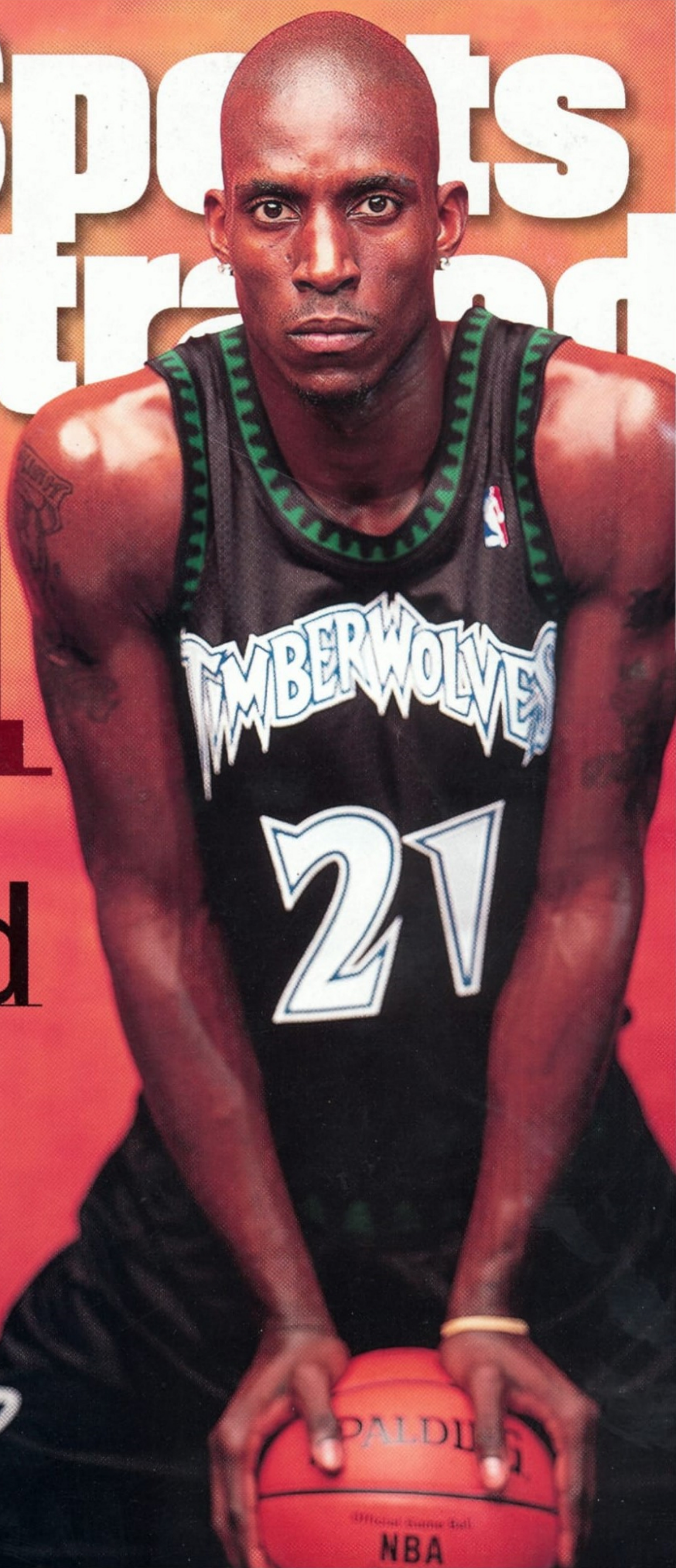


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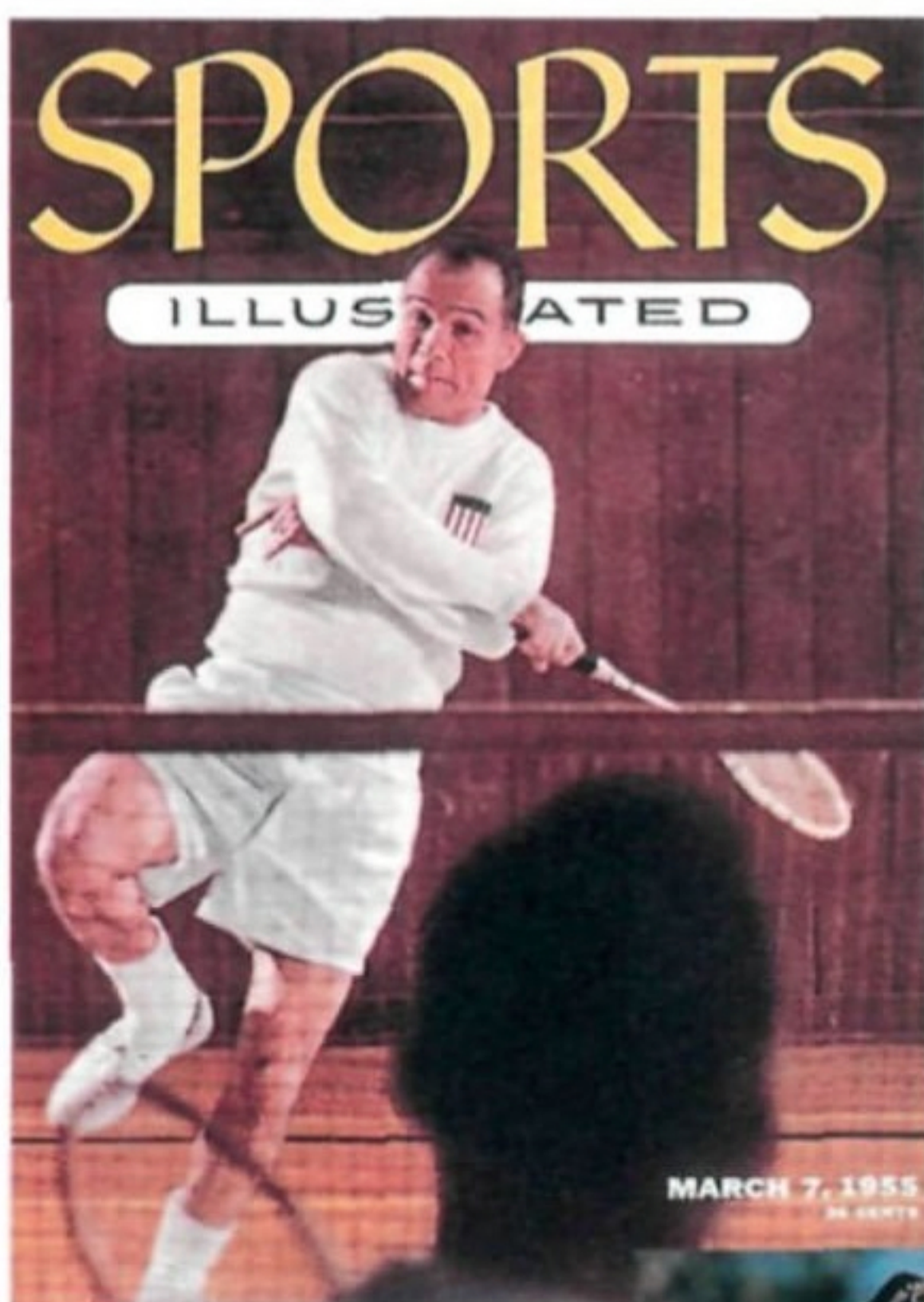
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MAY 3, 1999
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Joe Alston, Badminton Champion

March 7, 1955



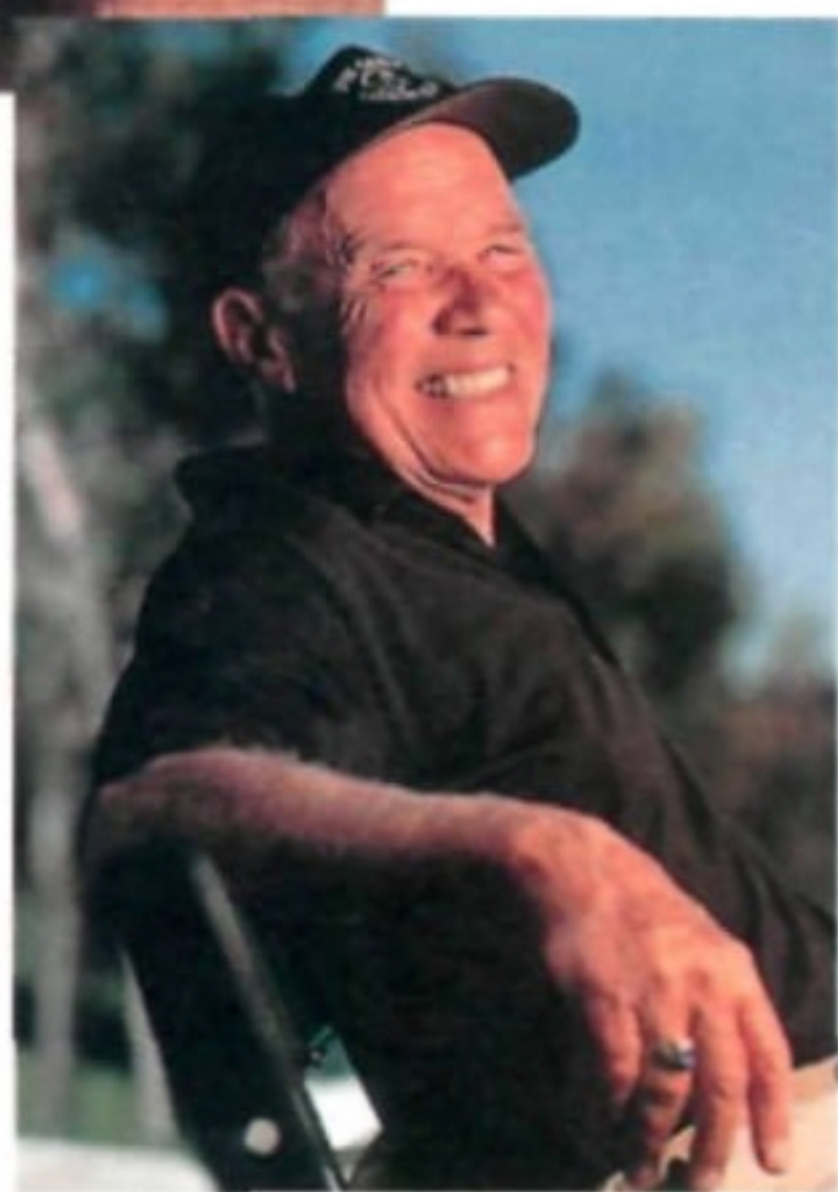
THAT PICTURE," says Joe Alston, the only badminton champion ever featured on the cover of SI, "really changed my life." Alston, now 72, was in his fourth year as an agent with the FBI and had just won the U.S. Open singles title. "I was due to be transferred to checking security clearances when that cover came out," he says. "The bosses said, 'Maybe this isn't the time to have you doing undercover surveillance.' As a result, I continued working investigations—kidnappings, extortions, bank robberies, all the good stuff—the rest of my 30 years in the Bureau."

Alston, who grew up in San Diego, met his bride-to-be, Lois Smedley, on a badminton court shortly after getting out of the merchant marine in 1947. They were married in

'51, just after Joe had won his first national singles title and joined the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover thought having an agent winning championships was good p.r., so Alston was allowed to take several weeks of leave each year to travel to tournaments.

Top-level badminton is to the game we play at family picnics what the NBA is to H-O-R-S-E in the driveway. Alston won the World Invitational singles in Scotland in

As an FBI agent he was involved in high-profile cases like those of D.B. Cooper and Patty Hearst.



MARK KAUFMAN (COVER); ROBERT BECK

1956 and in '57 became the only American to win the all-England doubles title—teaming with partner Johnny Heah of Malaya. He was No. 1 in the U.S. a record 28 times in singles, doubles and mixed doubles, and he won two U.S. Open mixed titles with Lois, who ranked as high as No. 3 in the world in women's singles. Eight times he represented the U.S. in the triennial Thomas Cup team competition, and he captained the American squad in '78-79.

From 1967 through '80 Alston was the FBI's major case coordinator in Los Angeles, overseeing such high-profile cases as those of D.B. Cooper and Patty Hearst. "When I retired from the Bureau in 1981, there weren't many people with as much experience as I had investigating kidnapping and extortion cases," he says, "so it led to a perfect job as a consultant with a private firm in Beverly Hills. I traveled all over the world for the next 10 years."

Hip replacements in 1982 and '86 ended Alston's badminton career, but he still cheers on Lois in senior events. They play golf a couple of times a week near their house in Solana Beach, Calif., and have two sons: Nick, 41, a commercial-mortgage banker, and Tony, 37, an FBI special agent and Thomas Cup veteran. "Every morning I think, God, I'm lucky," says Alston. "The Bureau liked me playing badminton, and my wife loved to play, too. I haven't got a complaint in the world."

—Barry Lorge

