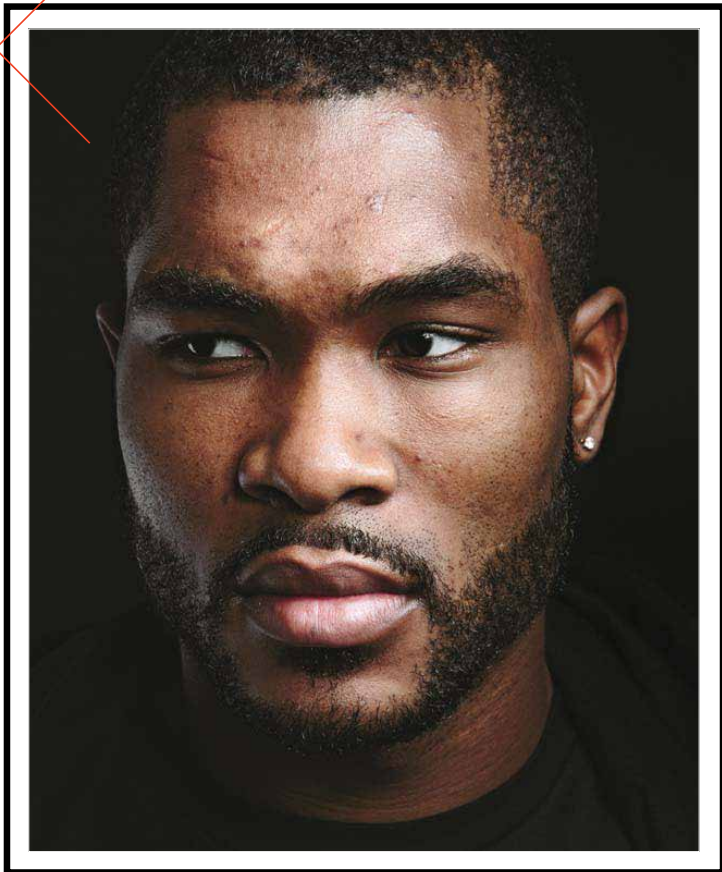


# 0311

In games in 2013 that the FBI alleged involved a conspiracy, San Diego was 0-2-1 against the spread.



CONSPIRACY

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SUBJECTS  
GAMBLING, CHEATING,  
COLLEGE HOOPS



WRITTEN BY  
SHAUN ASSAEL  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
DAYTON GARDNER

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## PORTRAIT OF A POINT SHAVER

TO BRANDON JOHNSON, IT SEEMED HARMLESS ENOUGH: A QUICK WAY TO MAKE SOME MONEY, HELP OUT A FRIEND AND QUIETLY STICK IT TO THE UNIVERSITY HE'D COME TO LOATHE. THEN THE FBI

# THE

# SQUAD OF FBI AGENTS

## ROLLED UP TO THE HOUSTON TOWN HOUSE IN FULL ARREST MODE.

They broke into pairs, fanning out to cover three doors and several windows that looked like escape routes. With everyone in place, the lead agent took a deep breath, gripped his service Glock and whispered into a tiny transmitter: "Execute."

Two firm knocks rattled the front door. Inside, Brandon Johnson roused himself from sleep. It was April 9, 2011. His alarm clock read 5:50 a.m. Who the hell was hammering on his door at this hour?

"Brandon Johnson, this is the FBI!" Johnson climbed out of bed in his boxer shorts and opened the curtains to see a dozen men in blue-and-gold flak jackets surrounding

his house. He rushed to his front door, where an agent not much older than the 24-year-old Johnson was waiting with the Glock squared right at him.

Johnson tried not to panic: The cops were always arresting the wrong people, he reasoned. The best thing to do was to follow their orders and straighten it out when everyone was calm. So he threw on some clothes, let them cuff him and took a ride in the backseat of their sedan to their Houston headquarters.

Moments later, he sat in a locked interrogation room, and the young agent walked in with a laptop. He set it on the table and started to play a recording. Johnson heard his voice coming out of the computer.

*Uh-oh, he thought. This is gonna be bad.*

**BRANDON JOHNSON FELT** out of place the moment he arrived at the University of San Diego in the fall of 2005. The campus, overlooking miles of blue-green coastline and celebrity mansions, was a world away from the seedy Houston neighborhood of his youth. As he watched students unloading their suitcases from expensive SUVs, the hoops recruit felt embarrassed by his two worn backpacks, which carried everything he owned, and his self-described ghetto accent that he hid behind mumbles. It took some effort for him to remind himself why he'd come to the sleepy Roman Catholic college: *I'm going to build an empire here.*

It was an audacious goal. USD wasn't anyone's idea of a basketball power; the Toreros were ranked seventh out of eight teams in a West Coast Conference preseason poll. But they had a desire to get into the big time, and their freshman guard had a desire to lead them there.



So Johnson practiced giving interviews in the mirror. He walked off the life he left behind in Houston, referring to the rap sheets of family members in only the vaguest terms. Then he maddened the young Toreros in his own image: fast and fearless.

USD went 18-12 in 2005-06 and nearly knocked off powerhouse Gonzaga in the WCC tournament semifinals thanks to 19 points from its freshman All-American. As a sophomore, Johnson became a taskmaster as well as a playmaker, leading the team in assists and to 18 wins. When two newcomers were suspended for violating team rules, he led the team: "We're going to get 'em. We're going to be their daddies and mommies now."

In 2007, USD, looking to jolt the program, replaced coach Brad Holland with longtime Gonzaga assistant Bill Grier, and Johnson thrived in the new up-tempo offense. Thousands of fans filled the Jenny Craig Pavilion to see the junior guard break the school's single-season scoring record. Handsome, with high cheekbones and a well-manicured goatee, Johnson was now the face of his university. Teachers waved to him when he went to class. Girls

**Johnson, the Toreros' all-time leading scorer, "could start for any team in the Big East," UConn coach Jim Calhoun said in 2008.**

slipped him their numbers. Scouts started calling, asking for game film. UConn coach Jim Calhoun paid San Diego's star the ultimate compliment: "Brandon Johnson could start for any team in the Big East." And that was all before the Toreros upset the Huskies in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

USD fell to Western Kentucky in the next round, but Johnson was already measuring himself for the next step: an NBA career. He had financial responsibilities to consider now; his girlfriend back in Houston had just given birth to their son. But eight games into his 2008-09 season, in a televised loss to San Diego State, that dream took a holiday when Johnson suffered a season-ending Achilles tear.

Johnson received a fifth year of eligibility, and he returned to the court the next fall following a second surgery to repair bone spurs in his ankle. But he wasn't the same player. The new Toreros,

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who'd largely seen Johnson only on film, now saw before them a tired-looking, slow-moving 23-year-old. Without faith in his jumper, Johnson was short-tempered and moody. Skipping classes and partying heavily between games, he gained weight and his stats sank. On the road in December, Grier suspended him after he tore up a visiting locker room. Weeks later, the Toreros got blown out of the second round of the 2010 WCC tournament as Johnson lumbered up and down the court, scoring just seven points.

As USD wrapped up an 11-21 campaign, the leading scorer in school history no longer cared about the empire he'd built. He was counting the seconds until he could get out.

**WHEN JOHNSON NEEDED** to complain about what it felt like to be a 23-year-old father playing alongside teenage boys, he turned to a former Toreros assistant named T.J. Brown.

Brown was a Kansas native who'd played point guard at Texas A&M, moved to California to get into coaching and worked his way through the assistant ranks at USD. He lost his job during the coaching change that brought in Grier, and he found a new job as a nightclub manager in San Diego.

Over time, Johnson became a fixture at his ex-coach's home. He spent weekends and holidays there, and he grined when Brown introduced him as his "little brother." In 2008, when Brown's drinking got the best of him and he sought treatment, Johnson stayed in close contact. The two men shared almost everything, and by Johnson's redshirt senior year, that included his complaints about his coach and the team and his increasing obsession with finding

**IN THE LOCKER ROOM  
AFTER USD'S 72-69 LOSS,  
COACH GRIER ASKED HIS  
BEST SHOOTER WHY HE DIDN'T  
PUT UP A LAST-SECOND SHOT. AS  
JOHNSON WOULD LATER RECALL:  
THAT'S A "G"  
RIGHT THERE.**

**THAT SHOT WOULD  
NEVER HAVE  
GOTTEN ME  
THE "G."**



The booksie at the center of the point-shaving conspiracy was Steve Gorla, who, unfortunately for Johnson, doubled as a drug dealer.

money to send back to Houston for his baby boy.

Brown, meanwhile, had moved from one addiction to another and was now betting upward of \$5,000 a week on college basketball.

As Johnson's grievances got louder, Brown began throwing money on the Toreros to lose. Five grand, 10 grand a game, whatever he could max out. His bets were paying off so big that a local bookmaker eventually refused to take his action, suspecting Brown had a pipeline to the locker room that gave him an unfair edge.

Brown's bookie was Steve Gorla, a pudgy man partial to shiny suits who stood out on the surfer streets of San Diego. He was known to wear around thick wads of bills, hang out with strippers and jet to Las Vegas on weekends.

"He had this huge condominium, marble floors, gold fixtures in the bathrooms, a full bar," says David Gates, his former bodyguard. Gates describes Gorla as a halfhearted tough guy, the kind who threatened deadbeat clients but rarely followed through. "It didn't really have to break anybody's legs or beat them up with bats or ruin their cars or nothing," says Gates, before adding, "I only did it like three times."

Gorla may have been a specialist of Brown's luck, but he didn't want to lose his business entirely. In February 2010, the two met at a San Diego diner, where Gorla told Brown that he'd pay \$2,500 for any tips he had about "sure things." Brown says he saw it as an intriguing opportunity because he could make money without risking his own. And he knew just where to turn for the sure thing.

When the Toreros went on a crucial road trip the following week, Brown called Johnson to learn what he could. The point guard admits that he knew Brown was betting on college hoops and didn't have an issue with it; he'd grown up around gamblers in Houston. And when he helped Brown gain inside information, well, that's what friends were for. So he told Brown that because of a groin injury, he planned to sit for the Feb. 11 game in Portland, in which the Toreros were 11½-point underdogs. Brown immediately called up Gorla: "Take Portland and be the points," he said.

San Diego lost the game 70-56. But before

Gorla would pay Brown his cut, he wanted proof that Brown really had an inside man on the team. So on a clear San Diego day, Brown says, he brought Johnson to a luxurious home on a cul-de-sac in Chula Vista. Johnson contends that Brown didn't tell him why they were stopping to talk to Gorla, he just shook Gorla's hand and sat on the couch playing PlayStation while Brown moved to another room to speak to Gorla, out of earshot. Finally, Brown emerged with his \$2,500 curled in a stack. He approached Johnson and gave him a grand of the top. "This is for your baby back home," he said. Johnson claims he didn't receive the money until a week later and did not consider it related to the visit—he says it was for the purchase of a computer.)

According to court documents filed later, Gorla's next big bet was on Feb. 18, when San Diego played Saint Mary's. Johnson admits he knew the line going in—but USD was an eight-point underdog—instead it was just a coincidence that he shot just 6-for-15 from the floor. In any event, his teammates were even worse. The Toreros hit only 38% of their shots, and Saint Mary's won 61-49. Gorla made \$40,000 from that game, Brown received \$10,000—and Johnson \$1,000 of that.

Two weeks later, Gorla decided to plot his winnings from the previous week into a USD home game against Loyola Marymount. Brown called Johnson to say that he and Gorla were

taking the visiting Lions, who were 2½-point underdogs. According to interviews and court documents, Brown didn't need to say anything more for Johnson to understand the underlying message. If Gorla and Brown won big, there would be another thousand bucks waiting for the guard.

On Feb. 25, 2010, Johnson made only a single shot, but his team led deep into the second half before LMU suddenly pulled ahead. With less than a minute left and USD down 70-66, Johnson drove to the basket and clanged a teardrop off the rim for a miss. When Johnson got the ball back after a quick turnover, he drove again. But this time, instead of trying to score quickly and bring the Toreros to within two, he pulled up and passed the ball into the hands of an LMU defender.

In the locker room after the 72-69 loss, coach Grier asked his best shooter why he didn't put up an open shot. As Johnson would later tell Brown, he looked at his coach and thought: That's a "G" right there. That's why I ain't got no shot up. That shot would never have gotten me the "G."

**WITH ABOUT 5,000** NCAA-sanctioned basketball games every year, it's nearly impossible to police relationships between players and gamblers, and just so hard, with that many games, to detect when a fix is in. But according to a study published in the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Sport Finance* last August, there's reason to suspect that point-shaving is far from an isolated occurrence.

The study's authors, George Diemer and Michael Leeds, theorized that if point-shaving

were happening on a large scale, they'd most likely find signs of it in regular-season games with double-digit lines. Why? Imagine you're a player who's willing to shave points. If your team is favored by 11 points, you might feel confident that you can cost your team the cover without blowing the outright victory—instead of winning 12 or 13, you make it so your team wins by merely seven or eight. What's the harm in that? But if your team is favored by only two or three points, you'll likely be less willing to fix that game, since the risk is much higher that you will cost your team the outright win. And you certainly wouldn't dare fix an NCAA tournament game, no matter how much you're favored, given all the extra eyes watching.

To see whether their theory was correct, the two authors looked at point spreads over a 15-year period between 1995 and 2009—35,164 games in all. As they expected, there was nothing fishy in games with smaller spreads. In contests featuring a three-point spread, for example, the most common result was that the favorite won by three. The next most common result was the favorite winning by four or two, then by five or one, and so on—a "normal distribution" of outcomes.

But when the authors looked at regular-season games involving 11½-point spreads, the distribution was far from normal. There was a significant spike in the number of times the favorites won by seven, eight or nine points—they won but failed to cover. Tellingly, and as the authors had predicted, this anomaly was not seen in postseason games with 11½-point spreads. With all the extra attention in March, the outcomes followed

the same distribution pattern as the rest.

This wasn't the first study to suggest a game within the game for better. In 2006 economist Justin Wolfers estimated that point-shaving occurred in about 5% of games with large spreads, or as many as 30 games a year—roughly the number Diemer and Leeds came up with.

Of course, skeptics point out that there are plenty of reasons a heavily favored team might fail to cover: Stars get removed in lopsided games, backups struggle, the losers start playing for pride. "It's like a woman is favored in her bed and her husband is suspected of murder," says Phil Birnbaum, a statistics analyst who reviewed the Diemer-Leeds study for *The Mag*. "He was home, and they had a big argument. So there is some evidence for the hypothesis that there was a murder. But there's other evidence that could explain the death too, such as the woman had a heart condition. And since people with that condition die of natural causes a thousand times more often than they get murdered, I'm going with natural causes."

Diemer and Leeds counter by pointing out a second anomaly in their data that can't be explained away by any of Birnbaum's objections. It turns out that in regular-season games with

11½-point spreads, the favorites also win by a blowout far more than would be normally expected. That suggests that players on big underdogs are fixing games too (after all, who cares if you lose by 11 or 24). "As the incentives to point-shaving increase," Diemer says, "so too does the evidence."

Still, Diemer and Leeds acknowledge that if point-shaving is widespread, it's also exceedingly difficult to pinpoint with hard evidence. In fact, only a handful of cases have been exposed over the years. In 1997 two Arizona State basketball players—Steven Smith and Isaac Burton Jr.—pleaded guilty to throwing four regular-season games. More than a decade later, several football and basketball players from the University of Toledo admitted selling themselves to a pair of Detroit gamblers who fixed regular- and postseason games. A former point guard for Auburn, Yance Ward, is under indictment on charges that he threw a January 2012 game against Arkansas. And UTEP kicked three players off the team—McKenzie Moore, Jalen Craigle and Justin Croglie—who are suspected of manipulating games.

So if the crime is almost imperceptible, how do you prove it happened? The answer is, you

