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Break Down
the Upcoming Season

EXTRAVAGANT ESCAPES

Our Guide to the World's
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Special

HIGH-DEF ISSUE!

- *Incredible New HD
Blu-ray Players*
- *10 Ultimate
BIG-Screen HDTVs*
AND MORE...





"It's the job of a father to instill values into his son...and what we value in this house is the Minnesota Vikings."

-Per Jacobson (Vikings fan since 1982)

When you connect to a whole new
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imagination lives



Whatever your team allegiances may be, the Samsung Series 8 puts you right on the 50-yard line to view every square in, pitch out and first down in perfect, game-changing clarity. Experience a new generation of television for a new generation of fan.



OFFICIAL HDTV OF THE NFL

when comforters fit comfortably, imagination lives.

At 4.5 cubic feet, Samsung's new WF448 washer not only has the largest capacity in its class, its Vibration Reduction Technology makes for the quietest* washing experience. Now that's something to smile about.

samsung.com/homeappliances

SAMSUNG



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*As tested by Owens Corning for front-load washers at maximum spin speeds.

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SONY®



Screen image simulated.



21 available on Blu-ray Disc™
HD media and DVD July 22nd

HDNA
High Definition. It's in our DNA.

Best

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SONY®

Sony® recommends Windows Vista® Home Premium



Born out of Sony HD technology.

The new extra-widescreen Sony VAIO® FW notebook with Intel®
Centrino® 2 Processor Technology. Learn more at sony.com/hdna



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BestEDITORS'
NOTE

Special High-Def Issue!

About every 10 years, a new product is introduced that makes us wonder how we ever survived without it. The best examples of this decade are the iPod and the cell phone. While you may occasionally wax nostalgic about the good old days when you walked into Tower Records and browsed the aisles, the instant gratification of virtual music and the convenience of a package-less media can't be denied. Likewise, though your cell phone may drive you crazy at times, you'd be hard-pressed to find a superior communication device for emergencies or travel.

We are now on the cusp of another technological revolution. Although it may not be as dramatic as the digital music movement, high-definition is slowly but steadily winning the hearts of television viewers across the nation and usurping the old regime of standard-definition broadcasts. Hollywood is getting in on the action too, releasing their latest blockbusters on high-definition Blu-ray discs. In this issue's "A Vision in Blu," we've picked several Blu-ray players that will make your movies truly sparkle.

The Federal Communications Commission's mandate that all TV broadcasters go completely digital in early 2009 is also encouraging viewers to ditch their old analog sets in favor of digital TVs—most of which are capable of displaying high-definition resolutions. In turn, the cable and satellite providers are doing battle to see who can offer the most high-def options. Our article, "Life Beyond Analog" details some of your programming choices and offers hints on surviving the DTV transition. Meanwhile, in "The Glory of the Gridiron, HD-Style" we review 10 of the best *really* big HDTVs that provide breathtaking HD images, whether you are enjoying fall football or playing PlayStation 3.

We hope that you are as excited about this new era of high-definition as we are. Once you experience an HDTV, a Blu-ray movie, or a high-def broadcast, we promise that you will never, ever want to watch anything but true HD. If we're wrong, we'll send you our old boxes of 8-tracks and VHS tapes.

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linksys.com/dualNband



Simultaneous Dual-N Band Wireless Router WRT610N



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Courtly Classics

Not only is this classically styled home theater speaker easy on the eyes, it is a delight for the ears as well. The floorstanding Klipsch Icon WF-35 has three 5.25-inch high-output fiberglass cone woofers with powerful ceramic motor structures to unleash the kind of deep bass that radiates through the entire room, much like in a concert hall. What makes these speakers really perform, however, is Klipsch's X-Tractrix Horn-loaded technology, which equalizes the speed of sound waves coming from the speaker to produce high-output, well-dispersed, low-distortion audio. Another of the X-Tractrix engineering's key benefits is that it allows all the inner workings of the speaker to fit into a delightfully narrow package. To top off its tasteful design, the speaker has a furniture-grade, wood-veneer finish, available in cabernet or espresso. Whether you choose to showcase the drivers or cover them up, the WF-35 possesses a timeless beauty that will complement any décor.

\$1,499/pair, www.klipsch.com

What's New A sneak peak at the latest & greatest



NO SUNBLOCK REQUIRED

Perfect for the patio, pool area, or deck, the SunBriteTV 4610HD 46-inch high-definition LCD needs no sunblock. This all-weather model is engineered for outdoor installations; it features a corrosion-resistant, powder-coated aluminum exterior that protects the TV's internal workings from the elements, insects, and extreme temperatures. The optional wall mount is also weatherized, and even the remote control is water-resistant. Desert denizens will appreciate the quad-fan airflow system, which quietly keeps your TV cool when temperatures hit 122 degrees F. If the mercury dips to -24 degrees F, an internal heater turns on automatically. The all-weather SunBriteTV will keep viewers outdoors long after summer has passed.

\$5,495, www.sunbrite.tv

GREEN & GORGEOUS

The Fisker Karma is neither coupe nor concept car. But given its ultra-sensuous lines and revolutionary technology, it might as well be both. Although Fisker Automotive may not ring a bell, cars designed by owner Henrik Fisker (among them the BMW Z8 and Aston Martin DB9) will. Now on his own, Fisker set out to deliver a sedan that was beautiful, luxurious, and



environmentally sensitive. The curvaceous Karma seats four in first-class seats surrounded by a host of amenities. The most noteworthy feature of this car, however, is the plug-in hybrid technology. This innovation uses a small gasoline engine to turn the generator, which charges the battery pack that powers the electric motor. According to the company, the

Karma can be driven emission-free for up to 50 miles per day if charged every night. "If consumers follow this routine," says Fisker Automotive, "they will only need to fuel the car once a year." The first Karmas to come off the line in '09, signed by Fisker himself, are reported to cost around \$80,000.

\$80,000, www.fiskerautomotive.com

Perfect Partners



anywhere to avoid worrying about errant speaker wires. A complete, compact system, this Bluetooth-enabled bar has a built-in DVD player with 1080p upscaling, which is fantastic for watching the legacy DVDs in your movie library. Samsung has even included a USB port for easy playback of your other digital media files. Want outstanding audio and great looks in a space-saving package? The HT-X810 is for you.

\$700, www.samsung.com

On the Cuff



Cartier is a global symbol of cosmopolitan fashion, especially when it comes to watches and fine jewelry. So for truly special occasions, one can't go wrong with a pair of Cartier Santos 100 cufflinks. Inspired by the famous Cartier Santos 100 watch, the cufflinks feature steel squares and exposed screws for a classic yet industrial look (they are also available with 18-carat yellow-gold accents). The contrast of steel against the cuff creates a masculine look that is never ostentatious.

\$595, www.cartier.com

LEAN & GREEN

To say the Vectrix maxi-scooter is environmentally friendly is a vast understatement: It is fully electric with zero emissions. In fact, you will never need to buy gas again. The Vectrix's clean electric motor doesn't use oil, either, and it is much quieter than a gas-powered scooter. Simply charge the Nickel Metal Hydride (NiMH) battery using any 110-volt outlet (a full charge takes three to five hours), then take the scooter for a drive on local roads or even major highways. You'll get from 35 to 55 miles on a single charge, depending on speed and weight. The scooter goes from 0 to 50 miles per hour in 6.8 seconds and has a top speed of 62 mph, letting you zip in and out of traffic with ease. Aesthetically, the Vectrix has gorgeous lines and a unique, aerodynamic style. This green machine will not just get you around; it will get you noticed.

\$11,000, www.vectrix.com



10,000 Stations

If your musical tastes tend toward underground electronica, prog-rock, or new grass, you can finally find something on the radio thanks to Sonoro's Cubo Elements Internet/FM radio console. This little device is the gateway to more than 10,000 radio stations of various genres. Distinctive in design, the unit has a jet-black, high-gloss finish topped off with a glowing metal-ring control knob that helps you select stations by geography or category. A full-range upward-facing speaker delivers a surprisingly full-bodied audio experience. Great for listening to sports broadcasts and tunes from across the nation, Cubo Elements opens up new avenues of radio exploration.

\$300, www.sonoro-audio.com

MEMORIES TO THE MAX

With numerous digital camcorders available, it is often hard to figure out which one is right for you. If you're looking for something that provides amazing high-definition video in a dramatically reduced size, then the new JVC HD Everio GZ-HD40 high-definition hard-disk camcorder is a great option. Its full 1920 x 1080i high-definition videos are stored on the built-in 120GB hard-disk drive, and users can record up to an impressive 50 hours of high-def content. One of the GZ-HD40's handiest features is a smart sorting system for clip organization called Intelligent Grouping. Once you hit the Sort button, your clips are organized based on duration and timestamp. This is wonderful news, as it can be hard to find specific clips on a large hard drive. When you are ready to watch your home movies, connect the GZ-HD40 to a TV with an HDMI input. Then sit back to relive memories of your child's first day of school or that game-winning touchdown.

\$1,299, www.jvc.com



Petite HD

Westinghouse Digital's new 26-inch SK-26H730S LCD high-definition TV looks gorgeous whether it is on or off. With its slim frame, piano-black finish, and silver accents, the set fits perfectly in any kitchen, bedroom, or bonus room. It also includes many of the features found on Westinghouse's larger, more expensive models. The innovative SpineDesign, for example, gives viewers easy access to inputs and outputs, while the DayBright panel provides a beautiful image, day or night. The SK-26H730S proves that an HDTV doesn't have to be enormous to offer a great picture. Plus, at only \$500 dollars, it's a real steal.

\$500, www.westinghousedigital.com

Music **2** Go



Be prepared when venturing into the wild with the Skullcandy Link H2O pack, designed specifically for mountain bikers, hikers, and snow enthusiasts. This pack goes beyond simply carrying gear. You can store a half-gallon of water for hydrating on long treks, and the Skullcandy Link technology lets you listen to music from an MP3 player or use a mobile phone hands-free through the strap speakers. Whether skiing, snowboarding, or hitting the trails, the Skullcandy Link H2O pack has you covered.

\$140, www.skullcandy.com



MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Aesthetics are such a big factor in selecting home theater furniture that some manufacturers largely ignore technical considerations—at the consumer's expense. Sanus Systems, however, goes the extra mile to design pieces that are optimized for A/V equipment. The company's two new models—the CFA56 five-shelf audio cabinet and the CFAV34 three-shelf A/V cabinet—are specifically designed with technology in mind. Both feature quick-release back panels for easy access to your components, wire management, deeper shelves that also minimize vibration, and a built-in convection system to keep your equipment cool. Sanus has even considered how you'll move these racks, providing removable "carpet glides" to prevent floor-scratching. Now that's attention to detail.



CFA56, \$850, CFAV34, \$600; www.sanus.com

Designed by a Master

Anything with audio engineer *extraordinaire* Mark Levinson's name attached to it is bound to sound amazing, and LG's LHT888 DVD home theater system is no exception. Tuned by Levinson himself, the audio is as painstakingly beautiful as the design. The speaker's silhouette was inspired by the delicate lines of the champagne flute, featuring multiple drivers in parabolic housings with tapered integrated pedestals. Of course, the speakers are just part of the appeal; the system also includes a DVD player with 1080p upscaling, USB port, and HDMI output. Designed for the décor-driven music and movie enthusiast, the LHT888 will have you reaching for the bubbly as you sit back to enjoy a new album or movie.

\$650, www.lgusa.com



SAMSUNG



with more space in the same space, imagination lives.

The sleek new Samsung French Door refrigerator is bigger inside, not outside – holds nearly 4 more cubic feet* of berries, or more of the foods a foodie loves.

Chef Danny Boome

Danny Boome



*Compared to 25 cu. ft. refrigerators with the same footprint from other leading brands. ©2008 Samsung Electronics America, Inc. Samsung is a registered trademark of Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.

Mouth-watering Music

Despite protestations from gastronomes, resting in a Corbu chaise and listening to a Beethoven sonata through a pair of high-quality headphones rivals the pleasure attained from a meal at Napa Valley's French Laundry. Though larger than earbuds, over-the-ear headphones offer greater comfort—a non-negotiable for extending listening sessions. The new Ultrasone HFI-2200s, paragons of luxury headphones, boast both detachable velvet ear pads designed for long-wearing comfort and maximum transparency from its 40mm gold-plated drivers. The resulting sonorous, detailed audio is totally satisfying. As with all Ultrasone headphones, the HFI-2200s feature the company's patented S-Logic technology that delivers natural surround sound while reducing pressure on the eardrum by up to 40 percent. Now for those hors d'oeuvres.

\$299 www.ultrasone.com



THE GLOBETROTTER

Sony's HDR-TG1 fully featured and fashionably designed Handycam camcorder weighs a mere 10 ounces and truly lets one travel light. Its ultra-portable body measures 1.3 inches wide by 4.7 inches tall by 2.5 inches deep, so it fits easily in a carry-on or even a large pocket. Although the camcorder is diminutive, its recording capabilities are grand, with the ability to capture up to 85 minutes of 1920 x 1080 resolution video. You can also use the HDR-TG1 to snap 4-megapixel digital photos, obviating the need for a separate digital camera. Frequent flyers will appreciate the camcorder's durable titanium body, which is highly resistant to scratches, while the style-conscious will value its slender upright form and polished two-tone color scheme.

\$899, www.sonymstyle.com

Clean & Quiet

High-end, high-tech appliances are becoming increasingly popular as manufacturers provide thoughtful features in more aesthetically pleasing packages. The Samsung WF448AAP front-load steam washer is the perfect example, tackling laundry by offering extra-large capacity in a sleek, modern package. The unit can wash a king-size comforter or a load of 28 bath towels in just one cycle, drastically minimizing the amount of loads you have to do. Vibration Reduction Technology keeps operating noise to a minimum, never intruding upon the sanctity of surrounding rooms. Using quadrillions of sanitizing silver ions, Samsung's SilverCare technology rids clothes of bacteria in cold water—even without bleach. Pick a washer that matches your décor, as the unit comes in Neat White, Onyx Blue, Stratus Grey, and Tango Red.

\$1,500, www.samsungusa.com





ONE-STOP SHOPPING

Panasonic's new SC-BT100 is a total package. The company's first home-theater-in-a-box with an integrated Blu-ray disc player provides a superb image and lets you enjoy Bonus View (picture-in-picture) functionality. This media-friendly entertainment system, however, goes beyond Blu-ray. A built-in dock charges your iPod and lets you play back music or video on your home theater system while displaying audio tracks and menus on

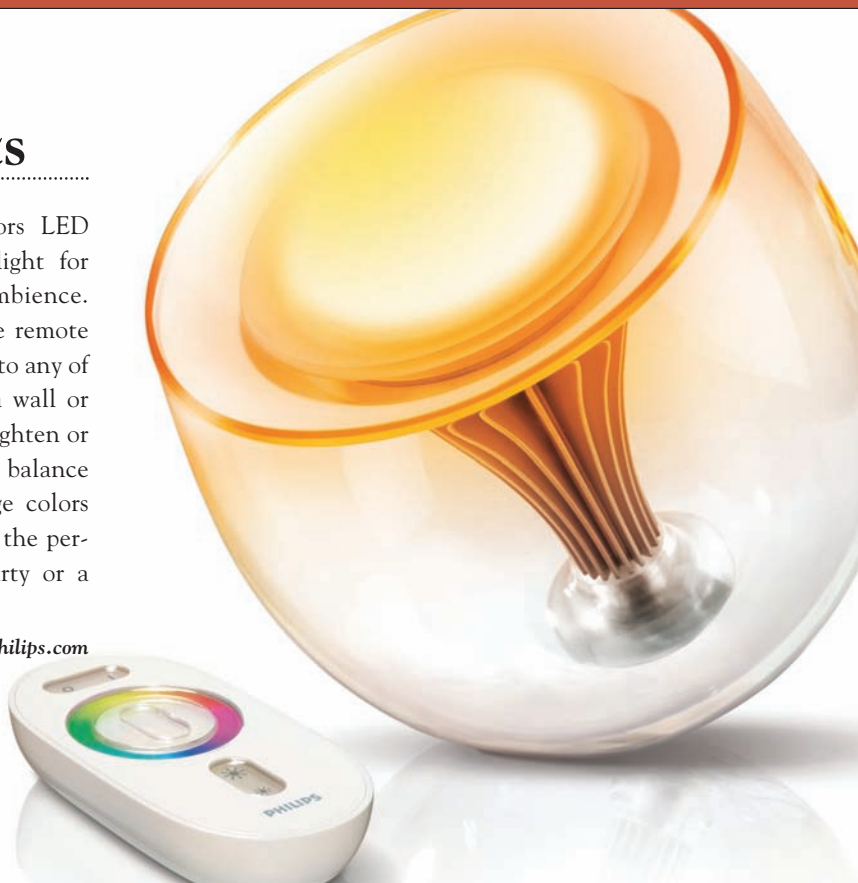
the TV screen. For photo slide shows and home movies, an SD memory card slot on the front panel lets you enjoy your personal memories in standard definition or in high-definition AVCHD format. While the SC-BT100 is a 5.1 system, it is 7.1-channel-ready, meaning it can be easily upgraded with the optional purchase of two side speakers and a transceiver.

\$999, www.panasonic.com

Ambient Accents

Philips Lighting's new Living Colors LED lighting systems combine color and light for completely customizable, portable ambience. Simply touch the control wheel on the remote and the Living Colors' LED will change to any of 16 million selectable colors, washing a wall or accent in colored light. You can also brighten or dim the light, as well as adjust the white balance to get a deeper or softer tone. Change colors depending on mood or theme, creating the perfect backdrop for a festive holiday party or a romantic *al fresco* fall dinner.

\$199, www.philips.com



iPhone Spreads its wings


When Apple introduces one of its new gadgets, lines of consumers magically appear at the few stores where the coveted objects are available, which often leads to shortages and long waits. In September, those lines got a lot shorter when Best Buy became the only other retailer besides Apple and AT&T stores authorized to sell the highly regarded iPhone 3G, the second-generation of the well-publicized gadget. If you want to see the G3 in action, visit the Best Buy Mobile section at any of the 970 Best Buy stores across the country.

8GB, \$199, 16GB, \$299; www.bestbuy.com



the Nile sofa

With this beautifully lengthy couch, you can share a movie in high definition with the whole family, extended family, neighborhood, and zip code.

Available at: 

X3's a Charm



In the compact digital camera world, manufacturers are forever locked in a race to add megapixels. Ironically, the result is often worse, not better, pictures. Sigma, however, stepped back and took its time to produce a small camera, the DP1, whose chief claim to fame is image quality over megapixels and size. Yet the camera is still small enough to fit in a large shirt pocket.

Sigma is a major SLR lens manufacturer, and with the DP1, they have focused their efforts in making the best small camera they could, rather than getting diverted into the megapixel war. The lens does not zoom; it is a purpose-built 28mm equivalent "prime lens." Unsurprisingly, the results are excellent, as the DP1's images have minimal chromatic aberration, sharp corners, and fine contrast. The lens retracts into the body when not in use to reduce the overall size of the camera.

Along with a great lens, the camera also features a very large sensor, similar in size to those found on big, professional D-SLRs. Image files from the DP1 are 4.64 megapixels in size. However, thanks to its unique Foveon X3 sensor, you get approximately three times greater accuracy per pixel. Multiply 4.64 x 3 and you are right at 14 megapixels. The result is that the DP1's pictures easily surpass the quality of most pocket-sized cameras, which have very tiny CCD or CMOS sensors.

Sigma is to be applauded for being the first manufacturer to realize that there is a great demand for a high-quality lens and a large sensor, wedded in a compact package. This little wonder should not be compared with the countless less-expensive small cameras. It is unique, almost old-fashioned and slow to operate—sort of like a "classic Leica" version of a small digital camera. The DP1 will best be appreciated by serious photographers and is perhaps not ideal for the casual amateur shooter who would be better served with a simple, all-automatic point-and-shoot. Overall, the Sigma DP1 is a terrific option for the photographer looking for superb picture quality in a very small package. For more detailed technical information, visit Sigma's website.

\$799, www.sigmaphoto.com

memorex.com



Blu-ray Disc Player

Watch together.

memorex™
fits your life.

Tiny Speakers, Big Sound



You'd never guess the five incredibly small speakers in Sony's new 5.1-channel HT-IS100 BRAVIA Theater Micro System could deliver such powerful surround sound. That's partly thanks to Sony's auto-calibration feature, which optimizes the speakers based on your room's acoustics. Obviating the need for a separate receiver, the speakers plug directly into the included subwoofer, which handles all of the amplification. For video, the HT-IS100 sports three HDMI inputs, letting users switch between high-definition sources like a Sony Playstation 3 and Blu-ray player. A built-in AM/FM radio and a Digital Media Port for external devices like an iPod are just icing on the cake.

\$699, www.sonystyle.com

CORD CUTTERS

It's a wireless world, so why have headphone cables dangling from your ears? The Sennheiser MX W1 wireless stereo headphones feature the company's exclusive twist-to-fit design, which ensures each stylish earpiece stays securely and comfortably in the ear. When paired with the included matchbox-size transmitter, the headphones afford you the freedom to enjoy your music anywhere. Conveniently, the MX W1 carrying case doubles as a charger for earphones and transmitter, so you can recharge the devices up to three times without ever plugging in. Of course, none of this would matter if the earphones didn't perform. Luckily, Sennheiser has that covered, as well. With quality like this, in-ear music has never sounded so great.

\$499, www.sennheiserusa.com



Color Your World



Thanks to Dell's new Studio series laptops, available in seven case colors, it is easier than ever to match your laptop to your lifestyle. Not only do the cases stand out from the traditional black, they also have optional color-coordinated accessories to match, such as portable mice, hard drives, cases, and bags. There are two screen sizes available: Studio 15 models with 15.4-inch screens and Studio 17 editions boasting 17-inch displays. Both models are available with 2.5GHz Intel Core Duo 2 processors. Prices start at \$749, but you can add several options, such as a Blu-ray drive or a bigger hard drive.

\$749, www.dell.com



Play Like Tiger

Nike's new Tiger Woods Platinum collection is the company's premium offering in performance golfing apparel, created to reflect the unique personal style and expertise of the man himself. The company worked closely with Tiger to design clothes that are stylish and technically advanced. The TW Platinum Nike Sphere Pro jacket, shown here, features No Sew technology that allows players to stay competitive by reducing weight and bulk in sleeves, collars, and plackets. External bonding and taping are included in back for uncompromising performance and great looks—on the course and off.

\$210, www.nikegolf.com

THE CHANGELING

Salamander Designs' Jump Seat Ottoman may look like a place to simply rest your feet or park a bowl of popcorn. When open, however, it converts to a small theater seat—a convenient option when guests come over for movie night or the big game. Put an ottoman in front of every seat, and instantly double the capacity of your viewing environment. It even includes a cup holder and a compartment for remotes or game controllers. The Jump Seat is available in 14 leathers, 10 Microsuedes, or a combination of both. After all, versatility is this Salamander's forte.



\$899, www.salamanderdesigns.com

The Time Machine

Most people check the time these days by glancing down at their cell phone, but the truly stylish will have no problem using this elegant watch instead. The Ferrari Panerai Chronograph pink-gold 45mm timepiece is the result of a partnership between these two luxury mega-brands. The watch features a nod to the automaker with its distinctive red second hand and the Ferrari logo at 12 o'clock. Famous watchmaker Panerai has produced Ferrari watches in the past, most notably the Granturismo models, but this limited edition is something a bit more special. It is sold with two wrist straps, a classic black alligator version and a sportier rubber one. Better hurry—only 50 will be made.

\$53,500, www.panerai.com





Conquer the Clutter

Every business traveler gathers piles of receipts during his or her travels. Say goodbye to that clutter with Neat Receipts Advance Release (version 1.0), the company's first product specifically designed for the Mac platform. Using the supplied scanner, this product lets you input receipts into your computer, then manage them using the included software—all via an interface that Mac users will be familiar with. Incredibly versatile, Neat Receipts has several practical features: Multiple Libraries lets you make separate databases for various businesses, projects, or time periods. The program also offers a Document Collections option so multi-taskers can organize paperwork by group to keep relevant items together. Smart Collections gathers receipts or documents based on specific criteria, such as vendor name, category, or date. Frequent travelers should also note that they can export receipt collections to a PDF expense-report format for easy tracking. Versatile and easy to use, Neat Receipts will help you get rid of the clutter.

\$179, www.neatreceipts.com

GO FOR THE GOLD

Though thousands displayed incredible athleticism at the Beijing Olympics, only the rare few mounted the podium for the gold. While Olympic gold may not be in your future, you can still achieve your personal best with the help of the Nike+ SportBand. The band gives runners real-time performance feedback—including distance, pace, time, and calories burned. While the SportBand is designed for those who choose not to run with music, it can also be used with iPod nano if tunes are a must. Perhaps its coolest feature, the SportBand's detachable face (called LINK) captures run data from a sensor located in compatible Nike+ footwear. Once your run is completed, the LINK plugs into a computer like a USB drive, and data is sent to www.nikeplus.com, where you can track your progress.



\$59, www.nikeplus.com



Ready for Action

If you own a newer D-SLR or high-def camcorder, you know memory cards have a tendency to fill up faster than you would prefer. Memory capacities have increased at an inexorable rate over the past few years, and Kingston's new 32GB SDHC card is a prime example of this. With room for up to 6,000 still images (taken with a 10-megapixel camera) or eight-plus hours of video (at a 6-megabits-per-second HD Extended recording setting), you'll never have to worry about precious memories going unrecorded. Furthermore, Kingston's line-up of SDHC memory cards is backed by a lifetime warranty and round-the-clock live technical support so that you'll be ready to record whenever necessary. With this much capacity, you can forever lay to rest the fear of the dreaded "card full" screen as you attempt to capture history. •

\$308, www.kingston.com



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feel free

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Life **BEYOND ANALOG**

This **COMPLETE GUIDE** to **DIGITAL TV**, from the analog cutoff in early 2009 to new high-def programming options, will help you take full advantage of **DIGITAL'S ENHANCED IMAGE QUALITY** and **OFFERINGS**.

By **DAVID ELRICH**



Recently, the airwaves have been saturated with public-service announcements heralding the transition to digital-only TV. This transition will not affect the vast majority of viewers. It might, however, impact people you know, and you certainly don't want them to miss out on their local news or favorite TV programs.

Currently, TV stations transmit broadcasts by analog signals. (Some have already started to send their broadcasts digitally.) These analog signals will stop airing on Feb. 17, 2009, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will require full-power broadcasters to begin transmitting signals exclusively in digital format. This transition will free up the analog-broadcast airwave spectrum for use by public-safety agencies and new wireless services.

If you already subscribe to cable or satellite pay-TV service, the analog cutoff won't affect you, no matter what type of TV you own. However, if you know people with analog TVs who pull in over-the-air signals with antennae (either rooftop or rabbit ears), they will lose their television signal on the cutoff date. According to 2007 FCC estimates, approximately 14 percent of U.S. households (15.5 million homes) receive TV content exclusively over the air—that's a lot of people who will be left in the dark.

DO A GOOD DEED

Be a Digital Good Samaritan and help usher analog TV users through the transition, which can be confusing for those who

don't understand technology. Let them know there are several options available, and the transition is less complicated than it may seem.

To ensure a working television after the cutoff date, the least-expensive approach is to purchase a special converter box that changes over-the-air digital signals to the analog

format compatible with existing analog TVs. Manufacturers like Insignia, RCA, and EchoStar now offer these digital-to-analog converter boxes for \$40 to \$70. To help mitigate the DTV transition's financial impact, the federal government has launched a program where every U.S. household can receive up to two \$40 vouchers to help purchase the converters. The program went live on Jan. 1, 2008, and will remain in effect while supplies last. So far, millions have received the vouchers. For more information on converter boxes and the coupon program, visit www.dtv2009.gov.

Another option is for viewers to subscribe to cable, satellite, or another paid-television service. If they do, the provider will handle the necessary digital-to-analog conversion that will allow viewers to keep using their analog TV sets. Of course, subscribers will also be required to pay the monthly service fee.

Finally, your friends could use the cutoff date as an excuse to buy a new TV with an internal digital (ATSC) tuner. With new digital televisions, which are available in stan-



Will My Antenna Still Work?

If you are upgrading to cable or satellite TV, you can ditch your old antenna. However, if you are purchasing a converter box or even a new DTV and want to continue to enjoy free over-the-air broadcasts, you will still need a outdoor rooftop or indoor "rabbit ears" antenna to pull in these signals. Your current antenna might still work with digital signals; to learn more about the kind you need, go to www.antennaweb.org.

Three Simple Ways to Get Digital Broadcasts After the DTV Transition

1. Purchase a digital-to-analog converter box to connect to an analog TV.
2. Subscribe to cable or satellite pay-TV service.
3. Buy a new digital TV with an ATSC tuner.

standard definition or high definition, viewers won't miss a beat when it comes to watching their favorite TV shows.

Of course, buying a DTV (Digital TV, not to be confused with High-Definition TV, or HDTV) can also be bewildering for the uninitiated. Luckily for them, the FCC has ordered TV manufacturers to add a label on or inside the TV packaging that clearly states if the product has a digital television tuner. (Note that this sticker doesn't necessarily guarantee the TV is capable of displaying *high-definition* content at its proper resolution. To enjoy high-definition programming, viewers need a high-def television that is able to display HD-quality resolution. Not every DTV meets this criterion.)

The TV-upgrade approach begs the question of what to do with an old analog TV. A recent Consumer Electronics Association study found that 48 percent of over-the-air TV viewers plan to keep their TVs and get a converter box. For those who plan to replace their analog sets with DTVs, there are better, more environmentally friendly options than throwing them out. The three best courses of action are selling them, giving them away, or recycling them. To find a recycler in your area, go to www.mygreenelectronics.org.

From left to right: DirecTV On-Demand, MLB Extra Innings SuperFan on DirecTV, Starz Play

STEPPING UP TO HDTV

Whether you are a DTV veteran or switching to digital due to the FCC's all-digital broadcasting mandate, it's good to know many of your favorite channels are making the move to high definition. Cable and satellite providers are racing to deliver the most high-def programming, and fortunately this is one war where the consumer wins, as he receives clearer, more lifelike images on a greater number of programs than ever.

DirecTV Leads the Race

The current leader in the race is DirecTV; last August, DirecTV launched more than 30 additional high-def channels, bringing the company's total to 130—that's a lot to choose from. All these high-def programs are available with an accompanying Dolby Digital soundtrack for better audio, and later this year, DirecTV will begin delivering movies in 1080p, the same resolution offered on Blu-ray discs. That is also great news, as 1080p high-def broadcasts will have more image detail than current high-def broadcasts, rendering sharper and even more lifelike images.

Among the new high-def channels DirecTV launched are Showtime Extreme HD, Showtime Showcase HD, Planet Green HD, ABC Family HD, additional DirecTV HD pay-per-view channels, and 23 more Regional Sports Networks (RSNs), which appear in high definition 24 hours a day. In addition to this full lineup, sports fans will appreciate NFL Sunday Ticket, NCAA Mega March Madness, and NASCAR HotPass—all in dazzling high definition.

While these premium channels are fantastic, what about local news from ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC? In August, DirecTV began rolling out new local HD markets. This project is ongoing and DirecTV promises channels in 121 areas by year's end. When all is said and done, the company will have markets capturing more than 88 percent of U.S. TV households. The new locations range from Augusta, GA, to Youngstown, OH. (To find out if your area will be included, go to www.directv.com.)

Cable and Satellite Providers Closing In

Of course, DirecTV isn't the only game in town. Other providers are following suit and delivering more HD content daily, including Dish Network, Time Warner Cable,



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NFL Sunday Ticket SuperFan Game Mix on DirecTV

Comcast, Verizon FiOS, and numerous others.

Dish Network's TurboHD basic package starts with 40 channels, including ESPN HD, ESPN2HD, Discovery Channel HD, TBS on HD, and many more. You can also get your local channels for a slight additional fee. Like DirecTV, Dish Network offers some high-definition 1080p content via their video-on-demand channels. Not to be outdone by the competition, Dish claims they will offer 150 high-def channels by the end of the year.

The nation's largest cable network, Time Warner Cable, is also in on the action. The company—like many other cable providers—offers packages that include Internet access and phone service along with high-def channels galore. Comcast, the nation's number-two cable network, has a myriad of offerings, depending on your location. It claims 500 high-def choices at any one time, including video-on-

demand movies. No matter how you cut it, that's a lot of HD for the asking!

Upstart Verizon FiOS, the new high-def system from the major telecommunications firm, is ramping up the high-def options as well. In August, they added dozens of channels including offshoots of HBO and Showtime along with Sci-Fi HD, CNN HD, and the Smithsonian Channel, for a total of more than 50 HD stations.

While it may be hard to choose between the various cable and satellite services, you really can't go wrong with any of them. The all-digital mandate and the providers' race to offer more and better high-definition content provide a plethora of HD channels and service options. This healthy competition ensures the best service at the lowest possible cost for the consumer. Now all you need is a high-def DVR to save all that programming; after all, you don't want to miss a thing! •

Images from Verizon FiOS' Smithsonian Channel



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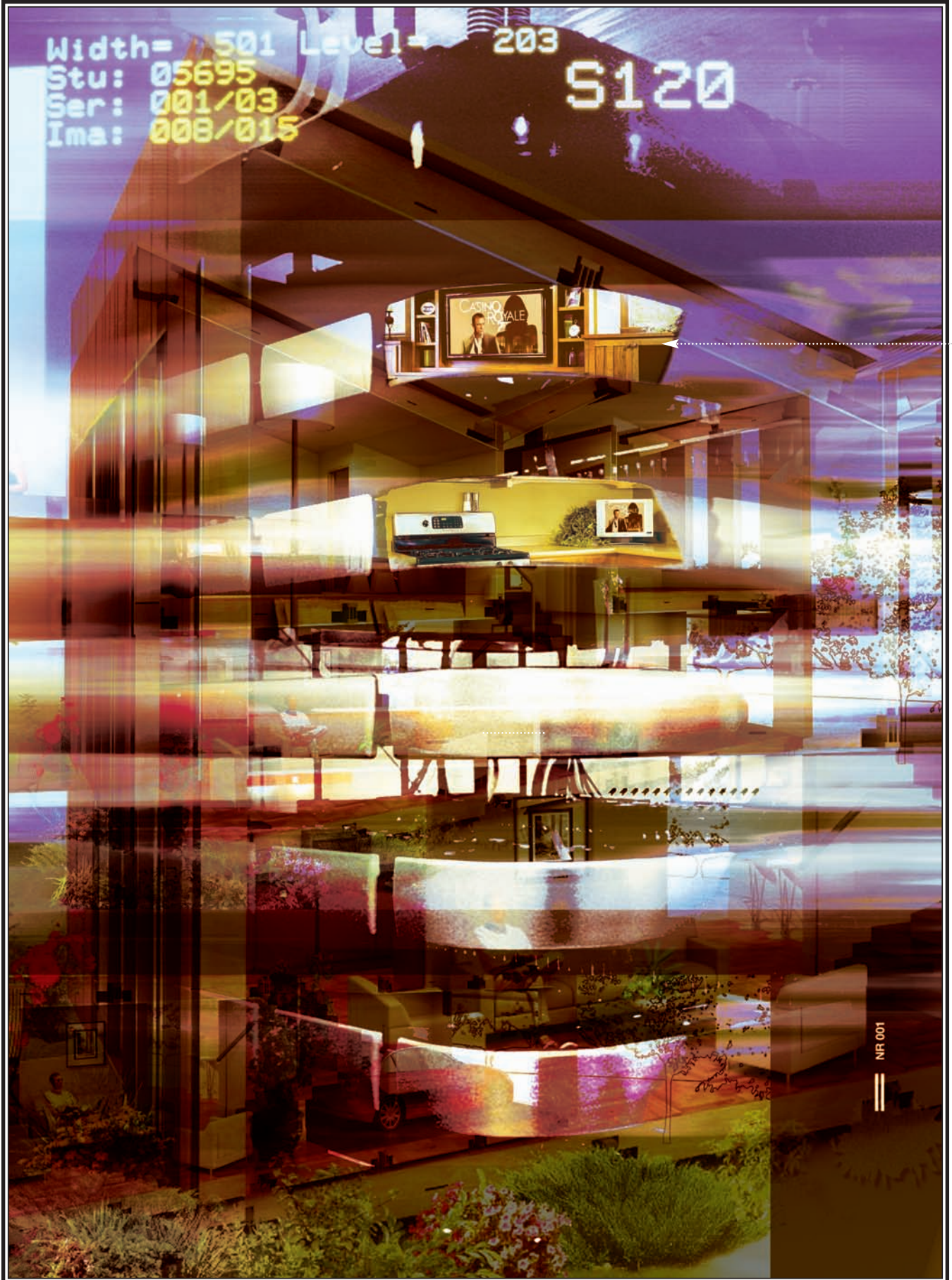


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NR 001

Creating a HIGH-TECH Home

Building a dream home theater or connected home requires teamwork. Here's how to find the champions.

By KRISSY RUSHING

There is nothing quite like entering a world-class home theater. Whether it is a neighbor's remodeled media-room or a friend's built-from-the-ground-up shrine to the movie palace, the environment is ripe for relaxation and escape. A quiet hush descends upon the viewer as he enters this acoustically sacred space, his blood pressure drops as he sinks into a comfortable theater recliner or plush couch, and his body rattles as he feels, not just hears, a film soundtrack through a state-of-the-art surround-sound system.

Likewise, walking into a truly connected home is a remarkable experience. We've seen homes whose owners have the ability to control central air, security, and even the oven over the Internet. A connected home can also work wonders during parties: Lighting can be changed to the ideal preset mode with the touch of a button, and multi-zone audio makes music more consistent from room to room, easier to control, and simply better-sounding. Once you live with amenities like these, it is hard to go back to an "unconnected" way of life.

Of course, one does not create a high-quality integrated home, dedicated home theater, or media room alone. Trained professionals should help usher homeowners through the process. Throughout the course of the project, it is likely that audio/video installers, architects, builders, electricians, interior designers, and even acousticians will lend their services.

In this article, we offer advice for creating a high-tech home, media room, or theater like those shown on these pages, as well as invaluable tips for high-tech shopping. We'll help get you started on the right path to a lifestyle that will change the way you think about technology.

Working with an Audio/Video Retailer and Custom Installer

When embarking on a high-tech project, one has to start somewhere, but it is often difficult for homeowners to figure out where that is. For a new-home project in which you have the luxury of designing a connected home, home theater, or media room from the ground up, it is paramount to talk to an A/V installer *before* your architect draws plans and starts pouring the foundation for your house. Installers have a wide knowledge base that is beneficial at the planning stage. For example, he or she knows a rectangular room is better for acoustics than a square room, and that you may want the ceiling of a theater to be higher than in other rooms to accommodate risers of theater seats. If the foundation has already been poured, have an installer do a site consultation as soon as possible, preferably before the drywall goes up. Once walls are erected, it becomes far more difficult to wire a connected home or home theater for electricity, audio, video, and data.

If you are remodeling an existing space into a media room or theater, take your blueprints and electrical drawings with you to the audio/video retailer. With these tools in hand, an installer can make more informed decisions on issues such as what kind of speakers will sound best and what size screen is feasible considering the room's depth.

Due to the fact installers have to work around existing structures, like support beams, doors, and air ducts, media-room remodels are generally more complicated than rooms specifically designed for audio and video performance. When remodeling a room, creative installers and architects will suggest viable solutions to circumvent troubling room-structure problems. For example, that awkward built-in shelving might be the perfect place to hide a projector and, if filled with books, can act as the perfect acoustic diffuser.

This begs the question: Where does one find a good custom installer? Fortunately, due to the popularity of home theaters and media rooms, it's not hard to find a trained A/V consultant. In fact, some major electronics retailers employ several custom installers who will actually come to the site to figure out what the customer needs, make recommendations for products, and return to install the system. Of course, this industry is growing exponentially, so there are also many less-qualified installers trying to cash in, but who don't have the skills needed to do the job correctly. As with any job, this is where interviewing the potential installer is key. (See our sidebar, "Shopping at an Audio/Video Retailer," for more tips on the experience.)



The kitchen is usually a hub of activity. Many high-tech homes include kitchens with connected appliances, such as ovens that you can program over the Internet to turn on and start cooking dinner before you even get home. Small LCD televisions make great additions to the kitchen, as they are bright enough to compete with ambient room lighting.



Your interior designer or architect and custom installer will end up collaborating at some point. Here, the interior designer and the installer had to work closely to design the custom cabinetry, which features wire management for the electronics equipment, as well as a cabinet covered with acoustically transparent fabric that houses the center speaker.

SHOPPING AT AN AUDIO/VIDEO RETAILER

1) DON'T BE SOLD. If your audio/video salesperson seems more focused on selling you a certain piece of equipment than ascertaining your specific needs, take your business elsewhere. He should ask questions like:

- What are your interests? Watching movies at night? Watching sports during the day? Listening to music?
- Do you have children? Will they be using the system? How many people are in your family? Do you entertain?
- How much time do you plan to spend in the media room?

2) READ THE FINE PRINT. You have chosen an audio/video retailer, selected equipment, and are about to lay your credit card down. Do you really know what you are getting into? Has the store been clear regarding the scope of their services? For example, do they charge a flat installation fee or do they charge by the hour? Do they offer service after installa-

tion is complete if something goes wrong with equipment? What about equipment warranties? Be a smart shopper and read the fine print.

3) MAKE SURE YOUR INSTALLER IS QUALIFIED. While there are many good consultants out there, the industry is growing so fast that less-qualified “installers” are jumping into the business. Just because someone wired their own home for electrical doesn’t mean that they are capable of assembling a high-performance theater. Buy from a reputable establishment (like a Best Buy with its Geek Squad), one that has an actual physical store (not just a company van) where you can experience equipment in action. Be sure to deal with a company that is established, well-financed, and that will still be around if you need updates.

Working with Architects and Interior Designers

Because connected homes and home theaters are becoming so complex, seasoned installers find themselves working more and more with other experts, such as builders, architects, and interior designers. Integrating a plasma display into a bedroom, an LCD in the master bath, or even in-wall speakers throughout the house requires installers to collaborate with these professionals. This process is not guaranteed to be trouble-free, as interior designers, builders, and architects who have no experience designing media rooms or home theaters may find it challenging to work with custom installers. A good installer will be able to make recommendations on talented, local professionals who have experience with high-tech homes, which will help keep issues to a minimum.

For reasons stated above, it's important from the beginning to decide who is going to be the project manager. For example, if you have a finicky architect who is not willing to install huge floor-standing speakers and an installer who wants the audio to sound out of this world, you might have a standoff in terms of which professional wins. Ultimately it will be your decision, but it's a good idea to put someone in charge. If the room's technical aspects are more important than the design, then the installer is a natural choice. On the other hand, if aesthetics are more important to you, then choose the architect or builder. Note that if you are working on a connected home, the installer will usually defer to the architect or builder, who has a bird's-eye view of the home's ultimate goals.

In terms of interior design, you must weigh multiple issues before you choose the carpet and install the drapes. For example, in a home theater, large speakers hidden in walls must be covered with acoustically transparent material, which may or may not be available in the color scheme the designer has chosen. Likewise, an interior designer may not realize hardwood floors and concrete countertops will wreak havoc on room acoustics. If you synchronize your design and technical teams as early as possible, you will run into far fewer conflicts later in the project.



Many installers will have suggestions for interior designers and architects who are competent and flexible—professionals who are willing to make small compromises to get the best end-result for the homeowner. In fact, some interior designers specialize only in theater design, creating theaters that are simply gorgeous, with the right materials and dimensions to foster great audio and video. For more tips on working with an interior designer, architect, or builder, see our sidebar “Managing Contractors.”



Connected bathrooms have special considerations, such as high humidity, that competent installers will know how to deal with.

Just like any project, building a new home theater or a connected home has its challenges, but the real-world dividends are invaluable. •



Enjoying your media room means being happy with the end result. Hiring talented installers and designers who have experience working with technology will help you attain this goal.

MANAGING CONTRACTORS

- **RESEARCH POTENTIAL CONTRACTORS.** When hiring architects or interior designers, check the American Institute of Architects (www.aia.org) and the American Society of Interior Designers (www.asid.org) to see if they are accredited. Not only do these organizations provide ongoing education and training on emerging markets, they often participate in consumer electronic events to help their members understand how to better work with technological elements in the home.
- **LET THEM KNOW WHO IS BOSS.** Make it very clear to your team of installer, architect, and interior designer who the boss is: You. You control what does and doesn't go in your own home. It helps to put one of these professionals in charge to adjudicate conflicts between competing interests. Putting someone in charge will come in handy when there are conflicts, say, between the interior designer, who wants to put a light neutral color in the home theater and the installer, who wants to paint the walls black.
- **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.** When interviewing architects, builders, and interior designers to build and design your connected home, ask them questions to determine if they are the right fit for the job. For example, how does your interior designer feel about in-wall speakers throughout the house for your multi-zone audio system? Are they going to have a problem working around that big pop-up plasma case you want to put at the foot of your bed? You will inherently get a sense of their stance on technology, and if they don't seem open to working with it or to compromise, move on to the next candidate.



This sun porch may not look high-tech, but in fact it's one zone of a multi-zone home audio system. On-wall and in-wall speakers integrated into the ceiling allow music to waft down during parties for seamless audio from room to room.

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The Glory of the Gridiron, HD-Style

Enjoy America's game on the best big-screen displays.

By ADRIENNE MAXWELL

The days are getting shorter, and the smell of fall is filling the air. While it's sad to say goodbye to summer, there is a distinct upside—football season is here! So begins another year of powerhouses and underdogs,

blowouts and upsets, and miracle catches and missed field goals for everyone's favorite college and NFL squads. There's no better way to enjoy this drama than in stunning high-definition on a large screen.



Big-screen HDTVs are available in a wide variety of flavors including front and rear projection as well as beautiful flat-panel LCD and plasma. With so many options, how do you decide which big-screen technology is right for you?

All of the various high-def display types have their benefits and drawbacks. Front-projection systems deliver the biggest screen sizes—from 10 to 25 feet diagonal—and often represent the best overall value. They do present design and installation challenges, however. These systems are not one-piece living-room solutions; you must add a screen and

install it in a room where light can be controlled. As far as more traditional televisions are concerned, rear-projection TVs are still a good deal at the bigger screen sizes—60 to 70-plus inches—but fewer manufacturers are making them. The sex appeal and popularity of big-screen LCD or plasma flat panels are undeniable, but be prepared to pay a premium when you move into the 55-inch-and-above category.

We've assembled our picks of the top performers in each category—gorgeous big-screen displays guaranteed to deliver a great football season, no matter how your favorite team fares.

Big and Thin: Flat-Panel HDTVs

EDITORS'
PICKS

Samsung LN52A750 52-inch LCD HDTV

Like the flashy wide receiver who combines high performance with high theatrics, the LN52A750 demands to be noticed. While other TV manufacturers are trying to minimize the amount of bezel on their TVs, Samsung goes a step further, turning the already slim frame into a design statement. The LN52A750 has an attractive piano-black finish, accented by a hint of deep red and a clear edge along the frame's outer border. The red effect is subtle but adds an extra bit of style to an already elegant TV. (Samsung recently announced it will also be adding Touch of Color models with deep blue accents to its lineup.) Of course, the LN52A750 is more than just a pretty frame.

This 1080p LCD renders a breathtaking high-def image with strikingly rich color, good detail, and natural skin tones. Deep blacks and high brightness combine to create an excellent overall contrast ratio, so HD sporting events simply jump off the screen. Samsung's Auto Motion Plus 120Hz technology is one of the superior 120Hz implementations; it's capable of producing extremely smooth, fluid motion with film sources while also cutting down on motion blur in faster-moving action sequences. All of this adds up to an

amazing picture no matter what you're watching. Plus, the built-in woofer allows for a better audio experience compared with many other flat panels. Because Samsung also manufactures big-screen plasmas and DLP rear-projection sets, 52 inches is the largest screen size you'll currently find in its LCD repertoire. The LN52A750's slightly smaller screen size means a lower price tag than the other flat panels on our list, but viewers won't miss out on features—including four HDMI inputs, a USB port for music/movie/photo playback, and an Ethernet port to access news, weather, and stock RSS feeds. The TV can even be added to a network for streaming media. It's hard not to notice the LN52A750, and any lucky person who purchases this set will be glad he did.

\$3,499, www.samsung.com



Samsung 52-inch
LN52A750



LG 60-inch 60PG60

LG 60PG60 60-inch Plasma HDTV

A good team slogan goes a long way. The slogan for this year's PG60 series from LG is "Taking It to the Edge," and this 60-inch, 1080p model certainly has an edge over the competition: THX certification. Only a handful of flat panels have earned this coveted stamp of approval, which means the TV meets stringent THX requirements in the areas of black level, contrast ratio, color, and video processing (among others). The TV's THX Movie Mode allows users to set up the TV to look its best with one simple menu adjustment. Whether it's movies at night or sports during the day, the 60PG60's good blacks and brightness create a well-saturated image with rich colors. HD signals have a lot of detail, and this plasma doesn't suffer from motion blur with faster-moving sports programming. Even so, LG has incorporated its new Fluid Motion technology to produce

even smoother motion with sports and action movies.

The new PG60 model has a single-layer glass design that allows it to measure only 3.3 inches deep, and its Super Bright Panel helps minimize light reflections in a brighter viewing environment to improve contrast.

The newly conceived "invisible speaker system" places actuators around the frame, creating the illusion that audio is emanating from the entire screen. Available connections include four HDMI inputs, with one on the side panel for easy access after the TV has been mounted on a wall, as well as a USB port for music/photo playback. Looking for an

edge over your friends when it comes to game-day entertaining? Audition the 60PG60.

\$4,300, www.lge.com

The newly conceived
"invisible speaker system"
places actuators around
the frame, creating the
illusion that audio is
EMANATING from the
ENTIRE SCREEN.



Pioneer Elite
KURO 60-inch
PRO-151FD

Pioneer Elite KURO PRO-151FD 60-inch Plasma HDTV

Pioneer's KURO is currently the reigning champ in flat-panel performance, and this year's roster looks even stronger than the 2007 team. KURO means black in Japanese, and black level is the key to this lineup's truly exceptional image quality. Pioneer claims this year's models can produce a level of black that is five times deeper than last year's. While I can't confirm that exact number, I can say the improvement is evident. The deeper blacks give the entire picture more depth, dimensionality, and richness. Colors are lush and vibrant without being oversaturated or cartoonish, and the TV excels at rendering shadow detail and fine contrast. Both high- and standard-def sources have amazing detail, and, as with any plasma, motion blur isn't a concern on faster-moving sports content. In this year's models, Pioneer employs an entirely new Optimum picture mode that monitors the room's lighting conditions and the content on screen, adjusting the picture and sound accordingly.

One notable bonus is the Home Media Gallery that Pioneer carried over from earlier models. This feature lets users connect the PRO-151FD to a home network via the back-panel Ethernet port and stream audio, photos, and HD/Internet video from a PC.

On the aesthetic side, this plasma, with a depth of just 3.7 inches, is about 20 percent slimmer than last year's 60-inch panel. The PRO-151FD is also the largest (and most expensive) of the company's four new consumer models. There's also a \$5,500 60-inch KURO panel that has fewer advanced picture adjustments and some subtle differences but offers very similar performance. In fact, there isn't an underachiever on the KURO team.

\$6,500, www.seeingandhearing.com

Panasonic TH-65PZ850 65-inch Plasma HDTV

Panasonic plasmas are like the Indianapolis Colts of recent years: You can always count on them to be top-tier performers. Plus, Panasonic is one of the few manufacturers that can produce plasma displays greater than 60 inches at a decent price. Granted, \$8,000 isn't exactly cheap, but it is reasonable by big-screen flat-panel standards. This 65-inch, 1080p beauty is part of the company's new flagship PZ850 series, and it offers deep blacks while maintaining ample brightness for a moderately lit viewing environment. Factor in the TH-65PZ850's fine detail and color reproduction, and the result is a TV that will do an equally good job with the *Invincible* Blu-ray at night as it will with Fox's NFL football broadcast during the day. Plus, the image quality holds up from any angle in the room, and motion blur isn't a concern for sports.

Enthusiasts will appreciate the inclusion of the Pro Setting menu that allows for more advanced image adjustment. Meanwhile, the anti-reflective screen effectively reduces light reflections off the glass panel to further improve contrast in a brighter room. This model also uses a single sheet of glass to reduce depth and weight, compared with previous-generation panels. Still, a 65-inch plasma is heavy and will require significant bracing if wall-mounted.

The PZ850 series is the first to feature Panasonic's VieraCast Web technology, which grants access to sites like YouTube, Bloomberg, and Google's Picassa Web photo albums. Viewers also have the option of viewing their own photos via the front-panel SD card slot. Excellent all-around performance on a big screen . . . how can one not cheer for Panasonic?

\$8,000, www.panasonic.com



Panasonic 65-inch
TH-65PZ850

Sharp LC-65SE94U 65-inch LCD HDTV

If you're looking for a big 65-inch panel to use in a bright, sunlit living room, consider one of Sharp's 1080p LCDs: the \$5,500 LC-65D64U or the \$8,500 LC-65SE94U. We've selected the more expensive SE model primarily because it adds 120Hz technology. On a giant 65-inch screen, motion blur will be much easier to see in faster-moving sports and action programs. Sharp remedies this problem with their 120Hz implementation, which does a nice job preserving fine details, like the faces in the crowd when the camera does a quick pan across the stadium. Given its excellent light output and lack of significant glare off the screen, the LC-65SE94U is a perfect choice for a super-bright viewing environment such as a large family room with numerous windows. Thanks to its fine detail, lack of digital noise, and natural-looking hues and skin tones, bright, colorful HDTV material looks fantastic on this LCD. Topping it all off is Sharp's five-wave-length fluorescent backlight, which produces deeper greens and reds than on a traditional LCD.

Though it may have a large screen, the LC-65SE94U's thin design helps keep the overall form factor somewhat manageable: Sharp says this TV is 28 percent slimmer and 9 percent lighter than previous Sharp models. You can also remove the stand and speakers if you plan to wall-mount it and mate it with a separate audio system. Its design is attractive, with gloss-black frame, corner accents, and a silver speaker bar along the bottom of the unit. The marquee connection is the Ethernet port, which grants access to Sharp's AQUOS Net Internet portal to pull up local weather, stocks, comic strips, and (if needed) live tech support. Big-screen LCD HDTVs are no longer relegated to the fantasy draft. All you need is \$8,500 in green to add this first-rate player to your roster.

\$8,500, www.sharpelectronics.com



Sharp 65-inch
LC-65SE94U



Sony 55-inch
KDL-55XBR8

Sony KDL-55XBR8 55-inch LCD HDTV

Sometimes all it takes to turn a great squad into a championship team is a change at one key position. Already an LCD powerhouse, Sony has made one important alteration to this year's flagship LCD lineup. The new XBR8 series marks Sony's first affordable foray into LED backlighting (they also have a \$30,000 70-inch model). A traditional LCD panel uses a single fluorescent backlight to illuminate the entire screen. You can often adjust the brightness of this backlight to improve black level or light output, but LCD blacks are generally not as good as those of other technologies because the backlight can never fully be turned off. Sony's Triluminos LED technology uses individual clusters of red, green, and blue LED backlights to create better color purity and employs local dimming technology for more precise backlighting around the screen. Black areas can remain black, while bright areas can still be spectacularly bright. That gives this TV excellent contrast and makes it a perfect choice for both daytime and nighttime viewing. LEDs also consume little energy and don't contain the mercury found in fluorescents, so they're a green solution. HD sources look wonderfully detailed on this 1080p TV, and Sony's Motionflow 120Hz technology ensures those crisp images remain as such when the action picks up. Motionflow also reduces the choppy, juddery look of film sources to create very smooth motion.

Beyond offering stellar image quality, this very advanced HDTV has plenty of inputs, and its Digital Media Extender and Digital Media Port allow users to attach a host of peripheral devices, like an iPod dock, a Bluetooth interface, or Sony's Internet Video Link for streaming online content. Sony had not yet announced pricing at press time, but the KDL-55XBR8 will likely fall at the high end of the spectrum. Performance of this caliber doesn't come cheap. Ever try signing a top-tier free agent for little money? That's the point.

Price unavailable, www.sonymstyle.com

Big Screens, Great Value: RPTVs

EDITORS' PICKS

Samsung HL67A750 67-inch DLP RPTV

When comparing large-size screens at the local electronics emporium, you'll notice that rear-projection TVs are definitely less expensive than flat panels. The problem is that most RPTVs use a lamp-based lighting system, and that lamp must be replaced every few years. Over the life of the TV, that cost adds up, so it is something to think about when considering a rear-projection TV. Enter Samsung's HL67A750, which replaces the



Samsung 67-inch HL67A750

traditional bulb with an LED-based lighting system designed to last for 60,000 hours. LED light sources are also energy-efficient, so this TV will likely consume less energy than a comparably sized rear-projection, plasma, or traditional LCD flat-panel sets. Improvements to LED technology have increased its brightness potential, allowing Samsung to incorporate LEDs into larger screens like this 67-incher, the largest LED-based RPTV available.

This TV is definitely bright, which makes it a good choice to enjoy a day of college football in a sun-lit living room. It does a nice job rendering the finer details, like distinct blades of grass on the field, while colorful team uniforms pop off the screen. Plus, this DLP-based TV doesn't suffer from the motion-blur issues that plague many LCD flat panels, so details remain intact during faster-moving action. Though it may not be as thin as a flat panel, the HL67A750 is still manageable at 15.5 inches deep and 87 pounds. It even includes an attractive cabinet design that puts very little frame around the top and sides of the screen for a minimalist feel. Never underestimate the importance of longevity: The HL67A750's LED design will help it deliver a dazzling HD image for many seasons to come.

\$2,500, www.samsung.com

Mitsubishi Diamond Series WD-73835 73-inch DLP RPTV

No manufacturer has been more committed to rear-projection TVs than Mitsubishi. The company recently released seven new RPTV models, and this 73-inch, 1080p monster leads the lineup in features and performance. This TV's potent light output and vibrant colors are perfect for watching bright sporting events during the day. It offers excellent detail with high-def sources, and the Smooth 120Hz technology ensures those details remain intact and that motion looks flawless. Blacks aren't quite as deep as those of a projector or a higher-quality flat panel, but HD content still has a solid amount of saturation in a dark room. The viewing angle is better than that of many LCD flat panels, and the screen doesn't exhibit the hot-spotting problem (when the center of the screen is clearly brighter than the outer edges) apparent on some rear-projection models.

The WD-73835 has an attractive design with only a hint of gloss-black frame around the top and sides to focus more attention on that big screen. This RPTV measures 17.5 inches deep and weighs about 95 pounds. It is also 3-D-ready; with the addition of an optional kit, you can enjoy 3-D games and movies as they become available. The TV has a generous connection panel, with four HDMI inputs (including one on the front panel) and a USB port for photo playback. Mitsubishi's Diamond series models are a little pricier than a basic RPTV, but there isn't a 73-inch flat panel anywhere near this TV's \$4,299 asking price. For those who love being on the cutting edge, it's worth mentioning that this fall Mitsubishi will introduce an entirely new genre of RPTV that replaces the traditional bulb with a laser light system. Early LaserVue prototypes look promising, but pricing will likely be more expensive than these Diamond series models.

\$4,299, www.mitsubishi-tv.com



Mitsubishi Diamond Series 73-inch WD-73835



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Biggest of the Big: Front Projectors

EDITORS'
PICKS

Epson PowerLite Home Cinema 1080 UB LCD Projector

On draft day, every team hopes to acquire a steal—a late-round pick who turns out to be a fantastic performer (e.g. Tom Brady). Epson's Home Cinema 1080 UB projector is that pick. At \$2,999, it is one of the best values in the 1080p projector market, but it doesn't sacrifice performance or features to achieve that affordability. The UB stands for Ultra Black, and this projector is indeed capable of rendering deep blacks, laying the foundation



for a rich, well-saturated image in a darkened theater environment. This is achieved by use of a dynamic iris. Similar to the human eye, the iris automatically adjusts itself based on scene content, closing in darker scenes to improve black level and opening in brighter ones to improve light output.

The projector does a wonderful job with Blu-ray and DVD movies, offering good detail, natural skin tones, vibrant color, and very little digital noise. It also has solid light output to bring out the best in brighter HDTV programming, even with some ambient room lighting.

Many entry-level projectors cut corners when it comes to setup features, but not the Epson: Its high 2.1x manual zoom and very generous horizontal and vertical lens-shift features make it much easier to center the image on the screen, regardless of where the projector is. Epson didn't skimp on aesthetics, either: The 1080 UB has an attractive styled cabinet with a white pearlescent finish. Mate the Epson with a 100-inch-diagonal screen, and enjoy this high-value pick.

\$2,999, www.epson.com

Sony BRAVIA VPL-VW60 SXR D Projector

Though the VPL-VW60 may be priced as a mid-level projector (below the reference \$15,000 VPL-VW200 but above the entry-level \$3,000 VPL-VW40), its performance rivals that of its more expensive brother. It uses a dynamic iris, which opens and closes automatically to achieve better contrast, almost twice that of its predecessor, the VPL-VW50. With multiple iris settings and lamp modes available, the Sony permits great flexibility for tailoring the black level and brightness to any viewing environment. The VPL-VW60 is capable of rendering deep blacks to help movies look engaging and film-like in a darkened theater room. It has a nice overall level of detail with Blu-ray and HDTV sources, and its good shadow detail means the viewer is better able to make out the subtle details in darker scenes, which is especially important in complexly lit film sources. If you simply must see the scowl on your buddy's face when your team triumphs over his, the VPL-VW60 is also bright enough to accommodate some ambient room lighting.

The inclusion of two color modes lets the user choose between either vibrant or natural colors, and an advanced setup mode allows a professional calibrator to tweak colors to be even more accurate. The projector is one of the few at this price to offer electric focus, zoom (1.8x), and vertical lens-shift functions, instead of manual ones, to simplify setup using the remote control. Sony is a perennial top pick in the projection realm, and the VPL-VW60 is yet another example of the company's skill.

\$4,999, www.sonymstyle.com



JVC DLA-HD100 D-ILA Projector

Some players have to work hard to become the best, while others are just naturally gifted. It's the same with projectors. The hard-working projectors obtain their higher contrast-ratio numbers by using a dynamic iris that must constantly adjust itself based on the type of content being displayed. While these irises can be successful, their performance varies depending on what they are trying to reproduce. The innately talented DLA-HD100 doesn't use a dynamic iris, relying instead on its natural contrast prowess. JVC lists the projector's native contrast ratio as 30,000:1, and several tech magazines have measured real-world numbers between 12,500:1 and 15,000:1. For the non-techie, these numbers are simply outstanding and give the image extra depth and three-dimensionality over the competition. Blacks are truly black, while areas of light, like white stars in the night sky, still have plenty of pop.

The DLA-HD100 also has great video processing, giving high- and standard-def sources excellent detail. Its neutral color temperature (or color of white) helps skin tones look very natural. Colors look vibrant and engaging.

All these positive traits combine to produce gorgeous movies and HDTV in a light-controlled room. The DLA-HD100's picture can also handle some ambient light, but owners of this projector will want to use light control (like blackout shades) to watch HDTV programming during the day. Other perks include a fan that is quieter than on previous JVC models, electric zoom (2x) and focus controls, and manual vertical and horizontal lens shift. This is simply one of the best projectors that money can buy. To see natural talent on display, see the DLA-HD100 in action. •

\$8,000, www.jvc.com



Picture Perfect

We can't say it enough: An HDTV viewed "out of the box" will not look nearly as good as one that has been properly calibrated. A few tweaks at home will dramatically improve an HDTV image.

- **Get the room ready.** Set the lighting to the appropriate viewing levels and sit where you normally would when you watch TV.
- **Make sure you have a source of high-def signals before your new HDTV arrives.** If you subscribe to cable or satellite TV, upgrade to a new high-def set-top box first, preferably one that includes a digital video recorder for recording and watching your favorite high-def programs at your convenience. Nothing beats a DVR for catching up on shows that air while you're at work, asleep, or traveling.

- **Make sure the set-top box is up and running when your HDTV arrives so you can investigate the TV's different A/V inputs to make sure everything works correctly.** Set-top boxes usually have multiple output-resolution settings, such as 720p or 1080i. For a 1080p HDTV set, select the 1080i output—1080p output is not yet available on any set-top box. If you are having your HDTV calibrated, the technician will want to compare actual high-def signals before and after the calibration is completed. If you don't plan on having a professional calibration, the following easy steps will help you get the best picture quality:

Open the HDTV's picture menu and see what choices you have for picture modes. Chances are one of them is labeled something like dynamic or vivid. Dynamic modes make sets look really bright in showrooms, but they can degrade the picture quality by washing out highlights and emphasizing the edges of people and objects in the picture. Instead, select a setting labeled standard, cinema, movie, or natural. The image won't be as bright, but this mode's lifelike color and contrast will create a more pleasing image. You may also find you don't need the picture to be as bright for normal viewing. Look for the contrast or picture control, and set it about midway (50 to 60 percent). **You may also want to turn down the set's sharpness to 10 or 20 percent.** This will get rid of white outlines around people and objects. Sharpness enhancement is not needed when viewing high-def programs—they are already sharp enough!

Check to see if the picture menu includes a color temperature or white-balance setting. If so, stay away from cool settings, and instead use the medium, mid, 6500, or warm setting to get better flesh tones and more natural colors.

- **Wherever possible, use the digital A/V connections to hook up DVD players and set-top boxes.** This will ensure that you get the highest picture quality with the lowest signal loss. HDMI cables carry as much video information as five component video cables! Any good HDTV will include three to four HDMI connectors, which should take care of almost anything you'd want to connect. Because HDMI connectors also carry the audio signals, you'll have a smaller nest of wires behind your set when you finish setting up. If you've also purchased a surround-sound system with your new HDTV, you can use an HDMI connector to hook into your A/V receiver with minimal fuss.

If this all seems like too much to deal with, many set manufacturers have an easy way to handle it. They have a special "movie" or "home theater" mode that gets the television close to what some feel are the best all-around picture settings. —Peter Putman

*Player: LaDainian Tomlinson,
Photographer: Peter Brouillet*



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A Vision in **BLU**

The time is right to buy a new high-definition disc player.

By PETER SUCIU





While some aspects of the economy have slowed to a crawl, there is a reason why consumer electronics sales are weathering the storm: People are staying put and investing in home entertainment. Purchasing a Blu-ray player is just the thing to take a system from ho-hum to one that exceeds a night out at the cinema. Your favorite movies never looked or sounded as good as they do on this new high-definition format. It is the next best thing to being there.

The heat is beating down in the desert and an army of Saracen warriors is angrily approaching. A few minutes later, the sound is so intense you can almost feel the catapults launching objects towards the walls of Jerusalem. This is better than watching the epic *Kingdom of Heaven* in a movie theater. It's Blu-ray, at home.

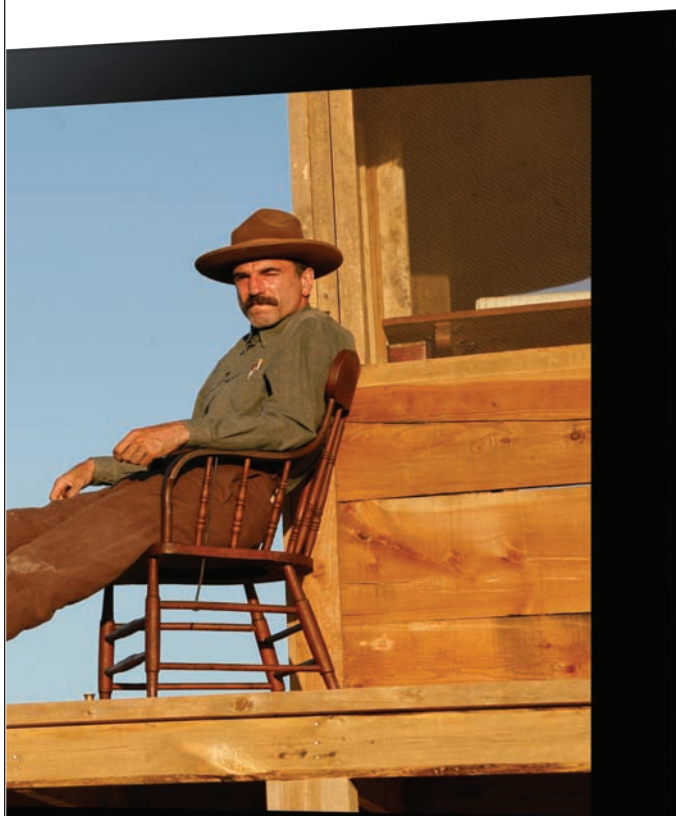
Blu-ray offers beautiful high-definition picture quality (up to 1080p, which is more than twice the resolution of standard-definition DVD), delivering an amazingly bright, crisp, vibrant, and, most importantly, lifelike image. These high-def discs also decode the new high-resolution surround-sound formats, Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio,

which produce rich, exciting sound that is losslessly compressed and therefore more dynamic, detailed, and lively than anything you've yet heard at home. Ideally, when played back, these formats should be identical to the digital master and sound better than Dolby Digital or DTS surround sound on ordinary DVDs.

For those who like to be fully immersed in a film, Blu-ray offers increased disc capacity and therefore more room for extras and bonus content related to the movie. Final Standard 1.1 Profile (also known as Bonus View) players support secondary audio and video decoders to handle picture-in-picture options and will provide at least 256MB of local storage for extra content. This means viewers can check out special features while simultaneously watching a movie. The latest Profile 2.0 players have Ethernet ports and more memory for additional downloadable content from the Internet. However, only specifically mastered Blu-ray discs take advantage of Profile 2.0 (also known as BD-Live) features, and there are only a few such discs and players available as of yet, like Panasonic's DMP-BD50 and Sony's BDP-S550.

Since Blu-ray players will still play and actually enhance the quality of existing DVDs, there is no need to throw your old DVDs out with the DVD player. Because you will be able to keep and enjoy your entire DVD library, the transition to Blu-ray will be much easier and less costly than that of VHS to DVD.

In fact, the time has never been better to make the transition to Blu-ray. According to the research firm NPD Group, approximately 40 million American households now have HDTVs. A Blu-ray player will help you get the most out of your HDTV's enhanced picture quality and wide screen. Here, *Best* has reviewed several fantastic Blu-ray models that make the grade. See them in action at your local electronics emporium, then take one home and enjoy the new *Cool Hand Luke* Blu-ray disc. We promise you won't see anything like it at the cineplex.



**THERE WILL
BE BLOOD** *looked
dynamic and real,
COMING TO LIFE
in the comfort of
the living room.*



Panasonic DMP-BD30K

The Panasonic DMP-BD30K was one of the first Profile 1.1 players to hit store shelves. All Profile 1.1 players are required to have 64KB of onboard persistent memory, 256MB of local storage, and secondary audio and video decoders, all of which allow this unit to take advantage of picture-in-picture features. The DMP-BD30K was also one of the first to output Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio soundtracks in bit-stream format. You will need a compatible receiver to process these new high-resolution audio codecs, such as Sony's STR-DA5300ES. (If you don't have such a receiver, the player still offers standard Dolby Digital and DTS surround-sound processing.)

An SDHC card slot under the flip-down panel reads

MP3s, JPEG photos, and even your high-def AVCHD video, letting you enjoy your homemade high-def movies directly through the player.

Of course, the star here isn't the audio or the features—it's the video quality. The DMP-BD30K does an excellent job with Blu-ray movies. The player made short work of even the most challenging discs and scenes. Films like *There Will Be Blood* looked dynamic and real, coming to life in the comfort of the living room. Standard-def DVDs played back on the Panasonic also looked solid, with even older discs like *Raising Arizona* appearing vivid and detailed and without any noticeable artifacts. This is not the newest player of the pack, but it's a tried and true performer that has earned its many plaudits.

\$499, www.panasonic.com



Sharp BD-HP20U

One of the first things we noticed about the Sharp BD-HP20U is its speed. It's no secret some Blu-ray discs take longer to load than DVDs, but Sharp has addressed this issue with the BD-HP20U's Quick Start option. This feature loads certain discs in record time, with some up and running in as little as 10 seconds.

That's not all we noticed, especially when we switched the player to 1080p/24fps mode. *Spider-Man 3* looked incredible, with bold colors that practically popped off screen and razor-sharp images in both dark and light scenes. Owners of this player won't be disappointed with the image quality.

The audio is likewise astounding, with the transformation of the Sandman in the early part of *SM3* putting out a truly

remarkable home theater audio experience. The player has onboard support for DTS, Dolby TrueHD, and Dolby Digital Plus, but not in bit-stream format—meaning you can't send the surround-sound signal to your new capable receiver for processing. There is also no support for DTS-HD Master Audio or DTS-HD High Resolution.

The BD-HP20U is a Profile 1.0 player, which means that viewers can't take advantage of the picture-in-picture commentary available on some discs. While this may be a deal breaker for some, others won't miss that little bit of functionality. Overall, this is a wonderful value that we

highly recommend for its superb audio and excellent video.

\$399, www.sharppusa.com



SPIDER-MAN 3 looked incredible, with bold colors that practically popped off screen and **RAZOR-SHARP IMAGES** in both dark and light scenes. Owners of this player won't be disappointed with the image quality.



Philips BDP7200

Philips BDP7200

Philips' BDP7200 is both unique-looking and affordable. It's made of dark-gray plastic and has rounded corners for a soft, yet sleek, aesthetic. Like the Panasonic DMP-BD30K, it can output Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio in bit-stream, but, again, you'll need a newer receiver that includes processing for these high-res audio formats. The player is also Profile 1.1 compliant, so it can handle picture-in-picture commentary on so-enabled discs.

In 1080p/24fps mode, the image quality was very good. The on-screen action came through with pristine clarity as the U.S. Marines came ashore in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Likewise, the audio sounded spectacular—especially the film's haunting score. Even when you play your legacy DVDs, you'll find that they look better than on your old DVD player. We especially enjoyed *The English Patient* DVD's sweeping vistas. While the BDP7200 is not as feature-rich as some of the other players in our roundup, if price was stopping you from taking the Blu-ray plunge, this could be the player that will finally let you jump in.

\$399, www.philips.com

Pioneer Elite BDP-95FD

If you desire a top-notch experience and price is no deterrent, look no further than Pioneer's Elite BDP-95FD. This player, which is aimed at the ultra-choosey videophile, offers unprecedented high-definition picture and sound. Audio fidelity will blow listeners away. Along with an internal decoder for Dolby TrueHD, the Elite BDP-95FD features bit-stream output for DTS-HD Master Audio. The sound is as accurate as the director intended, so you can hear the slightest ambient background noises, while key action scenes, like the chase scenes in *Face/Off*, will shake the walls.



This player supports 1080p playback at 24fps, and the video quality is impeccable. *Drillbit Taylor* looked vibrant and colorful, with all the unforgettable facial expressions of the actors coming through in the greatest detail. The picture is rivaled only by the player's dashing good looks; the mirrored black finish is breathtaking. We also like the Source Direct feature that plays the disc's contents at their native resolution or lets the user upconvert at any time without pausing the movie and going through menu bars. The player is not Profile 1.1 or 2.0 compliant, so it doesn't allow for picture-in-picture commentary or connection to the Internet for additional bonus content, but other than that, this is a solid, high-end player any discerning movie buff will love.

\$999, www.pioneerelectronics.com



Pioneer Elite BDP-95FD



Panasonic DMP-BD50

We are big fans of Panasonic video products, and the DMP-BD50 is no exception. The player is one of the first Profile 2.0-compliant standalone players. What this means is that it has an Ethernet port and can access Internet features available on a handful of movies when connected to the Internet (the player is also compatible with Profile 1.1 discs for picture-in-picture functionality). The DMP-BD50 looks remarkably like its sister, the DMP-BD30K, and like that unit, plays back your own AVCHD high-def home videos through the front panel's SDHC card slot.

Unlike the BD30K, the BD50 has onboard audio decoding of the high-resolution surround-sound formats, Dolby

TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio. This means you don't have to replace your receiver with one that can decode these surround-sound formats in order to enjoy them, as the player does the work—and with wonderful results. The roar of the shoot-out in *3:10 to Yuma* was particularly stunning. But even better is the video quality, which is dazzling. Detailed, crisp images appeared in every scene, and *Bee Movie*—a great disc to show off your home theater—practically buzzed off the screen. Another pleasant surprise is the player's quick loading times. Because Blu-ray discs have such high capacities and are usually filled with content, they can take a long time to load. The BD50, however, is fast, comparatively speaking. While this player isn't cheap, the stellar image quality, quick loading, and outstanding audio make it worth the price.

\$699, www.panasonic.com



Samsung BD-P1500

The relatively inexpensive Samsung BD-P1500 supports Profile 1.1 for picture-in-picture features. Samsung has also included an Ethernet port and a USB 2.0 port to allow for network connection and firmware upgrades—along with the promise of a Profile 2.0 upgrade for the player later this year. This unit boasts onboard decoding for Dolby TrueHD, and can output TrueHD and DTS-HD in bit-stream format. Surprisingly, there is no onboard decoding for DTS-HD Master Audio, but again, Samsung pledges a downloadable upgrade later this year. Regardless, the audio was simply spectacular. In fact, we felt the explosive special effects in *Next* as much as we



heard them—it's that good.

A slick design is a sign of good things to come when you hit the play button, with a phenomenal picture just a touch away. *National Treasure 2* looked amazing—coming alive in the final scenes at Mount Rushmore. With a perfect picture and full-bodied audio, this smooth-looking player is a package deal at an affordable price.

\$399, www.samsung.com

You haven't really seen **NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN**
until you've seen it on a
HIGH-QUALITY BLU-RAY PLAYER.



Sony BDP-S550

From the first scenes of *No Country for Old Men* you can understand why the Coen brothers' opus took home the Oscar for Best Picture. But you haven't really seen this movie until you've seen it on a high-quality Blu-ray player, such as Sony's BDP-S550. In 1080p/24fps mode, the film looked incredible, especially the open prairies of Texas in the first few scenes. In fact, this player lets viewers enjoy films exactly as directors like the Coen brothers intended audiences to see them. Even more technically challenging movies, like *Ghost Rider*, proved to be no problem for Sony's BDP-S550, which made quick work of even the most action-intensive scenes.

This new entertainment machine is Profile 2.0, so it has Bonus View and BD-Live capability, and comes with a 1GB storage device. Onboard and bit-stream decoding for Dolby TrueHD and Dolby Digital Plus, as well as bit-stream output for DTS-HD High Resolution and DTS-HD Master Audio are included. Listening to one of these high-res audio formats through good surround sound speakers, audio is enticing, enveloping, and earth-shaking.

Another useful feature is Sony's BRAVIA Theatre Sync, which powers on your entire home theater with a button-push. This well-rounded champion is worth every penny.

\$500, www.sonymstyle.com



GHOST RIDER *proved to be no problem for Sony's BDP-S550, which made **QUICK WORK** of even the most **ACTION-INTENSIVE SCENES.***





Denon DVD-3800BDCI

The most expensive unit on our list also gets some of the highest marks for features and performance. Denon's DVD-3800BDCI advanced player offers a

Realta sXT2 HQV (Hollywood Quality Video) processor for truly exceptional video processing. *The Blade Runner Ultimate Collector's Edition* Blu-ray looked phenomenal, with this restoration having especially great depth and detail through the Denon. Blacks—and there are a lot of them in this film—looked wonderfully dark, and the contrast of light and shadow came across beautifully on the Blu-ray format.

The DVD-3800BDCI also features D.D.S.C.-HD circuitry for the highest level of audio decoding, so you get high-quality sound with wide dynamic range. The *Blade Runner* Dolby TrueHD track sounded lively, with great imaging in the rear speakers and the legendary score coming through prominently but with finesse.

Because this is a Denon "CI" (Custom Install) unit, it has advanced connectivity and control features that installers will find useful in more complex systems. The player is Profile 1.1, which means that you can watch a secondary audio and video track while the film is playing. This DVD-3800BDCI is expensive, and it's targeted at those who have a high-end system that will most likely be integrated by an A/V professional. Its shockingly good audio and video quality on Blu-rays, in addition to a robust feature set and advanced A/V processing, are worth the extra cost.

\$1,999, www.usa.denon.com



Insignia NS-BRDVD

The Insignia NS-BRDVD offers excellent A/V performance, at a price that can't be beat. If that's not enough, the unit comes with \$100 in coupons for movies—a fine way to get a Blu-ray collection started. For the price, you get a great Blu-ray player with features, like the included SD card slot for playback of your personal media, lacking on some higher-end players.

In terms of audio, the player decodes Dolby Digital Plus,

DTS-HD, and two-channel Dolby TrueHD, all with superb results. The chase scene at the beginning of *V for Vendetta* was robust and appropriately bombastic. The high-def 1080p picture was very good as well; even the darkest scenes offered fine detail. Don't let its price tag or straightforward looks fool you:

This is a first-rate player. What the Insignia NS-BRDVD may lack in the style department, it more than makes up for with its striking picture and audio quality. You simply can't go wrong.

\$329, www.bestbuy.com



Blu-ray Movie Moments

Want to show off your new Blu-ray player and HDTV? While almost any movie on Blu-ray will look and, just as importantly, sound magnificent, there are some that go the extra mile to impress. Here are a few Blu-rays that reveal the true capability of the format.

CASINO ROYALE

This “reboot” of the James Bond franchise ditched the gadgets and far-fetched villains but thankfully kept the signature Bond girls and fancy cars; it’s eye candy for your system. The opening teaser is intentionally grainy, but it serves as a good contrast for the lush colors in later scenes, such as the Madagascar chase sequence. The audio also excels where Bond does—in the heat of . . . pursuit. Again, the early foot chase in Madagascar will put your system through its paces, along with the collapse of the building in Venice toward the film’s end. Nearly any scene here is good enough to show off your system’s Blu-ray potential.

> MGM/Columbia Home Entertainment

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

Clint Eastwood’s World War II epic does what few films have done—it humanizes the enemy. The invasion of the volcanic Pacific atoll by the U.S. Marine Corps is harrowing, and it couldn’t look more gorgeous or sound more enveloping than it does on Blu-ray. The brilliant cinematography features a muted color palette that just goes to show you that a film doesn’t have to be oversaturated and colorful to look spectacular on this format. In fact, *Iwo Jima* shines on deep black levels, shadow detail, and rich contrast. The Dolby TrueHD soundtrack has enveloping surround that is crystal clear, with deep, resounding bass. This film got the royal treatment on Blu-ray and has earned its spot in any self-respecting movie fan’s library.

> Warner Bros. Home Video

I AM LEGEND

I Am Legend is the stuff that great visuals are made of. A retelling of *The Omega Man*, Will Smith is possibly the last man on Earth, exploring a vacant New York City. The opening sequences as he drives through a deserted Manhattan are especially impressive from a video and audio perspective. The picture has an unbelievable sense of depth, and the audio is aggressive during the action scenes, with attention to fine detail and atmosphere in the quiet moments. With an alternate version included on a single disc, this one is proof of what the increased capacity of Blu-ray can offer!

> Warner Bros. Home Video

PLANET EARTH: THE COMPLETE BBC SERIES

This is perhaps the ultimate title to show off your Blu-ray player’s video quality, not to mention your high-definition TV. One of the most widely acclaimed nature documentaries ever made, BBC’s *Planet Earth* contains hours of breathtaking cinematography featuring unbelievable creatures and plants that have rarely been photographed. Of course, this was all shot in high-definition, and looks even better than the original broadcast version, which was highly compressed as all HD broadcasts are. Simply put, you haven’t seen *Planet Earth* unless you’ve seen it on Blu-ray. This series is an absolute must-have for the aspiring videophile. •

> BBC Video



TAKE OFF *with Blu-ray*

What better way to enjoy your favorite TV shows than with a Blu-ray boxed set? The high-definition video and sound is simply superb. We've chosen some great shows—from superhero outings to hospital dramas—to help you settle into fall viewing mode before the new television season begins. If that's not enough, we've also included some new Hollywood Blu-ray releases for your movie-watching pleasure.

By CHRIS CHIARELLA



< **Heroes: Season 1 and Season 2**

It's a really good time to be a superhero. With a tin man, that flying rodent guy, and a green goliath up on big screens this past summer, misunderstood do-gooders have sprung from the printed page and gone mainstream to an extent never imaginable. Not content to dramatize the

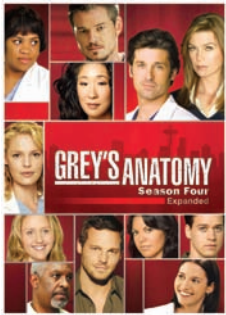
exploits of established comic-book champions (and pay the hefty royalties to DC and Marvel), NBC trotted out their own lineup of everyday folks suddenly coping with newfound über-human abilities—and not without a touch of irony.

There's Politician Nathan, who dreams of leaving his responsibilities behind, only to discover he can fly. Young cheerleader Claire (Hayden Panettiere in a breakout role) can

heal from any injury in a matter of seconds. Spoiled rich princess Eden can wrap people around her finger. And *Star Trek* fan Hiro can warp through space and time (his father is played, incidentally, by *Star Trek*'s George Takei). *Season 1* charged the superheroes with figuring out who among them would become a living nuclear bomb over Manhattan, while villain Sylar (played eerily by Zachary Quinto) emerged, collecting superpowers like souvenirs of his coast-to-coast hero-killing spree. The climactic showdown set up a complicated *Season 2*, linking a story set in feudal Japan with visions of a future where an engineered plague has killed almost all of mankind.

Both seasons are debuting on Blu-ray with cast/creator commentaries, a celebration of the work of show artist Tim Sale, and much more. The *Season 2* set tells the tale of a finale that never was and further fleshes out this new mythology with faux news reports and documentaries which, like the show itself, always take themselves just seriously enough.

Universal Studios



< Grey's Anatomy: Season Four—Expanded

My local hospital is manned by a bunch of tired, dour, unattractive MDs, a world apart from all the McBeautiful people of *Grey's Anatomy*. These bed-hopping life-savers always make for compelling drama. If you're a fan, this was a rewarding, rebuilding season, surviving the loss of Kate Walsh, who went off to start her own *Private Practice*. But at Seattle Grace, no one stays happy for very long. I guess it must be all the rain. The bonuses provide an overview of the new personnel, behind-the-scenes moments with Patrick Dempsey and Eric Dane, an extended version of the *Forever Young* episode with commentary, and deleted scenes. Bloopers are included too, which, of course, are something best relegated to TV hospitals only.

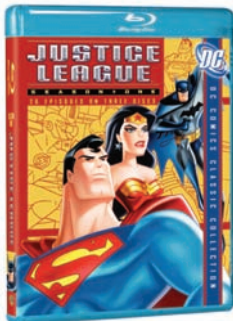
Buena Vista



< Prison Break: Season Three

Big-hearted brainiac Michael Scofield finds himself locked inside a Panamanian hellhole so utterly forsaken the guards have all walked away and even the military won't set foot inside. Kidnapping, blackmail, and extortion compel him to pick up his shovel once again, with some familiar nemeses at his side and the help of his tough-lug brother Linc—this time on the outside of the fence looking in. The suspense remains high in this 13-episode season, but thankfully with Blu-ray we can set our own pace if we just can't wait to unravel Michael's latest challenge or learn more about the deeper conspiracy. Cast and crew snitch about making their latest escape on the final disc.

Fox



< Justice League: Season One

Ambitiously conceived as a logical next step after the glory of the animated *Batman* and *Superman* series, *Justice League* presented distinct characterizations of Wonder Woman—rounding out DC Comics' central trinity—along with The Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, and Hawkgirl. The heros must band together to face an alien threat that none of them can defeat alone, combined their unique skill sets thwart incredible villains, with a bigness only possible in animation. Every adventure in this set is either a two- or three-partner min movie dealing with time and space travel, alternate universes and beyond, drawn from classic comic-book storylines and new originals, always with wit and thrills galore. The creators, meanwhile, reveal their secret identities in a variety of extras.

Warner



< Smallville: The Complete Seventh Season

The discovery of a seriously dark—and seriously good-looking—"Supergirl" helped breathe new life into this seventh year of the awkward Kryptonian-American's post-pubescent exploits. Clark enjoys a bit more airborne activity, despite the producers' edict of "No tights, No flight" for the Teen of Steel, while facing still more troublesome green and crimson rocks from his home planet, and the even-more-dangerous angst from his friends and foes. He also manages to find time for a little pro-am crime fighting alongside future fellow Justice Leaguers Aquaman, Green Arrow, and Black Canary. And once again we fans are given a look at what's different this season and how the twisting story line took shape.

Warner



< **The Godfather: The Coppola Restoration Collection**

Few blockbusters command the widespread, enduring appeal of *The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola's richly crafted adaptation of Mario Puzo's landmark Mafia tale. With their frame-by-frame restoration of *The Godfather* and *The Godfather: Part II*, more than a year in the making, Paramount has created one of the first must-have Blu-rays to help get this next-gen party started. In high definition, most audiences will see them as never before, as chronic degradation of the original 1970s film elements—now reversed—had heretofore blighted Gordon Willis' iconic, deliciously shadowy cinematography. An archive of the coveted supplements from the 2001 DVD set is joined by new special features, demystifying the restoration while providing fresh perspectives on the production and the subsequent *Godfather* culture, with appearances by most of the participants who have not shuffled off to that tomato garden in the sky. A remastered *Godfather: Part III* is here, too.

Paramount



< **Transformers**

For better or worse, nobody does summer blockbusters quite like director Michael Bay. And this toy-inspired opus is a bombastic treat for the eyes and ears as tasty as hot buttery popcorn that never asks us to engage our higher brain functions. Warring factions of living robots—disguised as American-made cars, trucks, and cell phones—come to Earth to do battle, so brace your home theater for the onslaught. They bring with them all the behind-the-scenes info we can handle, too, be it via onscreen text, picture-in-picture with Bay and executive producer Steven Spielberg, or copious featurettes about the winning partnerships with Hasbro, Chevrolet, Industrial Light & Magic, and even the U.S. Army. Newfangled BD-Live bonuses let us download alternate “Menubots” and more.

Paramount



< **How the West Was Won**

They don't make 'em like this anymore. No, really: Forget the star-studded cast (Gregory Peck, James Stewart, Henry Fonda) and epic story line that spans the Louisiana Purchase to the first transcontinental railroad. *West* was one of only two dramatic movies shot in the ultra-wide full “Cinerama” format, a complicated process requiring three 35mm cameras to capture and three projectors to display in theaters, with breathtaking widescreen results. Years of restoration have rendered an immaculate home video presentation of this 1962 Oscar-winner. This set's two discs are filled with extras, including an expert commentary, documentaries, and the Blu-ray-exclusive “SmileBox” version that presents the film with a unique curvature that virtually recreates the Cinerama experience at home, all inside a lavish Digi-book package that recreates the original press book. It's a piece of American history—and movie history—that will enhance your growing Blu-ray collection.

Warner



^ Cool Hand Luke

Paul Newman's antihero Luke is one of the most memorable roles of his more-than-five-decade career. In this timely gem from the tumultuous era of the late 1960s, he's a causeless rebel if ever there was one, bucking the establishment with a laid-back charm all his own. Sent to work on a chain gang after a drunken act of vandalism, he rubs his captors the wrong way while inspiring his fellow inmates. Ultimately, he is unable to stay put and serve his time like the dead-eyed sheep who surround him. This Blu-ray edition of the classic film features a running audio commentary by Paul Newman biographer Eric Lax, plus a mini-documentary that takes us back in time to the birth of *Luke*.

Warner



< Iron Man

A second-tier Marvel good guy played by Robert Downey, Jr. is certainly no guaranteed formula for success, yet the humor, heart, and high-tech thrills of *Iron Man* raised the bar for all comic-book movies. As billionaire industrialist Tony Stark, Downey goes from smug hedonist to rocket-powered champion of the innocent, and it's a wild ride. The bombastic Dolby True HD soundtrack just might inspire you to go out and buy a new subwoofer, as blasts of all description rock the home theater. Likewise, some of Industrial Light & Magic's best special effects to date are ideally savored in full 1080p. An entire second disc delves deeper, as we're given highlights of the armor-encased character's 45-year history in comics, secrets of the film's production, cast rehearsal, the star's screen test, and even a satirical faux news item from *The Onion*, all in high-def!

Paramount



< Kill Bill Vol. 1 & Vol. 2

From its first moments (the Shaw Brothers logo, the Klingon proverb, the theme from TV's *Ironside*) *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* reveals itself to be an educated pop-culture mash-up of the highest order, a bold reinvention of the martial arts genre by cinematic madman Quentin Tarantino. The sword-wielding Bride's (Uma Thurman) showdown with murderous Gogo and her steel ball/chain of death backed by the entire Crazy 88 army at House of Blue Leaves is the stuff of modern movie legend. It is also one of the most popular home theater demo scenes in recent years. The *Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* Blu-rays also enhance the films' dynamic, visually arresting camerawork and extreme colors, particularly in the eight-minute anime scene of *Vol. 1*. The longer, tonally more subdued *Vol. 2* provides both backstory and the much-anticipated resolution to this four-hour journey of revenge. Individual "making of" programs and music clips are provided, plus a *great* deleted scene from *Vol. 2*. •

Miramax



Take Your Best SHOT

*How to maximize return on investment
from your new digital camera.*

By GARY CRALLÉ

Digital technology has revolutionized photography, making it easier and more fun than ever before. Since many of the technical aspects of taking pictures have been programmed into the latest cameras, the photographer is free to concentrate on taking pictures rather than worrying about exposures. Photographers can select the Program or Auto mode to let the camera do almost everything, yet they still have the option of getting deeply involved. Simple or serious, it's the photographer's choice.



Photography is very personal, as it expresses the shooter's point of view, creation, and commentary on the world around him. It's visual communication: While talking is spontaneous and writing is thoughtful, photography is both. As a professional travel photographer who has been to 65 different countries over the years, I ask myself why I forgo a more sedentary life. Upon reflection, I realize my personal mission has been to discover and explore the world and myself. I search for beauty to record with my cameras, because beauty nourishes the soul. It doesn't matter whether you are a self-described snaphooter, avid shutterbug, passionate amateur, or a serious pro, you can find beauty in your favorite subjects by following a few simple guidelines.

Portraits

Humble snapshots are the most sincere type of photography. The photographer simply wants to capture the essence of someone's personality at a certain moment in time. In fact, snapshots of family and friends probably make up the majority of all pictures taken. With a few rules to guide you, you can take these portraits to the next level.



1) Decide what you want to say. Deciding what you want to say about someone may be intuitive or require a bit of thought. Are they serious or happy-go-lucky, studious or into sports? Perhaps you want to show their profession. After deciding your purpose, pose your subject accordingly. For example, a football player could stand close to the camera, with a stadium filling the background, or a musician could play his instrument. Subjects can either interact with the shooter by looking at the camera or focus their attention elsewhere. The results will be entirely different, of course, but that's what makes portraits interesting. They change based on the photographer's point-of-view and the message he is trying to convey.

2) Relax the subject. Paying more attention to the person or people you are photographing than your camera will put the subject at ease. If necessary, use the Auto setting to free you from any technical concerns. It's amazing what cameras can do these days. Whether I am using my pro-quality Olympus E-3 or my Stylus fun camera, the principle is the same: Interact with your subjects. It often helps if the you tell the subject what you are trying to convey through the portrait, ensuring complete cooperation for better pictures.

3) Get closer and keep it simple. The framing of your subject determines what viewers will look at. A full-length portrait of a bride will highlight her wedding gown. In a closer shot, her flower bouquet might be the center of attention. Closer still, a head-and-shoulders shot reveals her dazzling smile. Get no closer than 3 feet and use the necessary focal length to fill the frame; this should prevent optical distortion. Another benefit of near proximity is distracting background details are eliminated, allowing the subject to shine.

Scenics

1) Timing is everything. Scenics are most dramatic near the beginning and end of the day, when colors become magical, shifting from blue to amber and shades of salmon pink. These atmospheric tones seldom exist at any other time of day. For example, the low sun throws long, striking shadows, heightening the three-dimensional effect of every scene, while the sun at dusk—also known as the magic hour—lends scenics a warm, radiant glow.

2) Quality and direction of light render the same subject differently. Bare sunlight glancing off trees and mountains separates subjects from their surroundings, adding sparkle and contours. The diffuse light of an overcast or foggy day makes colors more pastel and even, while the absence of harsh shadows means that detail normally lost in deep shade is subtly revealed. Keep this in mind for getting excellent tree and flower details.



3) *Changing weather patterns create a drama unmatched by sunny, blue-sky days.* Don't put your camera away during so-called bad weather; keep it ready to record some of Mother Nature's best moments. My waterproof Olympus Stylus 770 SW goes everywhere with me. On rainy days, use a sandwich bag to protect your camera from moisture if it isn't waterproof.

Sports

1) *To freeze fast action, use the Action or Sports mode programmed on most digital cameras.* This mode automatically uses a fast shutter speed when shooting. With the blink of an eye, motion is stopped in its tracks.



2) *Anticipate the action.* With a bit of observation and planning, photographers can predict where the ball and bat will intersect or when a skateboarder will be at the height of his jump. That's where to aim and wait. If the camera has a burst or continuous mode, try it; several quick shots in succession are more likely to capture the peak of action than human reflexes.

3) *For a creative blur, try a slow shutter speed.* If your camera has a Shutter mode, set the shutter to $\frac{1}{4}$ th of a second or longer, then experiment. In Aperture mode,

use a small opening such as f/16. Either of these settings should allow a blur that shows your subject in slow motion without a "busy" background when used in low light. This technique works best if you pan with the subject, following the action with your camera.

Indoor Shots

1) *Increase the ISO to a higher number.* ISO is a

measure of the increased sensitivity to light of a camera's onboard chip. At higher ISOs used in dim light, there is a balance between the apparent sharpness of a picture and the ability to record moving subjects without blur. Try increasing the ISO

indoors—ISO 400 usually works well for me. For architectural shots without compromise, I recommend using a middle setting, such as ISO 200, while bracing the camera against a doorway, wall, or table. You will be amazed at how digital cameras "see" in the darkness. To avoid intrusive interference from the flash, turn it off when possible.

2) *For people shots it's best to use the camera's flash in combination with the natural room illumination.*

I have found on my Olympus E-510 camera that the Night + Portrait mode is an almost foolproof way of shooting interiors, such as restaurants with animated waiters. This method allows the interior lighting to retain its atmosphere while simultaneously throwing enough light on people in the foreground to show them clearly. Other manufacturers offer similar options. An external off-camera flash that can be moved away from the subject is also a great investment. Bounced off a low ceiling or nearby wall, the flash provides a pleasant, soft light on subjects. •



Travel photographer Gary Crallé lives in Georgetown, Ontario, Canada, and his work has been published in a number of the world's top publications, including National Geographic, Vogue, and Travel + Leisure magazines. Chosen as an Olympus Visionary, Crallé is currently working on a long-term project called American Ways, in which he aims to document American icons with a fresh, contemporary twist. For additional information on Crallé or to see more of his work, visit www.garycralle.com.



A woman with long, curly brown hair is seated on a red cushion. She is wearing a light-colored, patterned dress with a high collar and long sleeves. She is looking upwards and to the left with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a large piece of fabric.

The Best Digital Cameras

*For the enthusiast or the casual snaphooter,
we pick the finest cameras available.*

By SHAWN BARNETT

The camera market has changed quite a bit in the past year. During this time, we've seen a concentration of interesting cameras at both ends of the spectrum, from feature-rich pocket cameras to high-quality digital single-lens reflex (D-SLR) models. Falling somewhere in the middle are more powerful long zooms (up to 20x) and mid-size cameras with shorter long zooms (10x). After completing our search for the best cameras, we've come up with 12 incredible models, some pocket cameras, some high-end D-SLRs, and only one between these two extremes.

If some of these models seem very high end, remember, this list is the best of the best, so it includes heavy-duty professional digital cameras that are well-suited to people who take photos for a living. While these are still attainable marvels, be sure to consider size, cost, and purpose when deciding which camera is right for you. For those serious about getting better pictures, the top SLRs in this list or some of their lower-priced siblings are great options. Digital SLRs are now all quite good, so the time has never been better to purchase one. If you want the best, you will find them all right here.

The Pinnacle

We have a new champion among digital SLRs: the full-frame Nikon D3. While it does not exceed the megapixel count of the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III (12.1 vs. 21.1), its high ISO performance alone makes it the current leader. The Nikon D3 captures images at the mind-boggling ISO of 25,600, while maintaining usable detail. ISO 6,400 images are even better, looking more like the ISO 400 images from other digital SLRs. This is a truly astonishing achievement, far exceeding the capabilities of 35mm film. For those who have been waiting to use their old Nikkor lenses, the Nikon D3 has another major plus: Its full-frame sensor essentially matches the size of 35mm film. If the user adds a 24mm lens, the lens will perform just like it used to on an old 35mm SLR.

Next on the list of the Nikon D3's hot features is its 51-point autofocus system. Little red boxes light up in the viewfinder when the camera attains focus, painting the scene to assure users all areas will be in focus when they press the shutter.

The Nikon D3 makes these calculations very quickly, which is perfect for professional photography, from portraits to sports. Other notable aspects of the Nikon D3 are the ability to capture more colors with its 14-bit analog-to-digital conversion and the 9-11 frame-per-second continuous mode. Additionally, the D3's new Scene Recognition System combines the metering sensor's data with the information from the autofocus sensor to better track a subject. The in-camera lateral chromatic aberration fixes one of the more noticeable lens anomalies with surprising effectiveness. All of this adds up to one amazing camera.

Unfortunately, the Nikon D3 is not for everyone. It takes a lot of electronic hardware to put all of that imaging power into one camera, which results in a very large and heavy model that won't easily slip into a purse or pack for a walk in Tivoli Gardens. For those who are committed to photography, however, it is nice to know the Nikon D3 is available, ready to take up whatever challenges a photographer can dream up.

\$4,999, www.nikonusa.com



Nikon D3

Megapixels and More

Although the Nikon D3 is rocking the professional SLR market, archrival Canon has not been sleeping. The company's latest flagship—the EOS-1Ds Mark III—offers the highest resolution available from a digital SLR, far exceeding the performance of 35mm and medium-format film. Capable of capturing 21.1 million pixels in each shot, the EOS-1Ds Mark III delivers jaw-dropping pictures. The 21.1-megapixel full-frame sensor captures images that measure 5,632 x 3,750 pixels—that's a lot of data. The 1Ds Mark III moves that data fast enough to enable continuous speeds of up to five frames per second, which is key when shooting models or moving subjects. Also valuable is the camera's ability to shoot up to 12 RAW images before having to wait for the card to write.

For better composition, up to 45 autofocus points paint your subject to show in-focus areas, or you can select from among 19 more accurate cross-type AF points when you know right where your subject will be. Since the subject is almost always off-center, this is an important capability, and the Canon 1Ds Mark III makes it easy with the Quick control dial.

In fact, the 1D and 1Ds Mark III have Canon's most friendly interface to date, with more logical menus and a better navigation system thanks to the new joystick brought up from the company's mid-range SLR lineup. The EOS-1Ds

Mark III also has a vertical grip

built in, with a separate shutter-release and duplicated controls for easier operation. A new battery makes shooting a better experience, too, because it lasts for up to 2,200 shots, instead of the old battery's 1,200.

One of my favorite tricks with the 1Ds Mark III is connecting it to a computer

and remote-controlling it from the PC. Thanks to the camera's Live View mode, the photographer can even see the image and focus before pressing the virtual shutter button (which not only takes the picture but transfers it to the computer via cable or Wi-Fi with the proper adapter). This feature is extremely impressive and very versatile. Like the Nikon D3, the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III isn't the best choice for some photographers due to its size, weight, and cost, but for pure image excellence, this camera can't be beat.

\$7,999, www.usa.canon.com



Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III



*The Canon EOS 40D's big, solid build is full of **INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS** that make the 40D a significant upgrade to its forebears.*

A Tour de Force

Though it comes in at a lower price, the Canon EOS 40D is quite a *tour de force* among digital SLRs. Its big, solid build is full of incremental improvements that make the 40D a significant upgrade to its legendary forebears, but existing EOS users will find themselves instantly at home with this powerful tool. Most significant in the upgrade department is the 40D's improved autofocus system. While it still uses nine autofocus points in a diamond array, Canon has made each point more sensitive by making them all "cross-type" sensors, increasing speed and accuracy of autofocus acquisition. Canon also added an additional sensor that crosses through the center point at a 45-degree angle, adding another axis for greater precision with lines that intersect at odd angles.

It is probably the new Live View mode and the 3-inch LCD, however, that will garner the most attention. Again, it is her technical prowess that makes the Canon 40D truly special. While in Live View, for example, the 40D can be set to silent

mode, capturing up to 6.7 frames per second without moving the mirror or half the shutter mechanism. The reasons are technical, but the result is that the user can get more wildlife photographs faster than before and is less likely to make anything with ears scamper away after the first few shots. In addition, the Canon 40D has built-in dust cleaning, two exposure modes that prevent blown highlights and plugged shadows, and a new 14-bit analog-to-digital converter that forms images with four times the data than the old sensor could capture. That means smoother tones throughout the image. The Canon 40D doesn't slow down while shooting in this mode, either—it just keeps on cranking out 10.1-megapixel images at 6.7 frames per second. Canon also improved noise performance across the ISO range, allowing 13- x 19-inch prints from images shot at ISO 100 to 800 with little noticeable noise. The mid-range Canon EOS lineup has always consisted of well-crafted, no-nonsense photographic tools, and the Canon 40D continues that tradition.

\$1,299, www.usa.canon.com



12-megapixel digital SLR. From the D3, the Nikon D700 borrows the full-frame, 12.1-megapixel sensor with the same 8.45-micron pixel pitch and Expeed processor that combined deliver stunning high-ISO performance even at the extremely high setting of 26,500. From the D300, the D700 takes the Virtual Horizon Indicator, which is quite handy for straightening those horizon lines while the camera is on a tripod. This camera also uses the D300's two Live View modes: one that drops the mirror for focusing handheld, and a sensor-based, contrast-detect mode that is better used on a tripod. The D700 has Integrated Dust Reduction for knocking the dust off the sensor glass between shots, and a

built-in flash, among other things. Its 3-inch LCD shares the same 920,000-pixel resolution of the D3 and the D300, and its burly magnesium-alloy body is heavily sealed against moisture. Nikon D300 owners will be happy to know the D700

is compatible with the MB-D10 vertical grip and battery pack, and the D700's continuous frame rate can increase from five frames per second to eight frames if AA batteries or the Nikon D3's battery pack are used. Impressively for a full-frame

D-SLR, the Nikon D700's buffer can hold up to 23 12-bit RAW images, 20 14-bit RAW images, or more than 100 JPEG Fine images. Offering rock-solid construction, a full-frame sensor, fast performance, features like the 51-point autofocus system, and a big, bright viewfinder, the Nikon D700 is an incredible camera. As if the digital-SLR market wasn't exciting enough, the Nikon D700 just made it a whole lot more interesting.

\$2,999, www.nikonusa.com

A Breakthrough

In the war between the camera giants, 2007 was the year Nikon took a battering ram to Canon's hegemony in the full-frame D-SLR space. Thanks to the Nikon D700, 2008 may be the year they breach the inner defenses and storm the castle. For those who know a little about the Nikon D300 and D3, the new Nikon D700 will appear to be a blend of the two, with more than enough capability to take on the current Canon EOS 5D, which is also a full-frame,



Potent Punch

Nikons dominate the high-end SLRs in this list, and our roster would be incomplete without the Nikon D300. I've called this model the build-it-yourself Nikon D3, and with a few exceptions, I'd still recommend the Nikon D300 with the same gusto. After all, only a select few want to spend \$5,000 for the D3, and even fewer need or want to heft all that pro-camera goodness everywhere they go. What the Nikon D300 offers is a smaller body with all the seriousness and quality of its bigger brother. It's a lot of camera, and not well-suited for the novice. The good news is, serious photographers can add lenses and accessories to bring the Nikon D300 up to near parity with the D3. You can even raise the frame rate of the D300 from five frames per second to eight: Just add the optional battery grip and eight AA batteries to the included battery tray and you're ready for some serious sports photography.

While its expandability helps justify the initial investment, that's not where the D300's beauty is; it's in the controls and the images. Nikon knows what serious photographers need, so they put the most commonly used controls where they can quickly be found and activated for a fast return to the action. Bring the D300 to your eye and you can frame your image with the large, well-illuminated viewfinder. Lock your focus in quickly and precisely with the 51 autofocus points that nearly cover the entire image area. What's more, the D300 is eager to help, setting white balance and exposure with an almost magical accuracy rivaled only by Canon. The D300's 12.3-megapixel sensor delivers excellent image quality and high detail up to a surprising ISO 6,400. You can preview your images with greater detail, too, thanks to the 920,000-pixel LCD screen. Add access to Nikon's growing and improving collection of excellent lenses, and the D300 is a natural choice for any serious photographer.

\$1,799, www.nikonusa.com

A Flagship Model

As the first of the major SLR manufacturers from the last century to build an all-digital single-lens reflex platform, Olympus deserves some respect. They've earned it with their new flagship D-SLR: the E-3. Built like a piece of military equipment, the Olympus E-3 is big in the hands, and its specially molded magnesium-alloy body has a feel that instills confidence. Like other cameras in this pro-SLR class, the E-3 is festooned with buttons, dials, and switches. Intimidating at first, you'll quickly find them essential tools for taking photographs without having to wade through numerous menus for simple changes.

Like a digicam, the Olympus E-3 has a sturdy, 2.5-inch swivel-mounted LCD screen, which you can use to frame your images with Olympus' Live View mode. You can swivel the screen out to shoot from a number of angles, including below, above, left,

right, and even from the front. As with any D-SLR with Live View, it's still faster to shoot through the optical viewfinder, but what an optical viewfinder it is: big and bright, with 11 autofocus points. All of these points are "cross-type," meaning that each point consists of a vertical and a horizontal array to better assure proper focus at

*Built like a piece
of **MILITARY**
equipment...the
body **INSTILLS**
CONFIDENCE.*

every point, while many competing systems only have a cross-type sensor in the center. Other pro features include a 60-second to 1/8000th of a second shutter speed and a flash sync up to 1/250 second. Thanks to Olympus' new flash system, the E-3 can wirelessly control up to three groups of flashes using just the onboard pop-up flash. The Olympus E-3's 49-zone metering sensor works together with the autofocus system to set exposure, including flash exposure, for higher-quality images overall. Its fast image processor helps speed the 10-megapixel image files to the memory card, enabling a fast capture speed of five frames per second. One of the best features of the Olympus E-3, however, is the impressive lenses you can attach. Testing reveals that what Olympus has been saying about their "designed-for-digital" lenses is true: Most of them are sharper, edge-to-edge, than the competition. It's a little-known secret Olympus won't mind me telling.

\$1,699, www.olympusamerica.com



A Superb Camera

Canon has once again leapfrogged the competition with their EOS Rebel XSi by employing a higher-resolution sensor, Live View with contrast-detect autofocus, and a slightly faster continuous frame rate. These inclusions earn an already excellent camera lineup the designation of “superb.” Though the Rebel XSi remains a small camera, Canon moved to make the grip a little taller and managed to squeeze a big 3-inch LCD onto the back. The Rebel XSi’s 12.1-megapixel sensor captures stunning, sharp images that rival the pro cameras in this list, with enhanced highlights and shadow detail thanks to the new Auto Lighting Optimizer. Framing images has never been easier than it is with the Canon XSi’s new Live View mode with contrast-detect autofocus. Even the small improvement in frame rate is accompanied by a greater buffer depth, giving you the ability to rattle off up to 53 JPEG images at the Rebel XSi’s highest speed.

Easily the greatest bargain in optics on the market is the Rebel XSi’s new kit lens. Canon totally redesigned their standard 18-55mm kit lens to deliver greater optical quality, and the new design includes the company’s latest Image Stabilization technology, promising more stability when shooting indoors or at night. Canon’s standard kit lens needed an upgrade, but nobody really expected it to be this good. You get it for \$100 off the retail price when you purchase this sweet, light little lens in the kit, so it’s worth considering even if you want another lens as well. The Canon Rebel XSi is Canon’s best consumer digital SLR yet, serving up hot technology in a very small package.

\$899 with kit lens,
www.usa.canon.com





Travel Companion

The Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ5 digital camera improves upon its predecessor, the extremely popular -TZ3, with a very compact body and a potent 10x wide-angle zoom. While most long zooms forsake the wide-angle end in favor of more-impressive-sounding optical-zoom numbers, the TZ5 gives you the best of both worlds with its 28-280mm equivalent range. The TZ5's Leica lens does quite well, with good center-to-corner sharpness and excellent contrast for punchy shots at any focal length. Naturally, since it's a Panasonic, the TZ5 includes optical image stabilization, essential for the 280mm telephoto setting. You'll see your images on a large, vibrant 3-inch LCD with a higher-than-usual 460,000-pixel resolution for better focus verification and detail. What's more, the TZ5's Intelligent LCD technology adjusts brightness as the light levels change, so you don't have to think about it. Set the TZ5 to its Intelligent Auto mode and the camera will look at the scene and pick which mode to use for truly set-it-and-forget-it convenience. The TZ5 also locates the faces in images to make sure they are in focus and the exposure is right for flattering pictures. If video is important to you, the Panasonic DMC-TZ5 offers 1280 x 720-pixel HD



Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ5

recording at 30 frames per second.

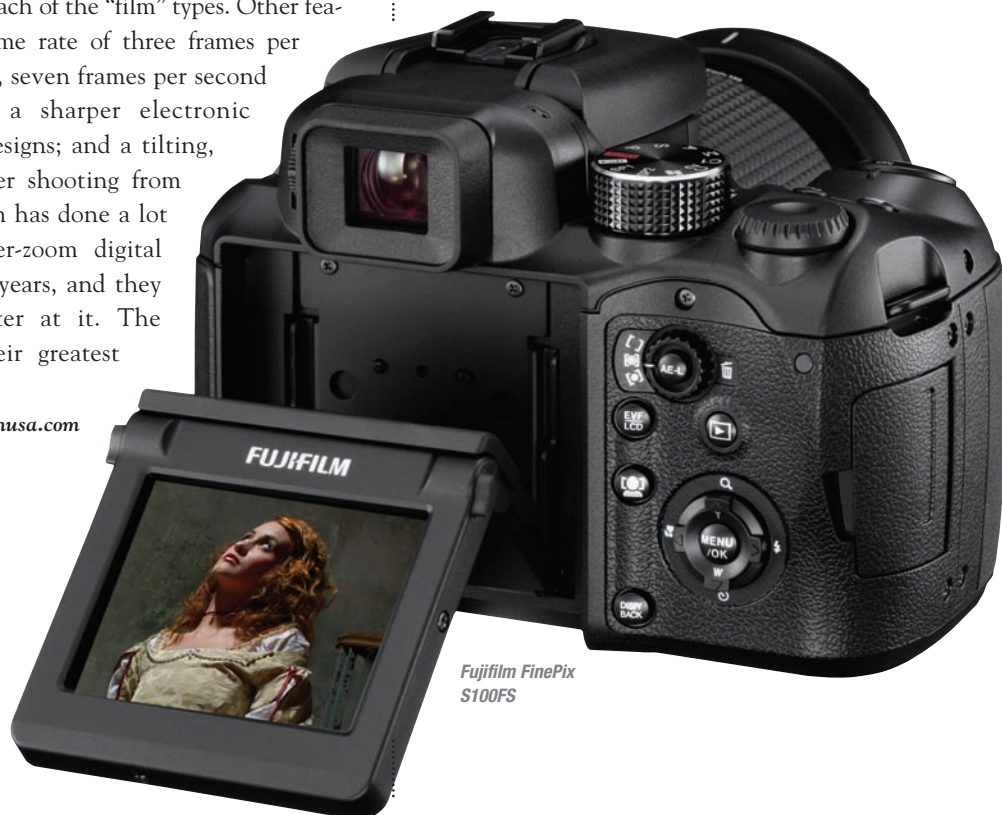
Especially useful if you're traveling, the TZ5 has a special mode for photographing and recalling important documents like timetables, subway maps, and important pages from that travel book. You can recall all of these on the high-resolution LCD for later reference. With its small size, quality lens, and ideal zoom range, the Panasonic DMC-TZ5 is a natural travel companion.

\$349, www.panasonic.com

Memories and Movies

In the age of the D-SLR it is rare to see such a burly super-zoom digital camera. The Fujifilm FinePix S100FS offers something you can't get with an SLR: one very big zoom that can capture 11.1-megapixel stills as well as movies. Most super-zooms use a motorized-zoom mechanism, which is slow and frequently audible in movies, but the Fujifilm S100FS's mechanical-zoom ring makes composing your images smooth and fast, and pulling zoom in a movie is more natural with a mechanical zoom than any consumer camcorder can offer. Fujifilm's S100FS also includes optical image stabilization, an essential component in a zoom lens that covers a 28-400mm focal length or 14.3x magnification. While SLRs are plagued by dust and have to be cleaned now and then, Fujifilm claims a fully dust-free chamber in the S100FS, made possible by the permanent lens on this tightly built digital camera. A few new sensor technologies and processing modes will appeal to the serious photographer, including the company's extended Dynamic Range mode for better reproduction in shadows and highlights. The overall effort is to make the S100FS perform more like negative film, which offers greater exposure latitude than digital. (Digital is more unforgiving in highlights and shadows like slide film.) Indeed, the "FS" in the name stands for Film Simulation. In Film Simulation mode, you can choose between two popular Fujifilm types, Velvia and Provia, and a Soft mode for smoother tonality. You can even bracket your shots, capturing one of each of the "film" types. Other features include a fast frame rate of three frames per second at full resolution, seven frames per second at three megapixels; a sharper electronic viewfinder than past designs; and a tilting, 2.5-inch LCD for easier shooting from above or below. Fujifilm has done a lot to champion the super-zoom digital camera in the last few years, and they just keep getting better at it. The FinePix S100FS is their greatest achievement to date.

\$799, www.fujifilmusa.com



Fujifilm FinePix
S100FS



Sony Cyber-shot
DSC-H50



A New Level

Small super-zooms are fun to use, and the Sony Cyber-shot DSC-H50 takes small and simple to a new level. With a 15x Carl Zeiss optic, the Sony H50 covers a good, long-zoom range, equivalent to a 31-465mm zoom. That's a great range for a camera that fits in one hand and weighs just over a pound. Its 9.1-megapixel sensor delivers high-quality images capable of enlargement up to 11 x 14 inches and the Sony H50's Super SteadyShot works to keep images sharp in low-light situations. Like most other cameras on the market, the H50 has face detection to ensure good focus and exposure of faces, but Sony takes it further. The camera is actually able to detect a smile and fire the shutter immediately for those hard-to-photograph subjects. You can even set the camera to look for either children's or adults' smiles. Flip a switch on the top left and you will be able to see in the dark: The NightShot infrared mode can take pictures in near and even total darkness at close range thanks to the camera's infrared illuminator. It's perfect

for getting a shot of the kids without waking them up (because every parent knows how beautiful they are . . . when they're asleep!). Sony also loaded their Dynamic Range Optimization into the H50 to preserve shadow and highlight detail, something borrowed from their SLR lineup. A tilting LCD completes the package, making low- and high-angle photographs as easy as flipping the 3-inch LCD either up or down before taking your shot. The Sony Cyber-shot DSC-H50 offers a lot, is a joy to use, and takes awesome images, all for an impressively low price.

\$399, www.sonymstyle.com



A Refined Edition

Sony has driven the pocket camera's maximum megapixel count higher with the advent of the DSC-W300 (13.6MP), and they've also increased the sensor's size. The net result is better image quality across the board and truly stunning resolution from a pocket-sized camera. With a 3x zoom lens and a 2.7-inch LCD display, the W300 doesn't push the envelope, but instead refines what's good about a Sony pocket camera. The company has included an optical viewfinder for easier framing in a hurry or in bright sunlight. They have also kept the W300 light, weighing in at 5.5 ounces. Of course, they poured in all their recent digital technology, like Face Detection, Smile Shutter mode, Super SteadyShot image stabilization, and Dynamic Range Optimization, to name a few. For greater scratch resistance, Sony also made the W300 more rugged with a special titanium coating, which the company says is "five times harder than anodized aluminum." The Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W300 is beautiful and takes equally beautiful pictures. It is just the kind of camera you want in your pocket.

\$349, www.sonymstyle.com



*The Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W300 is beautiful and takes equally **BEAUTIFUL PICTURES**. It's just the kind of camera you want in your pocket.*

A Touch of Class

Pick just about any Canon pocket camera and you'll do just fine. But if you want the best image quality and strongest build, go for the SD950 IS Digital ELPH. With a 12.1-megapixel sensor, you'll get a lot of detail, probably more than you will need. The 3.7x optical zoom will cover a solid 36-133mm zoom range with very good quality across the board. Built-in optical image stabilization helps keep things sharp even in low light. The 2.5-inch LCD is great for framing images, and the optical viewfinder is standing by to help out in a pinch.

If you take a lot of snapshots of friends and family, the SD950's Face Detection comes on automatically to set exposure and focus, and corrects red eye with ease. Canon's DIGIC III processor quickly handles the large files and shuffles them off to the SD card for storage and fast follow-up shots. To top it off, the SD950 is wrapped in pure titanium for light weight, dent resistance, and just plain ruggedness. The SD950's pictures look great when blown up to 16 x 20 inches; even ISO 400 shots look terrific at 11 x 14. This is the Cadillac of Canon's compact lineup, including everything that makes the company's PowerShots so popular, plus greater resolution and a touch of class. •

\$399, www.usa.canon.com



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The Choices are CLEAR

Pick a winning laptop, from perfectly portable compacts to full-size speed demons.

By STEVE MORGENSTERN

Choosing a laptop computer is an exercise in compromise. It is always better having a big screen and keyboard, right? Well, not when it means having to lug a large, clumsy machine through airport security. What about those fixated on getting the smallest, lightest-weight machine possible? No problem—unless they want to play a computer game or watch a movie when they get to the hotel. In that case, a built-in DVD drive and the processing power of a full-size laptop will surely be missed.

The good news is, while different classes of laptops still have their own strengths and weaknesses, overall portable computing performance in every laptop shape and size has increased dramatically. In just the last several months, the truly ultraportable category (machines weighing about 3 pounds or less) has gotten an amazing kick-start. Two years ago—the old days in the computing world—an ultraportable computer was basically a lightweight data-entry device, a traveling accessory for the “real” computer back home or at the office. Today a featherweight laptop can successfully take on heavyweight tasks such as photo editing and video playback. That is why we have highlighted several notable ultraportables in this roundup, each of which take a distinctive approach to providing computing comfort in a petite package. We haven’t forgotten power-hungry road warriors, either, highlighting standout laptops geared toward productivity, entertainment, and even world-class virtual combat. Whether hitting the road or just carrying a laptop from the den to the patio, there is something here for everyone.





Lenovo IdeaPad U110

If your goal is to draw admiring stares from passersby at Starbucks, you can't do any better than the striking IdeaPad U110. Whether a conservative black or fashion-forward red case, the exterior is textured with a subtle tendril design, and the interior sports a shiny piano-black finish. This is clearly not a corporate econobox pushed by the IT department.

Good looks are just a small part of the story, fortunately.

The U110 comes fully loaded, including a power-sipping but reasonably speedy 1.6GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor, a 120GB hard drive, a high-res 11.1-inch widescreen display, 2GB of memory, and a built-in Webcam. The keyboard is 97 percent the size of a standard laptop and feels perfectly comfortable even during long word-processing sessions. There isn't a built-in optical drive, but the system does come standard with a lightweight external dual-layer DVD drive. Two batteries and a pleasingly small AC adapter are also included. The smaller battery keeps the total laptop weight down to just 2.4 pounds, but there is a catch: The computer gets only about an hour and a half of battery life on a single charge.

Swap in the larger battery and move up to a respectable four-hour battery-life range—and still slip in under 3 pounds.

Connectivity is another strength of the IdeaPad U110. Unlike the MacBook Air, which sacrifices frequently used connectors for style and space, the Lenovo includes three USB connectors plus a FireWire port, an ExpressCard slot, VGA out, and a six-in-one card reader. The only thing missing is built-in support for wireless cellular data networks, a corporate-oriented feature not included in this consumer-focused laptop (owners can always use the ExpressCard or a USB port for a data modem).

The price of the IdeaPad U110 is relatively substantial—\$1,799—but it is an elegant, fun-to-use machine for the money.

\$1,799, www.lenovo.com

MSI Wind

This handsome little 2.6-pounder proves you can go ultraportable without going ultra-expensive. Running Windows XP Home Edition, the MSI Wind costs just \$500.

The Wind, which stands for Wi-Fi Network Device, runs a much-talked-about new low-power Intel processor, the 1.6GHz Atom, which is fine for basic Web surfing and productivity applications like word processing. Like a certain famed advertising bunny, it keeps going and going—almost five hours on a single charge.

As tempting as the price and portability combo is, there are definitely compromises. The screen measures 10 inches diagonally, which is perfectly usable for a single window but gets a little

cramped with two windows—say a word processor and a Web browser—on screen simultaneously. Roughly 80 percent the size of a standard laptop, the keyboard is definitely small—big-handed touch-typists need not apply. The 80GB hard drive is small, but it's in line with what is provided on some far more expensive machines. Of course, there is no built-in optical drive. On the other hand, MSI does include built-in Bluetooth along with Wi-Fi, and even a Webcam, which is an unexpected extra in a machine at this price. And while Henry Ford famously offered his penny-pinching Model T in black, black, or black, MSI Wind buyers can choose from black, white, or pink at no additional charge.



\$500, www.msimobile.com



Apple MacBook Air

There's no question Steve Jobs knows how to bring sexy back—and no, I'm not talking about those ever-present mock turtlenecks he wears when deigning to speak to the public. The MacBook Air is an extraordinarily thin slice of high-end computing style, ultraportable (at about 3 pounds) but without the screen-size compromises or keyboard shrinkage we associate with the featherweight category.

No longer the world's thinnest notebook (see the Voodoo Envy 133), it still feels amazingly svelte, measuring 0.76 inch at its thickest point. The screen is, literally, a big attraction. Incorporating a full 13.3-inch display with the image quality we've come to expect from Apple into a machine this thin and light is a remarkable achievement. The full-size keyboard is another plus, though some users will find its distinctively Mac feel takes a little getting used to. Apple's MacBook Air runs the same 1.6GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor as Lenovo's IdeaPad U110, handling the graphics-intensive demands of Mac OS X Leopard applications smoothly and efficiently. There's an iSight Webcam and microphone mounted above the display for easy video chatting, and an enhanced keypad lets users employ multi-finger gesture controls, like zooming in and out of photos, just like the iPhone.

Connectivity is potentially the MacBook Air's Achilles heel. There is only one USB port, no FireWire or built-in mobile broadband option, and, most distressing, no Ethernet port. The optical drive is also missing—it's an optional extra. A maximum hard-drive size of 80GB is another cause for concern, as is the fact that the battery isn't user-replaceable. Still, Mac fans who want to get their act on the road without lugging the relatively heavy MacBook or MacBook Pro will take to the Air as they jump for joy.

\$1,799, www.apple.com



Voodoo Envy 133

The appropriately named Envy 133 comes from a company best known for big, hulking gamer PCs—liquid-cooled, demon-slaughtering behemoths. What a pleasant surprise, then, to take this incredibly thin and light laptop for a test drive. The machine measures a hair over half an inch thick (and not just on one side), and weighs just under 3.4 pounds, with a sharp 13.3-inch LCD screen and lightweight yet rock-solid carbon-fiber case. The Envy, which comes with 2GB of system memory, is available with the same 1.6GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor found in the MacBook Air and Lenovo IdeaPad, or a slightly faster 1.8GHz version. Following Voodoo's custom-built gamer-box tradition, the company offers a choice of paint jobs, from conservative to totally out there. In case you are wondering if this is a fly-by-night outfit, don't. Voodoo is part of the HP family.

Connectivity includes the USB, ExpressCard, audio, and Ethernet ports one would expect, plus a few surprises. An HDMI-out port for connecting to a big-screen high-def TV is

included, a rarity for ultraportables. Bluetooth support is also built in, and Voodoo is introducing a unique wireless Web-surfing capability. Connect an Ethernet cable to the power brick and roam the room freely via Wi-Fi—no need to pack a separate wireless router or configure a connection. The system also includes a built-in Webcam, a touch pad with gesture control, and an external optical drive. Like the MacBook Air, internal storage is limited to 80GB, but at least Voodoo lets users swap in a spare battery or replace a worn-out one without a trip to tech support. As for battery life, figure about 3.5 hours per charge. Pricing starts at \$2,099, a notch above the Mac, though that does include the external disk drive.

The Voodoo Envy 133 isn't a flashy machine. Its lines are straightforward and rectangular (though individual paint jobs may blow that stylistic restraint to smithereens). When we hefted the wafer-thin laptop, typed a little on the comfy keyboard, and enjoyed that bright, beautiful display, hardware lust hit hard.

\$2,099, www.voodooopc.com

Acer Aspire AS6920-6621

For those watching the company's budget but also needing a notebook they won't outgrow anytime soon, the Acer Aspire represents a terrific deal from a trustworthy company. You can find less-expensive machines around, but there's generally something amiss about the specs. For example, the laptop may only have 1GB of system memory, when 2GB is really today's practical minimum. The \$850 Aspire comes out of the box with 3GB of RAM, a 1.83GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor, a capacious 320GB hard drive, and a handsome, substantial 16-inch display. The built-in graphics system won't keep up with a demanding gamer's needs, but



it's fine for the tasks less-frantic people undertake. The sound system uses some advanced Dolby audio-processing techniques to squeeze out rich, well-rounded sound from DVDs and MP3s.

All the basics of day-to-day computing are built in, including a dual-layer DVD burner, wireless networking, and a Webcam, while the 7.3-pound weight

means users can carry it when they need to without risking muscle strain. As icing on the cake, there is a fun touch-panel media-playback control left of the keyboard, and the unit is available in a sleek color Acer calls Gemstone Blue.

\$849, www.acer.com

Sony VAIO Z Series

The Sony VAIO Z series brings new style and sizzle to the full-featured ultraportable market. Fully loaded with both cutting-edge graphics flexibility and a built-in optical disc drive, the VAIO Z still manages to weigh in at about 3.5 pounds. This is definitely not your father's laptop.

As part of the Blu revolution, Z series machines are available with optional Blu-ray drives. Using your laptop as a player and the HDMI output as a connection, you can watch a high-def movie on your HDTV at home. In a move of graphics ingenuity, the Z series machines incorporate both high-performance (but battery-draining) NVIDIA GeForce 9300 M GS graphics and more basic (but less power-hungry) graphics on the motherboard. Based on your battery considerations, you can alternate between standard graphics for

word processing and spreadsheets to NVIDIA graphics for portable gaming glory, all with a simple switch. Very smart.

The new Z series features a sparkling 13.1-inch widescreen LCD that uses LED backlighting and Sony XBRITE-Duraview technology. Colors are brilliant and deeply saturated at 1600 x 900 resolution. Also looking great is the all-aluminum keyboard with raised keys, which, better yet, is a joy to use.

This 2008 model has everything you'd expect in a new laptop including a fast 2.53GHz Intel Centrino 2 processor with DDR memory. You can load up with 320GB of on-board storage and 4GB of RAM to even further speed things along. For truly edge users, 128GB SSD drives are available. Wrap all of this in a rugged carbon fiber case, and you have one tasty tech package.

\$1,799, www.sonymstyle.com





Toshiba Qosmio G55-Q802

Many new laptops have built-in Webcams, but this entertainment-oriented Toshiba uses its in a truly innovative way: The Webcam turns the user into a human remote control!

The camera alone couldn't pull off this cool trick. It requires a whole lot of processing to watch a person's movements and figure out what they are trying to convey. That is why there is a Cell processor inside (the same speed demon used to power the Sony PlayStation3), in addition to the fast 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo chip powering the standard computer functions. Say you're watching a movie and want to pause it. You hold your palm up in the familiar traffic-cop "Stop" gesture, the Webcam sees it, and the system complies. Additional gestures raise or lower volume, fast-forward and reverse, skip chapters, and turn the system off completely. Make a fist in front of the Webcam and move it around—the onscreen cursor follows along. No, that nasty hand gesture is not recognized by the system, though it might be useful to indicate a song shouldn't be included in a future random playlist.

Beyond the unique gesture-control system, the add-on Cell processor makes video encoding extraordinarily fast, and even upconverts standard movies to full 1080i high-def resolution when played on an HDTV via the HDMI port.

Setting aside the neat tricks Toshiba's invented, the basic laptop is a powerful, full-featured 10.8-pound desktop replacement system, with a huge 18.4-inch widescreen display, a full-size keyboard with separate numeric keypad on the right, and substantial Harman Kardon front-mounted speakers. Add in powerful NVIDIA GeForce 9600M graphics and 500GB of hard-disk space and the \$1,549 sticker seems like a solid deal.

\$1,549, www.tais.com

Alienware Area-51 m15x

The problem with most truly tricked-out performance laptops—the kind that make gaming gods and award-winning video editors—is that you would never think of putting them on your lap, or even carrying them farther than the next room. The Alienware Area-51 m15x is no featherweight at 7 pounds, but it isn't like hauling a bag of bricks either, and the power in this reasonably portable package is more than worth the effort. This highly customizable system can be revved up with 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme processors and up to 4GB of system RAM, an NVIDIA graphics card with half a GB of memory on board, a single hard drive that holds up to half a TB, and a second HDD or optical drives and disc burners.

The display measures 15.4 inches diagonally, with up to a superb 1920 x 1200 resolution. Owners get a full-size keyboard that stands up to the most frantic gamer fragfest pounding, convenient instant-access buttons to control volume, Bluetooth, wireless, and more. One would expect a full suite of connectivity options, and that's precisely what is offered, including three USB ports plus FireWire, an ExpressCard slot, a seven-in-one media card reader, and HDMI output to feed an HDTV. Prices start at \$1,499, but it's easy to double that figure if you feel the need for speed.

The Area-51 m15x comes in two case models: a smooth Skullcap design and a ribbed design called Ripley that brings a certain Sigourney Weaver flick to mind. The company is, after all, called Alienware.

\$1,499, www.alienware.com





Gateway P-6860FX

Want a big screen and gamer-worthy processing power and graphics? The Gateway P-6860FX offers both at a great bargain.

This laptop has a bright, crisp 17-inch widescreen display that looks excellent whether battling evil, retouching family photos, or preparing a home-video masterpiece. The NVIDIA GeForce Go 8800M GTS graphics support the latest DirectX 10 enhancements found in cutting-edge computer games, while the 1.83GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor (backed up with 4GB of system memory) lets users run multiple simultaneous programs without a problem. Beyond these basics, buyers get a Webcam, 802.11a/b/g/n Wi-Fi support, Bluetooth for

wireless audio, FireWire for camcorder connections, and HDMI out to connect to an HDTV. The 320GB hard drive offers plenty of storage, and the five-in-one card reader makes getting photos from a camera into the computer a snap.

This bruiser is not for frequent travelers, as it weighs 9.2 pounds. When it's time to tackle processor-intensive gaming and entertainment tasks, however, P-6860FX owners have the power they need under the hood and a big, beautiful screen to enjoy the results. •

\$1,349, www.gateway.com



GADGET GALLERY

Why you can't live without these
CUTTING EDGE gadgets.

By STEWART WOLPIN

A gadget is more than just wiring in a plastic or metal case. While a flashlight or a can opener do useful things, they're not what we would define as a "gadget." Rather, a gadget is a flashlight or a can opener with a hefty dose of whimsical features and several layers of functionality.

Today's gadgets are intelligent thanks to their micro-processors, chips that let engineers and designers create amazing devices. From GPS navigation systems with built-in cameras to a robot that dances to your tunes, gadgets can be both fun and useful. Some will change the way you live; others will simply entertain. Here, we've compiled a list of our top-12 brainy multifunctional gadgets that go far beyond the ordinary.

Best

STUFF

1. Accessories Make the Machine

While the Archos 605 Wi-Fi portable media player comes standard with many features, its accessories are what really make it shine—and by accessories, we don't mean a Cartier watch. This multimedia player is equipped with a 4.3-inch touch screen and 4GB of built-in memory out of the box. It can also be augmented by an included 8GB SD card to store music and video transferred from a PC. (The 605 is also available with 30GB of memory for \$299 and 160GB for \$349.) With Wi-Fi and the optional Web TV & Radio plug-in (\$20), thousands of Web radio stations, podcasts, and hundreds of Web TV stations can be streamed live directly to the 605. An optional DVR dock



(\$100) allows the owner to connect the 605 to a cable or satellite box and record favorite shows for mobile viewing. Add the Archos TV+ and the TV portation software to watch personal recorded TV live wherever Wi-Fi is available. Snap the 605 into the GPS In-Car Holder (\$129) and create

a fully functional GPS device. This multitalented multimedia master can do practically anything with media files, and is a welcome addition to any gadget guru's library.

\$199 to \$349, www.archos.com

2

Apple's Latest and Greatest

Much ado has been made about the 3G and GPS capabilities of this next-generation iPhone—and its speedier Web access and navigation functions integrated with the contacts list are very handy. But the real star is the iPhone 2.0 software, which is free for all iPhone owners and a \$10 upgrade for iPod Touch users. You can now download thousands of fun and functional applications (mostly for free) that take advantage of iPhone's speedy 3G network access, GPS capabilities, and Safari browser. They include an eBay application for bidding and buying on the iPhone, a Major League Baseball application to watch highlights of live games, and video-game applications that take advantage of iPhone's internal gyroscope and tilt sensor to link hand movement to game play. Rumor has it a Slingbox application will soon be available that will allow users to watch TV live on the iPhone. Perhaps the ultimate gadget, the iPhone just got better.

8GB \$199/16GB \$299, www.apple.com





3. Cheerful Chumby

What in the name of Steve Jobs is a “Chumby”? It’s an Internet device that connects to your home Wi-Fi network to play podcasts and download more than 700 specially designed “widgets.” These applications access weather, sports, stock or traffic reports, horoscopes, eBay, and lots of other endlessly fascinating material—all without a computer or a keyboard. Available in black, latte, or pearl, the Chumby will help keep you connected throughout the day. It’s the very definition of the word “gadget.”

\$179, www.chumby.com

4

All Baseball, All the Time

For the baseball fan who has everything, this paperback-sized scoreboard is an homage to old-fashioned ballpark scoreboards, such as the Green Monster at Boston’s Fenway Park. Liveboard pulls scores, inning, batter up, ball-strike count, outs, and men-on-base situations from live baseball games via Bluetooth from a Web-connected PC. It displays the stats on this stylish board with a white-ash wooden frame. Best of all, it’s just in time for the playoffs and the World Series.

\$199, www.vroop.com



5. Truly Cutting Edge

The Nokia N810 is a speedy communication device, whose most important asset is how it connects to the Net—via new WiMAX high-speed wireless networks that deliver cable-modem-like speeds. Inside the Nokia N810 is a full Mozilla Web browser displayed on a 4.13-inch touch screen. Thanks to WiMAX, the browser, and a built-in Web cam, the N810 is also a video phone. Tired of talking? Turn on the music player and listen to tunes. Rhapsody service is available, or you can load your own tracks into the N810’s internal memory. Fast and friendly, this phone is perfect for the on-the-go lifestyle.

\$500, www.nokia.com



6

Bold and Beyond

In the age of the iPhone, BlackBerrys are all business. But all work and no play makes the BlackBerry a dull toy. So the folks at Research In Motion have created Bold, a tri-band GSM worldphone version of the BlackBerry. The Bold is complete with high-speed 3G broadband wireless access, movie viewing, photo slide showing, Roxio music management, and even an iTunes sync application. It also has 1GB of internal memory and an external high-capacity SD memory card slot. In many ways, it's almost an iPhone.

If you must work, Bold (technically the BlackBerry 9000) has DataViz' Documents to Go, which enables downloading and editing of Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files. Bold also adds integrated GPS functionality, a 2MP camera with video recording, and a next-generation 624MHz processor—the fastest engine BlackBerry has yet offered. It even looks sleeker than your less-bold, gray-flannel-suit BlackBerry.

\$350, www.blackberry.com



7. GPS Plus

To the uninitiated, Mio's C720t is just another portable navigation device with a 4.3-inch touch screen, text-to-speech, and turn-by-turn directions. Insiders, however, know that the C720t lets them document where they have been thanks to a 2MP digital camera that embeds GPS coordinates into photos for easy navigation back to the snapped scenic site. Best yet, for hands-free driving, funnel cell calls through the C720t's Bluetooth and built-in speaker. You'll never be lost again.

\$599, www.mio-tech.com



8

Dynamic Duo

Why didn't anyone think of this before? LG's satiny silver and black Decoy slider cell phone, available from Verizon, has a Bluetooth earpiece that snaps neatly into its back so you never have to scramble to find it. Plug in the Decoy with the Bluetooth earpiece attached, and the batteries of each are charged simultaneously. Once paired, the two remain paired as long as they're within range of each other. But LG didn't just tack on a Bluetooth earpiece, the Decoy is fully compatible with Verizon's V CAST music, application, and game services; their VZ Navigator GPS application; and streaming video services. Standard cell phone features such as a music player, a 2MP digital camera, Hotmail, AOL, and Yahoo! email, and instant messaging are also included.

\$179, www.verizonwireless.com

9. Driver's Best Friend

Now you can keep your hands on the wheel and tell your GPS what to do with the Garmin nüvi 880. For instance, ask it, "Where am I?" and nüvi displays your exact latitude and longitude, the nearest address and intersection, and the closest hospitals, police stations, and gas stations. Ask it to "find nearest Italian restaurant," and it will locate the nearest pasta place. Nüvi knows the name of big companies, too. Just enunciate "find place" then "Starbucks" to locate the nearest skinny double latte. Nüvi knows and understands English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Dutch. In addition to these near-conversational abilities, nüvi connects to MSN Direct services for up-to-date traffic, fuel prices, news, and business headlines. Available in early 2009, this GPS unit is one to look forward to.



\$1,071, www.garmin.com

10

A Defining Gadget

Next to the word "gadget" in the dictionary is a picture of the Sony Rolly. It's a palm-sized, egg-shaped object that rolls, spins, and lights up in reaction to music it plays through its room-filling stereo speakers.

With built-in robotic technology, Rolly moves its small arms, shoulders, and wheels (six moving parts) and flashes to the beat in around 700 colors. To get you started, Rolly includes pre-programmed choreography for "Also Sprach Zarathustra" (the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*), Avril Lavigne's "Girlfriend," and Earth Wind and Fire's "Boogie Wonderland," but you can program your own dance routines using the included Rolly Choreographer software. If nothing else, friends and pets will be fascinated.

\$400, www.sonystyle.com/rolly



11. Zen-Out

Creative's new Zen Mozaic is as much a conversation piece as it is a multipurpose media player. Known for the innovative mosaic pattern on its front and its bright 1.8-inch color screen, the Mozaic definitely draws stares. Beyond looks, however, the Mozaic offers surprising functionality for its meager \$59-\$79 asking price. While some players stop at simple media playback, Creative goes a step further by offering additional features, such as an FM radio tuner, voice recorder, clock, stopwatch, and radio alarm that wakes you with music. In addition to a standard headphone jack, a built-in speaker lets you share music with friends. Of course, you can also view your photos and watch videos on the Mozaic—up to 32 hours' worth on a single charge. Available in 2GB or 4GB versions, the Mozaic has three color schemes: black, silver, or pink. This high-style gadget combines dashing good looks with a great feature set. What you end up with is a terrific bargain.



Available in 2GB or 4GB versions, the Mozaic has three color schemes: black, silver, or pink. This high-style gadget combines dashing good looks with a great feature set. What you end up with is a terrific bargain.

\$59 2GB/\$79 4GB,
www.creative.com

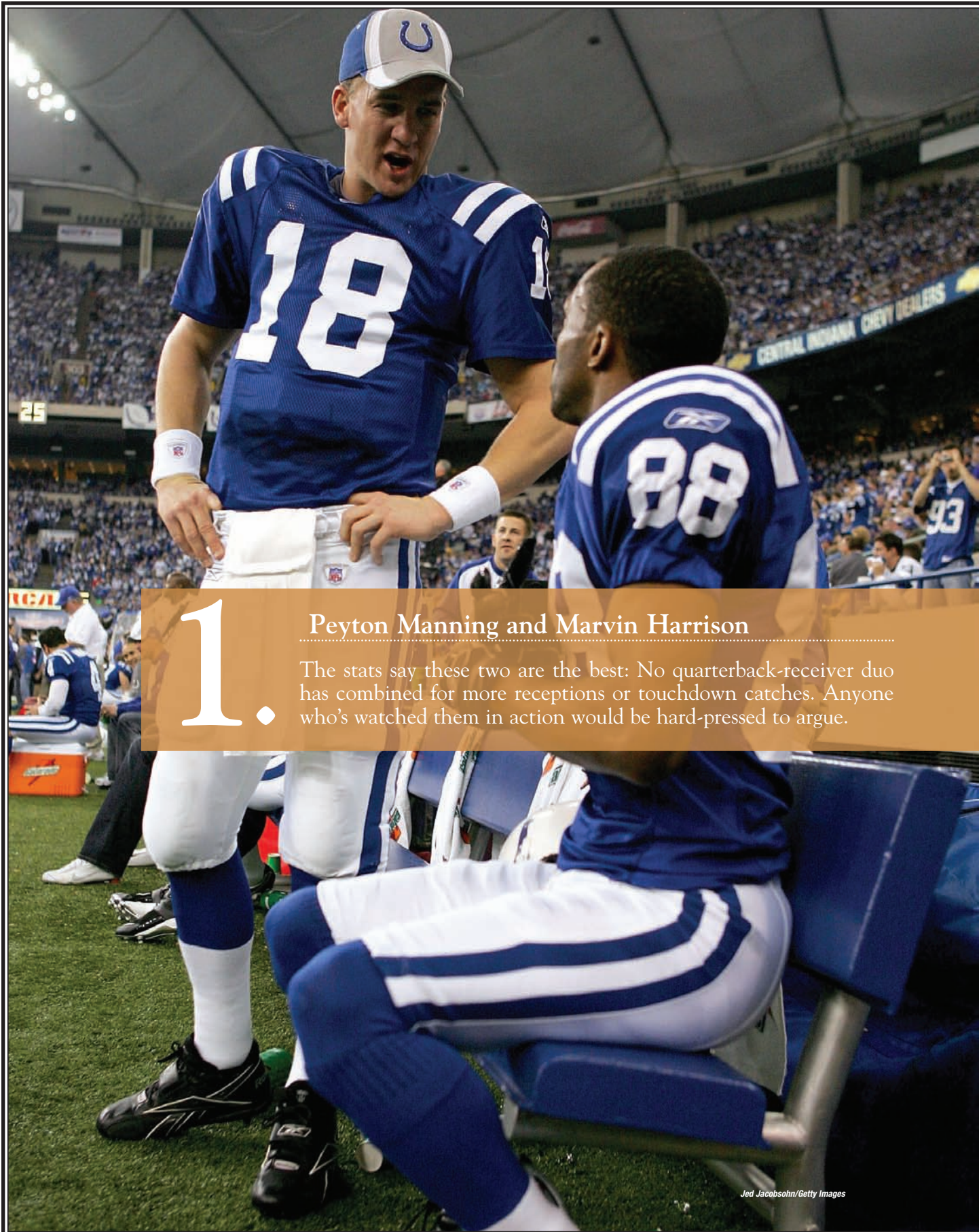
12

Ball of Sound

With all the buzz surrounding iPhone's many uses, it's sometimes overlooked that this ubiquitous device has its roots firmly in the music world. DLO's portable iPhone speakers make this impossible to forget. With this compact audio system, you can listen to your tunes out loud and on the road. For traveling, each speaker snaps into the base to create a ball only 6 inches in diameter; just toss them in your carry-on. While they may be small, the speakers are mighty enough—a great choice for a smaller room. Even better, the Portable Speakers have a unique design that includes a rotating and removable base that lets you turn the iPhone on its side for watching movies in a horizontal aspect ratio. This handy, yet robust, speaker package untethers you from your headphones. •

\$50, www.dlo.com





1. ◆

Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison

The stats say these two are the best: No quarterback-receiver duo has combined for more receptions or touchdown catches. Anyone who's watched them in action would be hard-pressed to argue.

Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images

The BEST of Pro Football

Ready for some football? Here are some Top 10 lists to whet your appetite, and our picks for the upcoming season.

By ATHLON SPORTS PRO FOOTBALL EDITORS

This issue of Best is all about getting the ultimate image from your HDTV—and we don't know any better reason to do so than fall football. To get geared up for the upcoming season, we've asked the editors of *Athlon Sports Pro Football* to share some historical insight and offer their educated predictions for this season.

TOUCHDOWN CONNECTIONS

It takes two to make a touchdown through the air, and these pairs of stars connected better—and more frequently—than anyone we can recall.

1) **Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison; see opposite page.**

2) **Steve Young and Jerry Rice**

An easy pick: While Manning and Harrison may have the edge in terms of total stats, no tandem so dominated their era as did Young and Rice during San Francisco's glory years.

3) **Terry Bradshaw and Lynn Swann**

"Swannie" shared the spotlight with a fellow Hall of Famer in John Stallworth, but Bradshaw's biggest—and most memorable—completions all seemed to land in Lynn's hands.

4) **Troy Aikman and Michael Irvin**

During the Cowboys' early-'90s heyday, Aikman and Irvin hooked up at a rate few tandems in NFL history have been able to match. Each helped the other to Hall of Fame careers.

5) **Tom Brady and Randy Moss**

Yes, this pairing is only one season old. Even so, it's hard to overstate the awesomeness of a season that saw both the quarterback and receiver set single-season touchdown records.

6) **Joe Montana and Dwight Clark**

Montana also excelled with Jerry Rice, but Clark was his go-to guy during two Super Bowl seasons. Their iconic connection on "The Catch" alone warrants inclusion in our list.

7) **Joe Namath and Don Maynard**

Namath was cocky where Maynard was subdued, but this pair of Hall of Famers clicked as a combination with the Jets during the late-'60s, with each helping the other earn All-Pro honors.

8) **Jim Kelly and Andre Reed**

They never won a Super Bowl, but Kelly and Reed were undeniably excellent during their decade-plus together in Buffalo; they're the franchise's top passer and receiver, respectively.

9) **Johnny Unitas and Raymond Berry**

Their era was conservative enough that their numbers can't keep pace with many contemporary combos, but this gritty pair defined aerial dominance during the late 1950s and early 60s.

10) **Warren Moon and Ernest Givins**

Yes, some of it was the system, but Jerry Glanville's run-and-shoot was only as good as the guys running the routes and the quarterbacks shooting the ball to them.

CONTEMPORARY DRAFT DAY STEALS

As Mel Kiper says, the NFL draft has become more scientific in the last 20 years. Accidents do still happen, though: The following stars were drafted in the fifth round, later, or not at all.

1) **Tom Brady**; see picture, right.

2) **Terrell Davis** (6th round, 196th overall pick, 1995)

Injuries effectively ended Davis' career by age 27, but by then he had already made three All-Pro teams, won two Super Bowls, and recorded a 2,000-yard season between 1995 and 1998.

3) **Priest Holmes** (Not drafted, 1997)

Despite never starting full-time at Texas nor being drafted, Priest proved just about impossible to stop during his run of jaw-dropping dominance in K.C. between 2001 and 2004.

4) **Zach Thomas** (5th round, 154th overall pick, 1996)

Too short. No, too slow. Well, Thomas was too *something* to sneak into the first 153 picks in 1996, but the Texas Tech tackling machine became a five-time All-Pro in Miami.

5) **Tony Romo** (Not drafted, 2003)

Dallas quarterbacks coach Sean Payton persuaded the Cowboys to take a shot on this fellow Eastern Illinois product as a free agent. Despite not yet winning a playoff game, Romo can be considered a success with back-to-back Pro Bowl seasons.

6) **Marc Bulger** (6th round, 168th overall pick, 2000)

Bulger had a fine career at West Virginia and has always had a great arm, but somehow slipped to the sixth round. He was the fifth QB picked that year; Tom Brady was seventh. Yikes.

7) **Shannon Sharpe** (7th round, 192nd overall pick, 1990)

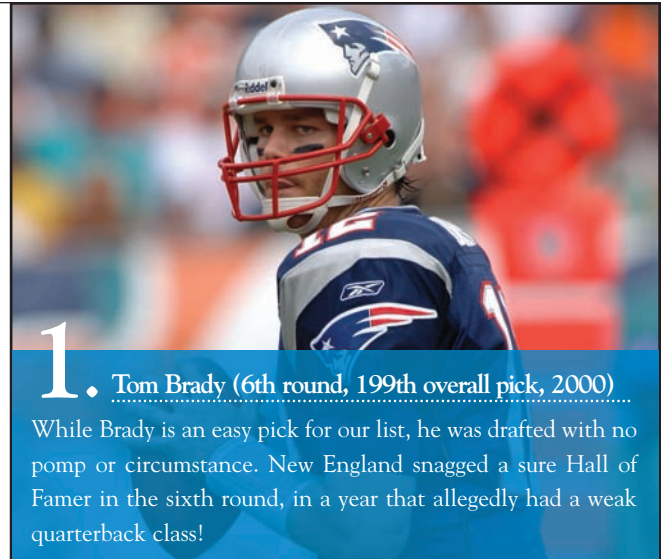
It's true that 191 players were selected before Sharpe. He still managed to become the most productive pass-catching tight end of his generation and made eight Pro Bowls.

8) **Joe Horn** (5th round, 135th overall pick, 1996)

Horn's alma mater of Itawamba Junior College is no powerhouse, but its sole NFL product went on to have a great career: Horn made four Pro Bowls in New Orleans.

9) **Jessie Armstead** (8th round, 207th overall pick, 1993)

First off, the NFL Draft doesn't even have eight rounds anymore. But this ostensibly undersized five-time Pro Bowler would've been a steal in any round.



1. **Tom Brady** (6th round, 199th overall pick, 2000).....

While Brady is an easy pick for our list, he was drafted with no pomp or circumstance. New England snagged a sure Hall of Famer in the sixth round, in a year that allegedly had a weak quarterback class!

Mark Langello

10) **Rod Smith** (Not drafted, 1994)

Yeah, Denver's pretty good at this. Smith was overlooked entirely out of Missouri Southern University, but was the first receiver Broncos quarterbacks looked to for more than 12 stellar seasons.

SMALL SCHOOL/BIG STAR

This list reminds us why NFL teams have so many scouts, and why those scouts log so many frequent-flyer miles: Big-time stars have come from some small-time programs. Here are the 10 most notable from lesser-known schools.

1) **Jerry Rice**; see opposite page.

2) **Walter Payton** (Jackson State, Class of '75)

Though hardly a powerhouse, Jackson State has produced numerous NFL players. None, though, were as dominant as "Sweetness," who became the NFL's all-time leading rusher over 13 Hall of Fame seasons.

3) **Deacon Jones** (Mississippi Vocational College, Class of '61)

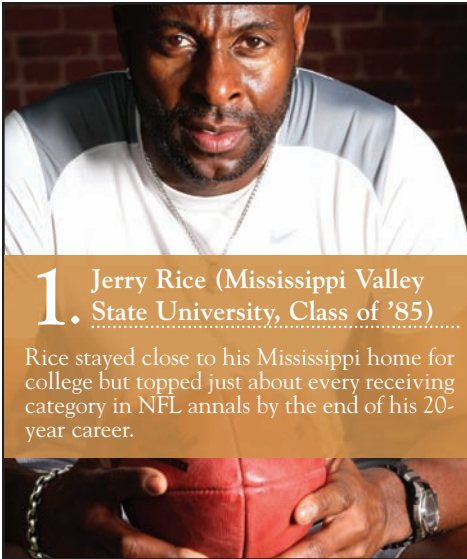
Deacon's alma mater was later renamed Mississippi Valley State, which means that it produced two players on this list and gave the NFL possibly the most dominant defensive end ever.

4) **Michael Strahan** (Texas Southern, Class of '93)

Only one other player from Texas Southern has played in the NFL in the last decade, and no player from any school has ever matched Strahan's standard-setting 22.5 sacks in 2001.

5) **Terrell Owens** (Tennessee-Chattanooga, Class of '96)

T.O. could have told you he was a big-time talent. Before he could make five first-team All-Pro appearances, however, he had to prove himself at unheralded Tennessee-Chattanooga.



1. Jerry Rice (Mississippi Valley State University, Class of '85)

Rice stayed close to his Mississippi home for college but topped just about every receiving category in NFL annals by the end of his 20-year career.

Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images

6) Richard Dent and Ed “Too Tall” Jones (Tennessee State, Class of '83 and '74, respectively)

“Too Tall” was the first player picked in 1974; Richard went 203rd in '83. The two defensive ends share more than an alma mater, though: They racked up plenty of sacks and combined to make seven Pro Bowls.

7) Phil Simms (Morehead State, Class of '79)

One of just eight Morehead alums ever to make the NFL, Simms went on to become the top passer in Giants history and win a pair of Super Bowls with the Big Blue in 1986 and 1990.

8) Joe Greene (North Texas State, Class of '69)

“Mean Joe,” a future Hall of Famer and 10-time Pro Bowl pick, was the fourth player picked in 1969. Only two other Mean Green players have gone in the first round since.

9) Steve McNair and Donald Driver (Alcorn State, Class of '95 and '99, respectively)

The ultra-tough pair never played together at Alcorn, but they each made three Pro Bowls—and quite an impact—in the NFL.

10) Andre Reed (Kutztown State, Class of '85)

Boasting an NFL career twice as long as any of his alma mater's five other NFL players, Reed was selected to seven Pro Bowls. Did we mention he's also the top receiver in Buffalo Bills history?

SUPER BOWLS

They're always worth watching, but some Super Bowls are more super than others. These are the classics of the Super Bowl era that stand above the rest as incredible sports moments.

1) Super Bowl XLII (Giants 17, Patriots 14)

Despite not yet passing the test of time, all the circumstances are right for this game to go down in the history books. The previously perfect Patriots were supposed to crush the Giants. Instead, the two teams gave fans a mind-bendingly tense and thrilling game, capped with a truly amazing upset.

2) Super Bowl XXV (Giants 20, Bills 19)

Scott Norwood's missed kick is the best-remembered moment, but the entire game—between two tough and very well-matched teams—was packed with memorable moments.

3) Super Bowl III (Jets 16, Colts 7)

Joe Namath kept his promise, the AFL made a huge statement, and the Super Bowl era was off and running. For sheer improbability, this upset will probably never be surpassed.

4) Super Bowl XXXVI (Patriots 20, Rams 17)

Remember when the Patriots were underdogs? Besides announcing Tom Brady's arrival as a star, this game was played nearly perfectly by two very, very good teams.

5) Super Bowl XXIII (49ers 20, Bengals 16)

A tough, low-scoring first half gave way to a tense, tactical sec-

ond half and, finally, a definitively dazzling game-winning drive from Joe Montana and the 49ers.

6) Super Bowl XXXIV (Rams 23, Titans 16)

The Rams teams of this period were awesome on offense, but “The Tackle” left Titans wide receiver Kevin Dyson one yard short of a tying TD, and made for a legendary final play.

7) Super Bowl XXXII (Broncos 31, Packers 24)

This was not only a great upset—the Broncos had made the playoffs as a Wild Card—but also a great, closely played game that finally broke Denver's Super Bowl jinx.

8) Super Bowl XXXVIII (Patriots 32, Panthers 29)

That “wardrobe malfunction” wasn't the only surprise in this one. The underdog Panthers went TD-for-TD with the juggernaut Pats until a last-second field goal won it for New England.

9) Super Bowl X (Steelers 21, Cowboys 17)

Despite lacking a specific standout moment, this game is still memorable as two of the best teams of their era played a hard-fought, near-perfect football game. Only two penalties were called all game.

10) Super Bowl XXII (Redskins 42, Broncos 10)

Not a close one, but the Redskins—who scored 42 unanswered points behind backups QB Doug Williams and RB Timmy Smith—authored a monster of a Super Bowl stunner.

NFL PREDICTIONS

Besides Brett Favre's move to the New York Jets and the improbability of another New England Patriot run at perfection, little has changed among the contenders for Super Bowl XLIII. *Athlon Sports Pro Football* magazine has tabbed the Cowboys and Chargers (two teams without much postseason success as of late) to meet in the Super Bowl, but all the familiar names will be in the hunt: the Patriots and Colts in the AFC and the Seahawks, Packers and Saints in the NFC. Perhaps the best news for football fans, however, is that living away from your favorite team no longer sentences you to viewing highlights. With NFL Sunday Ticket on DirecTV, you can watch every game, every Sunday, no matter where you live*.

Here's a quick overview of how America's leading preseason magazine sees the 2008 season shaping up.

*Blackout rules and other conditions apply.



NFL Sunday Ticket on DirecTV

2008 AFC PREDICTIONS

AFC EAST

1. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Pats are back to prove Super Bowl loss was a fluke.

2. BUFFALO BILLS

Toronto initiative forces Buffalo fans to roam north of the border.

3. NEW YORK JETS

Can Brett Favre work his magic in the Big Apple?

4. MIAMI DOLPHINS

Big Tuna's fish franchise now, following 1-15 finish in South Florida.

(AFC East teams play NFC West and AFC West in schedule rotation)

AFC NORTH

1. PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Big Ben contract tolls to the tune of eight years for \$102 million.

2. CLEVELAND BROWNS

Missed playoffs with 10-6 record; Dawg Pound hungry for more.

3. CINCINNATI BENGALS

Defense and discipline lacking for "Bungles" under Marvin Lewis.

4. BALTIMORE RAVENS

New head coach, new quarterback, new era for Ray Lewis' team.

(AFC North teams play NFC East and AFC South in schedule rotation)

AFC WEST

1. SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

Super Chargers shocked by injuries; Bolt-ing for Tampa this season.

2. DENVER BRONCOS

A healthy Jay Cutler could emerge as one of the NFL's best young QBs.

3. OAKLAND RAIDERS

Raider Nation hoping Darren McFadden is as good as advertised.

4. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Rookie class spearheading fresh start after "Hard Knocks" season.

(AFC West teams play NFC South and AFC East in schedule rotation)

AFC SOUTH

1. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Unofficial last lap for Tony Dungy as new stadium opens in Indy.

2. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS*

Teal Curtain defense adds new coordinator and potential pass rush.

3. TENNESSEE TITANS*

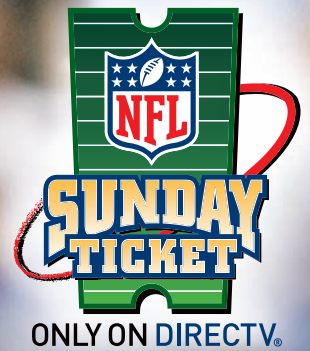
Vince Vibe enters third year as Titans celebrate 10th anniversary.

4. HOUSTON TEXANS

Last-place team (8-8) in the best division in NFL history last year.

(AFC South teams play NFC North and AFC North in schedule rotation)

(* denotes wildcard playoff spot)



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POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP

SAN DIEGO CHARGERS OVER NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

NFC CHAMPIONSHIP

DALLAS COWBOYS OVER SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

SUPER BOWL XLIII

DALLAS COWBOYS OVER SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

Sunday, February 1, 2009 • Raymond James Stadium, Tampa, Florida



Visit athlonsports.com for in season updates.

2008 NFC PREDICTIONS

NFC EAST

1. DALLAS COWBOYS

Jerry Jones' collection of stars hasn't won a playoff game since '96.

2. NEW YORK GIANTS*

Big Blue Wrecking Crew title defense starts now.

3. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Andy Reid family issues, Donovan McNabb injuries clip Eagles' wings.

4. WASHINGTON REDSKINS

Jim Zorn takes over for Hall of Famer Joe Gibbs as leader in D.C.

(NFC East teams play AFC North and NFC West in schedule rotation)

NFC NORTH

1. GREEN BAY PACKERS

Brett Favre era in Title Town over after 275 consecutive games.

2. MINNESOTA VIKINGS*

Twin Cities fans hope A.D. ("All Day") is healthy A.Y. ("All Year").

3. CHICAGO BEARS

Bears turn to Kyle Orton to take over at quarterback.

4. DETROIT LIONS

Millen Man March members have given up the cause in Motown.

(NFC North teams play AFC South and NFC South in schedule rotation)

NFC WEST

1. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

"12th Man" ready to cheer for Mike Holmgren's final playoff run.

2. ARIZONA CARDINALS

Phoenix fans hope to see Matt Leinart celebrating—on the field.

3. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

The franchise of Joe Montana and Steve Young can't find a QB.

4. ST. LOUIS RAMS

"Greatest Show on Turf" a distant memory in Gateway to the worst.

(NFC West teams play AFC East and NFC East in schedule rotation)

NFC SOUTH

1. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Big Easy faithful hope to be partying in February.

2. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Home-field advantage in Super Bowl if Bucs' ship doesn't sink first.

3. CAROLINA PANTHERS

John Fox and Jake Delhomme must win to remain in Charlotte.

4. ATLANTA FALCONS

Troubled franchise turns to rookie Matt Ryan at quarterback.

(NFC South teams play AFC West and NFC North in schedule rotation)



Tomlinson: Peter Brouillet; Patriots: Doug Pensinger/Getty Images; Manning: Tim Clark/Athlon Sports; Texas Stadium: Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

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Neptune Villa Master Bedroom, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas



The World's **Best SUITES**

*Ten fabulous hotel suites
you will want to call home.*

By JEAN TANG

Looking for the very best in luxury accommodations with that little something extra? We've scoured the country (and parts of the globe) to find the best suites that money can buy in the world's finest hotels.

Our criteria included impeccable service, unbelievable attention to detail, unique amenities, amiable personality, breathtaking interior design, and, in some cases, sheer size. We concentrated our attention on major cities and remained largely focused in the U.S., with only a few overseas suites making the list. You won't find any trendy boutique hotels here, nor will you find bed-and-breakfasts, however quaint. Our picks are major forces in the luxury hotel business that have raised the bar for quality and are consistently excellent. From cabanas with private pools to penthouses with views of the city, our list is diverse, but we were unswerving in terms of our judgment parameters. Whether your travels require an extended stay or you are simply enjoying a few nights of decadence, these incredible suites, quite simply, can't be beat.



Artemis Villa Living Room, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas

Caesars Palace: Augustus Suite and Artemis and Neptune Villas (Las Vegas, NV)

Staying in one of the palatial suites at Caesars Palace makes luxuriating in your own chambers preferable to an evening out—quite a feat in Las Vegas. Let's start with the famous pool villas: To call them home is a stretch, as their combined 21,000 square feet is bigger than most residences. Of course, the super-high rollers and A-list guests (Oprah, Celine Dion, Michael Douglas) invited to stay here will undoubtedly be accustomed to the suites' 24-hour butlers and security guards. Whereas other Vegas high-roller properties focus on perks like bowling lanes and backstage passes, Caesars cuts to the soul of a certain golf-loving, billiard-dabbling type: The villas are equipped with a humidor, barber chair, pool table, and virtual golf. Aside from being gargantuan, the accommodations are ornately imperial—just the thing for a modern-day emperor.

On the penthouse level, the Augustus suite is tremendously large at 10,000 square feet. Upon arrival, you'll spend the first hour simply meandering. Designed by Michael Medeiros of world-renowned firm Wilson & Associates, the suite caters to the truly well-traveled by taking inspiration from some of the finest hotels in the world. The main living room commingles antiques with modern artwork for an eclectic but cohesive aesthetic. Explore further, and you'll discover a distinctive men's club environment in the bar and billiards room—perfect spots to sip a martini. Exotic Parquet de Versailles wood floors and padded hand-tooled leather walls lend a surprising intimacy to these grandiose spaces. The bar nuzzles up to a cozy home theater that is the pinnacle of the suite's technological offerings (there are also at least 15 flat-panels and complete automation of lighting, climate, music, and video). A stately master bedroom, private massage room and spa, and three additional bedrooms are all appointed with the same finesse and attention to detail.

The Artemis, Neptune, and Augustus suites are aptly named after gods and kings, because at Caesars, you'll definitely be treated like both. You'll never want to go home once you experience service and amenities like these.

www.harrahs.com



Augustus Suite Billiards Room, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas



Presidential Bungalow Living Room, Beverly Hills Hotel, Los Angeles

The Beverly Hills Hotel & Bungalows: Presidential Bungalow (Los Angeles, CA)

Through the ages, “The Pink Palace” on Sunset Boulevard has remained beloved by doing a simple thing very well: stoking old-Hollywood nostalgia with the glitz and modern comforts of new Hollywood. Indeed, the place exudes history. Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich bunked here, and Elizabeth Taylor honeymooned with six of her eight husbands in the famous bungalows. The Presidential (also known as Bungalow No. 5) is the grandest of the suites, a 2,520-square-foot unit tucked deep in the palm-tree groves. While the hotel rekindles old Hollywood glamour, there is nothing dated about the amenities. No. 5 has four spacious bedrooms, a wood-burning fireplace, Sub-Zero appliances, Bose speakers, a private kitchen, and a wine refrigerator. A 24-hour chef and butler are available to keep you comfortable and satiated. Perhaps one of the biggest star draws is the hotel’s respect for its guests’ privacy; the Presidential Bungalow features its own entrance! In fact, the suite was equipped with a totally private pool for frequent guest, billionaire Walter Annenberg. At the Beverly Hills, discretion is of the utmost importance.

www.thebeverlyhillshotel.com



Presidential Bungalow Private Pool, Beverly Hills Hotel, Los Angeles



Four Seasons Hotel George V: Royal Suite Living Room, Paris, France

Four Seasons Hotel George V: Royal Suites (Paris, France)

Paris' grandest hotel echoes like the Louvre, and aptly so, considering the 17th-century tapestries, 18th-century chandeliers, and other kingly furnishings. Located in a landmark 1928 building, the Four Seasons Hotel George V offers breathtaking views of the City of Lights from interior spaces that radiate European opulence. Space is the theme here. Above the stunning, marble-clad lobby are some of the largest guest rooms in Paris (on the Champs-Élysées, no less). Our favorites are also the most decadent: a pair of 3,000-square-foot palatial residences. These include marble foyers and fireplaces, glittering dining rooms and parlors, offices, kitchens, and a mini-Versailles worth of French armoires, statues, and paintings dating back to the Sun King himself. As a bonus, you get a private terrace with a view of an Art Deco fountain that Louis XIV never laid eyes on. Once you experience these splendid accommodations, this will be the only place you'll want to stay in Paris.

www.fourseasons.com/paris



Four Seasons Hotel George V: Royal Suite Bedroom, Paris, France



Presidential Suite Bath, Mandarin Oriental, New York

Mandarin Oriental, New York: Presidential and Taipan Suites

This flagship hotel's incomparable views sweep midtown Manhattan, the velvet expanse of Central Park, the Hudson River, and the setting sun, then give a haughty glance over New Jersey. The hotel's top suites command these views through shining plate-glass windows. Inside, they showcase Asian artworks and antiques, including carved figurines in the 2,634-square-foot Presidential suite and an 18th-century Chinese parchment calligraphy book. But these suites are no tombs; they're flooded with light, furnishings, and Thai silk drapes the color of sand. The Mandarin hasn't neglected the more practical side of living, either. In the Presidential suite, you'll find a 65-inch plasma TV, five zones of audio, and a Bang & Olufsen sound system for your entertainment needs, while a Mozambique wood-paneled study offers the business traveler a reflective place to work. It's a major bonus that the hotel's fine service hails from the service-conscious East—a heritage that shows in a staff as fluent in grace as it is in quiet efficiency.

www.mandarinoriental.com/newyork



Presidential Suite Living Room, Mandarin Oriental, New York



Penthouse Suite Living Room, St. Regis, San Francisco

St. Regis, San Francisco: Penthouse Suite

Not to be outdone by the competition, the St. Regis Penthouse suite has outright suburban proportions. Combine the Presidential suite with a neighboring suite, and a person can stretch out a little: 4,750 whopping square feet include a 950-square-foot master bedroom, a formal dining room for 10 with an antique buffet table, two living rooms, a 600-square-foot marble bath with steam shower and Kohler soaking tub for two, and a walk-in closet. But it's still the city, which means culture at your fingertips (the SF Museum of Modern Art is next door) and wraparound views of San Francisco and the Bay Bridge from the custom-designed silk mohair sofa. When you want to take your culture in-suite, turn your attention to the contemporary fine art and sculpture from around the world adorning these chambers, or simply head over to the built-in media room for a bit of distraction. If you plan to take your meals or throw a dinner party here, you can be assured that St. Regis has only the finest dining accessories: Spiegelau stemware, Christolfe flatware, and Wedgwood china designed by Vera Wang exclusively for the hotel. Indeed, the finer things are what the St. Regis, San Francisco—and particularly the Penthouse suite—is all about.

www.starwoodhotels.com

One Aldwych: Dome Suite (London, U.K.)

Designed in 1907 for *The Morning Post* newspaper, One Aldwych is a visually striking building—with its weathered copper roof—located amid a sea of theaters in the heart of Covent Garden. The hotel prides itself on its prime location, as well as its museum-worthy private contemporary art collection. The 797-square-foot Dome suite at the top of this beautiful luxury hotel is the smallest of our picks, but also one of the most likable. There are just three rooms—all in sweet tones of lilac, gray, and ivory. The centerpiece: a circular room with a dining table for 10, where the Duchess of Cornwall, Camilla Parker Bowles, hosts her lunches. Service is unpretentious, thoughtful, and detailed, down to the mandarin slices frozen in ice and fresh flowers and fruit delivered to the suite daily.

www.onealdwych.co.uk



Dome Suite Dining Room, One Aldwych, London, U.K.

Park Hyatt Tokyo: Tokyo Suite

Anyone who saw *Lost in Translation* will recognize the dizzying neon views, quirky art-jazz lounge, and eerily insular spaces of this hotel. Last year, the Park Hyatt unveiled its new Tokyo suite, an idiosyncratic gallery perched 50 stories above bustling Shinjuku. Enter the 2,368-square-foot space, and you're enveloped in green Italian marble, which leads to a living area adorned with Noguchi lanterns, Korean vessels, Chinese tribal headdresses, and specially commissioned sculptures and paintings. The living room also doubles as a library/screening room complete with art-house films and a thousand fine art books. Retreat to the lavish bathroom for a soothing rain shower or dry sauna, and then head back out to the lobby for another look at the towering skyline and view of Mount Fuji—you might just spot one of the many celebrities that frequent the hotel.

www.hyatt.com



Tokyo Suite Living Room, Park Hyatt Tokyo, Japan



Tokyo Suite Bedroom, Park Hyatt Tokyo, Japan



Peninsula Suite, Peninsula Chicago

Peninsula Chicago: Peninsula Suite

Immaculate, generously scaled, and faintly European (much like Chicago itself), the Peninsula Chicago is a knockout through and through—drawn in classic lines and fresh tones of lemon, rice, and light. The 3,113-square-foot Peninsula suite carries this look to a tee: The imperious crown moldings, formal living room with its Yamaha grand piano, separate parlor, delicate bedroom, and private gym seem to suggest a Hong Kong-society hostess whose tastes run from Art Deco to Victorian England to the Ming dynasty. Ironically, if the weather is nice, all this interior beauty may go unseen, as guests gravitate toward the breezy, 2,000-square-foot terrace and Jacuzzi. To enjoy the best of both worlds, simply gaze out the oversized windows at the magnificent views of the historic Water Tower, Lake Michigan, and Chicago's Gold Coast.

www.chicago.peninsula.com



Ritz-Carlton Suite, Ritz-Carlton, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

The Ritz-Carlton, Georgetown: Ritz-Carlton Suite (Washington, D.C.)

The brick archways and graceful curves of this landmark structure on the banks of the pretty Potomac have been repurposed (from a trash incinerator, no less) into one of the nation's most charming Ritz-Carlton hotels. Just minutes from the Smithsonian and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, its location is a big part of the attraction. But it's the Ritz' interior spaces that will make you return for a second visit. Immersed in history yet contemporary in style, the Ritz-Carlton, Georgetown, juxtaposes old architecture with undeniably new design.

At 2,465 square feet, the Ritz-Carlton suite is smaller than the Royal Potomac suite, but we love its yawning, expansive terrace over the Potomac River and its red-hued living room, complete with a gas fireplace and a plasma TV. A 24-hour personal concierge is provided for suite guests, and no detail is neglected, from champagne and strawberries to the twice-daily housekeeping service. While the hotel's gracious service and legendary luxury are evident in even its smallest rooms, you'll feel like royalty in this lavish suite.

www.ritzcarlton.com



Ritz-Carlton Lobby, Ritz-Carlton, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.



Terrace Presidential Suite Living Room, Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek, Dallas

Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek (Dallas, TX)

In 1908, a cotton baron constructed this mansion just north of downtown Dallas. After a fire, it was rebuilt into an Italian Renaissance vision: carved plaster ceilings, an elaborate stone fireplace, stained-glass windows, inlaid dining-room ceiling, and cantilevered stairway. The mansion is now owned by Caroline Rose Hunt, who spent her childhood playing on the grounds. The hotel continually receives accolades as one of the nation's top hotels, and for good reason: Its restaurant is one of the finest hotel eateries in the country and its Southern hospitality is a talking point among guests. Surprisingly, the mansion retains the intimate feel of a private residence, yet has all the resources of a powerhouse hotel chain.

Even before the renovation slated for later this year, the 1,350-square-foot Terrace Presidential suite is a stunning example of Hunt's preservation philosophies—the stone molding detail, high ceilings, antique furniture, and brass four-poster bed all hark back to a different, more romantic era. The enormous bathroom, oversized Jacuzzi tub, giant patio, and private kitchen with modern amenities, however, are from our times. Combining the best of old and new, the Mansion is a destination in itself. •

www.mansiononturtlecreek.com

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The Audi R8 and Bentley Continental GT Speed offer something
NEW AND EXCITING *in the world of* **LUXURY AUTOMOBILES.**

By BETH STEIN

With fall on the horizon, we're into cool. Way cool. Not the kind of cool that comes from a blast of air conditioning—although that's included. Instead, we're talking cool that comes courtesy of a pair of coupes whose looks, stats, and driving experiences will definitely give you goose flesh.

The Audi R8 and Bentley Continental GT Speed are a remarkable pair. As high-performance coupes inspired by successful models in their automakers' histories, there are similarities in concept, mission, and, to a lesser extent, market. Each sets a new benchmark for its respective marque as the fastest production car ever and introduces a level of performance heretofore reserved for Porsche, Ferrari, and the like. Both pin you to a leather seat in 0 to 60, drop jaws wherever they go, and are likely to get you propositioned and arrested.

But the road forks there. That's when we discover the unique characteristics that make one a Bentley, the other an Audi. It's a difference in philosophy and flavor, each reflective of its own revered heritage. Underscoring this point, we discuss early prototypes that eventually informed these two stunning coupes whose extraordinary performance and enviable style define a very modern version of cool.

Audi R8

Audi's decision to run a high-dollar ad for the R8 during the 2008 Super Bowl was pure genius. A takeoff on the famous *Godfather* scene with the bloody horse head placed in the bed as a warning to a Hollywood mogul, the Audi ad features an actor from the original movie waking to discover he is covered in motor oil, with the front end of what looks like an old Bentley beneath his covers. As he screams in horror, the camera cuts to the stealth R8 parked outside, roaring to life like dawn at Le Mans, then exiting in a blur of speed and sound. Among the last things we see are the Audi's menacing headlamps and the simple tag line "Old Luxury just got put on notice." In 60 seconds, the Audi R8 had ignited a worldwide "Wow."

This mid-engine supercar designed for the road was almost as fast in its inception—at least by automotive standards. Working day and night for just 11 months under strict secrecy, Audi's team managed to bring to life the Audi Le Mans quattro in time for the 2003 Frankfurt Auto Show. The fully functional, working prototype brought the thrill of the track (i.e. Audi's five-time Le Mans winner R8 racer) to the everyday sport/luxury driver—no small feat. Four years later, fully refined and in production, that car rolled into U.S. showrooms as a 2008 R8. America swooned.

Endowed with heart-stopping good looks, the R8 mirrors the tasteful, yet audacious presence of exotics like Ferrari and Lamborghini. Attribute this to its roots in racing and designers who didn't compromise. They worked within the race car's physical parameters to make passengers comfortable and driving easy.

From its deep, dark front fascia punctuated by the piercing



stare of headlamps underlined with marquis lights, to the formidable lift of its tail and every aesthetic detail in between, the R8 is pure exotic. The trapezoidal grille, unique arc of the roof, and four-ring insignia identify it as an Audi. The cabin is pushed forward to accommodate engine placement behind the driver, and the engine is fully visible beneath rear glass to

From its **DEEP, DARK FRONT FASCIA** punctuated by the piercing stare of headlamps underlined with marquis lights, to the **FORMIDABLE LIFT** of its tail and every aesthetic detail in between, the R8 is **PURE EXOTIC**.



flaunt its muscle. Over the top? Not in this case.

The mid-engine setup marks a first for Audi's production lineup, but it's common in race cars. Placing the engine forward of the rear axle creates a weight distribution (in this case 44 percent front/56 percent rear, just like the racing R8) that has a positive impact on driving dynamics. The R8 is 75

inches wide, but only 174.5 inches long and 49.3 inches high. It's compact.

But its 104.3-inch wheelbase affords surprising interior space for cabin and engine mounted longitudinally. Between its dimensions, weight distribution, and all-wheel drive, this car remains planted on the pavement. Push a button, and



The Audi R8's racing-inspired good looks are juxtaposed with its comfortable ride. Outside and in, it is worthy of its pedigree.

suspension adjusts from comfort to kick-it. The R8 becomes Formula One for the S-turns.

The high-revving 4.2-liter V8 builds on the R8 racer's FSI gasoline direct-injection technology. This new incarnation delivers 420 horses max at 7,800 rpm and 317 foot pounds of torque from 4,500 to 6,000 rpm. At least 90 percent of this maximum torque is also maintained from 3,500 to 7,600 rpm, guaranteeing plenty of thrust at all times. According to Audi, the R8 sprints from 0 to 60 in 4.4 seconds. Independent tests have shaved as much as 0.4 of a second off that time. Top speed is 187 mph.

There are two transmissions available, a manual six-speed and the Audi R tronic sequential-shift gearbox. The test car was outfitted with the latter, which shifts automatically or manually by using either the joystick or paddles mounted on the steering wheel.

For all the R8's swagger, however, it is a remarkably comfortable driving experience, as race cars go. Despite lightning reflexes and road clearance that skims the asphalt, it doesn't punish its passengers. The cabin furthers this notion with rich Audi luxury. Even steering dispenses with the stiff, heavy

feeling one expects from a car with this pedigree, yet communicates precisely. Other than the intoxicating growl of that big V8 behind your head at speed, it's surprisingly civilized. As promised, it is a car you can drive every day.

The best evidence of what a star this car is, is how often the media refers to its \$118,000 price tag as "a bargain." Count us in that chorus. This racing-inspired R8 coupe isn't simply a fresh model in Audi's lineup in the vein of most nameplates adding a new product. For Audi, it elevates the game exponentially. The German automaker has always ranked among Europe's elite in luxury/performance vehicles, but rarely has it set the standard, challenged the icons, or stolen the show. The R8 does all this and more. And Audi is far from done: At this year's North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Audi showed off the R8 6.0 V12 TDI concept, which is closely related to the engine in the R10, Audi's two-time Le Mans winner. Churning out 500 horsepower and more than 700 foot pounds of torque, it would be the first 12-cylinder diesel engine in a high-performance production coupe. A convertible R8 is also on the drawing board.

Base price: \$109,000
Price as tested: \$132,745



The best evidence of what a star this car is, is how often the media refers to its \$118,000 price tag as “a bargain.”

COUNT US IN THAT CHORUS.

*This racing-inspired R8 coupe isn't simply a fresh model in Audi's lineup in the vein of most nameplates adding a new product. For Audi, **IT ELEVATES THE GAME EXPONENTIALLY.***

Bentley Continental GT Speed

As much as we love Audi's *Godfather* commercial and appreciate the symbolism of that Bentley-esque grille beneath the covers, we have to say, "Right back at you, Audi" after driving the 2008 Continental GT Speed.

Part Queen Elizabeth II, part infamous punk rocker Sid Vicious, the Speed is Bentley's new sport version of the Continental GT coupe, which was already formidable in its own right.

If "Bentley" and "utterly wicked" in the same phrase strike a dissonant chord, you haven't met the GT, much less the Speed. The GT four-seater coupe was introduced in the U.S. in 2004 as an '05 and immediately won wide acclaim. Created to update Bentley's "Old Luxury" image in style and technology, the original GT boasts a 552-horsepower twin-turbocharged 12-cylinder engine. At its debut, it was one of the fastest four-seat coupes in the world with a 0 to 60 time of 4.6 seconds and a top speed of 198 mph. Those deep of pocket that were tuned to a more refined brand of sport embraced the GT. Its combination of elegance and excitement, comfort, and thrills did exactly what Bentley had hoped. So why stop there?

Enter this 2008 GT Speed. It uses the same 6.0-cylinder twin-turbo W-12 engine as the GT, but through a new engine-management system and a few other tricks, those 552 horses have now multiplied to 600, and torque has increased by 15 percent to 553. Zero to 60? Bentley says 4.3 seconds, but independent tests disagree: They get 4 seconds flat. Top speed hits 202 mph, a first for Bentley, and the quarter mile disappears in just 12.5 seconds at 114 mph. These numbers are astounding for a car that weighs a touch over 5,000 pounds.

Inspired by the revered Bentley Speed that first appeared in 1923, this new coupe distinguishes itself visually with wider air intakes and a more upright black chrome grill. The

Continental GT Speed sits a tad lower and sports big 20-inch wheels that are at once flashy and tasteful. Fat Pirellis and wider rifled tailpipes make the final impression as this Bentley blows on by. But these performance cues appear subtle as high-performance styling goes. The unmistakable class of the Continental GT remains intact.

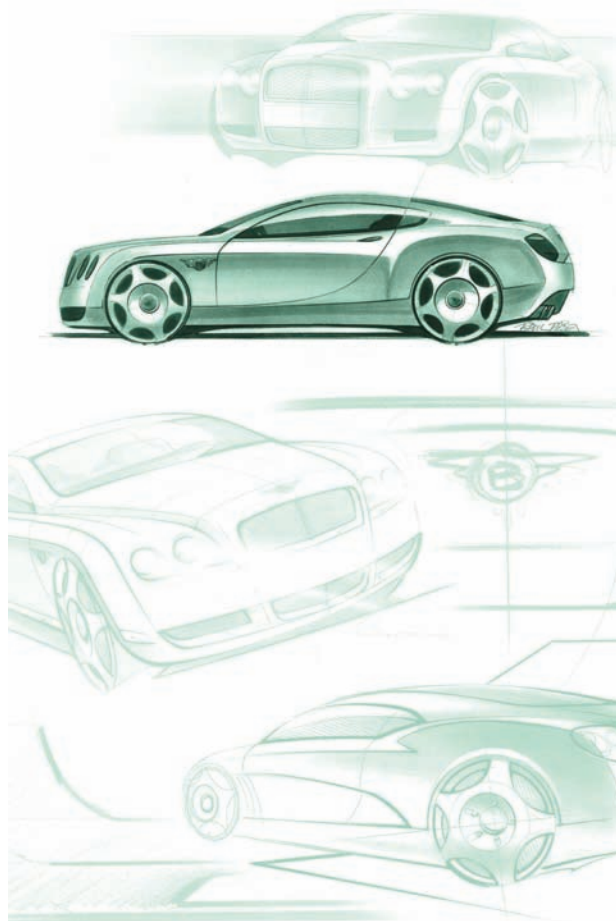
Power isn't the only asset here, however. The GT Speed's chassis is retuned for its new capabilities with stiffer suspension and anti-roll bars. Steering response has been tightened, and suspension can be dialed down for more spirited driving or eased up for comfort. All-wheel drive carries over from the GT. In short, this massive two-door is one kick-butt buggy that grabs corners like cars half its girth and eats up long stretches of road without taking a breath between bites.

But, incredibly, the Continental GT Speed is also a Bentley in the finest sense of the word. What passengers experience inside the cabin versus the velocity outside represents quite a contrast. With suspension dialed for comfort, the Speed's ride rivals that of the finest luxury sedans. Even at limits legal only in Europe, passengers hear the seductive bass of its sport-tuned exhaust and little else. Not even engine noise penetrates this cocoon, lined in the finest hides and

detailed with master-craftsman quality. Settle back in the diamond-stitched leather seats and revel in rich British tradition sport style. If the long list of standard and optional finery doesn't satisfy you, Bentley offers personalized customizing second only to Savile Row.

Although some might feel slighted by the Continental GT Speed's dignified ride and relative lack of visceral jollies, we applaud its ability to balance unyielding performance with such decadent luxury. This uncanny marriage of beauty and beast delivers effortless thrills beyond anything we've experienced. The price may be regal, but so is the ride. •

Base price: \$199,990
Price as tested: \$218,225



From drawing board to reality, the Bentley's smooth lines and high-performance styling make a luxurious statement.



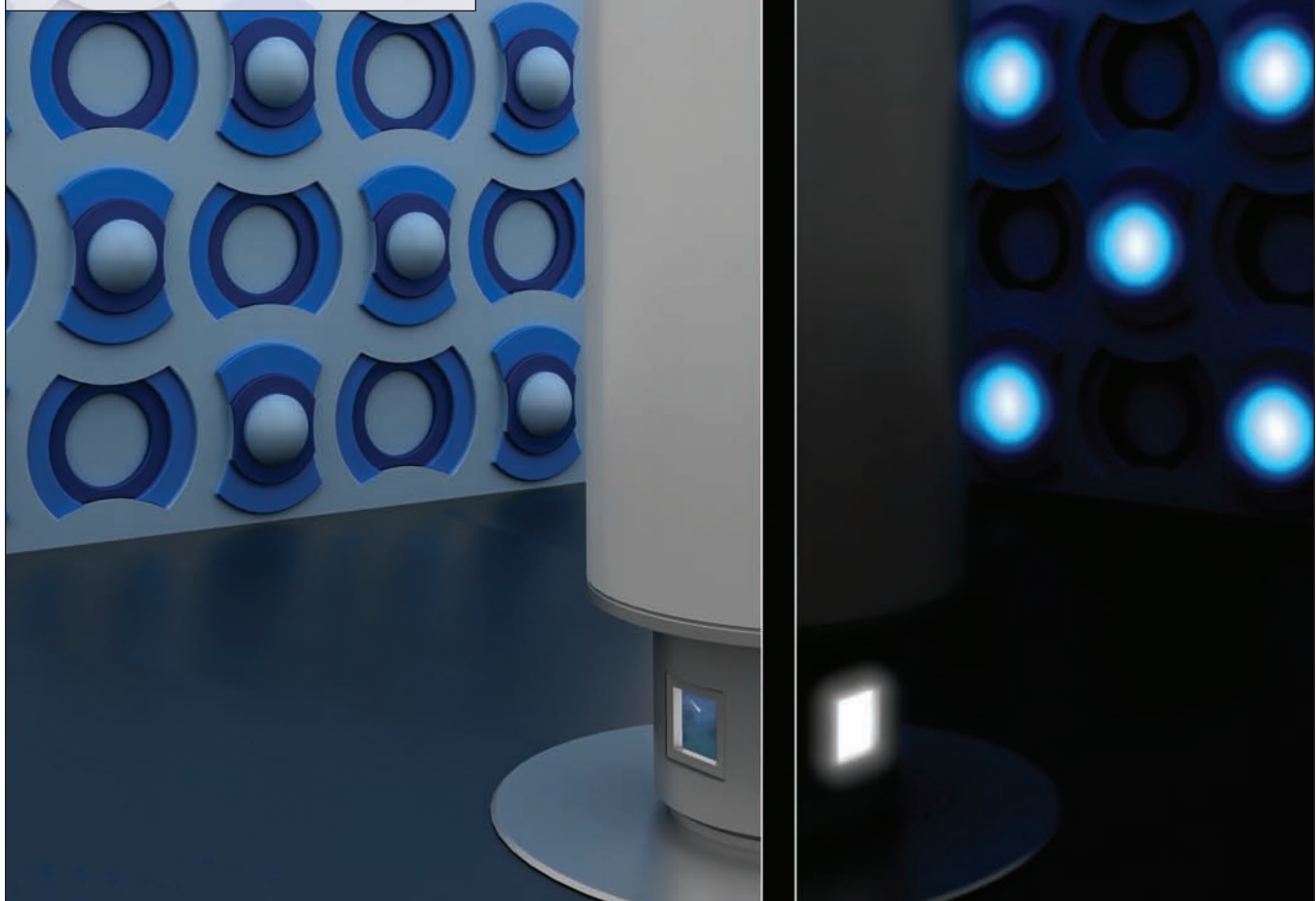
If “**BENTLEY**” and “**UTTERLY WICKED**” in the same phrase strike a dissonant chord, you haven’t met the GT, much less the **SPEED**.



Proving aesthetics and technology don't have to be at odds, Altera Design Studio has conceived this futuristic acoustic wall, known as Acustica, that is both visually exciting and enhances room acoustics.

If you've noticed your high-performance audio system doesn't sound as fantastic as you expected, poor room acoustics could be the culprit. Acoustically designed walls and rooms can remedy this situation and totally change the way you experience music or movie soundtracks. Molded from layers of Corian, Acustica's unique and artful texture helps break up room acoustics and diffuse sound, creating a superior listening environment. With one eye on performance and the other on aesthetics, Altera has infused Acustica with bulbs that produce a soft, translucent light, lending an ethereal ambience to your home theater. For more information, go to www.alt-era.com.

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