

PLASTIC SURGERY

Don't like your T-Mac McFarlane figure? No problem. Turn him into Kobe Bryant. BY JAN HUBBARD

Sports at its best brings out the kid in us, but in the case of Joe Ingraffia, having a childlike hobby has fed a passion and created profit. While it might be tempting to examine

Or \$100 for a six-inch figure? Yes, in the world of high-end collectibles, it may not seem like much. But as a part-time enterprise, it provides disposable income while allowing Ingraffia to do something he loves.

In short, Ingraffia is a sports figure plastic surgeon. If a Sam Bowie action figure existed, he could change it into Michael Jordan — something the Blazers wish they could have done in 1984.

A few years ago, Ingraffia looked at sports figures made by McFarlane Toys and while he enjoyed them, he felt something was missing.

"When McFarlane issued the first set of baseball and hockey figures," says Ingraffia, a 49-year-old procurement manager for a Chicago research institute, "they didn't have the license to

"I had done a lot of model and figure painting and decided that I wanted the Sammy Sosa figure to be in a Cubs uniform. So I stripped it and painted it myself."

Ingraffia worked on a few more figures and decided to post them online. The reaction was immediate and significant. He began getting e-mails asking about the process and the more figures he posted, the more e-mails he got. Finally, he was so overwhelmed with inquiries that he created a web site (customsbyjomo.com) with instructions and customizing tips.

So how does the process work? It starts with a request of, say, someone sending Ingraffia an Elton Brand figure and asking him to turn it into Yao Ming.

"I start by digging up a bunch of pictures of [Yao]," Ingraffia says. "I make sure I get all the uniform markings. I find the artwork to create the numbers, nameplate and logos. I probably spend a couple of hours getting that done.

"Then I take the original figure, clean it and take it apart. I prime it with all-white spray paint and then paint the uniform colors, including all the striping on the pants legs and [jersey]. Then I go through the



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Ingraffia's fascination with figurines and say this is a man who never grew up, it should be noted that collectors are willing to pay decent money for his creations.

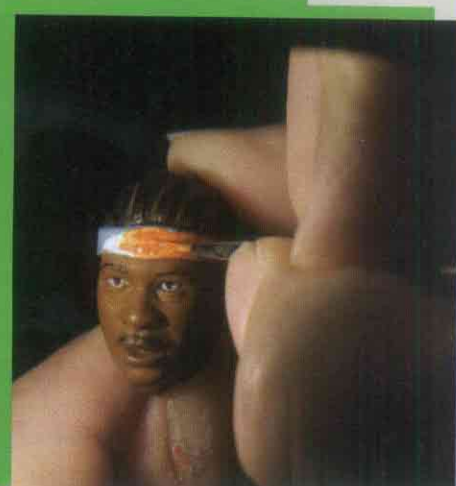
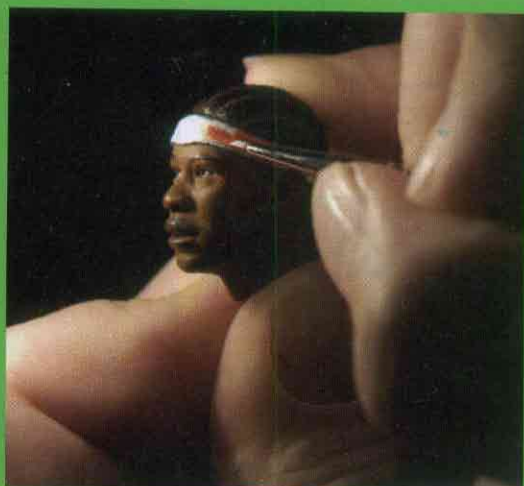
How about \$250 for a 12-inch action fig-

ure? Or \$100 for a six-inch figure? use logos. So the figures had on generic uniforms. The Sammy Sosa figure didn't have the Cubs logo, but had an 'S' for Sosa on the cap and 'Sosa' on the jersey instead of 'Chicago.'

SHOPPING LIST

What you'll need to customize your figures:

- A few good brushes
- Good cleaner
- Krylon or Testors Spray Primer (White, Black, or Gray)
- Acrylic paints
- Masking Tape
- Decal Paper exacto knives, sandpaper, scissors and assorted tools.



Ingraffia repaints a Carmelo Anthony figure, outfitted in his Nuggets uni. When finished, Melo will be decked out in Syracuse Orange.

process of adding decals. You can buy decal paper and print decals on a color printer, so that's what I do.

"I apply the decals then paint around them to cover the edges. Then I add several coats of sealer so the decals won't come off."

Nothing to it — at least if your brain operates in a way similar to a Swiss watchmaker. The average klutz is far better off letting Ingraffia do the work and forking over a hundred bucks.

Ingraffia estimates several hundred people are actively involved in recasting McFarlane figures. Although there may be licensing issues involved with some designers, Ingrassia avoids the issue by not offering anything for sale. If someone sends him a figure and asks him to redo it, he charges for his services but does not offer the figures for re-sale.

"If you send me a pair of shoes and ask me to paint the Nike swoosh on it, I can do it," Ingraffia says. "But I wouldn't post them for sale

and claim they are Nikes."

Ingrassia's work is unique because of the incredible detail. There is an entire section on his website about doing the eyes for the figures and it's almost haunting. You can click on the figure of Barry Sanders and it seems that he is looking right through you.

Ingraffia gets requests from all over the world —

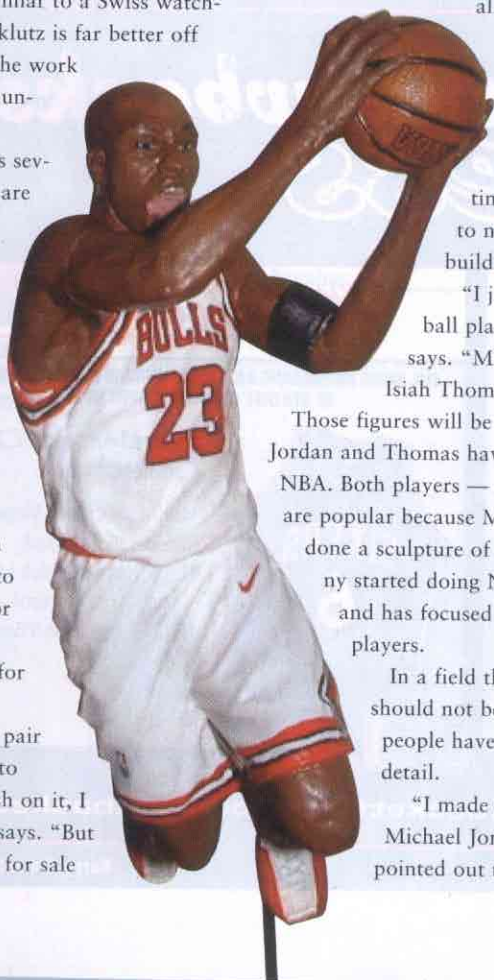
some of them either humorous or simply strange. A recent one involved two long-time rivals who prefer to not be in the same building as each other.

"I just sent two basketball players to Italy," he says. "Michael Jordan and Isiah Thomas."

Those figures will be closer in Italy than Jordan and Thomas have ever been in the NBA. Both players — especially Jordan — are popular because McFarlane has never done a sculpture of either. The company started doing NBA figures in 2001 and has focused strictly on active players.

In a field that's so precise, it should not be surprising that people have a fine eye for detail.

"I made one figure of Michael Jordan and someone pointed out that I had a jersey



NINE STEPS TO CUSTOMIZING

1. Decide whom you want to make.
2. Determine which base figure will work the best — take into consideration size of player (height/weight), right or left handed shooter, etc.
3. Locate *many* good pictures of the look you are going for and just as many pictures of the player you are making. It doesn't hurt to also find shots of other players in the same uniform.
4. Clean the figure and soak it in very hot water. This softens the plastic and allows it to be easily disassembled.
5. Spray a very light coat of primer over all parts to be painted. Repeat until you have a nice coat.
6. Start painting the jersey/pants/legs/equipment. The key here is planning. Work from light to dark.
7. Put the figure back together. Trimming the ball/socket joint with an exacto blade will help the parts slip back together.
8. Apply decals. Wet the area with Micro-Set. Slide the decals in place. Brush the decals with Micro-Sol especially on areas that are irregular. Let the Sol soak in for about 30 seconds — then gently press the decal into the folds, use a soft brush, tissue, or make-up sponge.
9. Spray with Testors Flat/Dull on the jersey/shorts, etc.

from one year and shoes from another," Ingrassia says. "He said that Jordan never wore that combination together. I get that sometimes because I look at so many photos. If it's worth fixing, I redo it. But most of the time it doesn't make that big of a difference."

The quality of Ingrassia's work has led to other opportunities. Lately he has been getting requests from families to make figures of their son playing high school basketball. He also has dabbled in sci-fi figures, such as *Star Trek* characters.

Ingrassia's workshop, with various body parts and heads scattered all over the place, sometimes more closely resembles a house of voodoo than a suburban home. But Ingrassia said when people see the final product, they never accuse him of being freaky or geeky.

"Most of the time, people are just fascinated," he said. "I keep a couple of figures in my office at my regular job, and people are always coming in and looking."

David Lee, editor of *Beckett Football*, has learned some tricks from Ingrassia and has customized several McFarlane figures.

"The coolest thing about customizing the McFarlanes is that it allows collectors to get creative," Lee says. "It's sort of like designing




your own sports cards. Some people, like Joe, are so into it that they will exchange body parts, sand down areas, buy numerous tools, etc. Customizing has really grown. With a little guidance and some creativity, anyone can get into it."

No doubt it is tremendously appealing to fanatical sports fans. And why not? In real life, plastic surgery is a booming business. It may only be sports



This figure was created when a fan sent in a Rockets figure and asked to have his likeness painted onto it.

figures, but if you have a chance to turn Radoslav Nesterovic into David Robinson, you'd be a fool not to do it. 

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