

The Tim Donaghy We Know

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For the past year, the National Basketball Referees Association, which represents all active NBA referees, has said very little in public about the federal criminal investigation of Tim Donaghy, who confessed to gambling on NBA games and disclosing confidential information about the league to other gamblers. Even when Donaghy and his attorney claimed in court documents that other referees manipulated the outcomes of games and engaged in other on-court misconduct in an attempt to demonstrate cooperation with prosecutors and seek a reduction in his punishment, we remained quiet.

Many of you – friends, families, neighbors, the media, and others in the sports community – have asked us the same question: “Why aren’t you defending yourselves? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

We chose not to say anything, until now, for several reasons that were compelling to us. Our embarrassment should be declared up front. We were embarrassed that one of our own could do something so despicable and unworthy of an NBA referee. And we were further shamed by the gritty tarnish to our reputations thrust upon us merely by association with Donaghy. We were also aware of the likely criticism that “if one did it, others could as well.” Indeed, this is the crux of the argument that Donaghy has made in the weeks and months leading up to his sentencing. For the record, we think that is hogwash.

We also remained silent out of respect for the legal process. Many of our members were interviewed, sometimes repeatedly, by FBI agents and federal prosecutors. In addition, all our members were questioned, at length, by a team of independent investigators hired by the NBA, and led by a prominent former federal prosecutor, to supplement the criminal investigators’ fact-finding and perform a comprehensive external review of the NBA’s operations. We didn’t want to interfere with, or prejudge, either of these tasks.

With respect to the troubling accusations hurled at us by Donaghy and others, we also recognized that it is often very difficult to prove a negative – that you did not do something, or that you did not do something for the reasons or motivations suggested by someone else. In our experience, naked denials, in contrast to unsubstantiated claims, often fall on deaf ears and lazy minds.

However, a few recent events have changed our view.

The day after his sentencing, Donaghy called our offices several times, spoke with two different people, and made comments that we perceived, and most others would almost surely perceive, as threatening. He was enraged because we had called him a “scoundrel” in a post-sentencing statement. In recent days, he also sent email messages to a former colleague threatening to embarrass several referees and others with public disclosures of their personal affairs.

These actions are not surprising to us. Published news stories over the years have described Donaghy's aggressive and menacing behavior toward others.

For example, the Philadelphia Inquirer and other local papers reported that Donaghy's next door neighbors sued him for setting fire to their tractor, crashing their golf cart into a ravine, stalking the family, and threatening them. Their lawsuit also alleged that Donaghy also filed numerous police reports against them when their young son threw stones over Donaghy's fence, the family puppy ran onto Donaghy's lawn, and a Comcast technician crossed Donaghy's lawn to get to the neighbors' house. The neighbors told us that Donaghy's original dispute with them was over unswept lawn clippings on the sidewalk.

Six years ago, Sports Illustrated and other new sources reported that Donaghy was charged with disorderly conduct for allegedly attempting to run a U.S. postal carrier off the road and assaulting him after the mail man either accidentally knocked over a recycling bin in front of Donaghy's home, or scraped his delivery vehicle against it.

Other similar incidents have been reported over the years by those who have crossed paths with Donaghy, and all of them are frightening and sad.

This is the guy that we know too well. Donaghy is angry and lashing out at everyone he feels has hurt or abandoned him. He is seeking to taint us so that he doesn't look as bad in comparison. And he will, if not now then eventually, disclose every scandalous, petty and horrible thing that he knows or thinks he knows about the NBA and its officiating staff. He is calculating, he loves playing the victim, and he can't control himself. He will not stop, will never show true remorse, and will always cast a shadow on all that we hope to accomplish, including reassuring the public about the integrity of the game.

No one can promise that another Donaghy will not occur, because a truly committed cheater, no matter the profession or circumstances, can always find a way. But we believe that the likelihood of another Donaghy in the NBA is very low. The officiating at every game, both during the game and afterwards, is thoroughly reviewed – by the crew itself, by independent in-arena observers, by referee supervisors, by NBA operations personnel in New York, and by the teams. All important calls made and calls not made by game officials are evaluated as being correct or incorrect, and detailed statistics are maintained and analyzed for unusual trends or deviations. All complaints or questions regarding calls are promptly evaluated and addressed. NBA referees submit game summaries and detailed written reports for every game, and these documents highlight and explain every unusual incident or problem that occurred on or off the court. Many hours of game tape are reviewed for training, evaluation, and quality control purposes.

Referees can and do make serious mistakes like everyone else, but if you ever have an opportunity to watch a game with one, you will quickly realize that they are their own harshest critics. They don't like missing calls, and they are not afraid to admit when they "kick" one. What many may not realize is that NBA referees are constantly working at their tradecraft and looking for ways to improve.

At the end of the day, not one NBA referee, other than Donaghy, has ever bet on an NBA game, shared confidential game information with other gamblers, or sought to direct a game's outcome for personal gain. And we are recommitting ourselves to the endgame that no one else will.