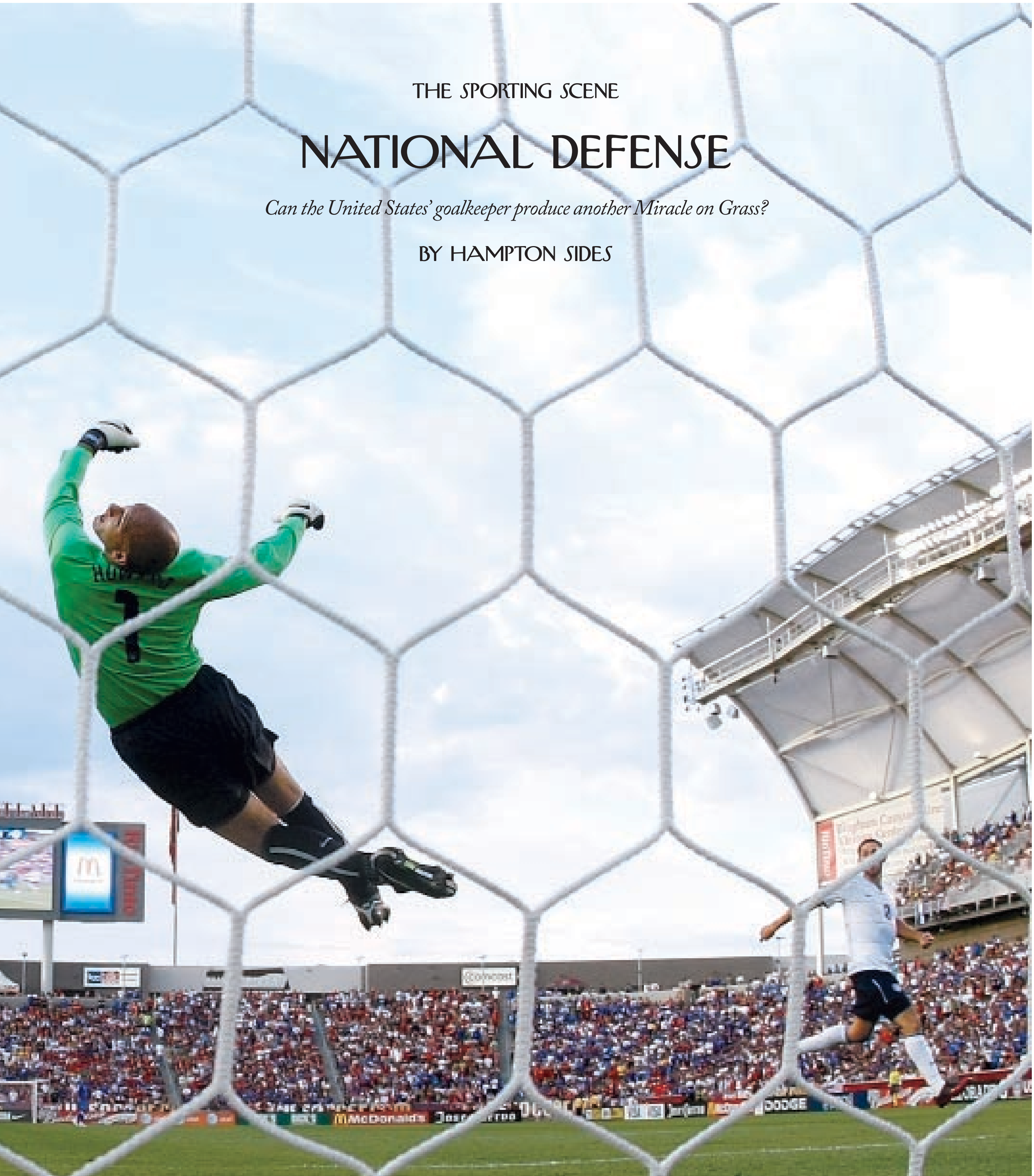
Tim Howard will be key in the long-awaited World Cup rematch against England next week. Psychologically, goalkeeping is the toughest

THE SPORTING SCENE

NATIONAL DEFENSE

Can the United States' goalkeeper produce another Miracle on Grass?

BY HAMPTON SIDES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spot on the field. Howard has Tourette's syndrome, which he feels may help him stay alert and reactive. Photograph by Jonathan Ferrey.

On June 12th, the United States men's national soccer team faces England, in Rustenburg, South Africa, in a match that is expected to draw one of the largest audiences in the history of televised sports. The last time the U.S. met England in a World Cup was sixty years ago, in June, 1950, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The American team, cobbled together so hastily that many players had just met one another, included a dishwasher, a mail carrier, a meat packer, and a hearse driver. A reporter from Belfast called them a "band of no-hopers" and "surely the strangest team ever to be seen at a World Cup." No one gave the Americans the slightest chance. Their coach, Bill Jeffrey, described his squad before the game as "sheep ready to be slaughtered."

The English, then known as the Kings of Football, viewed the game as a mere demonstration. Their team, which Lloyds of London had reportedly insured for three million dollars, was filled with players from England's well-established domestic leagues, led by Stanley Matthews, who was widely regarded as the best player in the world. Since the end of the Second World War, the English national team had amassed a record of twenty-three victories, four losses, and three ties. Winning the World Cup was seen as a birthright. The British had essentially invented football, after all, when, in 1863, a group of eleven clubs and schools huddled in a London tavern to reconcile inconsistencies in local versions of the game. In 1950, most bookies had the English a three-to-one favorite to win the whole tournament.

In Belo Horizonte, the Yanks (as the U.S. team is called) were outmatched at every position. The English passed crisply and maintained a bombardment worthy of the Great War. The American goalkeeper, an Italian-American from St. Louis named Frank Borghi, hurled himself from one side of the goalmouth to the other. Though the English strikers hit the crossbar or the post several times in the first half, nothing went in.

Then, in the thirty-seventh minute, the American midfielder Walter Bahr struck a long ball toward the far post, a lofting, quixotic shot that appeared to be a routine save for the English goalkeeper. But a forward named Joe Gaetjens dove through a cluster of defenders and got his head on the ball, deflecting it past the keeper and into the back of the net.

The English fought back, playing a menacing second half. Borghi again blocked a battery of shots, but the Americans were forced to rely mainly on near-thuggish defending and prodigious good luck. They also had a "twelfth man," in the form of the stadium crowd of thirty thousand Brazilians, who cheered for them rapturously—not because they loved the Americans but because they wanted to see the English knocked out, to better their own team's chances.

Finally, the whistle blew: the Yanks had beaten the Kings of Football, 1–0. The Brazilian spectators swarmed the team, carrying Borghi and Gaetjens off the field. "Boy, I feel sorry for these bastards," one American defender was quoted as saying. "How are they ever going to live down the fact we beat them?"

It came to be regarded as the greatest upset in the history of World Cup soccer—the so-called Miracle on Grass—and was the subject of a 1996 book by Geoffrey Douglas, "The Game of Their Lives." The English could not quite grasp what had happened. Newspaper editors in London, certain the score that came in over the wires was a typing error, posted the result as "10–1, England." The English lost their next match, against Spain, and failed to advance to the next round. In London, the postmortem on England's disastrous performance carried a hint of comic desperation: British constitutions don't fare well in the tropics; the long airplane trip was too stressful; the U.S. team had been recruited right off the boats at Ellis Island.

The Americans, who also failed to advance, came home to silence. Few of their countrymen even noticed that they had pulled off a shocking upset, and the victory did nothing to excite soccer's popularity in the United States. The U.S. men's national team did not make an appearance in a World Cup for forty years, and didn't win another World Cup match until 1994. But the game in 1950 remained an emblem of hope for a succession of mediocre squads. "Sometimes the better team loses," Walter Bahr, now eighty-three, told a reporter recently. "You can't pick the winner beforehand—you have to play the game."

Although the Miracle on Grass was surely a historical aberration, it has nonetheless characterized the English and American teams for decades. England: imperious, delusional, fragile on foreign soil, good but rarely as good as its fanatical supporters believe. The United States: brutish, defense-oriented, inured to the fact that scarcely anyone back home gives a damn, but buoyed by the perennial hope that a big victory might usher in a Golden Age of American Soccer. If the English relationship with the World Cup has been one of anguish and disappointment—England has won the trophy only once, in 1966—the American record has been one of incremental improvement, leading to rising expectations that are never quite met.

Still, American soccer sensibilities look toward the British game—its ethos, its personalities, even its idiom. Among aficionados, a field is a "pitch." Cleats are "boots." A scoreless game is "nil–nil." A team is a "side," and a side is plural—as in "Chelsea have won the Premiership." In at least this one area of endeavor, Americans are still colonials, living in thrall to the great faded empire. As if to underscore the point, ESPN, which will be televising the World Cup in the United States, has selected four commentators to announce the games; three of them are British and one is a Scot.

Next week in South Africa, England will again field some of the best-known footballers in the world, like Frank Lampard, Steven Gerrard, and John Terry. Its star striker, a fleet Caliban named Wayne Rooney, is among the two or three most dazzling attackers playing today. The team manager, a debonair Italian named Fabio Capello, is reportedly the highest-paid coach at this year's World Cup, and for good reason. In the qualification route to South Africa, his team earned nine victories in ten games, scoring thirty-four goals. England is eighth in the world standings, but for the first time in a long while the English are justified in believing that their team—proudly called the Three Lions—has a chance to win the Cup. The euphoria is captured in a song that's being sung, only half facetiously, around Britain these days: "Football's Coming Home!"

The World Cup is by far the largest athletic event on the planet. More than a billion people are expected to watch this year's tournament via live television, and events will be held at ten venues across South Africa, from Cape Town and Durban to Johannesburg. Between June 11th and July 11th, thirty-two teams from every part of the globe will play a total of sixty-four games. Vice-President Biden will attend the opening ceremonies and the U.S.-England game. Among a host of security and logistical worries, Al Qaeda has vowed to have "a presence" at the tournament. Because the World Cup has never been held in Africa before, it is a source of considerable pride across the continent. Three hundred thousand visitors are expected throughout the month, straining South Africa's infrastructure and bringing in millions of tourist dollars.

English and American fans are expected to descend on South Africa in unprecedented numbers. (After England, the U.S. goes on to play what are generally viewed as weaker opponents—Slovenia on June 18th, and Algeria on June 23rd.) Ranked fourteenth in the world, the Americans are physically impressive and well-prepared. In recent years, they have beaten Spain and tied Argentina. But in next weekend's contest, at Rustenburg's Royal Bafokeng Stadium, they are certainly the lesser team, and would regard a tie as an emphatically good result. The American blueprint against England may closely resemble the one used in Belo Horizonte sixty years ago: concede most of the possession, hope to get lucky on a furious counterattack, hunker down to defend against the inevitable onslaught—and pray that the American goalkeeper, like Frank Borghi, can bring off a miracle.

For more than a decade, a succession of American-born keepers have competed well on teams throughout the world—goalkeepers have been the United States' one reliable soccer export. The reasons for this have been widely debated, but they share a central proposition: American athletes know how to use their hands. ("Ever seen an Englishman try to throw a ball? It's worse than 'throwing like a girl,' " Kasey Keller, who played in goal for the U.S. national team in two World Cups, says.) By all accounts, the U.S. team's current keeper, a thirty-one-year-old named Tim Howard, will be a linchpin in South Africa. Howard, who starts for Everton in the English Premier League, will be under enormous pressure in Rustenburg. Luckily for the Americans, he is in the prime of his career, and is generally thought to be one of the best goalkeepers in the world.

"I thought we agreed—no moms!"

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In Amsterdam a couple of months ago, Howard was practicing with the U.S. team in preparation for a friendly match against Holland, set to be played in a few days at the Amsterdam Arena. The U.S. coaching staff had scheduled a series of tune-up games against élite international teams, and the match against Holland, ranked fourth in the world, was an opportunity to test new players and strategies. The practice field, in a cloistered neighborhood not far from the city center, was bordered by a pathway coursing with bicyclists. Nearly all the American starters were there, immersed in drills: Landon Donovan, an attacking midfielder from the Los Angeles Galaxy, who is perhaps the greatest player the United States has ever produced; Jozy Altidore, a strapping Haitian-American who scored a glorious goal against Spain last summer; and Oguchi Onyewu, the team's central defender and celebrated "hard man," who, though recovering from a torn patellar tendon, had travelled to Amsterdam from his home, in Milan, for light training. (Clint Dempsey, the crafty American attacking midfielder, who plays for Fulham, had stayed in England to nurse a knee injury.)

The head coach, Bob Bradley, who coached at Princeton before moving to Major League Soccer, was putting the team through its paces. Bradley, a severe man with a buzz cut, is built along the lines of an American football coach: a steady, hardworking, but personality-free drill sergeant whose analysis of plays is smattered with terms like "systems" and "work rates." Across the field, the players were whooping and shouting, happy to be sprung from their professional clubs and reunited with their countrymen.

Bradley's practice concluded with an intense shooting drill, in which waves of attackers fired balls at Howard. Even in practice, he is a commanding presence. There is an almost operatic quality in his facial expressions and bodily contortions; he has mastered what keepers call "making yourself big." He executed his dives and punches with a hint of flamboyance, as though to telegraph confidence to any doubters who might be watching.

Afterward, Howard strolled off the field, sweaty, smiling, and joking with teammates. Genial and self-deprecating, he speaks softly, in a New Jersey accent that has been slightly diluted by seven years of playing in the U.K., first in Manchester and then in Liverpool. The son of a Hungarian mother and an African-American father, Howard is a rangy, ochre-skinned man standing six feet three and weighing a hundred and ninety pounds. His head is shaved to a sheen, and a vein protrudes at his temple.

We met afterward at the team hotel

downtown, on the banks of a canal. Wearing a U.S. team warmup suit and sandals, he sipped a cappuccino in the hotel restaurant. Outside, a pair of German autograph stalkers, hoping to gather signatures from the entire squad, had to be marched from the premises. Howard laughed. Around Liverpool, he is a major star, pursued by fans and photographers. For the past three years, he has played for Everton—the Toffees, one of the oldest and most hidebound clubs in England—and recently signed a five-year contract that makes him the highest-paid American soccer player in history.

Another singular thing about Howard: he has Tourette's syndrome, a disorder of the nervous system that manifests itself in facial jerks, spasms, and involuntary tics. The intense focus he is required to summon in games moderates his symptoms, and often cancels them altogether. (When the ball is safely away from the goal, his tics will sometimes emerge.) But in conversation he repeatedly clears his throat, blinks, and stammers; his neck tightens and his cheeks twitch. He refuses to take medication for fear that it will make him "zombielike" and impair his motor skills. "I'm very adrenaline-filled, and I wouldn't want to suppress that," he told me. "I like the way I am. If I woke up tomorrow without Tourette's, I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

When, in 2003, he was hired away from the New York/New Jersey MetroStars to become Manchester United's goalkeeper, the British tabloids said that he was "handicapped," even "retarded." The spontaneous outbursts and involuntary utterances that affect a minority of people with Tourette's are not among Howard's symptoms, but fans in Manchester nonetheless devised a curse-laden chant that became a mainstay whenever he made a good save: "Tim-timminy, tim-timminy, tim-tim, te-roo, We've got Tim Howard and he says, FUCK YOU!"

Howard, the father of two children and a devout Christian, is not particularly known for his temper, but he can sometimes lose it on the field. In a clip on YouTube titled "Everton's Tim Howard Goes Mental," he chases down a player from the Wolverhampton Wanderers who obstructed him, grabs the back of his head, and shoves him to the ground. Howard says it's possible that Tourette's actually helps him in goal, that it makes him more alert and reactive. "Some people with Tourette's syndrome seem to have an unusual somatic empathy," Dr. James Leckman, of Yale, who has published widely about the syndrome, says. "They tell me that they sense things in the body movements of others that the rest of us screen out, some signal or vibration, some sensory cue. It's almost like they can see what's going to happen before it happens." Tourette's is characterized by a buildup of anxiety and neurological tension, sometimes intensified by certain kinds of sensory overload—a not implausible description of the state of mind required for competitive goalkeeping.

"In goal, you're taking in all the movement, all the runs," Howard said. "You see everything. You're yelling. You're tense. You're so wired-in. To tell you the truth, I don't enjoy the game—I've never actually had fun within the course of those ninety minutes." Because the object is always a shutout—a "clean sheet," as the British call it—he can never relax. "As long as there's time on the clock, there's still danger," he says. "When the whistle blows, I'm completely exhausted, physically and mentally. I get in the locker room and I sit down and I just exhale. Finally, the danger is over."

MUSEUM OF MODERN GIFT ITEMS
T-SHIRTS OF THE MASTERS
SALE

Against Holland a few nights later, Howard had a standout performance. Although it was only a friendly match, the fifty-one-thousand-seat Amsterdam Arena was nearly sold out, the stands packed with fans wearing brilliant orange, the team color. The Dutch crowd followed every nuance of the action with rapt attention. In the Netherlands, one senses, soccer is not so much a sport as a national science project. Through most of the match, the Dutch team was obviously superior in skills and tactics. Against such teams, Bob Bradley plays a game that is bruising and reactive—"ugly soccer," some have called it. In lieu of finesse, he relies on his players' size, speed, and toughness, and trusts his goalkeeper to organize a tight, hunkered-down defense.

Defensive soccer is not by definition unglamorous. The Italians, in the sixties, mastered something they called the *catenaccio*—the door bolt. The Americans are neither as sly nor as grandiose as the Italians, but Bradley has adapted a page from their playbook. The idea is to stay compact and lure the stronger team forward so that its players leave themselves vulnerable to a high-speed counterattack. Last June, at the FIFA Confederations Cup tournament, in South Africa, Bradley employed this strategy to upset top-ranked Spain, a team that had not lost a game in thirty-five consecutive outings.

The Dutch won, 2–1, but Howard was thrilling and exhausting to watch: smothering balls, swatting them away, lurching and leaping. He is an instinctive shot-stopper, whose pure reflexes and athleticism allow him to make saves that seem impossible. Some have argued that those astonishing recoveries would often be unnecessary if he were more meticulous in his footwork and field positioning. But few keepers in international soccer can match his raw reactions or his acrobatic saves. Even during lulls, he was in motion—kicking the goalposts to clean the sod from his cleats, tugging at his socks, touching and retouching the mesh of the net. He seems to find comfort in tactile repetition, and in reminding himself, to millimetre tolerances, exactly where he is.

Howard, who describes himself as a "yeller," is a loud and demonstrative field marshal. He barks commands at his defenders—adjusting their position, organizing a wall to fend off a direct kick, or expressing displeasure with the way a striker is being guarded. The stream of signals is nearly constant—in this sense he is like a catcher in baseball, or a coxswain in a scull—and his defenders are alert to his cues. "A keeper's got to have a certain bravado," Howard says. "You have to connect with the players, you have to have a chemistry. You need to show your distaste for things that are happening, as they're happening. You can't be a stiff in there."

Goalkeepers are the oddballs of soccer. They wear neon colors, sport aggressive hairdos, and affect strutting postures. Italy's great keeper Gianluigi Buffon is an actor of the first order, with a camera-loving face that bluffs, sulks, bullies, and mocks. The German Oliver Kahn, now retired, had the aspect of a pillaging Teutonic warrior, and seemed to relish his own shock effect.

Howard, though he greatly admires Kahn and Buffon, is not an eccentric. Growing up with Tourette's made him unusual enough, and as a teen-ager he was always worrying about what people said behind his back. He strove most of his life to fit in—and, he says, to keep his itchy impulses "at bay."

Howard was born in 1979 and grew up in a lower-middle-class family in North Brunswick, New Jersey, about forty miles south of New York. His mother, Esther, was from Budapest, and his Hungarian grandfather introduced him to soccer. Esther, a manager for a cosmetics distributor, knew early on that something was different about Tim. "He was my high-maintenance child," she recalls. "He would fill up a room with his energy. He never slept through the night. Something was always going."

Although Howard's parents divorced when he was three, his father, a long-haul truck driver, played a part in his upbringing. When Howard's parents put him in Little League, he hated it. "It just wasn't fast enough," Esther recalls. "He was bored stiff out there." But soccer attracted him—its fluidity, its feints and deceits, its intricate movements in a simple framework. He was a field player at first, but soon found himself in goal, mainly because he was taller than his teammates. His spot in the net helped him learn to grasp patterns and to see potential plays. "He had an ability to see the game unfold in front of him," Esther says, "and to anticipate what would happen next."

Psychologically, goalkeeping is the toughest spot on the field. It requires resilience and a short memory, as well as a somewhat Manichean view of the world. "In goal, they're trying to get the ball past you; you're trying to stop it," Howard says. "Anything else is just meaningless. And, when you screw up, it's gone, it's finished. You can't get it back."

When he started playing in goal, the demands of the position sometimes got the better of him. "When I was maybe nine," Howard recalls, "I remember crying and being so upset, and my mom would walk down the sideline and just tell me it was all right. There's some days now, in stadiums filled with fifty thousand people, where I could still use her."

The facial tics started when he was around ten. In addition to experiencing jerks and blinks, he grew extremely anxious in unfamiliar situations, and began to show obsessive-compulsive behaviors, repeatedly straightening, counting, and touching things—gaps in the floorboards, or bricks in the wall. "A certain pattern had to be followed, an exact routine," Esther recalls. "He had to put his clothes on the same way every day." Howard was eleven when a doctor made a definitive diagnosis. "I believe there's a certain yin and yang to things," she says. "If you have a disorder like this, then you also have a gift that you've been given and you just try to learn what it is. Soccer was his gift. It provided an escape from Tourette's—it absorbed that energy."

Howard caught the attention of the U.S. Soccer youth program, and in high school he travelled around the country attending showcase tournaments and élite clinics; he calls his teens "my nomadic years." Tim Mulqueen, who is the goalkeeping coach for the U.S. national youth team, met Howard when he was twelve, and was astonished by his ability. "Athletically, Timmy was off the charts," Mulqueen told me. "He had all the attributes: the vertical leap, the hand-eye coördination, the aggressiveness, the competitiveness, the physical presence. When he came on the field, you knew he was there."

In high school, Howard also played basketball, as a forward, and in his senior year the team made the state finals. He thought about playing professionally (he was recently made an honorary member of the Harlem Globetrotters), and though he became convinced that he had better prospects as a soccer player, his time on the courts informed his game. "With goalkeeping, as in basketball, there's no slow movements," Howard says. "Everything is carried out on a very small area of play, with sharp movements, tight cuts, quick jumps. I definitely think the two went hand in hand."

Howard went semi-pro in 1997, joining the New Jersey Imperials. A year later, at eighteen, he moved to the MetroStars, where he eventually became the highest-paid goalkeeper in Major League Soccer, earning more than two hundred thousand dollars a year. In 2002, he was courted by Sir Alex Ferguson, the manager of Manchester United, perhaps the most successful football franchise in the world. United reportedly paid a $4.1-million transfer fee, and in 2003, at twenty-four, Howard was starting in the team's Old Trafford Stadium, the so-called Theatre of Dreams. "It's a fantasy really to even think you'll play here," he said, shortly after he arrived. "It's the best club in the world without a doubt."

Howard's rookie season was triumphant. With fourteen clean sheets, he was named the English Premier League's Goalkeeper of the Year, and helped lead Manchester to its first Football Association Cup in five years. He got married, and bought a house in Manchester. Ferguson boasted that in his experiment with Howard he'd made a sort of anthropological discovery about the promise of American footballers. The Americans "are an athletic, agile race," he said. "You see the spring Tim's got. A lot of them play basketball, which possibly helps. And they don't believe they can lose—that's their upbringing."

The next season, Howard made several high-profile blunders—most notably against Porto, in the second round of the Champions League tournament. In the ninetieth minute of the game, he parried a shot into the path of an onrushing striker; the resulting goal eliminated Manchester United from the tournament and cost the club an estimated eighteen million dollars in revenue. Howard was summarily benched. The British papers wrote that he was "under scrutiny," and "way off the standard." They said that his Tourette's had got worse and that he was travelling to the United States to consult with specialists. The *Daily Record* predicted "HOWARD'S END."

"It was brutal," Howard recalled. "It seemed like they wanted to see my downfall. At Man U, there's no room for error. It's a cutthroat, fickle business. They want results, and they want them now." Esther Howard, visiting her son in Manchester, was astonished by how quickly his fortunes had soured. "In England, the goalkeeper is treated like a necessary evil," she says. "It's a totally thankless position. One mistake, and you've gone from being a hero to being a bum."

Howard had a little more playing time in 2004, but "he began to overanalyze himself," Tim Mulqueen says. "He became cautious and conservative, in order not to make errors. He played the way he thought they wanted him to play." In June of 2005, when Ferguson signed Edwin van der Sar, the Dutch national goalkeeper, Howard understood that his time was up at Manchester United.

In 2006, he was loaned to Everton, which plays in a creaky old stadium called Goodison Park, in Liverpool. "Coming to Everton from Manchester United was definitely a downgrade for Tim," Roger Bennett, an English soccer journalist and lifelong Everton supporter, says. Although soccer is as deeply rooted in Liverpool as music, Bennett says, "Everton was a middling team running on the fumes of past glory, and when Tim arrived it was just beginning to emerge from many dark years of turgid soccer."

The team's manager, a Scotsman named David Moyes, had a reputation for salvaging careers. Under Moyes, Howard found his rhythm again. He has been at Everton since then, and is widely credited for helping to reverse the team's fortunes. In 2008-09, Howard broke the club record for the highest number of clean sheets, with sixteen. Bennett says, "For many weaker individuals, what Tim went through at Manchester would have finished them off. But he's had a Second Coming at Everton. He's beloved. His confidence is back, and his game is improving every day."

This past season, Everton briefly made room for another American star: the attacking midfielder Landon Donovan, Tim Howard's friend and U.S.A. teammate. Donovan spent ten weeks in Liverpool in the late winter and early spring, and Everton fans, thrilled by his mad runs down the flanks, would often chant "U-S-A!" With Donovan at right wing and Howard in goal, Everton became an oddly Americanized team—and a successful one. It moved up four spots in the Premiership, upsetting Chelsea and Manchester. After Donovan's final Everton game, in March, in which he got a goal and an assist, he was hoisted by a teammate, and a slightly varied cheer went up in the crowd: "U-S-A! You must stay!"

If Howard leads the U.S. team's defense, then Donovan is the engine who will drive its attack. A nerveless and clinical finisher, Donovan is the U.S.A.'s all-time leading scorer, with forty-two international goals. He is also the most experienced man on the U.S.A. roster, having played in the last two World Cups, and made more than a hundred and twenty international appearances.

Donovan, a native Californian, is a fine-boned man with smoldering eyes and a scallop of receding black hair. He is a specimen of human endurance, able to run a full ninety minutes at near-top speed. On counterattacks, his open-field sprints can be glorious. More than that, he possesses an ability to create plays seemingly from nothing. His problem has been emotional inconsistency. He's prone to streaks of brilliance but, like many great attackers, he can be finicky and easily offended. Three disappointing stints in Germany earlier in his career suggested that, for all his strengths, he couldn't make it abroad.

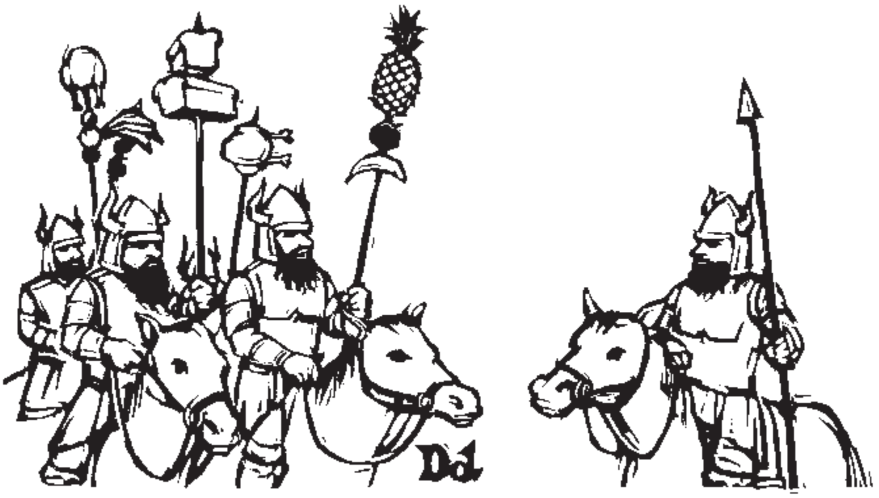
Donovan's success with Everton quieted many of his critics. Still, when he is uninspired, he can seem oddly distracted on the field. In a match for Everton against Tottenham Hotspur in late February, he shanked a laughably easy shot right in front of the goalmouth, in what the British football press pronounced "the miss of the season." Donovan was so embarrassed that he apologized to his whole team. The next game, he played brilliantly.

"You never know which Donovan will show up," David Hirshey, a soccer journalist and editor, says. "Landon's got all the technical ability, but his mercurial personality often gets in the way. He's frustrated that the other American players aren't on his level. He'll make a beautiful, telepathic pass, then throw up his hands in exasperation when the other player isn't there to receive it. But Donovan's the one American who can pull off a pure act of improvisation."

Alexi Lalas, a former World Cup defender for the United States who is now an on-air commentator for ESPN, agrees. "Donovan's a world-class player—maybe our only one, other than Tim Howard and Clint Dempsey. When his mood ring turns the right color, he brings out something no other American can."

One such moment came last year in Johannesburg, in the Confederations Cup final, against Brazil. In the twenty-sixth minute, Brazil had pushed nearly its entire team toward the American goal for a corner kick. A few seconds later, a U.S. defender got possession and passed to Donovan, who was left alone in midfield with only two Brazilian defenders between him and the goal. Instantly exploiting the huge gap, Donovan angled the ball deep along the left flank, reaching the winger Charlie Davies, who passed it back to Donovan, by now sprinting toward the top of Brazil's penalty box. Donovan coolly outmaneuvered his defender and drilled the ball past the Brazilian goalkeeper.

The goal was a stunning illustration of how, in one swift moment, a tightly drawn defense can transform into a decisive counterattack. With three passes, the Americans covered eighty yards in less than ten seconds. Though the Brazilians won the game, the play has become a canonical moment in U.S. soccer history. Donovan, it seemed, had seen it all before it happened.



"By the time we got there, all we wanted to do was raid their kitchen."

In next weekend's game against England, the United States faces a nation in an almost desperate state of expectancy. England knows that it is formidable this year, but beneath that confidence is a sinking sense that the team will, as usual, find a way to leave the tournament early. Time and again in the World Cup, the English have been stopped by dumb luck, rash mistakes, and faulty penalty shooting. They are usually dispatched by their archrivals, Germany and Argentina.

England's main problem, many critics have argued, is a deeply embedded mixture of arrogance and ignorance. The soccer commentator Paul Gardner, an Englishman who has lived in the United States for decades, says, "The English tend to be snotty about other soccer cultures, especially America. They think they're supposed to be top dogs at this, and will not accept that there could be something interesting coming out of the United States. The feeling is, if they didn't think of it, it can't be any good."

Still, after failing to qualify for the 2008 European Championships, the English hired the Italian Fabio Capello to lead them in the World Cup. He has described his role as that of a "ghostbuster," exorcising the U.K.'s World Cup demons. Capello is an urbane man, a lover of opera and art—his collection of Kandinskys, Chagalls, and other significant works is said to be worth about ten million pounds. He is also a stern disciplinarian who has expressed admiration for Francisco Franco. In South Africa, Capello announced, cell phones will be banned at meals, the team hotel will be alcohol-free, and the players will be limited to precisely one conjugal visit between games. (This last stricture was a response to the 2006 World Cup, in Germany, during which the frenzied shopping and night-clubbing of Victoria Beckham and other celebrity WAGS—"wives and girlfriends"—was a major distraction.)

Capello's biggest vexation, though, has been injuries; up and down his roster are hobbling sprains, fractures, and hamstring pulls. In March, David Beckham ruptured an Achilles tendon while playing for A.C. Milan, eliminating the aging star from his fourth World Cup. A greater concern is the twenty-four-year-old Wayne Rooney, who plays for Manchester United and is at the center of the national team's offense. In May, during his final United game of the season, Rooney limped off the field, kneading his upper thigh and wincing. As the games in South Africa grow closer, the British have held a national vigil on the fragile state of Rooney's groin. One business newswire fretted that on these tender muscles rests "the future of England's dwindling pub industry." Rooney, though, has insisted to reporters that "the groin will be fine for the World Cup," and he played the full ninety minutes in a recent game with Mexico.

A healthy Rooney is the player the Americans fear most. Howard has immersed himself in videos, studying Rooney's tendencies, his runs, his angles, his feints. "Rooney's phenomenal," Howard says. "Very unpredictable. He's got a lot of tricks up his sleeve. You have to pick your poison with a player like that."

Yet Howard insists that he is not in awe of anyone on the English team. He's been playing with and against them for seven years, and is the only American who could conceivably start for the Three Lions. Though he would be happy with a tie, a reprise of the 1950 upset is not impossible. "I've been dreaming of this, working toward this, my entire life," Howard says. "It's a huge game for us—the whole world will be watching. But we have nothing to fear."

The Americans are not deaf to the echoes of history: the U.S. team's new uniform, made by Nike, is styled after the 1950 jersey, with a vintage sash across the front. The tribute pleases Frank Borghi, the 1950 keeper, who still lives in St. Louis, having retired from running a funeral parlor. When I spoke with him recently, he said that he would be closely watching the World Cup match against England, rooting for Tim Howard and the Americans.

I asked him what he remembered about the game in Belo Horizonte. Borghi was modest. "They outplayed us," he said. "I was just lucky enough to make a few saves." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM/VIDEO
Highlights from Tim Howard's career.