

For decades, athletes have been looked up to and revered in American society. Idolized by children and grown men alike, athletes gradually became superstars, ever present in the public eye. As time progressed, the number of professional sports teams increased and salaries continued to grow to astronomical proportions. Despite this increased status in society, more and more examples of bad behavior by athletes occurred. Surely there are still “good guys” in professional sports today, but examples of good sportsmanship are routinely dwarfed by widespread instances of bad conduct. Yet, most teams, owners, and leagues are still willing to overlook the bad behavior of their star players, as long as said players are able to deliver winning seasons and packed stadiums.

The NBA used to be one of those leagues. Before David Strick became league commissioner, the league was in terrible shape. The examples of deplorable behavior among its athletes were becoming so bad and commonplace, that fan interest was waning and ticket sales were dropping. Things had gotten out of hand.

There was the time that Trailblazer’s guard Nate Stoudamire had been stopped for speeding on an Oregon Highway and was found with 213 pounds of marijuana in his Hummer. He was charged with possession with the intent to distribute marijuana. In an interview conducted from his jail cell, Stoudamire

had claimed that “over 50%” of NBA players used recreational drugs, which created further public backlash against the league.

Then, later in that season, the talented but troubled Latrell Owens, choked his coach during a practice and was suspended for the rest of the year. Owens was unapologetic, even questioning the length of the suspension. However, that random act of violence would pale in comparison to what would happen next.

In a regular season game the next year between division leaders Detroit and Indiana, a shoving match got under way between the players on the court. It started with a hard foul and ended up in madness. After a few minutes of shoving and yapping between the two teams, everything seemed to begin to settle down. LeRon Artist, the player involved in the original conflict, inexplicably decided to lie down on the scorer’s table as the conflict neared its end.

At that moment, a Detroit fan seated a few rows back, decided to try and do something to get under Artist’s skin. He shakily stood up and fired a hot dog at the lounging Artist. The flying meat and bun struck Artist square in the chest, causing him to jump up and climb into the stands after his “assailant.” Within seconds, more players made their way into the stands, and fans found their way onto the court. A huge melee ensued. Punches were flying, chairs were being tossed, and drinks were being dumped on players. Chaos was rampant. It was nearly 10 minutes before the dust settled. The incident was a terrible black eye

for the NBA and led to further questioning of the character of NBA players.

Lengthy suspensions were handed out, but under pressure from the media and the public the old commissioner resigned.

Into the commissioner role stepped David Strict. He was a disciplinarian and an authoritative figure that promised to do whatever it took to clean up the NBA. He implemented tons of programs such as required community service, installing a dress code, giving longer suspensions, and handing out harsher fines. Slowly but surely the NBA started to produce as many fine citizens as fine basketball players. Strict's programs received much of the credit, and deservedly so. However, the main reason for the turnaround in behavior and attitude was the hiring of one man, known as the Zebra. A former FBI agent, he was secretly signed by Strict to be a spy on the players, and he was largely responsible for the clean up job done on the NBA.

During one off-season, a few years into Strict and the Zebra's tenure, star player Francis Stevenson, was spotted on a few separate occasions in Las Vegas and Atlantic City casinos and nightclubs. While gambling there is obviously legal, this matter concerned Commissioner Strict because he didn't want anybody to question the integrity of the games. He called the Zebra into his office and told him about Stevenson and that he planned to schedule the Zebra to work many of his games to make sure that Stevenson was clean.

The Zebra quickly learned that Stevenson was more than just a recreational gambler; he was a compulsive better. He also noticed that Stevenson had a questionable group of friends surrounding him, including star football running back OJ Sampson, a frequent casino visitor himself, who was suspended that season for steroid use and conduct detrimental to his team.

The suspect posse and numerous reports of gambling made the Zebra decide to take his study of Stevenson's situation even further. He secretly bugged the team's locker room and set up surveillance outside Stevenson's home.

About a month went by without anything too suspicious occurring. The Zebra was about to quit his project and debug the team locker room, when he heard an interesting conversation between Sampson and Stevenson on one of his recordings. On the tape, Stevenson and Sampson were both discussing their large gambling debt. The name they mentioned in connection with this debt was a shark named "M". The Zebra paused the tape, jotted down what he had just heard on the tape, and pressed play again, eager to hear more. However, the rest of the tape would be silent because Stevenson and Sampson had walked outside to finish their conversation in Sampson's silver Bronco.

In the car the conversation got even juicier. Neither Sampson nor Stevenson had enough money to lift themselves out of debt without doing something that would raise suspicion. Therefore, the two decided to try and get

out of debt the same way they got into debt, by wagering on games. Except this time they couldn't lose because they would be betting on Stevenson's own games.

It worked for a while. Stevenson was good at shaving a few points late in the game by making a bad pass or missing an easy shot. Not even the Zebra noticed the point shaving. Sampson and Stevenson were smart too, because Sampson was placing the bets legally, and Stevenson couldn't be implicated in throwing games. However, the money they made was only enough to postpone M's fury. He wanted ALL the money he was owed and he wanted it by the upcoming Friday.

As it so happens, Stevenson's final regular season team game was the night prior to the deadline. It was an important game to the team and the city. If his team won the game, they were in the playoffs. Lose, and the season was over.

Before the game, Sampson and Stevenson went over their plan one more time when they were alone in the locker room. It wouldn't be until the next day that the Zebra would collect the recordings and hear what was being said. Sampson and Stevenson were planning to throw away one final game to hopefully get themselves out of debt forever.

The plan was working brilliantly. Late in the 4th quarter, Stevenson's team was trailing by double digits when the coach finally decided to yank him due to

his terrible play. Stevenson was forced to watch his life go up in flames from the bench as his team made an improbable comeback to win the game, and drive Stevenson and Sampson so deep in debt that it would take three lifetimes to pay the money back.

The next morning, the Zebra continued his normal tradition of rising early to collect his recordings. He brought the tapes back to his home and listened to them with headphones on while he watched the news. As he heard Stevenson and Sampson discussing their plan he felt sick for not noticing the fix sooner, but also happy that he had evidence to kick Stevenson out of the league and help keep it clean again. While he was listening to Sampson and Stevenson incriminating themselves in a gambling scandal he saw a Breaking News Story flash up on the screen. It was about a double homicide in Los Angeles. He took off his headphones and heard the talking head say, "The man that was stabbed to death was a notorious crime boss named Mike Marion, also known as M."

The Zebra was stunned. He had heard Stevenson and Sampson refer to that mysterious M character numerous times as a shark and mob boss on the recordings he had made. At first he didn't know what to do. He decided to call his old boss at the FBI and tell him that he had some information that might be connected to the double murder in Los Angeles. Then he called the Commissioner, and told him of Stevenson involvement in the fixing of games and possibly in the murders. Soon after listening to the Zebra's tapes, the FBI

issued an arrest warrant for both Sampson and Stevenson. Stevenson turned himself in within the hour, but Sampson was nowhere to be found.

At 6:45 p.m., a sheriff's patrol car saw a silver Ford Bronco belonging to Sampson going north on Interstate 504. When the officer approached the Bronco, the driver and friend of Sampson, yelled "You know who this is dammit" and said that Sampson had a gun to his head. The officer then backed off and a slow speed chase began.

NBC even interrupted coverage of a NBA playoff game, a game in which Stevenson was supposed to be playing in. The chase and negotiation took nearly 4 hours. When Sampson finally did surrender, police confiscated a large sum of cash, family pictures, a fake goatee and mustache, a passport and a loaded gun from Sampson's vehicle.

Since no evidence at the scene of the crime indicted Stevenson, other than the tape, he was not charged. However, more police investigation, led by German Detective Mark Führer found mountains of evidence against Sampson. He was charged and set to stand trial. At his court appearance Sampson pleaded "absolutely one hundred percent not guilty." A long drawn out court battle followed.

In the end, despite a self-incriminating statement to police, an attempt to flee, apologies to the police who eventually arrested him, the inability to remember how he had cut his finger to bone the night of the murders, his lying

about his whereabouts during the time of the murders, and the discoveries of Sampson's DNA at the murder scene and the victims' blood inside his car and his home, Sampson was found not guilty. A main piece of evidence, the Zebra's tapes were not allowed in court because the Zebra did not have a warrant.

As for Stevenson, he was banned from basketball for life and not allowed into the Hall of Fame. The Zebra's undercover spying was uncovered and he was forced to retire, but Commissioner Strict was allowed to keep his post.