if that closeness required him to remain in the shadows. In that choice, painful and complicated as it was, he found the life he could live.

The music remains. "Lush Life" still sounds like loneliness and wisdom. "Take the A Train" still captures New York's energy. "Chelsea Bridge" still shimmers with that

strange, suspended beauty that was Billy's particular gift. And in those compositions, Billy Strayhorn steps out of the shadows, no longer hidden, no longer erased. The world did not give him his due while he lived. But the music, which will outlast all of us, remembers his name.

H.H. Kendrick is Senior Culture Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the untold stories of men who shaped American culture.





JOHNNY MATHIS: THE VOICE OF ROMANCE, THE LIFE HELD BACK

(1935-)

By **H.H. Kendrick, Senior Culture Editor**
— **THE RIFLE**

For more than sixty years, Johnny Mathis has been the voice that accompanied first kisses, slow dances, marriage proposals, and anniversary dinners. His smooth, romantic tenor—effortless, intimate, achingly sincere—became the soundtrack to heterosexual courtship across generations. "Chances Are," "Misty," "It's Not For Me To Say," "The Twelfth of Never"—these songs promised devotion, whispered longing, and made millions of people believe in the possibility of perfect love. What those millions did not know, because Johnny could not tell them, was that the man singing about loving a woman had never loved one himself.

Johnny Mathis is gay. He has been his entire life. And for most of that life, he could not say so.

He was born in San Francisco in 1935, the fourth of seven children in a working-class family. His father recognized his talent early and scraped together money for voice lessons. By his late teens, Johnny was already exceptional—not just talented, but possessed of a voice so pure and controlled it seemed to exist outside normal human

limitations. He could hold a note forever, could glide between registers without effort, could make a lyric sound like a private confession. Columbia Records signed him in 1956 when he was twenty years old, and within two years, he had four albums in the top ten simultaneously. He was a sensation.

The marketing machine understood immediately what they had. Johnny was handsome—mixed-race (his father was Black, his mother was part Native American), with delicate features and an unthreatening demeanor. He was not overtly sexual in the way that Elvis or Little Richard were. He was safe. He was the boy you could bring home to your parents, the voice that made love seem gentle and achievable. Columbia dressed him in tuxedos and positioned him as the romantic ideal, and America bought it completely.

What America did not know was that Johnny's romantic life had nothing to do with the image being sold. He dated men quietly, discreetly, within circles where discretion was understood and maintained. He never married. He never had children. When asked about his personal life in interviews, he deflected with charm and vague references to being too busy for serious relationships. The studio encouraged this. His managers encouraged this. Everyone involved in Johnny Mathis's career understood that his value depended on women believing he could be theirs, and that illusion required him to remain unattached and theoretically available.

For decades, this arrangement held. Johnny performed, recorded, toured constantly, and kept his private life private. He was extraordinarily successful. His albums sold in the millions. His concerts filled arenas. He became one of the best-selling artists of all time, with over 350 million records sold

worldwide. He was wealthy, famous, admired, and utterly unable to live openly.

In 1982, Johnny Mathis came out. He gave an interview to a magazine and acknowledged, for the first time publicly, that he was gay. The response was immediate and panicked. His management team feared career disaster. Radio stations threatened to stop playing his music. The record label worried about album sales. Within weeks, Johnny walked it back. He claimed he had been misunderstood, that the interview had misrepresented him, that his personal life was private and not for public discussion. The retraction was unconvincing, but it served its purpose. The controversy faded. Johnny's career continued. And he went back into the closet for another thirty-five years.

The cost of that decision is difficult to measure from the outside. Johnny never spoke bitterly about it in later interviews. He remained gracious, professional, focused on his music. But there is something heartbreaking about a man spending his seventies and early eighties still unable to acknowledge openly what everyone around him already knew. He performed love songs written for women, to audiences who believed he understood heterosexual romance intimately, while his actual life remained hidden behind carefully constructed walls.

It was not until 2017, when Johnny was eighty-two years old, that he finally acknowledged his sexuality again, this time without retraction. In interviews promoting a new album, he spoke plainly about being gay, about the difficulty of living closeted for so long, about the relief of finally being able to speak honestly. He did not apologize for the years of concealment. He did not condemn the industry that demanded it. He

simply stated the truth, calmly and without drama, as though it were the most ordinary fact in the world.

By then, the world had changed enough that his announcement barely registered as news. Younger generations, who had grown up with openly gay artists and public figures, found it hard to understand what the fear had been about. Older generations, who remembered the 1950s and 60s, understood perfectly. Johnny Mathis had made a calculation that many men of his era made: career survival in exchange for personal honesty. He chose the career. He chose the music. And he lived for eighty-two years before he could afford to choose himself.

There is a deep irony in the fact that Johnny Mathis, who never loved a woman, became the definitive voice of romantic love between men and women. His sincerity in those songs was not a lie—he understood longing, devotion, and the ache of love unexpressed. He simply directed those feelings elsewhere than the world assumed. When he sang "Chances Are," he meant every word. He just was not singing to the audience the marketing suggested.

Johnny Mathis is still performing. At eighty-seven, his voice has lost some of its range and power, but it retains that distinctive warmth and precision that made him a star seventy years ago. He tours regularly, playing to audiences who grew up with his music and younger listeners discovering it for the first time. He is, by all accounts, content. He lives openly now, no longer burdened by the need to hide. He has outlived the closet, outlived the fear, outlived the industry that demanded his silence.

The contrast between Billy Strayhorn and Johnny Mathis is instructive. Billy lived

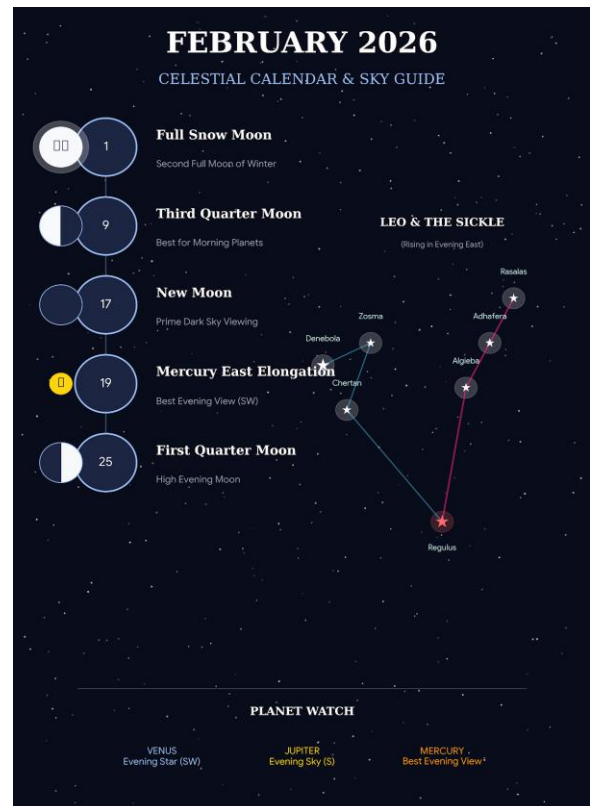
more openly within his community, accepted invisibility in exchange for proximity to the man he loved, and died young without widespread recognition. Johnny concealed himself completely, achieved extraordinary fame and success, and lived long enough to finally speak truthfully. Neither path was without cost. Both men made the choices that seemed necessary at the time, given the world they inhabited.

What Johnny Mathis's story teaches us is that survival sometimes requires compromise, and that living long enough means witnessing the world change in ways that once seemed impossible. The young man who hid his truth in 1956 because anything else would have ended his career before it began became the old man who could finally speak that truth in 2017 and find that the world, at last, had caught up.

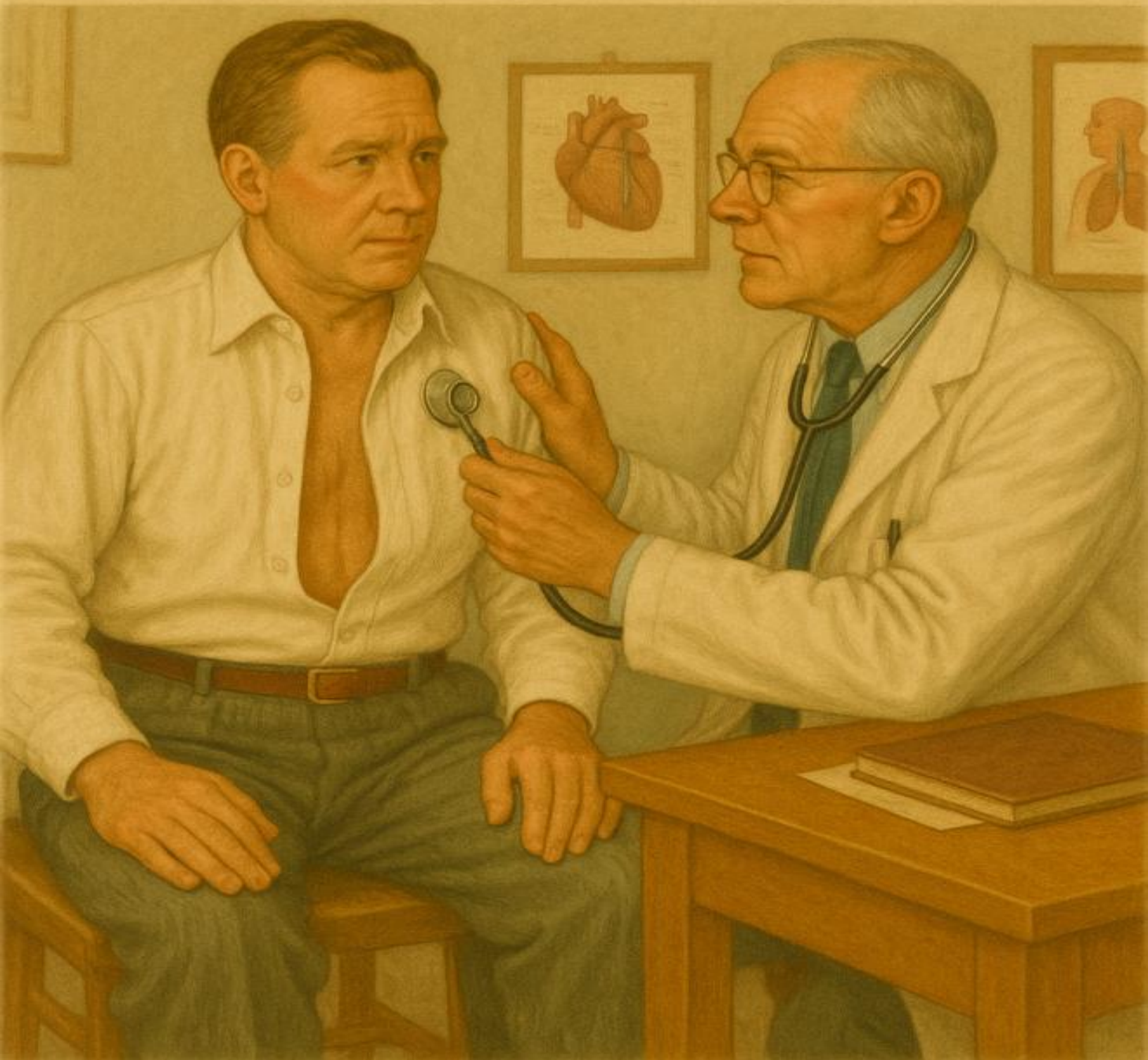
The voice remains. "Chances Are" still sounds like hope. "Misty" still captures that suspended moment of falling. "It's Not For Me To Say" still aches with restraint and longing. And now, when we listen, we hear not just the songs, but the man who sang them—the full man, complicated and brave in his own way, who gave the world the gift of that extraordinary voice while protecting the parts of himself he could not yet safely reveal.

He is still here. Still singing. Still, finally, fully himself.

H.H. Kendrick is Senior Culture Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the untold stories of men who shaped American culture.



HEART DISEASE IS SERIOUS GET CHECKED SOON



CAB CALLOWAY: THE HI-DE-HO MAN WHO MADE JOY LOOK EASY

(1907-1994)

By H.H. Kendrick, Senior Culture Editor
— THE RIFLE

There are performers who command a stage, and then there was Cab Calloway, who didn't just command it—he owned it, worked it, made love to it, and left audiences breathless wondering what force of nature had just blown through the room. In the white tuxedo that became his signature, with that processional strut and that wide, gleaming smile, Cab Calloway turned every performance into an event. He didn't just sing. He didn't just conduct his orchestra. He erupted. He was a comet in human form, and for more than six decades, he lit up every stage he stepped on with an energy that seemed to come from some inexhaustible source the rest of us don't have access to.

Cabell Calloway III was born in Rochester, New York, on Christmas Day 1907, though he grew up in Baltimore. His mother wanted him to be a lawyer. His sister Blanche was already making a name for herself as a singer, and Cab initially seemed headed for something respectable and stable—college, a profession, a life of quiet achievement. But the music pulled him. Jazz was exploding out of New Orleans and Chicago, reshaping American sound, and Cab could feel it in his bones. He started singing, and when he sang, people stopped what they were doing and

listened. More importantly, they watched. Because Cab Calloway didn't just have a voice—he had presence.

By the late 1920s, he was leading his own band, the Missourians, and working the club circuit. But it was 1931 that changed everything. Duke Ellington's orchestra was leaving the Cotton Club, Harlem's most prestigious nightclub, and the management needed a replacement. They chose Cab. He was twenty-three years old, and he stepped into the spotlight at one of the most famous venues in America with the confidence of a man twice his age. Within months, he had recorded "Minnie the Moocher," and the world discovered what Harlem already knew: Cab Calloway was a phenomenon.

"Minnie the Moocher" is pure Cab—a story-song about a good girl gone wrong, set to a driving beat, punctuated by that call-and-response "Hi-De-Ho" that became his trademark. The song was risqué, funny, propulsive, and impossible to ignore. It sold a million copies during the Depression, when a million of anything was hard to come by. But more than the recording, it was Cab's live performance that made the song legendary. He would strut across the stage, lean into the microphone, and call out "Hi-De-Ho!" and the audience would roar it back at him. He conducted them like an orchestra, bending their energy to his will, making them part of the show. No one had seen anything like it.

The Cotton Club years—1931 to 1940—were Cab's golden age. He performed there regularly, broadcast live on national radio, and became one of the most recognizable performers in America. The club itself was a complicated place: a showcase for Black talent that only allowed white patrons, a glittering stage built on segregation's ugly foundation. Cab navigated this contradiction

with his usual aplomb. He gave white audiences access to Black musical innovation in a setting where they felt comfortable, and he got paid handsomely for it. He was pragmatic. He understood that the system was rigged, but he also understood that he could work within it and still retain his dignity and his artistry.

His orchestra was one of the finest in the business. Cab hired the best musicians he could find—players who could swing hard and tight, who could keep up with his manic energy and his demand for precision. He paid them well, treated them professionally, and expected excellence. The Cab Calloway Orchestra wasn't just a backing band; it was a machine, and Cab conducted it with the same theatrical flair he brought to everything else. He would wave his baton, bounce on his toes, spin in place, and somehow never lose the beat. Watching him lead a band was like watching a man in conversation with music itself.

In 1936, Cab made his film debut in "The Singing Kid," working alongside Al Jolson, one of the biggest stars of the era. It was a significant moment—Cab and his orchestra sharing the screen with Jolson, singing duets, interacting as equals. In an industry that rarely gave Black performers anything resembling equal billing, Cab held his own. More than held his own—he outshone Jolson with sheer charisma and talent. Where Jolson was sentimental and broad, Cab was electric and precise. The camera loved him, and audiences noticed.

He would go on to appear in several films, including the Betty Boop cartoons where his rotoscoped image danced and sang "Minnie the Moocher" in a surreal, nightmarish landscape that somehow fit his manic energy perfectly. He also appeared in "Stormy Weather" (1943), the all-Black musical that

showcased the best talent of the era. By then, Cab was an established star, and his performance in that film—surrounded by legends like Lena Horne, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and the Nicholas Brothers—demonstrated just how far he had come and how undeniable his presence was.

But it was live performance that remained Cab's true medium. Films could capture his image and his voice, but they couldn't fully contain the energy he generated on stage. He moved constantly—strutting, spinning, bouncing, conducting, gesturing wildly, his body as much an instrument as his voice. He wore the white tuxedo because it caught the light, because it signaled sophistication, because it made him impossible to ignore. He was vaudeville and jazz and pure showmanship rolled into one impossibly energetic package. People came to see Cab Calloway not just to hear music, but to witness a performance that felt like a religious experience.

The big band era couldn't last forever. By the late 1940s, tastes were changing. Bebop was emerging, rock and roll was on the horizon, and the massive orchestras that had defined the swing era were becoming economically unsustainable. Cab adapted. He kept performing, scaled down his band when necessary, took roles in theater productions, and remained a working musician. In 1952, he played Sportin' Life in a revival of "Porgy and Bess," bringing his theatrical flair to Gershwin's opera and earning rave reviews. He understood that survival meant flexibility, that a career wasn't about one moment of glory but about showing up and doing the work for decades.

In 1980, something remarkable happened. Cab was cast in "The Blues Brothers," playing Curtis, the janitor at the boys' home where Jake and Elwood were raised. The

film gave him a showcase for "Minnie the Moocher," and a new generation discovered what their grandparents had known in the 1930s: Cab Calloway was a force of nature. He was seventy-three years old, and he still had it—the energy, the moves, the voice, the charisma. He commanded that stage in the movie exactly as he had commanded stages for fifty years, and young audiences who had never heard of the Cotton Club or the big band era suddenly understood why this man was a legend.

He kept performing almost until the end. Even in his eighties, Cab was still strutting on stage, still calling out "Hi-De-Ho," still making audiences believe that joy was the most important thing a performer could offer. He died in 1994 at the age of eighty-six, having spent sixty-five years in show business, having outlived most of his contemporaries, having left behind a body of work that captured American music at one of its most creative and exuberant moments.

What made Cab Calloway great was not just his talent—though his voice, a supple tenor with remarkable range and control, was extraordinary—but his absolute commitment to performance as joy. In an era when Black performers often had to navigate impossible social constraints, when segregation dictated where they could perform and for whom, when the music business exploited them as a matter of course, Cab chose exuberance. He chose to make every performance an explosion of energy and life. He chose to make audiences feel good, to make them forget their troubles for two hours, to make them believe that the world could be as bright and as thrilling as a Cab Calloway show.

There is a famous photograph of Cab from the Cotton Club years, mid-performance, caught in a moment of pure motion. His

body is twisted, his arms are flung wide, his face is split by that enormous smile, and you can almost hear the "Hi-De-Ho" coming out of his mouth. It is an image of a man fully alive, fully present, and fully committed to the moment. That was Cab Calloway every time he stepped on stage. He gave everything, held nothing back, and left his audiences exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure.

The music remains. "Minnie the Moocher" still swings. "St. James Infirmary Blues" still aches with that mournful beauty. "Jumpin' Jive" still makes you want to move. And in those recordings, Cab Calloway is still strutting across a stage somewhere, still calling out to an audience, still making joy look like the easiest thing in the world even though we all know, watching him, that what he did was a kind of genius that cannot be taught or imitated. He was singular. He was gold. And American music is richer for every moment he spent making us believe that life could be as bright and as thrilling as a man in a white tuxedo commanding a stage like he owned not just the room, but the entire world.

Hi-De-Ho, Cab. We hear you still.

H.H. Kendrick is Senior Culture Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the legends who shaped American performance.

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ELLA FITZGERALD: THE VOICE THAT NEEDED NO EXPLANATION

(1917-1996)

By Ella Vation, Music Correspondent —
THE RIFLE

*A-tisket, a-tasket, a green and yellow
basket...*

It was 1938, and a twenty-one-year-old singer named Ella Fitzgerald recorded a swing version of a children's nursery rhyme with the Chick Webb Orchestra. The song was playful, infectious, built on the simplest possible melody, and it became one of the biggest hits of the year. America fell in love with that voice—clear as a bell, precise as a metronome, warm as summer sunshine. What nobody knew then, but what the next five decades would prove, was that Ella Fitzgerald possessed one of the greatest voices in the history of American music, and she would spend the rest of her life showing us exactly what a human voice could do when guided by perfect pitch, impeccable timing, and a work ethic that never quit.

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1917, but grew up in Yonkers, New York, in circumstances that were often desperate. Her father left when she was young. Her mother died when Ella was fifteen. She ended up in a reformatory school, ran away, and found herself homeless and struggling in Harlem during

the depths of the Great Depression. She was singing on street corners for spare change when she entered an amateur contest at the Apollo Theater in 1934, planning to dance. But when she got on stage and saw the competition—a pair of professional dancers called the Edwards Sisters—she lost her nerve. At the last second, she decided to sing instead.

She chose two songs: "Judy" and "The Object of My Affection." Her voice was untrained, unpolished, but undeniable. The audience heard something raw and true, and they erupted. She won the contest. More importantly, she caught the attention of Chick Webb, one of Harlem's top bandleaders. He was reluctant at first—Ella was seventeen, awkward, shy, and didn't look like the glamorous singers who fronted big bands. But when he heard her sing, he understood what he had found. He hired her, and within two years, she was the most popular singer in his orchestra.

"A-Tisket, A-Tasket" changed everything. It sold a million copies, became Ella's first major hit, and established her as more than just a band singer. She had star power. But more than that, she had something that couldn't be manufactured or imitated: a voice of astonishing purity and control, a voice that could do anything. When Chick Webb died suddenly in 1939, Ella, at just twenty-two years old, took over leadership of the band and kept it together for three more years. It was an extraordinary act of determination and skill. Most singers would have collapsed under that pressure. Ella simply went to work.

The 1940s saw her transition from big band singer to solo artist, and the 1950s saw her become something more: a jazz vocalist of such sophistication and technical mastery that other musicians studied her the way

they studied Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie. She developed her scat singing—that wordless, improvisational vocal style where the voice becomes an instrument, mimicking horns and creating melodies on the fly—into an art form. When Ella scatted, she wasn't just making sounds. She was composing in real time, building intricate melodic lines with the same precision a saxophonist would bring to a solo. She could quote other songs mid-scat, reference bebop phrases, and navigate chord changes with an ease that made it all sound effortless.

In 1956, Norman Granz, founder of Verve Records, signed Ella and gave her the creative freedom she had never fully enjoyed. He produced the "Songbook" series—albums dedicated to the work of individual composers: Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer. Over the course of a decade, Ella recorded hundreds of songs, and in doing so, she created the definitive interpretations of the American popular songbook. These were not just recordings; they were monuments. Ella approached each song with respect for the composer's intent, clarity of diction, and an emotional intelligence that revealed layers of meaning other singers missed.

Listen to her sing "Someone to Watch Over Me" from the Gershwin songbook. The song is tender, wistful, aching with loneliness. Ella doesn't oversell it. She doesn't add vocal gymnastics or unnecessary ornamentation. She simply sings the melody as written, with perfect pitch and perfect phrasing, and in doing so, she breaks your heart. That was Ella's gift: she understood that the song came first, that her job was to serve the material, not to use it as a vehicle for showing off. And yet, paradoxically, by serving the song so faithfully, she revealed

her own artistry more completely than any amount of technical display could have done.

She was not flashy. She was not theatrical in the way that Cab Calloway or Sammy Davis Jr. were. She stood at the microphone, often in a simple gown, and sang. That was it. That was all she needed. The voice did the work. And what a voice it was—three octaves of range, perfect intonation, a tone that could be bright and girlish or warm and rich depending on what the song required. She could swing hard on uptempo numbers, making every note land exactly on the beat. She could caress a ballad, drawing out phrases with such tenderness that the audience forgot to breathe. She could scat with such inventiveness that instrumentalists would stop playing just to listen to what she was doing.

But there was more to Ella Fitzgerald than technical mastery. There was dignity. In an era when Black performers were often subjected to humiliating treatment—forced to use back entrances, denied service in the venues where they performed, paid less than their white counterparts—Ella carried herself with quiet grace. She did not make a show of her struggles. She did not complain publicly. She simply insisted, through her presence and her professionalism, that she be treated with respect. And increasingly, as her fame grew, she was.

There were still indignities. In the 1950s, even at the height of her success, she was sometimes denied hotel rooms because of her race. She was turned away from restaurants. She faced the thousand small cruelties that segregation inflicted on even the most celebrated Black Americans. But Ella kept working. She kept singing. And gradually, the world came around. Not because she fought publicly, but because her

artistry was so undeniable that even the most determined bigot had to acknowledge it.

She toured constantly, performing across America and around the world. She sang for presidents and prime ministers. She performed at Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, the Royal Albert Hall. She recorded with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and countless other legends. She won thirteen Grammy Awards, received the National Medal of Arts, and was given Kennedy Center Honors. By the time she retired in the early 1990s due to declining health—diabetes had taken its toll, eventually requiring the amputation of both legs below the knee—she had recorded over two hundred albums and had become one of the most honored musicians in American history.

But the honors and awards, as important as they were, never seemed to be what mattered most to Ella. What mattered was the work. What mattered was getting on stage and singing, night after night, year after year, for more than five decades. She loved to perform. She loved the audience's response. She loved the music itself. And she approached every performance, whether in a grand concert hall or a small jazz club, with the same level of professionalism and commitment.

There is a recording from a 1960 concert in Berlin where Ella forgets the lyrics to "Mack the Knife" midway through the song. Instead of panicking or stopping, she improvises, scatting and making up new lyrics on the spot, turning the mistake into a moment of pure jazz invention. The audience roars with delight. Ella laughs, acknowledges the flub, and keeps swinging. The recording won a Grammy. It remains one of the most beloved performances of her career, not despite the mistake, but because of it. It revealed

something essential about Ella: she was human, she could make errors, but she had such command of her craft that even her mistakes became art.

Ella Fitzgerald died in 1996 at the age of seventy-nine, having spent nearly sixty years as a professional singer. She had outlived most of her contemporaries, had witnessed the rise and fall of big bands, the emergence of bebop, the British Invasion, the rise of rock and roll, and the fragmentation of popular music into a thousand subgenres. Through all of it, she remained constant. She remained Ella. She sang the standards, she sang jazz, and she did it with a level of excellence that never wavered.

What makes Ella Fitzgerald unforgettable is not just the voice, though the voice was extraordinary. It is the combination of talent, humility, professionalism, and sheer endurance. She came from nothing— orphaned, homeless, singing on street corners—and became one of the greatest artists America has ever produced. She did it without drama, without self-promotion, without demanding special treatment. She simply showed up and did the work, night after night, year after year, until the work itself became her monument.

Listen to her sing "Summertime." Listen to "How High the Moon." Listen to "Cry Me a River" or "Misty" or any of the hundreds of songs she recorded. Close your eyes and hear that voice—clear, pure, precise, warm, human. That was Ella. That voice needed no explanation, no justification, no defense. It simply was, and it was perfect. And in a world that often felt chaotic and unjust, that perfection was a gift. It reminded us that beauty could exist despite hardship, that excellence could be achieved through discipline, and that a voice—just a voice,

nothing more—could change the way we understood what it meant to be human.

A-tisket, a-tasket, she sang in 1938, and we've been listening ever since.

Ella Vation is Music Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where she chronicles the voices that shaped American sound.

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SARAH VAUGHAN: THE DIVINE ONE WHO MADE EVERY NOTE COUNT

(1924-1990)

By Amy Price, Music Correspondent —
THE RIFLE

*I'll build a stairway to Paradise, with a new
step every day, I'm going to get there at any
price...*

When Sarah Vaughan sang those words, you believed her. That voice—rich, dark, impossibly controlled—carried a conviction that made promises sound like certainties. She didn't just sing about building that stairway; she climbed it, one perfect note at a time, until she stood at the top looking down at a career that spanned five decades and redefined what a jazz vocalist could be. She was called "The Divine One," and if you ever heard her hold a note, bending it and shaping it with that wide, shimmering vibrato until it seemed to occupy space like a physical presence, you understood why. Sarah Vaughan didn't just sing. She inhabited music, lived inside it, made it do things that seemed impossible for a human voice.

She was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1924, the daughter of a carpenter and a

laundress who both sang in the church choir. Sarah grew up in that church, learning piano and organ, absorbing gospel harmonies and the kind of vocal control that comes from trying to reach the back pew without amplification. By the time she was twelve, she was playing organ for services. By eighteen, she had entered the amateur contest at the Apollo Theater—the same venue where Ella Fitzgerald had been discovered a decade earlier—and won. The prize was a week's engagement at the Apollo, and during that week, she caught the attention of Billy Eckstine, who was singing with the Earl Hines Orchestra. Eckstine heard something extraordinary and recommended her to Hines. Within weeks, Sarah was on the road with one of the best big bands in the business.

But it was 1943, and the music was changing. Bebop was being born in after-hours jam sessions, and the Hines band was at the center of it. Charlie Parker was in that band. Dizzy Gillespie was in that band. These were the architects of a new jazz language—faster, more complex, more harmonically adventurous than anything that had come before. Sarah absorbed it all. She listened to the horn players, studied how they navigated chord changes, learned to think like an instrumentalist rather than just a singer. When she sang, she didn't just follow the melody; she reimagined it, bending phrases, adding unexpected intervals, treating her voice like a saxophone that could also form words.

In 1944, she joined Billy Eckstine's new orchestra, which became a finishing school for bebop musicians. Eckstine, Parker, Gillespie, and Vaughan—they were inventing modern jazz together, and Sarah was the only vocalist who could keep up. She could scat with the same complexity the horn players brought to their solos. She

could take a standard and deconstruct it, finding new melodic possibilities in familiar changes. She never simplified for the audience. She trusted that if she sang with intelligence and emotion, listeners would follow her wherever she went.

Her voice was unlike anything else in popular music. Ella's voice was bright and pure, like crystal catching sunlight. Sarah's was darker, richer, and almost orchestral in its depth. She had a three-octave range and could move between registers seamlessly—one moment singing in a dusky alto, the next soaring into a clear soprano, always with that distinctive vibrato that became her trademark. That vibrato was wide and operatic, and it gave every sustained note a kind of living quality, as though the note itself were breathing. Some singers used vibrato sparingly, as an ornament. Sarah used it as an essential part of her sound, a way of making notes shimmer and resonate.

She could sing anything. Ballads like "Misty" and "Tenderly" became showcases for her emotional depth and her ability to draw out a phrase until it felt like time had stopped. Up-tempo numbers like "Lover Man" and "Shulie a Bop" demonstrated her swing and her rhythmic precision. Standards from the Great American Songbook were transformed in her hands—she found melancholy in songs others sang cheerfully, found complexity in songs others treated as simple. And when she scatted, she built solos that were as architecturally sound and melodically inventive as anything Charlie Parker played on his horn.

The 1950s and 60s were her peak years. She recorded prolifically, worked with the best arrangers and musicians, and performed constantly. She was not as commercially successful as Ella—Sarah's music was more challenging, less immediately accessible—

but among musicians and serious jazz listeners, she was revered. Other singers studied her phrasing. Horn players marveled at her harmonic sense. She was a musician who happened to use her voice as an instrument, and that distinction mattered. She didn't just interpret songs; she composed new melodies in real time, each performance a fresh exploration of the material.

But Sarah Vaughan was not interested in being safe or predictable. She took risks that other singers avoided. She would hold a note far longer than seemed possible, bending it through microtonal variations that added color and tension. She would come in behind the beat, creating a sense of relaxed swing that made even the fastest tempos feel unhurried. She would completely rearrange a melody, sometimes to the point where the original tune was barely recognizable, trusting that her listeners would appreciate the journey even if they couldn't hum along.

She was also, by all accounts, "Sassy"—her nickname among friends and musicians. She had a sharp wit, a quick tongue, and no patience for nonsense. She knew her worth and demanded to be treated accordingly. In an industry that often exploited Black artists, Sarah negotiated hard, walked away from bad deals, and maintained control over her career in ways that were unusual for the era. She was professional, disciplined, and uncompromising about her art. If you wanted Sarah Vaughan to sing, you met her standards.

Her personal life was complicated—three marriages, all of which ended in divorce, and struggles with the constant travel and pressure of maintaining a career at the highest level. She never had children, and later in life, she expressed some regret about that. But she also acknowledged that the

demands of her career would have made motherhood nearly impossible. She chose the music, and the music rewarded her with a legacy that few singers have matched.

By the 1980s, her voice had deepened with age, losing some of its upper register but gaining a darker, more burnished quality that was stunning in its own way. She was in her sixties, still performing, still finding new ways to interpret songs she had sung hundreds of times. She recorded a final album in 1987, appropriately titled "Brazilian Romance," exploring bossa nova with the same curiosity and intelligence she had brought to bebop forty years earlier. Even at the end, she was still learning, still pushing, still refusing to coast on past achievements.

Sarah Vaughan died of lung cancer in 1990 at the age of sixty-six. She had been a professional singer for nearly fifty years, had recorded dozens of albums, had performed on every major stage in the world. She left behind a body of work that stands as a monument to vocal artistry and jazz innovation. She never achieved the mainstream popularity of Ella Fitzgerald or the cultural icon status of Billie Holiday, but among those who understood music deeply, she was without peer.

What made Sarah Vaughan great was the combination of technical mastery and emotional intelligence. She had the vocal equipment to do anything—the range, the control, the tone—but she also had the musical mind to know what to do with it. She understood harmony, rhythm, and phrasing at a level most singers never reach. She could hear the possibilities in a chord progression, could find the melodic line that no one else had discovered, could take a familiar song and make it sound like she had just invented it.

There is a recording of Sarah singing "Summertime" from the 1950s. The Gershwin standard has been recorded thousands of times, but Sarah's version is definitive. She starts low and quiet, almost whispering the opening lines, then gradually builds intensity, her voice growing richer and more powerful with each phrase. By the time she reaches the final chorus, she is soaring, holding notes that seem to last forever, bending and shaping them with that extraordinary vibrato. It is a masterclass in dynamics, phrasing, and emotional arc. It is also a reminder that Sarah Vaughan could do things with her voice that no one else could even attempt.

She built her stairway to paradise, one step at a time, at any price. The cost was high—years on the road, failed marriages, the exhaustion of maintaining excellence for five decades. But the reward was immortality. Sarah Vaughan's voice is preserved in hundreds of recordings, and in those recordings, she remains forever at the height of her powers, forever divine, forever making every note count. Listen to her sing, and you hear what a human voice can become when guided by genius. Listen to her scat, and you hear music being invented in real time. Listen to her hold a note, and you understand why they called her "The Divine One." Because in those moments, when that voice filled the room and seemed to transcend the physical limitations of breath and vocal cords, she was touched by something beyond technique, beyond training, beyond explanation. She was simply, impossibly, divine.

I'll build a stairway to Paradise...

She did. And we're still climbing it, following the path she laid down, trying to reach the place where Sarah Vaughan showed us music could go.

Amy Price is Music Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where she chronicles the voices that built stairways to paradise.



The roads
are slick

A steady man
Stays calm an bold

Burma-Shave



BEN VEREEN: THE DANCER WHO NEVER STOPPED MOVING

(1946-)

By River B'Long, Performance
Correspondent — THE RIFLE

*Rivers belong where they can ramble,
Eagles belong where they can fly...*

When Ben Vereen sang those words on Broadway in 1972, playing the Leading Player in "Pippin," he wasn't just performing a song—he was embodying a philosophy. Rivers ramble. Eagles fly. And Ben Vereen danced. For more than five decades, through Broadway triumphs and television stardom, through tragedy and miraculous recovery, through every shift in American entertainment, Ben kept moving. He danced with Bob Fosse, sang with the Muppets, acted in "Roots," survived a near-fatal accident that should have ended his career, and came back stronger. He rambled where he needed to ramble, and he never stopped flowing.

Benjamin Augustus Middleton was born in Miami in 1946 and adopted as an infant by James and Pauline Vereen, who raised him in Brooklyn. His adoptive father was a paint-mixer, his mother a theater wardrobe mistress, and young Ben grew up backstage, watching performers, absorbing the rhythms

of show business. He could sing, he could dance, and more importantly, he had that indefinable quality that makes someone impossible to ignore on stage—presence, energy, charisma, star power. By his teens, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life.

He studied at the High School of Performing Arts in New York—the school that would later inspire "Fame"—and then dove into the theater world with the kind of hunger that comes from knowing you're born to do something. He worked in clubs, did regional theater, took whatever roles he could get, and learned his craft the old-fashioned way: by doing it over and over until excellence became habit. In 1967, he made his Broadway debut in "Sweet Charity," choreographed by Bob Fosse. It was a small role, but Fosse noticed him. More importantly, Fosse recognized what Ben could become.

Bob Fosse was a genius and a tyrant, a perfectionist who demanded everything from his dancers and gave them brilliance in return. His style—angular, precise, sensual, jazz-influenced—required dancers who could think and feel simultaneously, who could hit every move with razor sharpness while making it look effortless. Ben Vereen became one of Fosse's favorite dancers, and when Fosse was preparing "Pippin" in 1972, he cast Ben as the Leading Player—the mysterious, seductive narrator who guides the audience through the story of a young prince searching for meaning.

"Pippin" made Ben Vereen a star. The show was a sensation, running for nearly five years on Broadway, and Ben's performance was its beating heart. He sang "Magic to Do," the opening number that set the show's playful, dangerous tone. He danced with that distinctive Fosse style—shoulders rolled,

hands articulated, every movement sharp and deliberate. And he sang "Rivers Belong Where They Can Ramble" with a warmth and wisdom that made the song feel like a benediction. He won the Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical, and suddenly, everyone in America knew his name.

But Ben Vereen was not content to stay on Broadway. He wanted to reach broader audiences, wanted to show what he could do beyond the stage. In 1977, he appeared in "Roots," the groundbreaking television miniseries that drew over 100 million viewers and changed American television forever. Ben played Chicken George, a complex character who moved through slavery's horrors with intelligence and resilience. It was a dramatic role, far removed from the song-and-dance performances he was known for, and Ben proved he could act with depth and nuance. He earned an Emmy nomination and showed the world he was more than a Broadway dancer—he was a complete performer.

He became a fixture on television variety shows and specials throughout the late '70s and early '80s. He had his own specials, appeared on everyone else's, and brought that Broadway energy to living rooms across America. And in 1979, he appeared on "The Muppet Show," performing with Kermit and Miss Piggy and a cast of felt creatures with the same commitment and joy he brought to everything else. He didn't condescend to the material or phone it in. He danced with the Muppets like they were the Royal Ballet, sang like he was at Carnegie Hall, and reminded a generation of children what live performance could be. For many kids watching that episode, Ben Vereen was their first encounter with a Broadway star, their first glimpse of what a trained dancer could do, their first understanding that

performance was a craft requiring discipline and joy in equal measure.

Through the '80s, he continued working—Vegas shows, television appearances, concerts, touring productions. He was everywhere, always moving, always performing. But in 1992, everything nearly ended. Ben was walking along a highway in Malibu when he was struck by a car. The accident was devastating—fractured skull, broken ribs, internal injuries, severe trauma. He was in a coma. Doctors weren't sure he would survive, and if he did survive, whether he would ever walk again, much less dance.

Ben Vereen not only survived—he came back. The recovery was brutal, requiring months of physical therapy, relearning basic movements, fighting through pain that would have broken most people. But Ben had spent his entire life training his body to do difficult things, and he approached rehabilitation with the same discipline he had brought to Fosse's choreography. Slowly, impossibly, he healed. Within two years, he was performing again. Not at diminished capacity, not as a shadow of his former self, but as Ben Vereen—still dancing, still singing, still giving audiences everything he had.

The accident changed him, though. He became more reflective, more spiritual, more aware of how fragile life could be. He started speaking openly about his struggles with addiction—cocaine had nearly destroyed him in the '80s, and the accident had been a wake-up call. He got sober, stayed sober, and used his platform to talk about recovery and resilience. He became an advocate for arts education, working with young performers, teaching them not just how to dance but how to survive in a brutal industry. He had rambled through his own

dark valleys and come out the other side, and he wanted to help others find their way.

He kept performing into his seventies. His body, after decades of Fosse's punishing choreography and the trauma of the accident, couldn't do everything it once could. But he adapted. He found new ways to move, new ways to command a stage, new ways to connect with audiences. The joy never left him. That smile—wide, genuine, impossible to resist—remained his signature. When Ben Vereen performed, even in his seventies, you could see the kid from Brooklyn who fell in love with theater, the young dancer who earned Bob Fosse's respect, the Leading Player who told us that rivers belong where they can ramble.

What makes Ben Vereen's story remarkable is not just the talent—though the talent was extraordinary—but the resilience. He survived an industry that chewed up performers and spit them out. He survived addiction. He survived an accident that should have killed him. And through it all, he kept dancing. Not because he had to, but because dancing was what he was born to do. Rivers don't choose to ramble; they simply follow their nature. Ben Vereen's nature was movement, performance, giving joy to audiences, and no amount of hardship could change that.

There is footage of Ben performing "Magic to Do" from "Pippin" in the 1970s. He moves across the stage with that distinctive Fosse style—precise, controlled, and impossibly smooth. His voice is strong and clear, his smile infectious. He makes it look effortless, makes you believe that magic is real and that it happens every time a performer steps into the light and gives everything they have. That was Ben Vereen at his peak, and that peak lasted for decades because he refused to stop moving, refused

to stop growing, refused to accept that anything—injury, age, hardship—could keep him from doing what he loved.

Rivers belong where they can ramble...

Ben Vereen rambled through Broadway, through television, through film, through Vegas, through tragedy, through recovery, and he's still here. Still performing. Still finding where he belongs. And we're grateful that his river flowed through our lives, bringing joy and movement and the reminder that resilience is not just surviving—it's continuing to dance even when the music stops, continuing to move even when the body protests, continuing to give even when you've already given everything.

The river keeps flowing. And Ben Vereen keeps dancing.

River B'Long is Performance
Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine,
where he chronicles the artists who never
stop moving.

Happy President's Day



PRESIDENTIAL VIRTUES FOR THE COLD SEASON

By Val E. Forge, Historical
Correspondent — THE RIFLE

February honors presidents, and rightly so. But the honor means little if we do not consider what these men endured and what their examples teach us about winter, leadership, and the discipline required to meet hardship without flinching. The men who shaped this nation did so through winters literal and figurative, and their virtues—endurance, resolve, humility, and clarity of purpose—remain as relevant today as they were in their own time.

WASHINGTON: THE ENDURANCE OF VALLEY FORGE

George Washington spent the winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge with an army that was starving, freezing, and falling apart. Men had no shoes. They wrapped their feet in rags and left bloody prints in the snow. Supplies were nonexistent. Morale was near collapse. Washington could have quit. Many officers wanted him to. Instead, he stayed. He drilled his men. He shared their suffering. He held the army together through sheer force of will and the example of his own endurance.

A man learns from Washington that leadership in winter is not about grand gestures but about showing up every day, visibly present, sharing the burden. Washington did not give speeches about

sacrifice; he lived it. His men saw him walking the same frozen ground they walked, eating the same meager rations, enduring the same cold. That shared suffering created loyalty that no amount of rhetoric could have achieved.

LINCOLN: THE WEIGHT OF WINTER MELANCHOLY

Abraham Lincoln understood darkness. He suffered from what we would now call depression, and he felt it most acutely during winter. The short days, the endless cold, the weight of responsibility—all of it pressed on him. Yet he worked. He wrote. He met with generals and cabinet members and petitioners. He did the work even when the work felt impossible.

Lincoln's example teaches a man that winter melancholy is real, that it can be acknowledged without shame, and that it does not excuse a man from his responsibilities. You feel the weight. You admit the weight. And then you lift it anyway, one day at a time, because the work matters more than your comfort.

ROOSEVELT: THE VIGOR THAT DEFIES THE COLD

Theodore Roosevelt believed that physical vigor was a moral duty. He chopped wood in winter. He rode horses through snow. He swam in icy rivers. He refused to let cold weather become an excuse for softness. Even after he left the presidency, even as his health declined, he maintained a discipline of physical activity that would exhaust men half his age.

Roosevelt's lesson is simple: winter is not a reason to stop moving. A man who remains active in cold weather—who chops his own wood, who walks daily, who keeps his body

strong—maintains not just physical health but mental clarity and moral strength. The cold tests you. You meet it with movement, with work, with refusal to surrender to comfort.

THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION

These presidents did not theorize about hardship. They lived through it and left examples worth studying.

From Washington: Show up. Be present. Share the burden visibly with those who depend on you. Endurance is not dramatic; it is simply continuing when others would quit.

From Lincoln: Acknowledge difficulty without being consumed by it. Do the work even when the darkness presses in. Your feelings are real; your responsibilities are also real. Both can be true.

From Roosevelt: Keep moving. Physical discipline in winter prevents both bodily

decline and mental stagnation. The cold is not your enemy; idleness is.

February asks us to remember presidents not as marble statues but as men who faced winters—literal and metaphorical—and chose to endure with clarity, discipline, and purpose. We honor them best not with parades but by applying their examples to our own cold seasons. The ice will melt. The days will lengthen. But the man who endures winter with the virtues these presidents demonstrated will meet spring stronger than he was before.

Val E. Forge is Historical Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where he studies the practical wisdom of men who shaped nations.



WELCOME TO MARCH: THE SEASON TURNS

By **THE RIFLE Editorial Board**

This is our third section, the final stretch of winter's long grip, the moment when light begins to win its slow battle against the dark. March is restless. It is mud and melt, cold mornings and warm afternoons, the awareness that something is ending and something else is about to begin. The day grows longer at a pace you can finally feel, and the world—quiet and still for so long—starts to stir.

We honor, this month, women whose work shaped the nation. Colonel Florence Blanchfield fought for nurses' recognition in the military. Constance Baker Motley dismantled segregation through the courts. Frances Perkins remembered a fire and spent her life ensuring it would not happen again. These were women who saw injustice, refused to accept it, and built systems that protected those who came after them. They did not ask for permission. They simply did the work.

We also remember two athletes whose excellence transcended their eras. Babe Didrikson Zaharias dominated every sport she tried and lived a life more complicated than the public ever knew. Baron von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge when the Continental Army was disintegrating and transformed farmers into soldiers who could win a war. Both came from places that could not accept them fully, and both found

purpose in America, even if America did not always understand what they were.

March is the month of brackets and basketball, of college tournaments that bring entire communities together to watch young athletes test themselves on national stages. It is the season when winter's lessons—discipline, endurance, patience—meet spring's energy. The snow melts. The mud comes. The restlessness builds. And on March 21, the equinox arrives, bringing balance. Day and night stand equal, and then the light begins its inevitable climb toward summer.

This is our last section in this winter compendium. We began in December's longest night, moved through January's deep cold and February's slow thaw, and now we arrive at March, where winter releases its hold and the world prepares for what comes next. We have told stories of men and women who endured, who fought, who created beauty and justice and change. We have honored those who lived openly and those who could not. We have remembered fires and freezing nights, courtrooms and training fields, stages and battlegrounds.

March asks us to prepare. Winter taught us endurance. Spring will ask for action. The ground softens. The work begins again. And we step into it knowing that the men and women who came before us—whose stories we have told in these pages—did the same. They met their seasons with discipline, with courage, and with the refusal to surrender to hardship or injustice. We can do no less.

Welcome to March. The season turns. The light returns. And we are ready.

COLONEL FLORENCE BLANCHFIELD: THE NURSE WHO FOUGHT TWO WARS

(1884-1971)

By Mae DeCross, Military Correspondent
— THE RIFLE

The transport ship was hit somewhere in the Pacific, 1944. The explosion tore through the hull, and within minutes the deck was chaos—wounded soldiers screaming, medics scrambling, saltwater mixing with blood. The Army nurses aboard didn't wait for orders. They moved through the wreckage, triaging the wounded, stopping hemorrhages with whatever they had, keeping men alive long enough to reach a hospital ship. They worked without rank insignia, without official authority, without the protections commissioned officers received under the Geneva Convention. If captured, they would be treated as civilians, not soldiers. But they worked anyway, because the men bleeding in front of them didn't care about technicalities.

Florence Blanchfield wasn't on that ship, but she knew those nurses. She had trained some of them, advocated for all of them, and spent years fighting to ensure they received the recognition and protection they deserved. By 1944, she was Superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps, the highest-ranking woman in

the United States military, and she was waging a war on two fronts: one against the Axis powers, and one against the military bureaucracy that refused to treat nurses as the soldiers they were.

She was born Florence Aby Blanchfield in 1884 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, though she grew up in Pennsylvania. Her father was a stonemason, her mother a homemaker, and the family had little money for luxuries. Florence worked her way through nursing school in Pittsburgh, graduating in 1906, and immediately understood that nursing was more than bedside care—it was science, discipline, and the difference between life and death. She worked in hospitals, in private practice, and eventually found her way to the military during World War I, joining the Army Nurse Corps in 1917.

The First World War taught Florence Blanchfield what war did to men's bodies and what nurses could do to save them. She served in France, working in field hospitals near the front lines, treating soldiers with injuries so catastrophic that many of them should not have survived. But they did survive, often because a nurse recognized shock, stopped bleeding, prevented infection, or simply refused to let a man die on her watch. Florence saw that nurses were as essential to the war effort as surgeons, supply officers, or field commanders. Yet when the war ended and she returned to the United States, she also understood that the military did not see nurses that way at all.

Army nurses had "relative rank" but not actual rank. They wore uniforms that approximated officer insignia but had no legal standing. They could not command, could not receive veterans' benefits, could not be promoted through the same system that governed male officers. If taken

prisoner, they had no protections under international law. They were essential to military operations but existed in a strange bureaucratic limbo—valued in crisis, invisible in peacetime. Florence Blanchfield spent the next two decades working to change that, and she did it with the same discipline and persistence she brought to nursing.

She remained in the Army Nurse Corps after World War I, rising steadily through its ranks, though "ranks" was a misleading term for a system that had no real authority. She served in the Philippines, in the Panama Canal Zone, in military hospitals across the United States. She became an expert in nursing administration, in logistics, in the complex systems required to move medical personnel and supplies where they were needed. By 1943, she was appointed Superintendent of the Army Nurse Corps, the top position in military nursing, responsible for more than 50,000 nurses serving around the world.

World War II was a logistical nightmare and a human catastrophe on a scale that dwarfed the First World War. The Army needed nurses everywhere—Europe, North Africa, the Pacific, Southeast Asia—and it needed them immediately. Florence Blanchfield organized the largest deployment of medical personnel in American history. She coordinated training programs, established standards, managed assignments, and ensured that every theater of war had the nursing staff it required. She worked eighteen-hour days, traveled constantly, and dealt with a military bureaucracy that still treated nurses as an afterthought even as it depended on them completely.

But logistics were only part of her job. The larger fight was for recognition. Nurses were dying in combat zones—killed by enemy

fire, lost in transport accidents, captured and held as prisoners of war. They faced the same dangers as male soldiers, but without the same protections or benefits. Florence Blanchfield used every ounce of influence she had to push for change. She testified before Congress. She wrote reports documenting the contributions of nurses. She built alliances with sympathetic officers and politicians. And slowly, over years of relentless advocacy, she made progress.

In 1944, Congress passed the Nurse Corps Act, which granted Army and Navy nurses temporary commissioned officer status for the duration of the war. It was not full equality—the rank was still limited, still conditional—but it was a significant step. Florence kept pushing. After the war ended, she continued the fight, arguing that nurses who had served with distinction deserved permanent recognition. She pointed to their casualty rates, their service records, their professionalism under fire. She made the case again and again: these women were soldiers, and they should be treated as such.

In 1947, Congress passed the Army-Navy Nurse Act, granting permanent commissioned officer status to military nurses. It was a victory that Florence Blanchfield had worked toward for nearly three decades. The recognition was not honorary or symbolic; it was real rank, with real authority, real protections, and real benefits. Nurses could now be promoted through the same system as other officers. They received equal pay for equal rank. They earned veterans' benefits. And if captured in future conflicts, they would be protected as prisoners of war under international law.

Florence Blanchfield retired from the Army in 1947, shortly after the law passed, but her work was not finished. She continued

advocating for veterans' rights, for nursing education, and for the recognition of women's contributions to military service. In 1951, she became the first woman to receive the Army Distinguished Service Medal, the military's highest non-combat honor. The citation acknowledged her "outstanding leadership" and her role in "establishing the nurse corps as an integral part of the military establishment." It was a formal recognition of what everyone who had worked with her already knew: Florence Blanchfield had changed the military, and she had done it through sheer determination and refusal to accept injustice.

She lived quietly in retirement, never seeking publicity or acclaim. She had no children, never married, and dedicated her life entirely to nursing and military service. She died in 1971 at the age of eighty-six, having outlived most of her contemporaries and witnessed the expansion of opportunities for women in the military that she had fought to create. By the time of her death, women were serving in every branch of the armed forces, in roles that would have been unthinkable when she first joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1917.

What made Florence Blanchfield exceptional was not just her administrative skill—though she was a brilliant organizer—but her moral clarity. She understood that fairness was not a favor to be granted but a right to be demanded. She saw nurses risking their lives in combat zones and recognized that their service deserved the same recognition given to any soldier. She refused to accept bureaucratic excuses, political delays, or the comfortable fiction that women could serve without being fully integrated into the military structure. She fought for decades, through two world wars and countless smaller battles with military leadership, and she won.

The nurses who serve today—who hold ranks up to general officer, who command medical units, who receive full benefits and protections—owe that opportunity to Florence Blanchfield. She did not fight for glory or recognition. She fought because the women under her command deserved better than they were getting, and she had the discipline, the persistence, and the moral authority to make the military acknowledge that fact.

There is a photograph of Florence Blanchfield from 1947, taken shortly before her retirement. She is in full uniform, wearing the rank insignia of a colonel—the first woman in American military history to hold that rank with full legal standing. Her expression is composed, professional, showing neither pride nor satisfaction, just the quiet dignity of a woman who had accomplished what she set out to do. She looks like what she was: a soldier who had fought two wars and won them both.

The transport ship in the Pacific, the nurses working through chaos to save wounded men, the lack of rank or protection or official recognition—all of that was part of the world Florence Blanchfield inherited when she joined the Army Nurse Corps. By the time she retired, that world had changed. Nurses had rank. They had authority. They had the respect and protections they had earned. Florence Blanchfield made that change happen, not through speeches or grand gestures, but through decades of disciplined, persistent, unglamorous work.

She fought for recognition because recognition mattered. It meant better pay, safer conditions, legal protections, and the acknowledgment that nursing was not support work but essential work. She fought for the women who came after her, so they would not have to fight the same battles she

had. And she won. That victory, quiet and bureaucratic as it was, changed the military forever and ensured that no nurse would ever again serve without the rank and recognition she deserved.

Florence Blanchfield was a soldier, a nurse, an administrator, and an advocate. She saved lives, organized systems, and changed institutions. She did it without fanfare, without seeking credit, and without ever accepting that injustice was inevitable. She simply saw what needed to be done and did it, for thirty years, until the work was finished. That is leadership. That is service. And that is why, seventy years after her retirement, we still remember her name.

Mae DeCross is Military Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where she chronicles the soldiers who fought for recognition as fiercely as they fought for victory.

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CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY: THE LAWYER WHO REFUSED TO LOSE

(1921-2005)

By Justice Wright, Legal Correspondent
— THE RIFLE

Constance Baker wanted to be a lawyer at a time when the idea seemed absurd to nearly everyone who heard it. She was Black. She was a woman. She was the daughter of immigrants from the Caribbean who worked as a cook and a domestic. She grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, during the Depression, in a neighborhood where ambition was fine but practicality mattered more. Lawyers were white men from wealthy families who went to Yale. They were not young Black women whose parents could barely afford to keep the rent paid. The obstacles were not subtle. They were everywhere, visible and structural, designed to make sure people like Constance Baker stayed exactly where they were born.

She refused.

What saved her was a combination of brilliance, stubbornness, and a single stroke of luck that came at exactly the right moment. Constance graduated from high school with top grades but no money for college. She took a job, saved what she

could, and attended community meetings where she heard speakers talk about civil rights, about justice, about the possibility of change. At one of those meetings, she spoke up—articulated, passionate, clear about what she believed. A white philanthropist named Clarence Blakeslee heard her speak and was impressed enough to offer her something extraordinary: he would pay for her college education. No strings attached, just an investment in a young woman who clearly had potential.

Constance enrolled at New York University and then at Columbia Law School, one of the few institutions that admitted women and Black students, though not warmly. Law school in the 1940s was a hostile environment for anyone who was not a white man. Professors ignored her. Classmates dismissed her. Study groups excluded her. But Constance had spent her entire life being underestimated, and she had learned that the correct response was not anger but excellence. She studied harder than anyone else. She mastered the material. She graduated in 1946 with her law degree and immediately understood that no white law firm would hire her. The obstacles had shifted but not disappeared. If she wanted to practice law, she would have to find a place that valued justice more than tradition.

She found it at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, where Thurgood Marshall was building a legal strategy to dismantle segregation through the courts. Marshall needed talented lawyers willing to work long hours for low pay in dangerous conditions, arguing cases in Southern courtrooms where hostility was a given and physical threats were common. Constance joined the team in 1945 and spent the next two decades fighting segregation one case at a time, in courtrooms across the South, in

front of judges who despised everything she represented.

The work was brutal. Southern judges often refused to address her directly, speaking instead to her white co-counsel or simply pretending she was not there. Court clerks "lost" her filings. Opposing counsel used racial slurs in open court. Local police followed her. Hotels refused her rooms. Restaurants refused her service. She traveled through the South as a Black woman lawyer in the 1950s and 60s, which meant she was always aware that violence was possible, that hatred was constant, and that the legal system she was trying to use for justice was designed to protect the very injustices she was challenging.

She kept working. She prepared meticulously, researched exhaustively, and argued with a precision that made it difficult for even hostile judges to dismiss her. She understood that she could not afford mistakes, could not afford to be unprepared, could not afford to give anyone an excuse to ignore her arguments. She had to be better than opposing counsel, and she had to do it while facing obstacles they never encountered. So she was better. She out-researched them, out-argued them, and won cases that seemed unwinnable.

She worked on *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark 1954 case that declared school segregation unconstitutional. She was part of the legal team, doing research, drafting briefs, preparing arguments. It was a collective effort, and Constance's contributions were essential even if her name was not on the Supreme Court briefs. But she would get her own chances to argue before the highest court in the land, and when those chances came, she did not waste them.

Between 1961 and 1964, Constance Baker Motley argued ten cases before the United States Supreme Court. She won nine of them. Let that sink in for a moment. A Black woman, in the early 1960s, standing before nine white male justices, arguing that the Constitution required the dismantling of segregation, and winning nearly every time. She argued cases involving school desegregation, housing discrimination, and voting rights. She represented students who wanted to attend white universities, families who wanted to live in white neighborhoods, and citizens who wanted to exercise rights that had been denied for generations. And she won, again and again, because her arguments were airtight, her research was impeccable, and her determination was absolute.

One of her most famous cases involved James Meredith, a Black Air Force veteran who wanted to attend the University of Mississippi. The state of Mississippi did everything in its power to prevent his enrollment—legal maneuvers, procedural delays, outright defiance of court orders. Constance represented Meredith through every stage of the legal battle, and when the case finally reached the Supreme Court, she argued that Mississippi's refusal to admit a qualified student based solely on race violated the Constitution. She won. James Meredith enrolled at Ole Miss in 1962, escorted by federal marshals through a crowd of white students who rioted in protest. The legal victory was Constance's, and it was total.

She did not stop with legal victories. In 1964, she ran for and won a seat in the New York State Senate, becoming the first Black woman elected to that body. She served one term, pushing for civil rights legislation and fair housing laws, before being elected to the position of Manhattan Borough President in

1965, another historic first. She was building a record of firsts that would have been impossible a generation earlier, and she was doing it through sheer competence and refusal to accept limitations others tried to impose on her.

But the crowning achievement came in 1966, when President Lyndon Johnson nominated her to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. She was confirmed by the Senate and became the first Black woman appointed to the federal judiciary. She was forty-four years old, and she would serve on that court for the next forty years, presiding over thousands of cases, writing opinions that shaped civil rights law, employment discrimination law, and constitutional interpretation. She became known for her clarity, her fairness, and her refusal to tolerate injustice in her courtroom.

As a judge, Constance brought the same determination she had shown as a lawyer. She did not grandstand. She did not write flowery opinions designed to make headlines. She simply applied the law with precision and ensured that everyone who appeared before her—regardless of race, gender, or economic status—received a fair hearing. She understood that justice was not an abstraction but a practice, something that had to be done correctly every single day, in every case, or it meant nothing.

She served as chief judge of the Southern District from 1982 to 1986, managing one of the busiest and most important federal courts in the country. Even after stepping down as chief judge, she continued hearing cases well into her seventies, maintaining the same work ethic and intellectual rigor she had shown as a young lawyer fighting segregation in Mississippi. She finally took senior status in 1986 but remained active on

the bench until shortly before her death in 2005 at the age of eighty-four.

What made Constance Baker Motley extraordinary was not just her intelligence—though she was brilliant—but her refusal to let obstacles define what was possible. Every step of her career involved breaking barriers that were supposed to be unbreakable. Black women did not become lawyers. Black women did not argue before the Supreme Court. Black women did not become federal judges. But Constance did all of those things, and she did them with a calm, relentless determination that wore down opposition through sheer persistence and excellence.

She once said that she had been fortunate to be part of the civil rights movement at a time when change was possible, but that framing undersells what she accomplished. Change was not inevitable. It happened because people like Constance Baker Motley showed up, day after day, in hostile courtrooms and unwelcoming spaces, and did the work. She faced judges who would not look at her, opposing counsel who treated her with contempt, and a legal system built to exclude her. And she won anyway, not occasionally but consistently, because she was better prepared, better argued, and more determined than anyone standing against her.

There is a photograph of Constance from her federal court confirmation in 1966. She is standing in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, composed entirely of white men, and she looks neither intimidated nor deferential. She looks like what she was: a lawyer who had spent twenty years arguing the hardest cases in the most hostile environments and winning. She had nothing left to prove, but she was about to spend another forty years proving it anyway,

because that was her nature. She did not stop. She did not compromise. She simply kept working, kept fighting, and kept winning until the barriers she faced as a young woman were so thoroughly demolished that younger generations could barely imagine they had existed.

Constance Baker Motley changed American law. She integrated universities, dismantled segregation statutes, and opened the federal judiciary to people who had been excluded from it. She did it without drama, without seeking glory, and without ever accepting that the obstacles in her path were reasons to stop. She saw what needed to be done, and she did it, for sixty years, until the work became her legacy and her legacy became permanent.

That is determination. That is what overcoming adversity looks like when practiced with discipline, intelligence, and absolute refusal to lose. Constance Baker Motley won because she was willing to work harder, prepare better, and endure more than anyone standing in her way. And because she won, the law changed. And because the law changed, the country changed. And we are still living in the world her victories made possible.

Justice Wright is Legal Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where she chronicles the lawyers who refused to lose.



FRANCES PERKINS: THE WOMAN WHO REMEMBERED THE FIRE

(1880-1965)

By Frank Lyons, Labor Correspondent
— THE RIFLE

Frances Perkins was having tea in Washington Square on March 25, 1911, when she heard the fire engines. She was thirty years old, a social worker living in New York, and she followed the sound of the sirens to the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, where the Asch Building was burning. By the time she arrived, women were jumping from the ninth floor. They jumped because the fire escapes had collapsed, because the doors were locked, because there was no other way out. They fell nine stories and hit the pavement, and Frances Perkins stood in the crowd and watched them die. One hundred and forty-six garment workers—most of them young immigrant women—died that day, and Frances Perkins never forgot it. The fire burned for less than thirty minutes, but it shaped the rest of her life.

Before the fire, Frances had been interested in labor reform the way educated, progressive people of her generation were interested in social improvement—intellectually, from a comfortable distance. She had grown up in Worcester, Massachusetts, in a middle-class family that valued education and respectability. She

attended Mount Holyoke College, studied economics and sociology, and graduated with the vague understanding that she wanted to do something useful with her life. She moved to Chicago, worked at Hull House with Jane Addams, and then came to New York to work with the Consumers League, investigating working conditions in factories and tenements.

The work had been eye-opening but abstract. She had read reports about unsafe conditions, long hours, child labor. She had visited factories and seen the crowding, the poor lighting, the lack of fire exits. But seeing is different from witnessing. Reading a report about locked doors is different from watching women jump to their deaths because those doors were locked. The Triangle fire was not abstract. It was visceral, immediate, and enraging. Frances stood on the street and understood that the women falling from the windows were dying because someone had decided that profits mattered more than safety, that locked doors prevented theft even if they also prevented escape, that regulations were expensive and therefore optional.

She decided, standing in that crowd, that this would not happen again. And she spent the next fifty years making sure it didn't.

The Triangle fire became a catalyst for reform in New York. The public outcry was immediate, and politicians who had ignored labor conditions suddenly found themselves pressured to act. The state legislature formed the Factory Investigating Commission to study workplace safety, and Frances Perkins became the commission's chief investigator. She spent four years visiting factories across New York, documenting hazards, interviewing workers, and building the case for regulation. She crawled through filthy tenement workshops, climbed rickety fire

escapes, and compiled evidence that factories were death traps waiting to happen.

She worked closely with two politicians who would shape her career: Al Smith and Robert Wagner, both of whom served on the commission and both of whom became convinced that government had a responsibility to protect workers. Smith was a Tammany Hall Democrat, a working-class Irish Catholic who understood labor issues because he had lived them. He and Frances formed an unlikely partnership—he was boisterous and political, she was reserved and intellectual—but they shared a belief that laws could save lives if someone had the courage to pass them and enforce them.

When Al Smith became governor of New York in 1919, he appointed Frances Perkins to the State Industrial Commission, making her the first woman to hold a state cabinet position. She oversaw factory inspections, pushed for stronger safety regulations, and fought with business owners who insisted that regulations would destroy their industries. They did not destroy industries. They saved lives. Frances understood that the opposition to regulation was never about economics; it was about power. Factory owners did not want to spend money on safety, and they did not want the government telling them how to run their businesses. Frances did not care what they wanted. She cared about preventing another Triangle fire, and she was willing to be as stubborn and relentless as necessary to make that happen.

She served in various New York state labor positions through the 1920s, building a reputation as someone who was competent, tough, and impossible to intimidate. She wore severe black dresses and tricorne hats that made her look like a Puritan schoolmarm, and she cultivated an image of

no-nonsense professionalism that helped her survive in rooms full of men who resented her presence. She did not charm. She did not flatter. She simply knew more than they did, worked harder than they did, and refused to back down.

When Franklin Roosevelt became governor of New York in 1929, he kept Frances on as Industrial Commissioner, and when he was elected president in 1932, he asked her to serve as Secretary of Labor. She hesitated. A woman had never held a Cabinet position, and she knew the appointment would be controversial. She also knew that Roosevelt was facing the Great Depression, with millions unemployed and the economy in collapse, and that the Labor Department would be at the center of any recovery effort. She told Roosevelt she would accept on one condition: she wanted the authority to push for ambitious labor reforms, not just manage a department. Roosevelt agreed. Frances Perkins became the first woman in the United States Cabinet, and she held that position for twelve years, longer than any other Labor Secretary in American history.

The New Deal—the massive program of economic and social reforms that defined Roosevelt's presidency—was built in large part on Frances Perkins's ideas and relentless advocacy. She was the driving force behind Social Security, the program that provided old-age pensions and unemployment insurance to millions of Americans. She pushed for the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established the minimum wage, the forty-hour work week, and restrictions on child labor. She championed the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. She fought for workplace safety regulations, workers' compensation, and public works programs that put unemployed men back to work.

She did all of this while facing constant opposition. Business leaders hated her. Conservative politicians tried to have her impeached. Organized labor, ironically, often distrusted her because she was not from their ranks and because she was a woman. The press mocked her appearance, questioned her authority, and suggested she was Roosevelt's token female appointment. None of it stopped her. She prepared meticulously for every meeting, built coalitions, outmaneuvered opponents, and used Roosevelt's support to push reforms through Congress that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier.

Social Security alone changed American life. Before 1935, old age meant poverty for most working people. There were no pensions, no safety net, no guarantee that decades of labor would result in anything other than destitution when you could no longer work. Frances Perkins designed a system where workers and employers contributed to a fund that provided retirement income, disability benefits, and support for widows and orphans. It was not radical socialism, as opponents claimed. It was practical recognition that a civilized society does not abandon people when they can no longer work. The program faced fierce resistance, but Frances built the case, drafted the legislation, and navigated it through Congress. When Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935, Frances Perkins stood beside him, and the program she had fought for became the foundation of the American social safety net.

The minimum wage and forty-hour work week were similarly transformative. Before the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, there were no federal limits on how long employers could work their employees or how little they could pay them. Children worked in factories and mines. Adults

worked twelve or fourteen-hour days for wages that could not support a family. Frances had seen these conditions firsthand during her years as a factory investigator, and she knew that voluntary reform would never happen. Employers would always choose cheaper labor over fair labor unless the law forced them to do otherwise. So she fought for the law, faced down opponents who claimed it would destroy American business, and won. The law passed, and suddenly millions of workers had protections that had seemed impossible just years earlier.

She served as Labor Secretary until 1945, through the entire Roosevelt presidency and into the first months of Truman's administration. By the time she resigned, she had fundamentally reshaped the relationship between government and labor, establishing the principle that workers deserved protection, fair wages, and dignity. The programs she created—Social Security, unemployment insurance, minimum wage, workplace safety regulations—became so embedded in American life that later generations could not imagine a time when they did not exist.

After leaving the Cabinet, Frances taught at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, continued advocating for workers' rights, and wrote her memoir of the Roosevelt years. She remained active and engaged until shortly before her death in 1965 at the age of eighty-five. She had lived long enough to see Social Security become untouchable politically, to see workplace safety regulations save countless lives, to see the labor reforms she fought for become accepted as basic standards of decency.

What made Frances Perkins extraordinary was the combination of moral clarity and practical competence. She knew what was

right—workers deserved safety, fair wages, and security—and she knew how to make it happen. She was not an ideologue or a dreamer. She was a bureaucrat in the best sense of that word: someone who understood systems, who knew how to draft legislation, who could build coalitions and navigate political opposition, and who never lost sight of the ultimate goal. She remembered the women jumping from the Triangle factory, and she spent her career ensuring that no one else would have to make that choice.

There is a photograph of Frances from 1933, taken shortly after she became Labor Secretary. She is standing in her office, wearing one of her severe black dresses and her trademark tricorne hat, looking directly at the camera with an expression that suggests she has work to do and no time for nonsense. She does not smile. She does not soften her appearance to make herself more palatable. She looks like what she was: a woman who had fought her way into the most powerful labor position in the country and intended to use that power to change lives.

The Triangle fire burned for thirty minutes in 1911 and killed one hundred and forty-six people. Frances Perkins stood in the street and watched, and she carried those images with her for the rest of her life. She did not forget the women who jumped. She did not forget the locked doors, the collapsed fire

escapes, the employers who valued property over people. And she built, over decades of relentless work, a system of protections that ensured their deaths meant something. She turned grief and rage into law, and those laws are still protecting workers a century later.

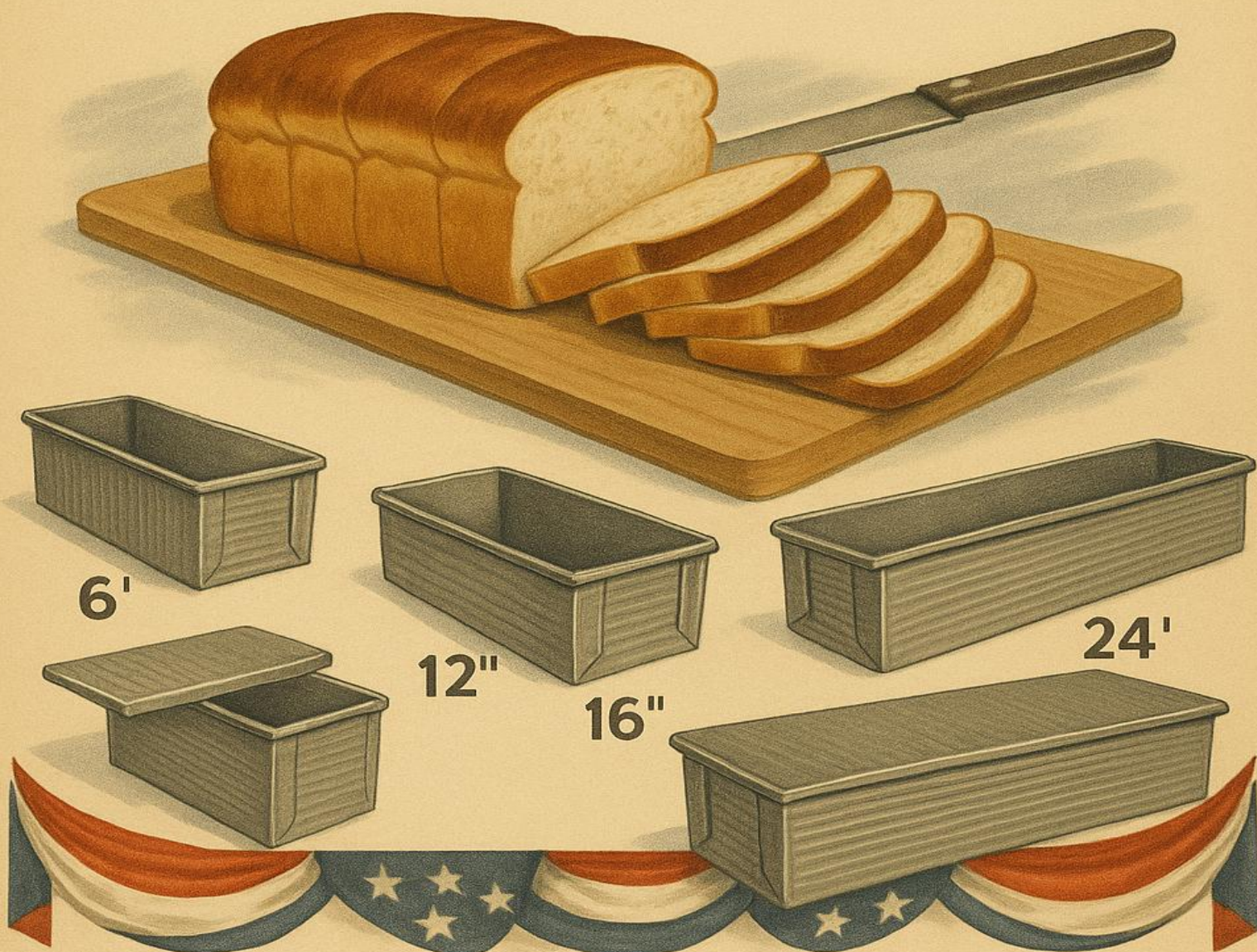
That is legacy. That is what happens when someone witnesses injustice and decides to spend their life fighting it. Frances Perkins remembered the fire, and because she remembered, millions of workers gained protections they would not otherwise have. She did not just mourn the dead. She honored them by making sure their deaths led to change. And because of her work, because of her determination, because of her refusal to accept that workers were expendable, American labor became safer, fairer, and more humane.

She remembered the fire. And she made sure the rest of us would never forget what it cost, and what it taught us about the price of indifference.

Frank Lyons is Labor Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the reformers who turned tragedy into justice.



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BABE DIDRIKSON ZAHARIAS: THE ATHLETE WHO COULD DO EVERYTHING

(1911-1956)

By Ath Letta, Sports Correspondent —
THE RIFLE

In 1932, Babe Didrikson entered the Amateur Athletic Union national championships as a one-woman team representing her employer, Employers Casualty Insurance Company of Dallas. She competed in eight events over the course of three hours. She won five outright, tied for first in a sixth, and placed in two others. She scored 30 points. The second-place team—the Illinois Women's Athletic Club, which had twenty-two athletes—scored 22 points. Babe Didrikson, alone, beat an entire team. When reporters asked how she had done it, she shrugged and said, "I just loosen up and go out and beat everybody."

That was Babe: supremely confident, fiercely competitive, and capable of backing up every word. She was the greatest female athlete of the first half of the twentieth century, possibly the greatest female athlete in American history, and she proved it in every sport she tried, track and field, basketball, baseball, golf, diving, bowling. Tennis. She could do all of it, and she could do it better than almost anyone else. She didn't just compete. She dominated. And she

did it at a time when women athletes were supposed to be graceful and modest, when being too good, too strong, too competitive made people uncomfortable. Babe made people very uncomfortable. She didn't care.

She was born Mildred Ella Didrikson in 1911 in Port Arthur, Texas, the sixth of seven children in a Norwegian immigrant family. Her father was a ship's carpenter, and the family had little money but plenty of toughness. Babe got her nickname because she could hit a baseball like Babe Ruth, and the name stuck because it fit. She was a tomboy in an era when that word carried both admiration and suspicion. She played every sport the neighborhood boys played, and she beat most of them. By high school, she was a basketball star, leading her team to the state championship. She was fast, strong, fearless, and utterly uninterested in pretending to be delicate.

The 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles should have been her coronation. She qualified in five events but was only allowed to compete in three due to Olympic rules. She won gold in the javelin throw and the 80-meter hurdles, setting world records in both. She won silver in the high jump after officials controversially ruled her technique illegal, though she had cleared the same height as the gold medalist. She was nineteen years old, and she had just become the most famous female athlete in America. The press loved her—her confidence, her swagger, her refusal to apologize for being better than everyone else. But they also couldn't quite figure out what to do with her. She was too muscular, too assertive, too unfeminine. Sportswriters called her "mannish" and questioned whether someone so athletic could really be a woman.

Babe responded by becoming even more dominant. She turned professional,

barnstormed the country playing exhibition basketball and baseball, pitched against major league teams, and eventually settled on golf as her primary sport. She had barely played golf before turning professional, but she approached it with the same intensity she brought to everything else. She practiced until her hands bled. She hit thousands of balls a day. She studied every aspect of the game and became, within a few years, the best female golfer in the world.

In 1938, she married George Zaharias, a professional wrestler and promoter who was large, loud, and devoted to managing Babe's career. The marriage served multiple purposes. It gave Babe respectability, allowed her to compete as an amateur again after regaining her amateur status, and quieted some of the whispers about her masculinity. George was useful, and Babe was pragmatic. Whether she loved him in the way married couples were supposed to love each other is unclear. What is clear is that the marriage gave her the cover she needed to keep competing.

She dominated women's golf through the 1940s and early 1950s, winning ten major championships and helping to found the Ladies Professional Golf Association. She was the tour's biggest star, the draw that filled galleries and made women's golf financially viable. She played with a power and aggression that male golfers respected and that female competitors struggled to match. She could drive the ball farther than most men, and she did it with a swing that looked effortless. She was Babe, and she beat everybody.

But there was something else, something that couldn't be discussed publicly. In the late 1940s, Babe met Betty Dodd, a young amateur golfer from Texas. Betty joined the tour, and she and Babe became inseparable.

They traveled together, practiced together, and shared hotel rooms. Betty moved into Babe and George's home in Tampa. The three of them lived together in an arrangement that George tolerated because Babe insisted on it. Betty was devoted to Babe in a way that went beyond friendship, and Babe returned that devotion. They were lovers, though that word was never spoken aloud, though no newspaper ever acknowledged what was obvious to everyone who knew them.

The relationship could not be public. Babe's career depended on her image as a married woman, as someone who had tamed her masculinity enough to be acceptable. But in private, with Betty, she could be herself. Betty later said that Babe was the love of her life, that their years together were the happiest either of them had known. It was a relationship that existed in the margins, hidden behind the marriage, never acknowledged but never entirely concealed either.

In 1953, Babe was diagnosed with colon cancer. She had surgery, underwent treatment, and astonishingly, returned to competitive golf within months. She won five more tournaments in 1954, including the U.S. Women's Open, playing with a colostomy bag and in constant pain. It was one of the most remarkable comebacks in sports history, and it was pure Babe—refusing to quit, refusing to acknowledge limitations, determined to prove that nothing could stop her.

But cancer did stop her. It returned in 1955, spreading despite further surgeries. By early 1956, she was dying, and she knew it. She spent her final months with Betty, too weak to play golf but still talking about the game, still convinced she would get back on the course. She died in September 1956 at the

age of forty-five, with Betty at her side. George was there too, but it was Betty who held her hand, Betty who stayed with her through the final hours, Betty who mourned her most deeply.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias was buried in Texas, and her funeral was attended by athletes, celebrities, and President Eisenhower sent a message of condolence. She was remembered as the greatest female athlete of her time, as someone who had broken barriers and inspired a generation of women to compete. What was not said, what could not be said in 1956, was that she had also lived a life that defied the narrow definitions of femininity imposed on women athletes. She had been too strong, too competitive, too uninterested in traditional womanhood to fit comfortably into the roles available to her. So she had performed respectability when necessary—married George, wore dresses for press photos, softened her image just enough to keep competing. But with Betty, in private, she had lived a different life, one where she didn't have to explain or justify herself, one where she could simply be Babe.

Her legacy is complicated. She opened doors for women athletes, proved that women could compete at the highest levels, and built a career that would have been impossible a generation earlier. But she also had to hide essential parts of herself to do it, had to perform a version of womanhood that didn't quite fit, had to live in the space between public image and private truth. She handled it the way she handled everything: with confidence, determination, and the absolute conviction that she was going to win, no matter what the rules were.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias could do everything. She just couldn't, in her lifetime, be everything she was. But the records

remain, the victories remain, and the memory of an athlete so dominant, so fearless, so utterly unwilling to be limited by anything—including the expectations of her time—remains. She loosened up, went out, and beat everybody. And even now, nearly seventy years after her death, nobody has quite matched what she accomplished or the way she did it, with absolute confidence and zero apologies.

Ath Letta is Sports Correspondent at THE RIFLE magazine, where she chronicles the athletes who refused to lose.

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SMELL FRESH ALL DAY—THE HALCYON WAY!

BARON VON STEUBEN: THE PRUSSIAN WHO SAVED THE REVOLUTION

(1730-1794)

By Major Payne, Military Historian —
THE RIFLE

The winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge was not a test of courage. It was a test of whether the Continental Army would survive long enough to fight again. Washington's men were starving, freezing, and falling apart. They had no uniforms, no proper shelter, no supply system worth the name. Some wrapped their feet in rags because they had no shoes. Others deserted because starvation seemed slower than going home. The army that limped into winter quarters in December was barely an army at all—just a collection of exhausted, demoralized men who had been beaten repeatedly by professional British troops and who had no reason to believe the situation would improve.

Then, in February 1778, a Prussian baron arrived in camp and announced that he was going to teach them how to be soldiers.

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben was fifty-seven years old, spoke almost no English, and carried himself with the rigid discipline of a man trained in the most professional military in Europe. He had no official commission from Congress, no authority to command American troops, and

no clear reason why Washington should trust him. But Washington was desperate, and desperation makes men willing to try solutions they would otherwise reject. The Baron offered to train the Continental Army in European military drill and discipline. Washington gave him the chance. And over the next four months, Baron von Steuben transformed a mob into an army.

He had been born in Prussia in 1730, the son of a military engineer, and had spent his life in the Prussian army, rising to the rank of captain and serving on the staff of Frederick the Great during the Seven Years' War. He understood European military discipline—the rigid formations, the synchronized movements, the relentless drilling that turned individual men into a coordinated fighting force. But something had gone wrong in Prussia. The details are murky, but von Steuben left the Prussian army under circumstances that suggest scandal. There were rumors, whispers about his relationships with young men, accusations that a Prussian officer of his rank could not afford to face. He fled to France, tried and failed to secure a position in the French military, and eventually found his way to Benjamin Franklin in Paris, who was desperately recruiting European officers to help the American cause.

Franklin saw an opportunity. The Baron had experience, credentials, and nothing left to lose. Franklin wrote him letters of introduction that exaggerated his rank—calling him a Lieutenant General rather than a captain—and sent him to America with the suggestion that Washington could use a professional military trainer. Von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge in February 1778, accompanied by two young aides, and immediately set to work.

What he found was chaos. American soldiers had been recruited from farms and towns, given muskets, and told to fight. They had no standardized training, no common drill, no shared understanding of how to move as a unit. Officers issued contradictory commands. Formations fell apart under pressure. Men loaded their muskets differently, marched at different paces, and had no idea how to execute basic battlefield maneuvers. The British, by contrast, were professionals who could march in formation under fire, execute complex movements with precision, and maintain discipline even in retreat. The disparity was why the British kept winning.

Von Steuben decided to start from scratch. He selected a model company of 120 men and trained them personally, working through translators because he spoke only German and French. He demonstrated every movement himself, drilling alongside the men rather than barking orders from a distance. He was patient, relentless, and willing to curse in three languages when soldiers made mistakes, which his translator often declined to translate precisely. The men responded. They had never seen an officer who would get in the mud with them, who cared enough about their training to demonstrate every step, who treated drill as something that could save their lives rather than just parade-ground pageantry.

Once the model company was trained, von Steuben used them to train other companies, creating a cascading system where trained soldiers taught new recruits. He wrote a drill manual—"Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States"—that standardized everything from how to load a musket to how to march in formation to how to build a camp. It was clear, practical, and adapted European methods to American conditions.

Washington adopted it as the official training manual for the Continental Army, and it remained in use for decades after the war.

By June 1778, the Continental Army was transformed. They moved as units, executed commands with precision, and carried themselves like soldiers rather than militia. The proof came at the Battle of Monmouth in late June, when Washington's army engaged the British in New Jersey. The Americans held their ground, executed complex tactical maneuvers under fire, and fought the British to a standstill. It was not a decisive victory, but it demonstrated that the Continental Army could now stand toe-to-toe with professional European troops. Von Steuben's training had worked.

He remained with the army for the rest of the war, serving as Washington's chief of staff and inspector general. He continued refining his training methods, overseeing the drill of new recruits, and ensuring that the standards he had established at Valley Forge were maintained across the army. He was present at Yorktown in 1781 when Cornwallis surrendered, effectively ending the war. The professional American military that accepted the British surrender was, in large part, von Steuben's creation.

After the war, von Steuben faced the same financial struggles many Revolutionary War officers encountered. Congress owed him back pay and had no money to pay it. He had spent his own funds supporting the war effort and was nearly bankrupt. He petitioned Congress for compensation, and eventually, they granted him a pension and a large tract of land in upstate New York. He retired to that property, built a cabin, and lived there for the rest of his life with his two aides—William North and Benjamin

Walker—who had been with him since Valley Forge.

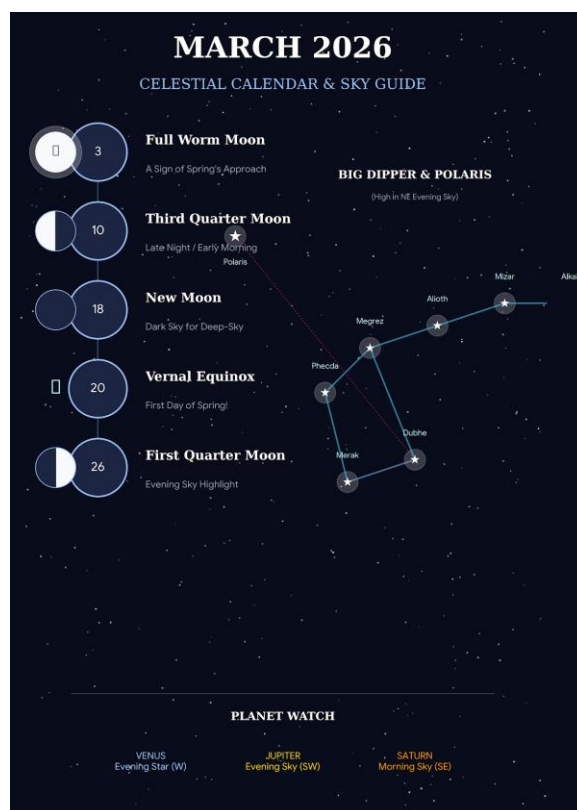
The household raised no official eyebrows. Von Steuben never married, and his close relationships with his young male aides were either accepted or quietly ignored by a new nation that owed him too much to ask uncomfortable questions. He lived openly in a way he had not been able to in Europe, and if anyone suspected the nature of his relationships, they chose not to make an issue of it. He had saved the Continental Army. That earned him the right to live as he pleased.

He died in 1794 at the age of sixty-four, having outlived the war by more than a decade. He was buried on his property in New York, and his former aides—who inherited his estate—ensured he was remembered with honor. The drill manual he wrote continued shaping the American military well into the nineteenth century. The training methods he introduced became standard practice. The professional army he built at Valley Forge became the foundation of American military tradition.

Baron von Steuben's story is a reminder that history is complicated, that the men who shaped nations often carried secrets, and that competence and courage matter more than the private lives people lead. He came to America fleeing scandal, found purpose in a desperate cause, and saved an army that was weeks away from disintegration. He trained farmers to fight like soldiers, wrote the book that defined American military discipline, and lived the last years of his life in peace with the men he loved. The Revolution succeeded in part because a Prussian baron with nowhere else to go decided that Valley Forge, in the worst winter of the war, was where he belonged.

Washington knew what von Steuben had given the army. In a letter written years later, he said simply that the Baron's contributions had been indispensable, that without his training the war might have been lost. That was the assessment that mattered. Von Steuben had arrived at Valley Forge in February 1778, when the Continental Army was freezing and starving and falling apart, and by June they were soldiers. That transformation, achieved through discipline and patience and relentless work in the coldest months of the war, saved the Revolution. And the man who did it lived the rest of his life knowing he had found, in America, something Europe had denied him: the freedom to be useful, to be honored, and to be himself.

Major Payne is Military Historian at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the soldiers who shaped nations in winter.



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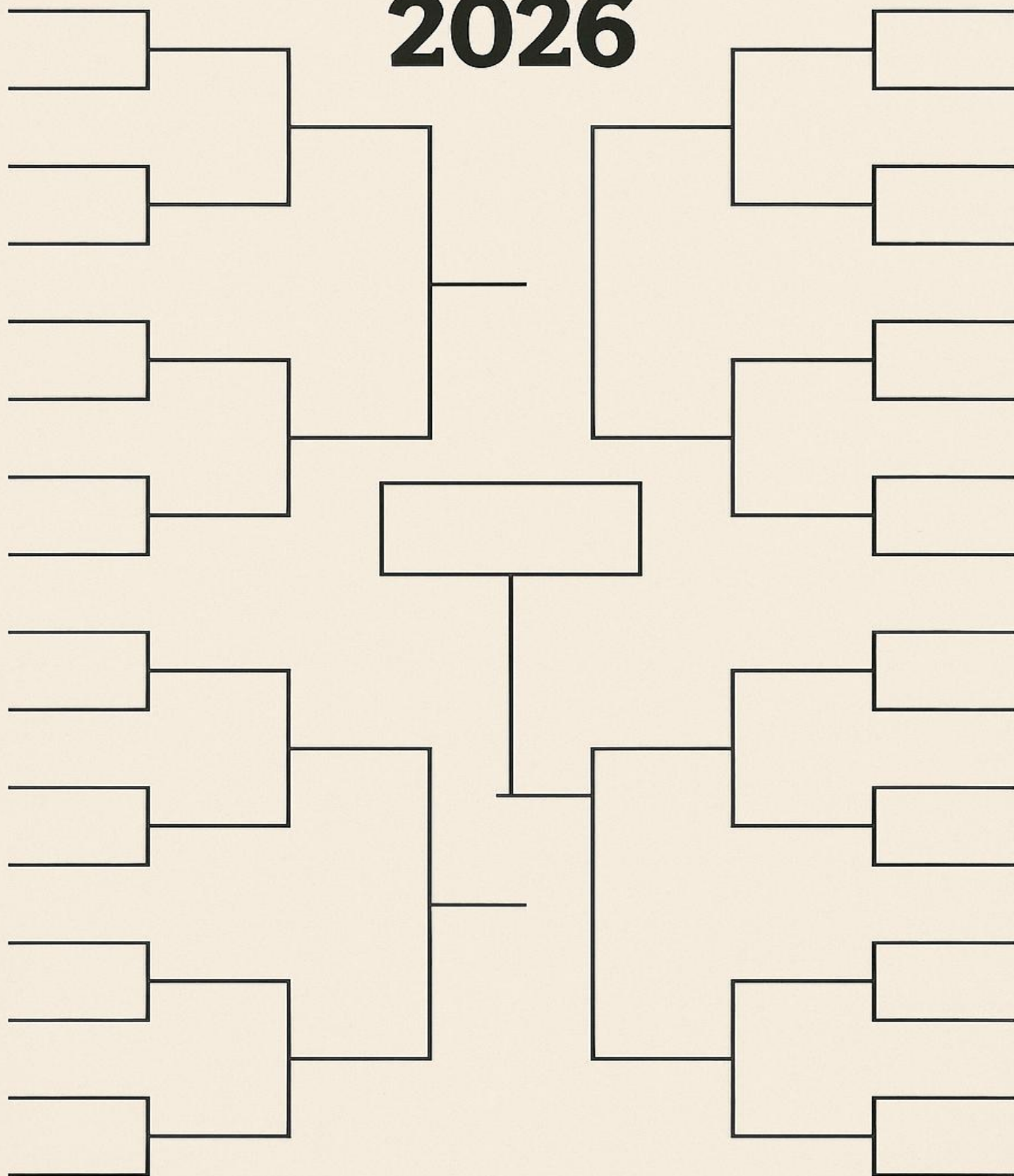
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ATLAS HOME GYM

NCAA TOURNAMENT BRACKET

2026



MARCH MADNESS: WHERE WINTER'S DISCIPLINE MEETS SPRING'S GLORY

By Court Side, Sports Editor — THE
RIFLE

Dawn, March 1, somewhere in a college gymnasium. The pounding of feet echoes off hardwood, the squeak of sneakers punctuates the silence, and sixty-eight teams begin the final push toward a dream that only one will realize. The strengthening of will and character, the endless practice sessions through winter's coldest months, the discipline built in empty gyms before sunrise—all of it pays off here, in March, when the tournament field is set and the madness begins.

March Madness is not just a basketball tournament. It is a national ritual, a three-week celebration of athletic excellence, improbable upsets, and the particular drama that comes from single-elimination competition. One loss and you go home. One perfect game and you become legend. The stakes could not be clearer, and the pressure reveals who has prepared and who has not.

The tournament brackets are announced in mid-March, and immediately, the country stops working. Office pools form. Brackets

are filled out with combinations of statistical analysis, gut instinct, and pure hope. Everyone becomes an expert. Everyone has a sleeper pick, a team that will outperform expectations and make a run. Most of those picks will be eliminated in the first weekend, but that is part of the joy—the certainty that chaos will arrive, that favorites will fall, and that some team no one saw coming will carry the hopes of an entire region deep into the tournament.

College basketball is different from the professional game. The players are younger, hungrier, less polished but more passionate. They play for schools, for traditions that stretch back generations, for coaches who have built programs on discipline and fundamentals. They are not yet jaded by contracts and endorsements. They are still playing because they love the game, because a championship means something beyond money, because they are carrying the dreams of campuses and alumni and hometowns on their shoulders.

The athletes themselves—lean, powerful, moving with the kind of explosive grace that only comes from years of training—represent the ideal of the collegiate competitor. Watch a guard drive to the basket, body control perfect, absorbing contact while maintaining focus on the rim. Watch a forward box out for a rebound, using positioning and strength to claim space. Watch a center protect the paint, arms raised, challenging every shot, refusing to yield. This is athleticism at its purest: disciplined, purposeful, beautiful in its efficiency.

The path to the Final Four is brutal. Sixty-eight teams enter. Four remain. The early rounds produce upsets that shatter brackets and create instant legends—the fifteenth seed that topples the second seed, the mid-

major school that takes down a blueblood program, the senior who has one perfect game and carries his team further than anyone thought possible. These moments become the stories people remember long after the champion is crowned.

The Sweet Sixteen and Elite Eight narrow the field further, and by the time the Final Four arrives, the four remaining teams have survived three weekends of pressure that would break lesser programs. They have won six games each, any one of which could have ended their season. They have faced hostile crowds, desperate opponents, and the weight of expectations. And now, in early April, they play for the right to compete for a national championship.

The Final Four is spectacle—a massive stadium, tens of thousands of fans, television audiences in the millions. But it is also the culmination of everything that began in those cold March gyms, when winter was still holding on and spring was just a promise. The players who take the court in April earned it in the months before, when no one was watching, when the work was unglamorous and exhausting, when discipline was the only thing separating those who would make it from those who would not.

There is something deeply satisfying about March Madness because it rewards preparation. The teams that advance are not always the most talented. They are the best coached, the most disciplined, the ones who execute fundamentals under pressure. They are the teams that spent winter building the strength and character that spring reveals. A missed free throw, a defensive breakdown, a moment of hesitation—any of these can end a season. The tournament does not forgive mistakes, and that unforgiving nature makes every possession matter.

For the fan, March Madness is a reminder that anything is possible, that giants can fall and underdogs can rise, that one perfect game can change everything. For the athlete, it is the test that defines a career, the stage where preparation meets opportunity and only the best survive. For the country, it is three weeks when basketball becomes the center of conversation, when brackets connect coworkers and families, when the drama of single-elimination competition provides a shared experience that transcends region and allegiance.

The madness begins in March, when the light is returning and the cold is finally loosening its grip. And it ends in early April, when one team stands alone, champion, having survived the gauntlet that eliminated sixty-seven others. They earned it in March, in those dawn practices, in the discipline built through winter, in the refusal to accept anything less than their best. The trophy is the reward. The journey—the madness itself—is the point.

Court Side is Sports Editor at THE RIFLE magazine, where he chronicles the athletes who prove themselves when it matters most.

THE REALITY: BLOOD AND SWEAT ON THESE BOARDS

Sidebar — THE RIFLE Sports Section

The gymnasium at 5:30 a.m. smells like sweat, old leather, and something chemical from whatever the janitor used to mop the floor last night. The heat hasn't kicked on yet. Your breath makes fog. Your ankles are taped so tight you can barely feel your feet, and you're wearing yesterday's practice gear because you didn't get home in time to wash it. This is March preparation. This is what nobody sees.

My blood and sweat are on these boards. Literally, that dark spot near the free-throw line? That's where I went down hard chasing a loose ball in January, split my chin, needed six stitches. That scuff mark at the three-point line? Dove for a rebound, slid eight feet, took the skin off my elbow. The locker room smells like a medical clinic and a gym bag had a baby—tiger balm, mildew, the particular funk of sweat socks that have been worn, washed, and worn again without ever fully drying.

The work is not beautiful. It is running stairs until your legs quit. It is shooting free throws until your shoulders burn and your form breaks down, and then shooting fifty more because that's when it matters—when you're exhausted, when the game is on the line, when muscle memory is the only thing that will save you. It is film study at

midnight, watching yourself miss rotations, blow assignments, fail to box out. It is the coach's voice in your head even when he's not there, reminding you that effort is the only thing you control.

Rivalries make it personal. That school across the state? They beat us last year in the conference finals, and we remember. Every player on their roster, every play they ran, every trash-talk exchange—we remember all of it. When we face them in February, it is not just a game. It is payback. It is pride. And when we win, when we send them home knowing they will not make the tournament, the exhaustion and pain and months of work suddenly make sense.

The trainer knows your body better than you do. She knows which ankle rolls, which shoulder is tight, which knee you favor when you're tired. She tapes you up before every practice, wraps ice after, tells you to stretch and you don't because you're twenty years old and invincible until suddenly you're not. Then you listen. Then you ice. Then you realize your body is not a machine—it is a collection of parts that hurt, that wear down, that require maintenance if you want them to last through March.

The camaraderie is real because shared misery bonds men in ways that comfort never does. You know who will show up at 5:30 a.m. without complaint. You know who will dive for loose balls in practice when it doesn't count. You know who will run sprints until they vomit and then get back in line. Those are your brothers. When March arrives and the stakes are real, you know exactly who will be there when it matters.

The big game—the tournament, the Final Four, the championship—that is the reward. But the reality is these boards, this gym, these early mornings, this smell, this pain,

this relentless grind that nobody watching on television understands or cares about. They see the final score. We lived every minute that led to it.

My blood and sweat are on these boards. So is every other player who made it to March. That is the price. That is the reality. And when the ball goes through the net and the crowd roars, we do not think about glory. We think about the work, because the work is what got us here.



ALL-STAR

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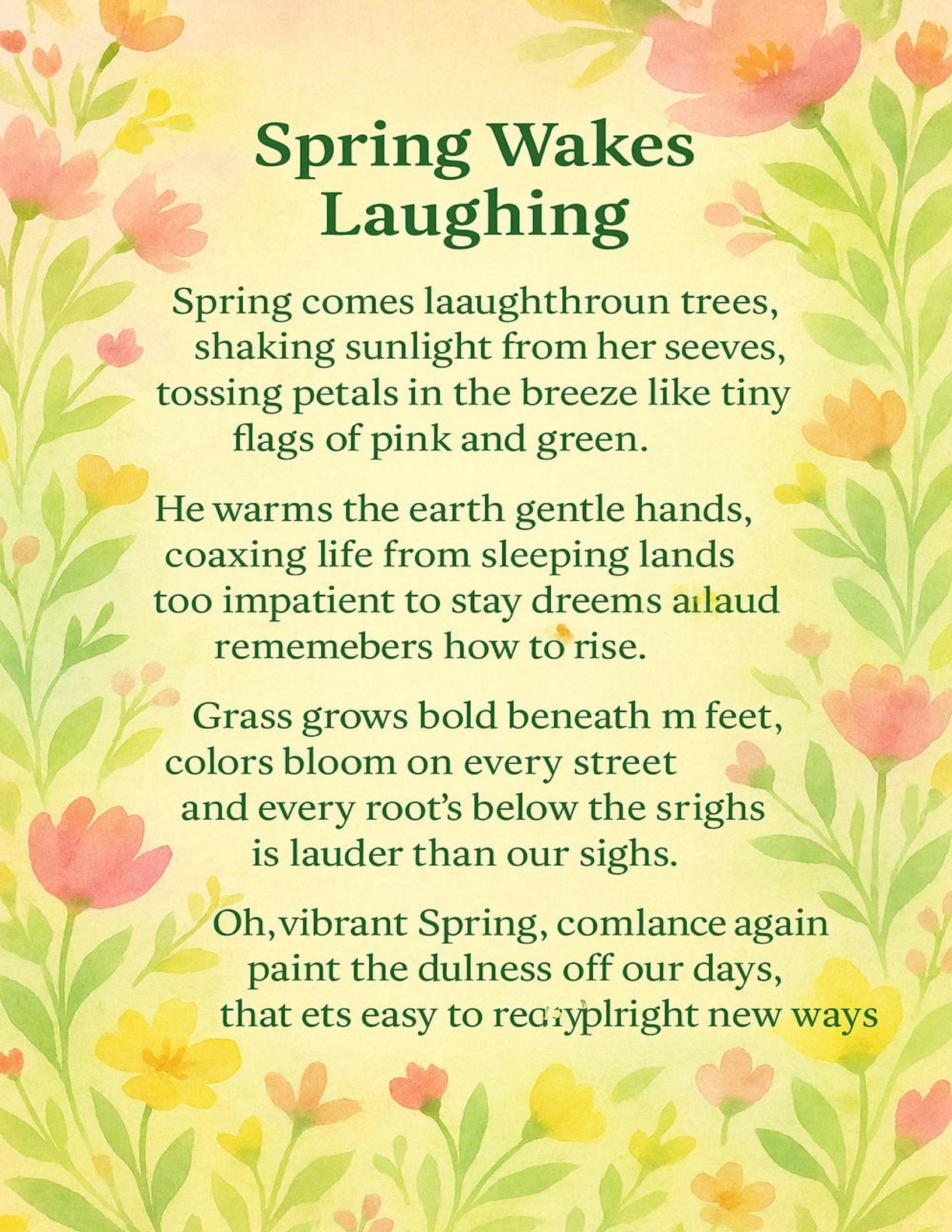


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Spring Wakes Laughing

Spring comes laaughthroun trees,
shaking sunlight from her seeves,
tossing petals in the breeze like tiny
flags of pink and green.

He warms the earth gentle hands,
coaxing life from sleeping lands
too impatient to stay dreems ailaud
rememebers how to rise.

Grass grows bold beneath m feet,
colors bloom on every street
and every root's below the srighs
is lauder than our sighs.

Oh, vibrant Spring, comlance again
paint the dulness off our days,
that ets easy to recryplright new ways

Letter from the Editor — Winter 2026

As we close this quarter's issue, I find myself reflecting on why we return again and again to the colors, styles, and stories of the 1950s. Our magazine has always been more than retro aesthetics; it's a kind of time capsule—one that lets us revisit an era when beauty was subtle, art was discreet, and charm hid in the shadows rather than the spotlight.

But nostalgia should never blur the truth.

1956 was a year when discretion wasn't always a choice—it was survival. This was an era when *coming out could end your career overnight* when a single rumor could unravel a life. When persecution wasn't abstract, but daily and deliberate, countless people lived in quiet courage, navigating a world that denied them safety, recognition, or even the ability to speak their truth aloud.

And yet, even in that silence, creativity flourished. Communities formed. Art was coded, clever, and resilient. People found ways to express longing, humor, desire, and identity between the lines. That spirit—the quiet brilliance of those who refused to disappear—is what we honor in every issue.

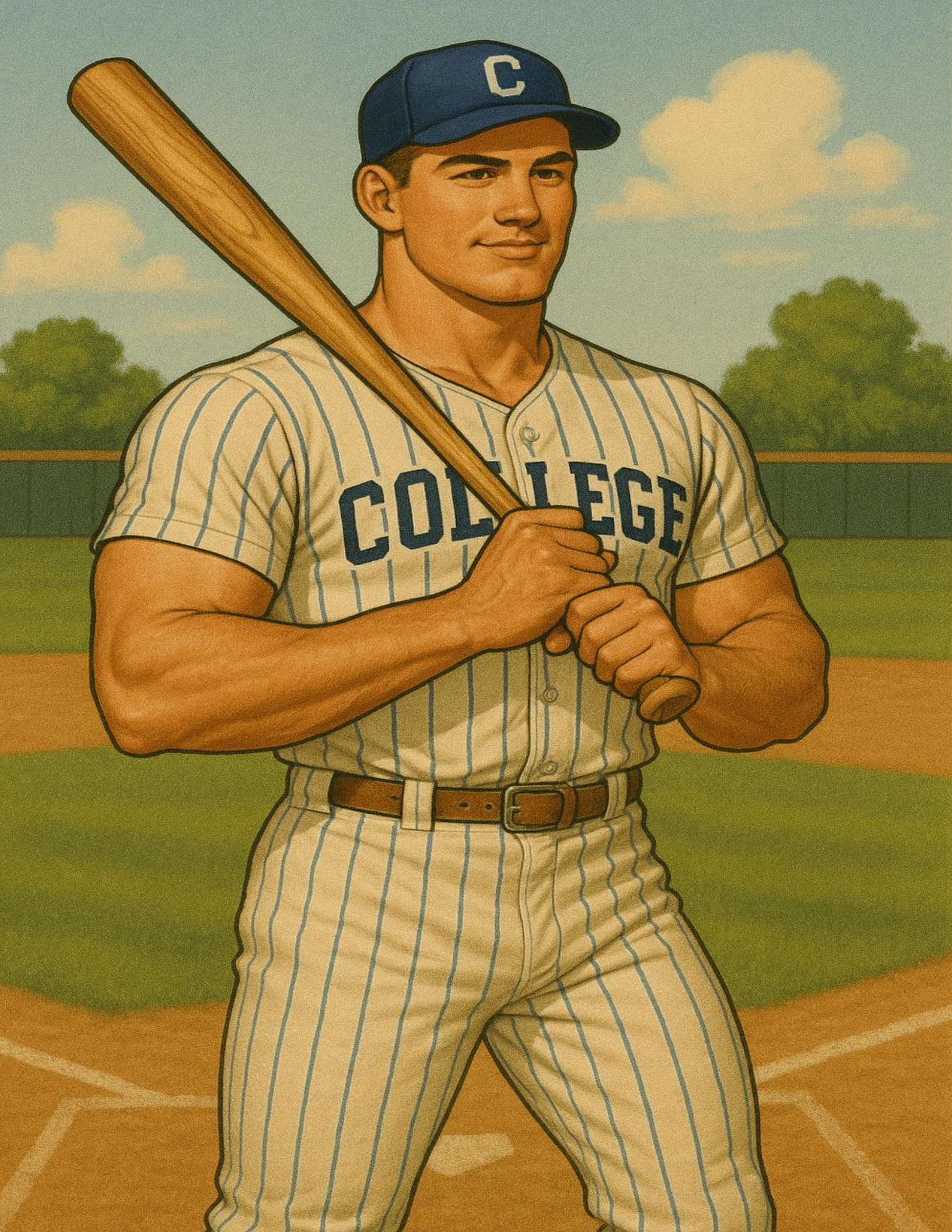
In 2026, where everything is instant and loud and endlessly scrolling, it's easy to forget how much subtlety once mattered. How beauty used to reveal itself slowly. How art often lived in suggestion rather than spectacle.

Our magazine tries to reclaim a little of that slower magic—while also giving voice to those who were once forced into shadows.

Thank you for walking with us through this mix of nostalgia, history, and remembrance. May we continue to celebrate the boldness of today while honoring the quiet strength of those who came before.

Until next time—

Your Editor



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