

Tanked!: Behind the Scenes with the NFL's Biggest Stars by the Game's Most Infamous Super Agent

William "Tank" Black

[Creative Publishing 2009]

xvi + 317 pages [\$19.95 U.S. (soft cover)]

ISBN: 9780982473009

Most readers of the *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport* are undoubtedly familiar with William "Tank" Black. After a highly distinguished football career at Carson-Newman College, Black became a college coach and later went on to become one of the most prominent NFL player agents in the 1990s. His list of clients read like an NFL Pro Bowl roster and his firm, Professional Management Incorporated, routinely represented first-round NFL draft picks throughout the decade. Black later expanded his agency business beyond football by securing the right to represent NBA superstar Vince Carter. While growing his agency business, Black also became a prominent entrepreneur who developed or invested in numerous businesses, many related to his player representation business.

Unfortunately for Black, the financial empire he built began to crumble in the late 1990s as federal and state prosecutors pursued a variety of criminal and civil charges against him and some of his business associates. He was eventually convicted of several charges including obstruction of justice among others and ended up serving approximately eight years in prison. In the process, the substantial business empire (including the thriving sports agency business) that he built up over approximately a decade was lost.

In his book *"Tanked!: Behind the Scenes with the NFL's Biggest Stars by the Game's Most Infamous Super Agent"*, Mr. Black makes his two main goals clear from the outset. In the "Author's Note" that starts the book, he states, "I wanted to write my own version of the events, both to set the record straight and to lend my voice to those who sincerely want to reform the deeply flawed and hypocritical business of developing and recruiting professional athletes." (Black, p. xii)

Tanked! starts with a biography of the author, the aforementioned "Author's Note" and an acknowledgement section. An interesting item of note from these introductory materials is when Black introduces his ghostwriter, Foster Winans. As Black openly discusses in the Author's Note, Winans is a former columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* whose career was torn asunder

by an insider trading scandal in the mid 1980s. Black draws realistic parallels between their situations when introducing Winans.

Unfortunately, one of the book's two main flaws is also exposed in this section as Black's own first name is misspelled as "Wiliam" at the end of the Acknowledgement section. Similar misspellings of player names and capitalization issues are present throughout the text. These are not major issues by any means but they do detract from the book's overall quality.

The main portion of the book is broken into four separate periods in Black's life. Part I, entitled "The Grass Cutter From Greeneville" is a seven chapter, 61-page section that provides the reader with background on Mr. Black's childhood in Greeneville, Tennessee, his time at Carson-Newman College, his attempt to make the National Football League's Atlanta Falcons, and the start of his professional career with electronic manufacturer Magnavox. This section is a quick read and gives the reader a necessary glimpse into the values and life experiences that would later help shape his attitude toward player representation and business development.

Part II "From Player to Coach" is a four chapter, 58-page discussion in which the author shows readers how he transitioned from being an executive at Magnavox, to college coach, to insurance salesman, and finally, to player agent. The section starts with Black leaving his position at Magnavox in 1982, and ends with him discussing his representation of NFL star wide receiver Sterling Sharpe a dozen years later. This section illustrates one of the strengths of the book as Black is very forthcoming about himself, his clients and his opinion on numerous issues facing the industry, such as NCAA regulations, player representation, and a variety of social and racial issues. In fact, some readers might feel he is too forthcoming and opinionated in some areas, especially when talking about clients and the issues he faced later in his career. Still, most readers will find his approach to be refreshing as anyone with an interest in any of these areas will find this material to be compelling reading.

This section also exposes the book's second major flaw which is that Black could have made *Tanked!* an even more important and enjoyable read by adding more content and perspective. The path that Black took from being a star small-college athlete, to building a significant player representation business over the course of approximately one decade, is one that would undoubtedly interest virtually every reader. Unfortunately, in Part II, it feels as if we only get a brief glimpse into how Black achieved this noteworthy career transformation. Similar issues are present later in the book as he discusses the fall of his business empire. In a career as noteworthy as Black's, having more content and detail about the things he went through would have been welcome

and given him an even greater level of success in achieving his two stated goals.

In Part III "Penalties and Time Outs," Black discusses the issues he faced during his representation of two higher profile clients, Andre Rison and Rae Carruth. He also talks about the issues he faced during his efforts to recruit future NFL players such as Reidel Anthony and Peter Boulware to his player representation agency. All of these discussions will undoubtedly be eye-opening for many hoping to enter the sports agent business and could serve as beneficial information for many readers. More importantly, this seven chapter, 82-page unit is where Black begins to introduce the reader to the issues, relationships, and decisions, that would eventually lead to the collapse of his then-developing business empire.

The final unit of the book, "End Game" is a six chapter, 65-page section that covers how his business empire finally collapsed and the numerous legal challenges that he faced. Woven throughout this discussion are a variety of anecdotes discussing issues Black needed to address while representing Sterling Sharpe and Vince Carter. As is the case throughout the text, Black is quite candid about the issues he faced and those faced by his business associates and clients during this period. Again, this is a compelling section that could have been made even better if the author had added more content to the discussion.

Tanked! concludes with a 22-page epilogue entitled "Answered Prayers" in which the author discusses the legal consequences he endured as a result of the fall of his business empire. Additional detail is provided regarding his efforts to earn commissions from clients while incarcerated and his subsequent successful efforts to clear his name of some of the charges he faced. Several pages taken from actual legal documents are provided to support the latter.

In conclusion, *Tanked!* will likely be a worthwhile, quick read for most *JLAS* readers. Virtually all readers will conclude that Black achieves his stated goal of providing the reader with his version of the events that took place in his life. His words provide significant perspective on the various issues he faced in his career. Most importantly for many potential readers, many of these issues are still being faced by today's sports management and sports law students. The issue of whether he achieved his stated goal of lending his voice to the reformation of developing and recruiting professional athletes is more of an open issue that will be up to the individual reader. Elements of this argument are sprinkled throughout the text but more content focused on this issue could have made the book more compelling in this area.

Tanked! would be an outstanding read for students looking to pursue careers in player representation, financial advising, or as entrepreneurs. The

details Black provides on how he built and ended up losing his business empire will provide valuable lessons for anyone starting out in these fields.

While both instructors and students might find the book to be a worthwhile read (albeit for different reasons), *Tanked!* is unlikely to be an ideal fit for use in most classroom settings outside of a seminar-style format. The book might be beneficial if used as supplemental reading for an introductory sport management class or sports law classes.

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