

Lingering Items - Law & Order Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Another Saturday, and another edition of one of my favorite columns ... "Lingering Items" from Gary Benz. This week, Gary talks about the Donte Stallworth debacle, and calls for Browns owner Randy Lerner to make a quick call on his future with the team. Sticking with the troubled athlete theme, Gary also hits on the disturbing charges levied against former Indian Mel Hall, and Sammy Sosa testing positive for steroids in 2003.



It's too bad that Phil Savage is no longer the general manager of the Cleveland Browns. It makes it impossible to fire him again, this time for what's now the aftermath of one of the worst deals in the history of the franchise, signing Donte Stallworth as a free agent.

The Browns find themselves bleeding money at the moment. A poor economy that has lowered the Browns' season ticket base and left numerous loges unsold for the 2010 has put them on less than solid footing. They've laid off several workers as a result.

The Stallworth signing didn't help, but that's a wound that's purely self-inflicted.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell did them a favor on Thursday and put a pretty hefty bandage on that wound by suspending Stallworth indefinitely and sending him a message that the ultimate penalty will be severed. But that doesn't address the larger issues. That takes the Browns off the hook for his salary for awhile, although it does nothing to help the Browns recoup the \$4.5 million roster bonus they gave him just hours before he killed Mario Reyes.

It had to be gratifying to owner Randy Lerner to learn that as part of the deal allowing Stallworth to plead guilty to DUI Manslaughter and escape with only 30

days in jail was the paying off the estate of the victim, undoubtedly with some of the millions Lerner paid him as compensation to catch a football.

If Lerner wants to regain some of the fans he's lost through his rather indifferent approach to managing his assets, he can make a statement by immediately cutting Stallworth, financial consequences be damned. But if he fiddles, if he lets a transient salary cap issue trump doing the right thing, the Lerner, too, is effectively putting a rather dismal price on the consequences wrought by one of his employees.

Stallworth was never a fit in Cleveland and still isn't. He's a borderline prima donna with a serious substance abuse problem that's now sporting the additional baggage of the guilt of actually having killed a man.

From just a purely football perspective, he's somewhere between Paul Hubbard and Braylon Edwards, and by Edwards I mean the bad Edwards, anyway.

In trading card terms, he's a common not a star.

He didn't deserve the contract Savage gave him initially and has systematically proven that point since almost day 1 of his stay in Cleveland.

He won't be missed.

The Browns have let it float out that cutting Stallworth now forces them to take a \$7.6 million salary cap hit. So? How is that relevant? It will make absolutely no difference on their ability to field still another mediocre team.

And what of that issue? Although it's difficult to find definitive figures, the Browns were several million under the league's 2009 salary cap heading into the season.

A cap hit of \$7.6 million doesn't help, but it doesn't hurt nearly as much as it's being portrayed.

Once the draft picks are signed, and there's still plenty of money to do that even with the salary cap hit, the roster will basically be set.

This isn't a matter of money but one of conscience.

Either the Browns make a statement about the kinds of people they employ or they don't.

It's really that simple.

There's no doubt in my mind that if Savage was still with the team, he'd be counseling patience and against overreaction, more so to protect his awful decision to sign Stallworth than to avoid cutting a player who is expected to contribute at a high level. But this is a new day and a new regime working to establish that it has actual boundaries and principles. Nothing would send a stronger signal that a player like Stallworth is everything that the new Browns are against than cutting him now.

Given Goodell's actions, I have no doubt that the Browns will just sit back and wait. After all, Stallworth is suspended and not drawing a salary. What we don't know, nor should it matter, is what Goodell ultimately will do.

Let Stallworth be someone else's problem, not Cleveland's.

What surprises me most about the Stallworth case is the relatively muted outrage from the public. Sure, some in the media, like me, have gotten our panties in a twist over this. And sure, there is a little "there but for the grace of God go I" element to his situation in that a good many of us have likewise driven under the influence, so perhaps that explains it somewhat.

There's also a public so jaded by athlete misconduct that the only surprise anymore is when the sports pages doesn't contain a story about another athlete committing a crime.

But even then, doesn't the public feel anything for Mario Reyes? The randomness of his death at the hands of Stallworth is jarring.

He just comes off the night shift, probably thinking about coming home to kiss his wife and kids before heading for some well deserved sleep in order to return the next night to a job that probably paid him less a year than the \$43,000+ Stallworth earns per game.

But he doesn't make it home because some privileged drunken jerk in a Bentley celebrating nothing more than being an overpaid jerk is still buzzing from an all-night drinking binge.

Too many of us can relate to drinking and driving, but apparently not enough of us have been victimized by the random acts of bad people to want to put a stake in the ground over the light treatment Stallworth got.

That's a pity.

The real truth in all of this is that today's athletes engage in so much misconduct because they have too much free time, too much money and too little character. That isn't to paint every professional athlete with a broad brush.

The good, hopefully, outnumber the bad.

But that doesn't mean we just shrug our shoulders at the bad and get on with our insular little lives.

We either send a message to our teams that having players like Stallworth on the roster is going to hit them where it hurts most, on the balance sheet, or we get what we deserve-a roster full of reprobates more notable for the crap they do off the field than the good they do on it.

It's time for the Browns to decide on which side of the fence they sit.

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Whatever else one thinks about Stallworth, there's no question that he has a top-notch lawyer. The deal that was struck was so favorable and so disparate to the crime committed that no matter what Stallworth paid him, it probably wasn't enough.

I can't help but think that former Cleveland Indians' outfielder, Mel Hall, wishes he had hired the same guy.

Hall was convicted recently of raping a 12-year-old girl he coached on an elite basketball team. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison which, if served to its limit, would make Hall 98 years old when released. In other words, it's more or less a life sentence.

Apparently the argument his lawyer advanced, that "Hall was a good man who mentored a lot of athletes and had a lot of good still to do" didn't quite resonate with the jury.

Good.

Hall is still professing his innocence in the whole matter but he just couldn't overcome the parade of witnesses that said otherwise. Given the despicable nature of his acts, justice was clearly served.

One can only speculate about what Bud Selig would do with all this if Hall was still in the major leagues. Sure, the whole prison thing would crimp Hall's availability, but considering how Selig has not dealt with steroids abusers, the chances are that Selig would probably petition the court on Hall's behalf for work privileges.

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Speaking of steroids abusers, it was hardly a shock to hear that Sammy Sosa was

one of those players who tested positive in 2003. Little by little, the names are finally coming out.

Although Sosa sort of told Congress in 2005 that he never used illegal performance-enhancing drugs, the positive test says otherwise. But then again Sosa acted as if he couldn't speak English during those Congressional hearings, so maybe he just misunderstood the question.

Certainly Sosa has gotten a better grasp of the language these days. He seems unfazed by the whole matter and told the media he'd just calmly wait for the Hall of Fame to call because, hey, he's got the numbers, doesn't he?

Sammy, if the phone isn't ringing, it's them.

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The news about Sosa comes on the heels of another moment of levity in the legal world offered up again by Jose Canseco. When you Google Wikipedia and look for "doofus" it takes you to Canseco's entry.

Canseco feels that he and others, like Sosa and Rafael Palmeiro, have been blackballed by major league baseball and thus is considering suing them and the players' union for, among other things, lost wages and defamation of character. Canseco feels like he's been deprived of various opportunities in baseball, such as a managerial or coaching job or just a "proper reference."

Believing he and the others will be deprived of the Hall of Fame, he posits that he'll lose out on the ancillary income that comes with being able to advertise yourself as a Hall of Famer.

Here's a note to Canseco. Even if he had never admitted to steroids use he

would have had no shot at the Hall of Fame.
far from a complete player.

He was

His 462 home runs would be impressive but not Hall-worthy.

He was a liability in the outfield.

He has fewer credentials than George Foster.

When you throw in the steroids use, whatever accomplishments he had at the plate are essentially nullified.

An untainted Palmeiro or Sosa might have a chance at the Hall of Fame and might still anyway. A lawsuit on their behalf is, at best, premature.

But the larger problem with the potential lawsuit is the pure folly of it all. It's honorable, in a perverse way, that he's been candid about his illegal drug use.

But that kind of honor only places one a notch about people like Pameiro, Sosa, Roger Clemens, and Barry Bonds who remain in denial.

It doesn't qualify him for accolades, let alone a job working around ballplayers at any level.

What is the job reference he craves? "Jose Canseco was a long-time abuser of illegal drugs.

It helped him play the game at a level his talent would not have otherwise allowed.

But he told the truth."

He can have that reference now and I won't even charge him.

Canseco, like so many others, lives in world where everyone's a victim just waiting for his day in court. He can't even begin to comprehend the unclean hands he

brings to any conversation about his future.
would you want him working for you?

Ask yourself this:

Still, I'm kind of hoping he does go through with the lawsuit. While he has no chance of winning, if he does manage to avoid having it summarily dismissed it would be great to have him take the depositions of Selig and the other owners who have knowingly tolerated the degradation of their game.

Watching them all squirm might not be real justice, but it might be the best we have.

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And what would a week of law and order be without Maurice Clarett resurfacing.

Apparently Clarett wants an early release so that he can resume his "career," potentially in the NFL. You can't resume what you never had. But what struck me most about the story is that Clarett's lawyer claims that Clarett supposedly has been contacted by NFL teams while in jail.

Really? Prove it. Not surprisingly, the lawyer refused to name which ones, probably because it never happened. My recollection is that when Clarett was cut by the Denver Broncos no one came rushing up to sign him then, and that was before he ever went to jail. Why would any team be interested in him now? They aren't.

If Clarett does get out of jail, he may get a try out somewhere. But it won't amount to anything. As Woody Hayes might have said to him if he were still alive, "Maurice, it's time

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to get on with your life's work."

For now and hopefully a good while longer, that life's work is making license plates.

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Given how legal news tends to now dominate the sports pages, this week's question to ponder is: How long before NBC gives a thumbs up to "Law & Order: Sports Page Edition?"