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Oomph.

He catches the log square in the chest—eliciting a groan from Pickett—and Wilson is stuck there until he drops to the ground, frustrated. The Marines are quick to offer tips, and even help him to the top. Instead of giving in, Wilson fires off questions to the assembled corpsmen, determined to get past this hindrance the right way. Satisfied with the Marines' advice, Wilson backtracks and then soars toward the log again.

Oomph!

This time he takes the hit right in the gut, swings his leg up, and flips his body so it's lying flat on the log, just like his instructor demonstrated moments before. The Marines erupt in cheers, and Wilson is all smiles.

DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

"So how did you get into magazines?" Wilson asks, striking up a conversation in the car. "And where did you go to school?" Decker from head to toe in Nike gear with a modest watch on his wrist, his broad frame and somewhat unruly head of hair are filling up my rearview mirror. Pickett is seated next to him. I've just picked them up at a staging area of Quantico for the 15-minute drive to the obstacle course where he'll be tackling that log.

It's an odd role reversal—Wilson, interviewing me about my career as I serve up questions about his football exploits—but the 24-year-old quarterback has never really sought, or attracted, attention. He's more about sizing up situations, and seizing opportunities, whether it's negotiating a log to the chest, or sneaking a tight completion into double coverage.

The 75th pick in the 2012 NFL draft, most football experts projected the 5'11" Wilson to spend his career as a hopeful backup. Instead, he's changing the way the league thinks of a franchise quarterback. He combines a strong, accurate arm with a devastatingly elusive running game, a skills package that puts defenses on their heels. Last season, he tallied 489 yards on the ground (the third highest total by a quarterback) while completing 64.1% of his passes and giving up just 10 interceptions over 18 regular-season games, a lethal blend that led the Seahawks to an appearance in the divisional round of the NFC playoffs.

As Wilson explains how he overcame comments regarding his height—"I just had to ignore it"—I think back to conversations I've had with pro athletes, the vast majority of which have been a string of clichés ("Leave it all on the field; take it one play at a time") punctuated by surly silences. The first thing that strikes you about Wilson is his level of engagement with what's going on around him. Look no further than his college athletics career. A two-sport athlete who spurned Major League Baseball to play college football, he juggled two Division I sports with a massive course load and excelled at all three.

"I was offered a million dollars [by the Baltimore Orioles out of high school]," he says matter of factly. "I turned it down, and I went to North Carolina State to play football and baseball, and I promised my dad I would graduate in three years, so I took 18 credits each semester." He figured that if he could get a master's with his scholarship, he'd go after it.

As he grew as a quarterback at NC State, Wilson's game steadily improved. He threw for 177 yards per game as a freshman, jumped

to 252 as a sophomore, and then jumped again to 274 as a junior (and earned a 4.0 GPA to boot). After three years he was near the top of most quarterback records at NC State and was poised to capture many of them during his final season, until it all came to an acrimonious end.

Wilson played baseball for NC State each spring. In the summer of 2010, he was drafted into the majors again, this time by the Colorado Rockies. In January of 2011 Wilson announced that he'd report to spring training with the team. It was a decision that didn't sit well with NC State head football coach Tom O'Brien, and as the story evolved, it became apparent that if Wilson returned to Raleigh, he would be coming in as a backup. So Wilson requested—and was granted—a release from his scholarship, under the provision that he would not sign with any team in the ACC or on NC State's schedule. "I believe it is in the best interest of the players and coaches involved to end any speculation of my return to the Wolfpack. It has become apparent that the time has come for the program to move on without me," Wilson said in a press release.

He played baseball with the Rockies' Class A affiliate, the Asheville Tourists, in the summer of 2011, but his heart never left football. He had reached a crossroads: Should he take the near-guaranteed money in professional baseball or take one more shot at football? "I would be on the phone with Russell for hours on end talking about what [sport] he wanted to [play], weighing the options," recalls Wilson's older brother, Harrison Wilson IV. "Ultimately, what trumped everything

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In 2009, Wilson set the then-NCAA record for most passes (379) without an interception.



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Statham! Stallone! The Rock! Top Tips p98

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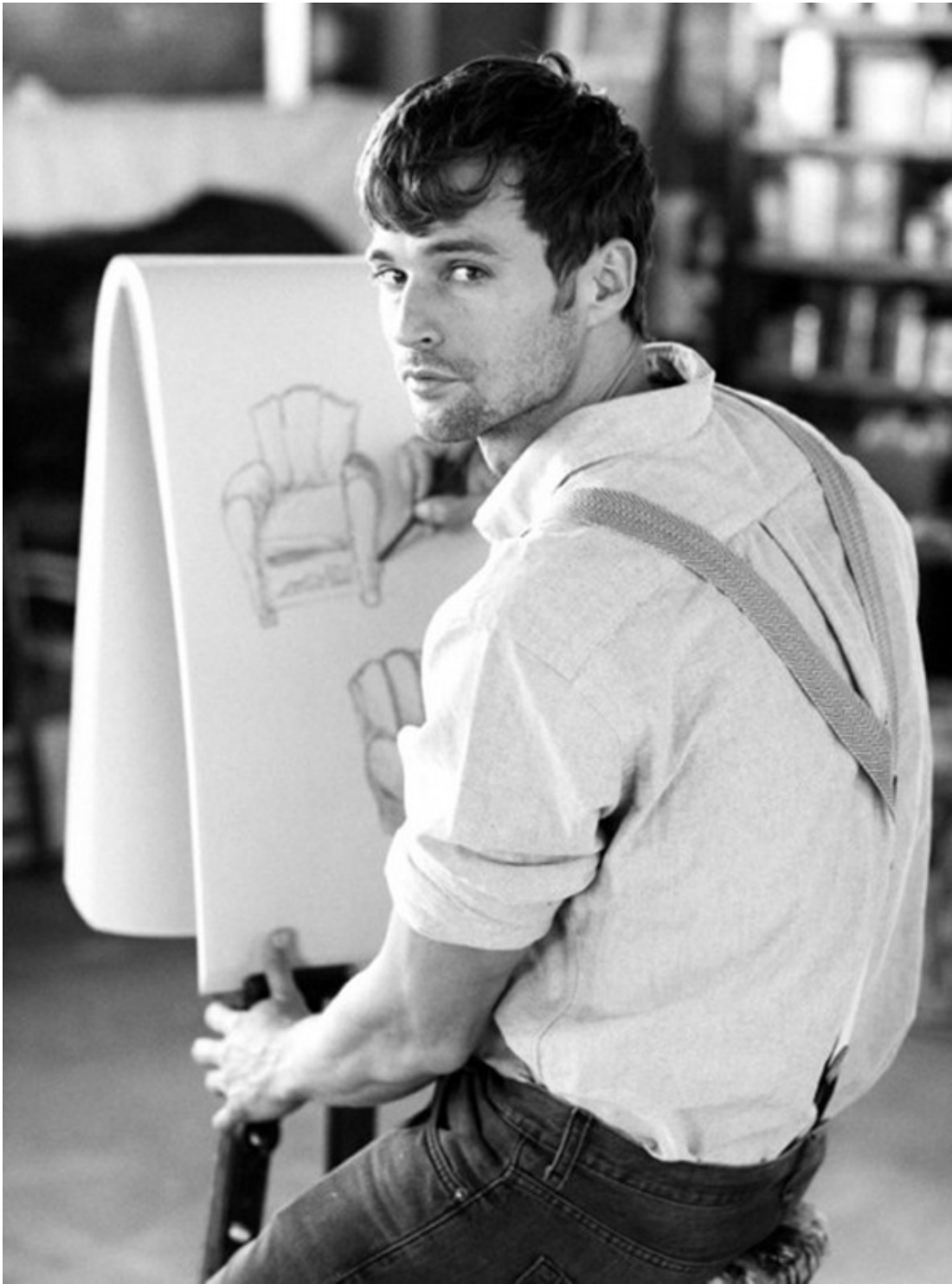
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