

PRO ATHLETES & PRO SECURITY

The Disconnect

by | MICHAEL BROWN

In the United States, sports are a way of life with many athletes reaching a level of celebrity status as early as high school, many to the equivalent of famous actors or musicians. In the US, football (the one you throw, not the one you kick) and basketball are breeding grounds for young men who almost overnight go from rags to riches when they sign contracts within the professional leagues. However, with that newfound fame, adoration and riches, trouble also seems to follow close behind.

Looking back to 2005, many of us followed the story of Jerome McDougle of the National Football League (NFL) Philadelphia Eagles who was shot in the abdomen by a group of assailants. Luckily, McDougle recovered... but the incident caused him to miss the entire 2005 season. Another incident found NFL Houston Texans cornerback Phillip Buchanon pistol-whipped, stripped naked and robbed in his own home. These are not random, isolated incidents:

- In September 2007, two men broke into the home of NFL Houston Texans cornerback Dunta Robinson and robbed him of several pieces of jewellery. Robinson was held at gunpoint during the robbery, bound with duct tape, before the robbers fled.
- In July, then National Basketball Association (NBA) Miami Heat star Antoine Walker was robbed at gunpoint during a brash home invasion in Chicago. The assailants took thousands in cash and jewellery, as well as Walker's Mercedes-Benz. During the robbery, three gunmen tied up the NBA star and another individual before making off with his valuables.
- Later that month, NBA New York Knicks center Eddy Curry was tied up, along with his wife and an employee, as his house was looted for cash and jewellery by three armed intruders. The intruders reportedly left with \$10,000 and several pieces of jewellery.
- In June, the mother of drowned NFL New England Patriots defensive end Marquise Hill had \$16,000 in valuables stolen from her home while she attended her son's funeral.
- In January of 2005, NBA Los Angeles Clippers guard Cuttino Mobley was robbed of nearly \$500,000 in cash, jewellery and other valuables from his Los Angeles home. Mobley wasn't home when the theft took place.



- That same month, three burglars were apprehended shortly after they stole over \$65,000 in cash, jewellery and other items from the condominium of then NFL Pittsburgh Steelers wideout Plaxico Burress.

These men were targeted because of their high profile status as professional athletes and the problem is only getting worse.

Fast-forward to 2007 and we witnessed the tragic death of Sean Taylor and the drive-by murder of Darrent Williams. Although hindsight is always 20/20... it is my contention that all of the above tragedies and near-tragedies could have been avoided by taking modest pro-active steps to anticipate and guard against the most common type of outside threat. And mark my words... players and team management had better begin to be pro-active very quickly because the threat is only getting more sophisticated and much, much worse. The evidence is very clear when you look at 15 NFL players having been arrested since the Lockout began (March 11, 2011) and two additional players were stabbed in the month of April just 3 days apart (unrelated incidents).

In today's high speed and total access internet world we often do not stop to think that almost everyone has access to almost everything about us and our lives, more importantly information concerning our principals/clients. Dedicated amateurs with an internet connection can find home addresses, shopping habits, the names of family members, past sweethearts and former school friends. The dedicated stalker or professional thief can find out what kind of car our Principal drives, where they party and where they are scheduled to speak or to appear and even which hotel they will use. The days of personal privacy and guarded anonymity are gone and will not be recovered. For those

who play professional sports, the problem can be even worse than for other high profile and high net worth individuals. One additional problem faced by professional athletes that is not faced by others can come from a fan enraged by a lost sports bet. Another problem unique to the professional sports world can be created by the psychological makeup of those who obsess on the masculine sports prowess of those who have something that they (the thief or stalker) will never be able to attain. The sick desire to humiliate, beat up, rob or in some way compromise someone who the perpetrator sees as superior is deep seated and intense and (worst of all) something that the normal person would not necessarily see coming. This type of 'act' also sets the stage for dealing with a very unstable person that could turn out to be dangerous as well.

All across the sports industry, including the high profile college level, people are talking about this problem and looking for positive solutions. "How do we protect our athletes?" And the real solutions may be easier and more cost-effective to implement than many might imagine. The key is to educate and convince the would-be Principal that you (the close protection specialist) can very clearly and non-passionately identify potential risks and liabilities, then work closely with the individual or team management to evaluate all available information and to suggest the least intrusive, best counter measures to mitigate all concerns. The goal is to create a plan that can be implemented with as little disruption to the Principal's daily routine as possible.

There are many factors that need to be taken into account when going through a professional risk assessment procedure and this procedure will be very different depending on the unique and special circumstances of each team or each individual professional player. For example, you may ask: Have you or anyone in your family been the target of a recent blackmail scam? Is a persistent stalker or overzealous fan bothering you? Have you been compromised by video stalking? Are you getting a great deal of media coverage? Are there situations in your private personal life that are now drawing public attention? Do you travel overseas? Is anyone "close" to you involved in criminal activity? How safe is your home? How safe is your family?

We professionals know that just picking up the Yellow Pages to hire some goon with a gun to be a "bodyguard" is not enough in today's world of more sophisticated personal threats. To be really safe your potential Principal needs 'smart' on their side. They need competent, confident and discrete personal protection from an individual or firm that has been battle-tested and experience-seasoned. They need to work with those who personally and directly understand the unique life-style and unique threats faced by the professional athlete. They need someone who can fade into the background and could trust with their or their family's life. The only problem with those needs is that the would-be Principal doesn't know what they need, that is why they continue to hire their friends, cousins, and/or old school mates as security instead professionals. A \$60 an hour rent-a-cop is much too likely to be untested, unseasoned, dazzled by the spotlight and too easily approached by the tabloid press, this is also true concerning untrained and inexperienced friends and relatives. As players continue to find themselves in bad situations and under arrest, they will eventually (hopefully) wake up and realize what they need instead of settling for an inexperienced and uneducated 'hook-up'.

Which brings us to the code of strict professional ethics and guaranteed confidentiality offered by security professionals. This code is a standard at the

highest levels of executive protection. This is a promise that is given without question to government officials, diplomats and business people when being escorted and guarded overseas and one that the professional athlete should expect absolutely from anyone they chose to protect them, their family and their assets. If you are offering your services to an individual or team and you balk in any way at providing a legal binding non-disclosure agreement, then you should expect the discussion to be terminated immediately and expect them to find someone who will not only guarantee their personal integrity by a handshake but who will also back up that handshake in writing.

Keep in mind that personal protection is just that, the very protection of personal self, personal assets, reputation, career, and sometimes family. When interviewing for a protection specialist position, you should expect the would-be Principal to ask you many questions and you should expect to do the same. Find out right from the get go if this is going to be a trusted, professional match since, literally, their very life, the life of loved ones, career and personal fortune may be at stake. Be prepared to answer a list of important questions such as: What is your background and qualifications? Do you have overseas experience? Police training? Military Training? How do we determine the duration of our agreement? How do we terminate this agreement if we decide it is not working for mutual benefit? What are the hourly rates? How do we handle travel and out-of-pocket expenses? What are the duty hours? What are the contingency plans for unexpected situations? Are you willing to execute a legally binding non-disclosure agreement? Will you submit to a background check? Preemployment screening? Having the answers to all of these questions prior to being asked will give your potential client a serious confidence boost in you during the interview. Write down and ask any questions that you feel are important to you as well. You then have to give the potential Principal time to answer the only question they can quietly in their own heart: Do I trust this person? Will he (or she) help keep my family and me safe?

The old ego days of the entourage or posse and the big buffed-up "bodyguard" are dead, just as dead (very sad to say) as those who led their lives without serious professional protection and paid the ultimate price for careless inattention. Many players and team front office staff will worry that they cannot afford executive level protection services but the cost of serious security is more easily afforded than many might realize (and certainly cheaper than a lost season and/or lost reputation or career). Even an initial professional security assessment can spot vulnerabilities that may have gone unnoticed by those living their lives each day. We all buy insurance because we know we need it... but really hope to never use it. For the high profile individual, for the high net worth family, for the professional athlete and team owner, quality personal security is one of the most cost-effective "insurance policies" available today. In these troubled times, the professional

athlete will soon find that doing "nothing" or waiting too long to implement personal security precautions may prove to be a costly mistake, so be prepared to step up to the plate to save yourself as a close protection specialist when the call comes. At the rate of crimes against players and arrests of players, this is an industry that is in dire need of our services and expertise.

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