

## The Case for . . . Ian Eagle

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

→ **Iron Eagle** is the title of a relatively old action flick about a wannabe fighter pilot—a poor man's *Top Gun*. It also sounds quite a bit like the name of a relatively young man who may be the closest thing to an actual top gun in sportscasting: Ian Eagle.

That homophonic association was not intended. "People think it must be a stage name," says Eagle, 44, whose moniker (and its pronunciation, EYE-an) is meant to honor his grandmother Ida, not a Louis Gossett Jr. vehicle. "It's not like my real name was Mike Wilson and I decided, Eh, that's not gonna work."

In fact, Eagle's disdain for cinematic flourishes is what makes him so pleasant on Sunday afternoons, when he calls NFL games for CBS. His enunciation isn't forced, nor is his vocabulary self-coined. He doesn't get carried away. His niche is keeping things honest. That's no mean feat in a sport where the action flows less like water from a faucet and more like ice cubes from a freezer-door dispenser, in stubborn, jagged chunks that resist rapid dissection.

Graphics don't always make these matters more digestible; at worst, they slow the info's journey from the screen to the eyes and to the mind. That's where Eagle comes in. He doesn't just have the correct down-and-distance or the obscure rule or the stakes of each situation—he also knows exactly when to layer each detail on the viewer. His magic is as much

about patience as it is precision.

What's more, the man knows how to hook an audience. Take Sunday's clash between the 3–3 Ravens and the 1–4 Steelers, when little more than bragging rights were at stake. Eagle could have simply run with that, but he homed in on a juicier narrative: a Baltimore rush defense that had lost a linebacker (Josh Byner) and nosetackle (Terrance Cody) to injury, and a Pittsburgh stable of backs that lacked even one runner with 100 total yards *on the year*. As rookie Le'Veon Bell churned his way to 93 yards, carrying the Steelers to a 19–16 victory, Eagle narrated the action as if he'd stayed up all of the previous night writing it. It was so fresh.

And, amazingly, Eagle never came off like a know-it-all. A nerd? Perhaps. He is, after all, often confused for 1980s superdweeb Rick Moranis. But when the cultural zeitgeist these days runs more *Big Bang Theory* than *Magnum, P.I.*, that's hardly a knock. Eagle is exactly the type of hipster you want calling, say, a Brooklyn Nets game. That he happens to juggle Nets basketball with his football and tennis and NCAA tournament responsibilities seems, well, overachievingly nerd-perfect.

Still, it would be a mistake to let Eagle's made-for-Brooklyn aesthetic—namely his bespectacled fresh

face—seduce you into thinking that he's above a little mischief. He lives for that, and his on-air partners are willing accessories. Last year sports fans were introduced to the straight-man/straighter-man act he has spent years perfecting with Nets partner Mike Fratello when a selection of their extra-dry late-game exchanges spilled onto the Internet. The blogosphere was convinced that the two were on the outs. "That's something Mike and I do every single day," Eagle says of the rehearsed banter. "The other day, we designed a bit to open up the season: I asked him how the summer went, and then I cut him off and said, 'We really have to get to this Nets preseason game. . . .'"

Alongside Dan Fouts, the other half of the NFL's most symbiotic broadcast team, Eagle is more restrained—but not by much. At the top of Sunday's game he jumped all over the Hall of Fame passer when he referred to Steelers tight end Heath Miller as "a comfort blanket" to Ben Roethlisberger. "Was Kellen Winslow your comfort blanket in San Diego . . . or your *security blanket*?" he asked.

"More security than comfort," replied Fouts.

Eagle is the safecracker of announcers, breaking into the scene with a touch so light you'll barely notice. And unlike with *Iron Eagle*, you won't feel robbed of an afternoon when he's through. □

