



  
BREWING CO  
*Coleman*

COME FOR THE  
BEER  
STAY FOR THE  
VIEW

ESPN

## THE AGE ISSUE

BRYCE HARPER  
IS A 22-YEAR  
OLD PHENOM  
MAKING HISTORY.  
CAN HE POSSIBLY  
GET BETTER  
WITH AGE?



5  
OF THE  
BEST YOUNG  
ATHLETES IN  
SPORTS



12.12.16

ESPN



# THE AGE ISSUE

- 45 JUSTIN UPTON**  
Join him in his chase for perfection
- 50 JIMMY ROLLINS**  
Join him on his Race against time.
- 60 LEADING OFF**  
A look at one of the best lead off hitters
- 67 CUBS WIN**  
How Fans around the world celebrated.

GO  
CUBS  
GO

## FORWARD

- 12 THE MAKING OF A LEGEND** A talk with the MLB best active player **BY DAXTER HOMES**
- 14 AGE ANAYLTICS** Sport by sport, carrer expectancies **BY JAMES MCGEE**
- 24 YOUNGESTERS** A look at the best young athletes today **BY JEFFERY MATHEWS**
- 30 THE MAKING OF A LEGEND** A talk with the MLB best active player **BY DAXTER HOMES**

## COLUMNS

- 8 LEADERS**  
Post election, Coaches need to lead more. **BY JESSICA LUTHER**
- 80 THE TRUTH**  
Qualifying offer **BY JESSICA LUTHER**

# PRODIGY



## LEADING OFF

AT 22, BRYCE HARPER IS RUNNING AWAY WITH AN MVP—AND PRODUCING AS ONLY A HANDFUL OF BASEBALL IMMORTALS DID IN THEIR YOUTH. THE QUESTION NOW: WHAT WILL HIS PRIME LOOK LIKE?  
**BY TOM VERDUCCI**



# THE AGE ISSUE

## Simply, The Best

**H**istorical greatness incubates daily under fluorescent lights. Every smashing game that brings Bryce Harper nearer to baseball's immortals begins here, in an indoor batting cage. To the disappointment of souvenir hunters and home run ornithologists who love a good, long flight, Harper has not taken batting practice on the field all year.

"I hit here and stick with my routine," he said last week in the cage behind the Nationals' dugout. "I started it just this year. That way I can just worry about getting through the baseball and not worry about where it's going."

Harper begins by hitting off a tee, first only with his top hand, then only with his bottom hand, and then, to feel his rhythm through the ball, Happy Gilmore style, in which he sets up two paces behind the tee and swings as he walks up to it, recalling Adam



Sandler's eponymous golfer. Next, from behind a screen, Ali Modami, a Nationals batting practice pitcher, flips him baseballs to hit. Finally, Modami, who is lefthanded, throws him BP, often calling out a situation Harper may face.

"Runner on first, one out, eighth inning, [Brian]w"

It is always Modami who throws to him. Harper knows he rarely will face a righthanded pitcher with the game on the line. He wants to make routine the difficult angle created when a lefty releases the ball to a lefthanded hitter. "I haven't taken BP from a righty since spring training," Harper says.

The routine never varies. The thwack of the bat on the baseball and the violent repetition of such labor evoke the pounding of a roofer hammering galvanized steel nails. But when his cage work is complete, Harper is not quite ready. There is one more piece of business.

Walk into any major league clubhouse an hour or two before a game and you might feel as if you stumbled into a college study lab. Players hunch over laptops or tablets to watch video of opposing pitchers.

Television monitors run a continuous loop of game footage of that

night's opposing starter. Color-coded printouts are available with breakdowns of opposing pitchers' pitches and patterns.

Harper wants none of it. He asks just one question of Rick Schu, Washington's hitting coach: "Does he have good control or bad control?"

"That's all he wants—well, that and velocity," Schu says. "We have some guys, like Jayson Werth, who want as much as you can give them. Not Bryce."

With that, the wrecking ball is properly prepared for demolition. At 22, Harper has put together such a historically monstrous season that the question is not whether he will be the National League Most Valuable Player, but whether he will become the youngest unanimous MVP ever.

Harper virtually has locked up the crowns for home runs (41) and batting average (.336), a double honor only two hitters as young as Harper have accomplished: Ty Cobb in 1909 and Ted Williams in '41. He also likely will win the "slash" Triple Crown (leading the league in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage), which has been achieved by a hitter so young only three



times: Cobb, Williams and Stan Musial ('43).

Even disregarding his youthfulness, Harper has been extraordinary because of how much better he has been than every other hitter in baseball. As measured by adjusted OPS, which takes into account league and park factors, the gap between Harper (201) and the next best hitter, Joey Votto (177), is the greatest in the majors since 2004, when Barry Bonds (263) blew away Albert Pujols (173) and the rest of the field. Bonds also won the majors' slash Triple Crown that year.

Long dead, cryogenically frozen or chemically enhanced, the closest comparables to what Harper has done this season are not of these times. And to think, Harper began this season as a .272 hitter better known for his indiscrimination, be it with his ferocious hacks or injurious defense and baserunning. "He's like a completely different hitter," says teammate Reed Johnson. "It's so impressive what he's done. Lots of guys work on improving their plate discipline, but I've never seen anything like this can be so amazing."

ONE DAY in mid-August, while the Nationals were in San Francisco, Harper was



walking past the tiny AT&T Park office of manager Matt Williams when a man in the room called out to him.

"Hey, come in here! Come talk to me!"

It was the first time Harper had met Bonds, the only other man in the past 14 years to have an adjusted OPS better than 200. One memory Harper has of Bonds remains particularly clear. Harper had just turned 10 when Bonds came to the plate against Angels closer Troy Percival in the ninth inning of Game 2 of the 2002 World Series. Bonds had seen 15 pitches that night and looked at 13 of them; a dozen were outside the strike zone. The 16th pitch was yet another ball. And then Percival threw a fastball over the plate.

"Throwing a billion miles an hour," Harper says.

"And he hits it nine miles to right. Barry was the best of all time with the eye and staying within himself."

At that first meeting the two hitters talked about not hitting. "He told me he had the confidence in the guys behind him, so he could take those pitches," Harper says. "He said, 'I knew I would see half a pitch an at bat, and that's what it was going to be. I knew the guy behind me would do the damage, I'd score and we'd win the ball game.' That really hit me, because it's true if I can take my walk and get on base, I did my"

Indeed, Harper's league-leading OBP this season has also translated to an NL-best 117 runs scored. Until this year, patience rarely had been associated with Harper, especially from his detractors, who

believed his game didn't match the hype around him. They saw more attitude than production. On Sunday, Nationals closer Jonathan Papelbon, a teammate for only two months, renewed the disparagers' criticism with the most public and ugliest attack yet. From a top-step perch even before Harper reached the dugout, Papelbon rebuked Harper for not running hard on a fly out. Harper, after descending the stairs, shouted back at Papelbon, who suddenly grabbed Harper's throat with his left hand and shoved him into the back of the dugout, where teammates quickly separated them. Papelbon apologized after the game, while a dismissive Harper said, "I don't really care—it's like brothers fighting."

Papelbon has had his own issues with teammates,

“In high school I couldn't hit the ball to rightfield to save my life”

saying recently that he was "one of the few who actually wanted to win" while with the Phillies. The scuffle dredged up past criticism of Harper, whether for being benched by Williams last year for a lack of hustle or cracking wise in spring training this year after the team's addition of free-agent pitcher Max Scherzer, "Where's my ring?"

"I didn't see that punk kid," says Washington GM Mike Rizzo. "I saw a player that had a love for the game, was gregarious, had a huge personality and wasn't going to be held down by."

This season, Harper's fourth, is his first uninterrupted one. As a teenage rookie in 2012 he spent all but two games in April in the minors. In both '13 and '14 he suffered injuries in April that caused him to miss chunks of time or to play hurt—first with left-knee and -hip injuries caused by collisions with outfield walls, then a torn left-thumb ligament suffered on a headfirst slide.

"I remember seeing where

guys would say he's an overrated player, that he'd never reach his potential," Rizzo says. "Wait a minute. He was a historic player at 19. He was a historic player at 20, 21—and he was never healthy in any of those seasons. He hit 22 home runs when he was 19—and if that's not a terrific start to a career I don't know what is."

"I'll tell you this: I've never seen a young player, at age 19, who from day one was pitched like he was Barry Bonds or Babe Ruth. He saw the least amount of fastballs in his first years in the league. Now he sees the least amount of balls in the"

Harper does see the fewest strikes as a percentage of total pitches, and he has cut the percentage of times he swings at pitches out of the zone from 35.7 last year to 27.9 this year.

What makes Harper so dangerous is his Bondsian knack for pouncing on the one time a skittish pitcher actually leaves a pitch over the plate. When Harper connects on the first strike (first pitch or counts of 1 and 0, 2 and 0