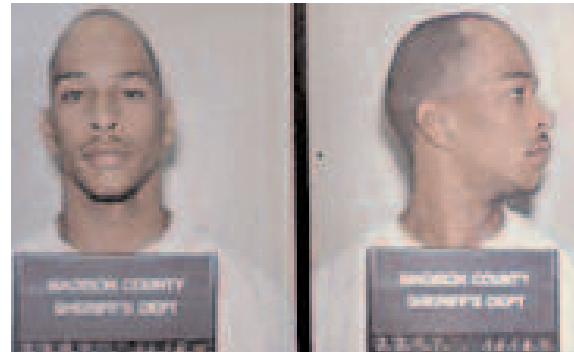


# night games

THE RAE CARRUTH CASE COULD EXPOSE THE DARKEST SECRETS OF CHARLOTTE  
— AND EVERYWHERE ELSE SPORTS AND SEX RUB AGAINST EACH OTHER

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PETERSON/SABA



Hobbled by injury, Carruth had lots of time to make the party scene in Charlotte, where Adams was a long-time fixture.

#### A LOT OF FOOTBALL PEOPLE ARE AFRAID THE CARRUTH TRIAL WILL DEGENERATE INTO THE *JERRY SPRINGER SHOW*.

**Big** Gus, a convicted bookie and local philosopher king, looks past the stripper falling out of her electric-green bikini top to concentrate on a matter significantly less entertaining—the question of what’s happened to the party in Charlotte. A 52-year-old man with a probation officer has a lot of time to think, and Gus Panos has thought long and hard. Scrunching his long face, he snaps his fingers for a refresher Scotch and says, “It’s gotten too hot.”

Gus liked this town before it went pro. When it was known for college hoops, NASCAR and Ric Flair. Those were the days you could take a bet from a country club phone and didn’t have to worry about the FBI, when you could run a Vegas night in South End, when you could find good-time women in the Yellow Pages. “Three years ago, Charlotte was wide open,” he says. “Now ...”

Now, the Queen City is reeling from the worst gut-punch of its 12-year-old pro sports life. Worse than the sexcapades of Hornets owner George Shinn. Worse even than the drag racing death of Hornet Bobby Phillips, or his teammate Derrick Coleman’s drunken-driving troubles. The story that has Charlotte on its knees—that would have any city on its knees—is that of ex-Panther wideout Rae Carruth, who sits in the Mecklenburg County jail accused of capital murder.

That story as we know it: On a cool evening last November, Cherica Adams, a pregnant part-time real estate agent and one-time stripper, was returning from a date with Carruth when a rented Nissan Maxima pulled beside her black BMW 325i. A gunman in the back seat sprayed four bullets into her neck, chest and abdomen. Her son was delivered 10 weeks premature and survived. Adams slipped into a deep coma and died a month later. Based partly on the testimony of one of his reputed accomplices, Carruth is accused of masterminding the ambush and luring Adams right into it.

The back story lies in the shadows anywhere young, rich and famous men who play pro sports cross paths with women wanting to share their lives and lifestyles—which, of course, is everywhere. Sex, power and ambition have always been the banked turns of sports’ fast lane. But recently the stakes and consequences have been fueled by high-octane revenues and player salaries.

The topic of sex and sports is one that few players, agents or league officials

like to talk about on the record, but now the very secrets an old-timer like Gus was so good at keeping are the secrets the Carruth trial is about to expose. “There are a lot of people in the NFL, and in sports in general, who are afraid this trial is going to degenerate into the *Jerry Springer Show*,” says Harry Edwards, the noted University of California professor of sports sociology and four-decade witness to the carnival. “Anyone who’s telling you there isn’t a wariness about what it will reveal is whistling past the graveyard.”

Delite threads her arm around the neck of a visiting NBA superstar like she’s a mink wrap. It’s early April and, until seven days ago, the 25-year-old with the girl-next-door looks was working with special-needs kids. Then she entered an amateur stripping contest and won. Now she’s at The Men’s Club in Charlotte, sitting on the future Hall of Famer’s lap, selling the black teddy as she throws her head back, coquettishly showing off her high cheekbones. The star doesn’t want her to dance, just talk, and for this he gives her two crisp \$100 bills and floor seats to tomorrow’s game. Three of his teammates are a bit less decorous. Each is being entertained by his own dancer, who grabs the backs of her pump heels and slowly rubs her thighs against his face.

Some 700 topless professionals dance in Charlotte during the NBA and NFL seasons, and most are not sitting on the laps of pro ballers. Face it: Men go to strip clubs. But the relaxed anonymity these places offer means much more to a recognizable athlete than to the CPA “unwinding” in the corner. The CPA leaves work and disappears into a social fabric that most mortals take for granted and most pros, sooner or later, envy. In matters of the heart, accountants, lawyers and plumbers worry about little more than “Will she go out with me?” (Or “Will my wife find out?”) Athletes have to consider everything from “What’s she after?” to “Whose boyfriend wants a piece of me tonight?”

“In a bar or at a party, there’s always some guy who lost money on the game, or thinks you’re eyeing his chick,” says one NBA vet who, like many others interviewed for this story, prefers to remain anonymous. “After a game I like to go where there’s good security and guys who keep to themselves.” No one’s asking a \$60,000-a-year CPA to feel sorry for a \$6-million-



**“I LIKE TO GO WHERE THERE’S SECURITY AND GUYS KEEP TO THEMSELVES,” SAYS ONE NBA VET.**

a-year point guard. But for athletes, strip clubs feel safe.

There are 20 other strip clubs besides The Men’s Club in Charlotte, many of which, until recently, had advertised dark alcoves called VIP rooms. When the city council passed a law last September banning such private spaces—worrying that what went on inside wasn’t just dancing—the owners panicked. “They wanted to know what they were going to do when pro players wanted privacy,” says Katherine Kasell, an investigator with Charlotte-Mecklenburg vice. “They were worried about losing a large source of their income.”

But commerce prevails. One club with a thriving “semiprivate” VIP business is The Diamond Club. It sits in a squat brick building on an industrial road that hints at its lack of pretense. The cocktail tables wobble, the chairs are from Staples. And on a Thursday night, a bottle-blond named Nicky sits by the bar and watches her baby-faced sister wrap her thighs around a pole. Nicky, a 20-something mother of two girls, has the night off. Usually, she can be seen at The Men’s Club. She’s got 30-grand banked, and figures she’s got another year before she quits and buys a house in the woods. She’s not dancing tonight only because she took in a Hornets game. How did she score her ticket? She whispers the name of an NBA player she calls a friend.

Talking to Nicky, it’s easy to imagine Cherica Adams, 24, sitting there too, talking about the child she’s going to have with Rae—just two young moms gabbing as they wait for someone to ask them to go upstairs and rub across a hungry lap for \$25. When it comes to dealing with athletes, dancers at The Diamond Club (and places like it) are usually of one of two minds. Some women are nothing more than amused to be tipped with tickets; it’s a perk of the job. For others, stripping is part of a longer-term commitment—a way to gain access to the world of the rich and famous (and one reason the clubs might not be so safe after all). For athletes, it’s often hard to tell the two types apart.

“From the time we’re in school, women want to be with jocks,” says David Carrodine, a Washington, D.C., sports marketer who played college baseball at Maryland. “But when you turn pro, it’s a hundredfold increase.” Adams, a first-generation child of Charlotte sports, was one of these women. She was 13 when the Hornets played their first game. While at West Charlotte High, she reportedly dated Larry Johnson (he acknowledges only that they knew each other) and babysat for Muggsy Bogues’ kids. In 1995, after two years at Winston-

Salem State, she dropped out and started taking frequent trips to Los Angeles. No one’s sure what she did there—a close friend told *The Charlotte Observer* that she knew a lot of NBA players and ran in an “upscale type of crowd”—but by the time Adams attended the ’98 NBA All-Star Game in New York, she was chummy enough with Shaq to have him stop by her seat to say hello.

Back in Charlotte, Adams drove a Beemer, dressed in pricey clothes and tried building a career. She wanted to establish herself as a promoter of musicians, but to pay the bills, she sold real estate by day and danced topless by night. “I read about Cherica, and she reminded me of a type I’ve seen a lot,” says Katherine Kinser, a Dallas lawyer who has represented dozens of pro players in family-related lawsuits. “She’s not a college grad, doesn’t have a big job and doesn’t have a way to up the ante and break out of her daily life unless she’s with someone important. She defines herself by who she’s with.”

For many who orbit the pro sports globe, the scene is about networking, whether it’s rubbing shoulders with the smart money or finding a stepping stone to opportunity not otherwise available. Michelle Bagby, one of the Honeybees (1991 to ’96), the Hornets cheerleaders, leveraged her gig to start a dance school. Two other dancers have become WCW Nitro Girls. “I joined because I love to dance,” says Bagby. “But I started schmoozing, getting into VIP parties. I have a business degree. I was never in it for ‘the life.’ I used to be in my car before the players hit the locker room. I’m just ...” She draws a square in the air. “But everyone has their own motives.”

The tough part for an athlete is recognizing those motives—especially when he is too immature or inexperienced or indifferent to realize they may be hidden. “Someone can slip into a player’s inner circle and appear as though they’ve been around forever,” says Chrysa Chin, the NBA’s Player Programs Senior Manager. “These people are skilled at being familiar.” Which is why more than one athlete has ended an evening with a lady and awakened with a lawsuit. “There’s a whole cadre of women for whom sports teams are rock bands,” says one West Coast agent. “They hang at clubs or parties. Next thing you know, they’re telling a player, ‘I’m pregnant. You’re gonna have to take care of my baby.’” Adds Kinser: “In most people’s lives, a relationship ends with ‘I’m outta here.’ In these people’s lives, it ends with ‘I’m going to the press.’”

After celibacy, an unlikely choice unless you’re A.C. Green, the next best



**Before he left town, Collins had no trouble finding a good time in Charlotte, whose 21 strip clubs are havens for pro ballers.**



path to follow is responsibility, as preached by the leagues in their preseason counseling sessions (see page 76). But the current reality of the dating game has led some veteran students of the scene to make a cold business calculation about the casual hookup. “If the choice is between paying \$500 for a night where everything is out in the open or having to pay \$250,000 in exploitation money, I don’t think it’s admirable, but I’d rather see the business deal go down,” says Edwards, who moonlights as an adviser to the 49ers.

That’s where Sonny Hart comes in. In six years as a bouncer and doorman at the New York topless bar Scores, Hart says he gradually gained a rep among athletes as a man who could arrange hook-ups with trustworthy women, often dancers and waitresses from local clubs. He says he arranged hundreds before he left in 1998. “Guys would say, ‘Send me someone who’s cool.’ That was the code. I’d get tipped for finding them women to leave with. For the girls, it’s cool to be known as someone who’s been with a superstar. Of course, there’s money in it. Not necessarily cash for sex, not prostitution. But, like, a watch as a gift, or an all-expenses paid trip to see them play in another city.”

Fixers. Middlemen. Pimps. Call Sonny Hart, and guys like him, what you will. By any name, they go where the pros go, a bit too eager to do somebody famous a favor. In some circles, there’s one “fixer” whose name is on every bartender’s lips. In others, hooking up is less direct, more serendipitous. In Charlotte—these days, anyway—it tends toward the latter. If there’s a Sonny Hart in town, Gus Panos doesn’t know him. “And,” says the one-time bookie, “I oughta.”

Another job title you and Gus won’t find at the Bureau of Labor Statistics? Street agents, who are part groupie, part personal assistant and all fixer for high-profile player agents who don’t want to get their hands dirty tending to a client’s most discreet needs. Explains one former player agent: “Instead of having your client wake up and discover he’s just fathered a child, you give

## RULES OF THE ROAD

BATTLING TO KEEP PROS OUT OF TROUBLE, THE BIG LEAGUES' BEST WEAPON IS THE LITTLE SCREEN

The story goes like this: An athlete answers the phone in his hotel room. A seductive female voice invites him to join some "friends" at a club. His wariness melts as the beguiling voice (which, in fact, belongs to a man) teases and cajoles. Cut to the club, where the athlete finds himself sandwiched between two beautiful women. Cut back to the hotel room. As the athlete walks toward one naked woman in his bed, the second slips away and opens the door. In bursts a photographer—Snap! Snap! "Cut the points or else," the slyster growls.

Okay, it's a little *L.A. Confidential*, but the video, *Gambling With Your Life*, is meant to alarm the rookies—from the NBA, NFL and MLB—who see it each year. So is the one on violence (domestic and barroom), and the one on the club scene. Rae Carruth and Ray Lewis have focused attention on the NFL, but the fact that all four leagues have programs on the dangers right outside the locker room shows they know that anyone can be next. And that their "assets" need protecting.

It's a losing battle. Young men with lots of money tend to get into trouble, and there's very little the older men who hand out the money can do about it. In July, security people from at least three of the big leagues (the NBA hasn't committed) will scrimmage over what more can be done to protect players. But as Larry Lee, who runs the Detroit Lions player programs, says, "It's like being a parent. You give them everything, and hope nothing happens to them." Yes, teams can put a morals clause in contracts, obligating a player to behave with some restraint. But how much good does that do when many players are so naive about the simplest things? "We have kids who come into the league who've never had a bank account or been out socially," says NFL executive vice president Harold Henderson. "We're considering ways to teach them how to order off a menu." Imagine, then, the difficulty of teaching manners when the menu offers much more than surf 'n turf.

Deep down, the leagues know that what keeps players out of trouble hangs by two flimsy threads: judgment and luck. To help with the latter, all four of the big pro leagues have a security officer assigned to each team to keep an eye on players and check out unsavory characters (male or female). For the former, the leagues rely on game, if lame, attempts at education. Think high school sex ed, with better

production values. This past March, for example, Kevin Hallinan, head of MLB security, embarked on his annual rite of spring: Making the rounds of training camps with his "off-Broadway show" in tow. With over-the-top videos (starring actors) and in-person advice (starring athletes), the revue bombards players with warnings about women, gambling and violence. "Players are always approached by fans offering meals, jewelry, clothes, women," says Hallinan. "I try to tell them there are no free lunches."

This message is vividly portrayed in the newest video, *Dangers of Night Life*, in which three athletes visit a strip club, are escorted into a VIP room by gorgeous women who ply them with liquor—and quickly come to ruination. Narrators explain that Paulie Walnuts types target an athlete and dispatch a beauty to ensnare him. "I don't kiss and tell," a temptress murmurs as she surreptitiously laces our man's drink with Ecstasy. "It'll be a night you'll never forget." Then? His valuables disappear, or he's stopped for drunken driving, or he's so wasted that he can barely perform in the next day's game. Or worse, says Stan Kasten, president of Atlanta's Braves, Hawks and Thrashers: "If you're not vigilant, they can get you in a blackmail loop in a flash."

Hallinan's show was a follow-up to a 3½-day seminar held in January for 90 MLB rookies and blue-chip minor leaguers. (Last year's program began with—how perfect—a meeting with President Clinton.) "Paternity suits can be a big problem, especially for Latin players," says Gene Orza, associate general counsel for MLB's Players Association. "A lot of players are gods back home, and the gap between their salaries and the average young woman's is enormous. Every year we see allegations of paternity galore. One former player had something like seven."

When educating players about the evil that lurks in skirts, it's important to teach humility, says Satch Sanders, who runs the NBA's player programs (including a 4½-day seminar similar to MLB's). "I remind rookies of their physical, uh, prowess and the money they make. Then I say, 'If you were not that attractive to ladies growing up, believe me, you didn't turn into Denzel overnight. If two or three women are discerning enough to see your good points, fine. But 30 or 40? Can so many women be so perceptive?'"

Of course, convincing a \$10-million-a-year, 22-year-old forward that he's not quite as "all that" as the ladies say may be the biggest lost cause in history. Keeping pro ballers out of their own way—at least when it comes to the opposite sex—may just be a task for greater powers. The Angels' Mo Vaughn, for one, trusts but a single person to vet all the gifts and letters he receives: his mom. —Diane K. Shah



Bagby (at her dance school) says women have many motives for circling the sports world.

him a number and say, 'Here's a connect. If you gotta do this, call this guy. He'll get you someone, and you can do all you want. Safely!'"

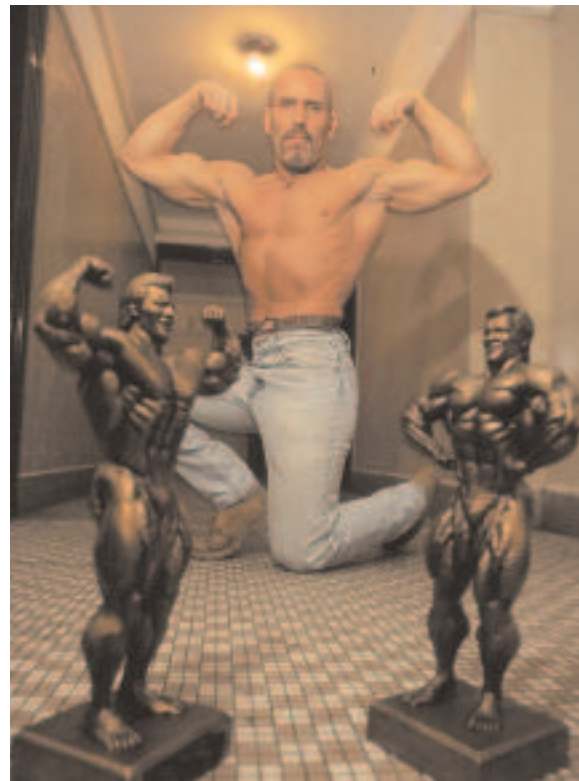
In St. Louis last year, police raided an apartment after noticing a classified ad that read: "Wanted: beautiful young ladies as exotic dancers and lingerie models who want to make a lot of money. Our clients are pro athletes and corporate executives." The owner of the condo, St. Louis-based agent Rocky Arceneaux, told the *Post-Dispatch*: "I didn't know they were using it for that." But agents do have a strong incentive to keep their clients happy and out of trouble. Says one Florida-based multisports agent, "It's true that at the end of the day, if they get paid, I get paid. But these are good kids. They make a mistake, and I want to get them out of it." So besides negotiating contracts, this agent has negotiated an abortion to cover one young client's mistake.

And it's not just agents who have the incentive. Many, if not all, pro teams employ people whose unofficial role is to help players navigate the obstacles. "I've had to hide players in the middle of practice when lawyers came looking to serve them with suits," says an executive with an NFL team. "Some of the stuff I've had to do would shock you." He admits to keeping a list of women who follow certain players from city to city, with indications of their potential for creating complications. "I spend way too much time keeping track of escorts, wives and jealous girlfriends," he complains. "It's killing me."

If all this sounds a little overheated it becomes somewhat more plausible when you drop back down into Charlotte, a tightly knit New South town where 65% of the population has been around for less than five years and the pro scene still has training wheels. This is a place with a short history of heroes, and of protecting them. This is a place where the formation of a cheerleading squad for the new basketball team was a major event. Three hundred women turned out for the finals, which were held in a shopping mall—an experience one participant called creepy. "Everywhere I went," she says, describing the early days of small-town star-making, "I'd get followed around by women who'd whisper, 'Oooh, there goes a Honeybee.'"

The Honeybees, in fact, were involved in a high-profile case that preceded Carruth's own. As viewers of Court TV know, Hornets owner George Shinn had a two-year relationship with one of the Honeybees. She was one of four squad members who has admitted to a relationship with a member of the team, even though such liaisons are forbidden. The relationship became public after Shinn was accused by another woman of sexual assault (he was exonerated last December). The cheerleader/high school teacher who testified that she'd been coerced into having sex with Shinn did have trouble explaining why she accepted \$12,000 to quit the squad and keep quiet. "I guess I knew I was going to get something out of it," she testified. "So I signed as opposed to not getting anything." She's since married a pro baseball player.

The Hornets don't have a corner on seedy sex suits. In divorce documents she filed, the wife of Panthers president Mark Richardson alleges she had to "deal with comments from people she knew about various women with whom Defendant was seen." When she went to check things out at a restaurant part-



IN SOME CIRCLES THERE'S ONE "FIXER'S" NAME ON EVERY BARTENDER'S LIPS.



Big Gus (right) used to run the party in Charlotte. Hart (left) helped to run it in New York. Now both are on the outside looking in.

owned by her husband, she says a doorman blocked her entry and accused her of pretending to be his wife. If Mr. Richardson was married, the doorman reportedly asked, "Why is he in here every night with different women?"

If Charlotte's top two sports executives were getting tripped up by their small-world celebrity, imagine what it was like for a 23-year-old, 2,700 miles from home. Rae Carruth arrived in Charlotte in 1997, an All-America first-round draft pick out of Colorado. He didn't drink or smoke, so he didn't spend much time at the Sunset Club, a members-only cigar bar started by Richardson and several of his players. Nor did he follow the scorched-earth party trail left by the now-reformed quarterback Kerry Collins, which ran through all the bars that serve ersatz chic on College Street. ("When Kerry was around we'd start our night at 10, hit a club, then another," says Jeff Panos, Big Gus' son and a local deejay. "At around 3 in the morning, he'd pick out like 20 of us and take us to his house. He'd say, 'Everyone take a room and have fun.' We called it Club Collins.")

Instead, Carruth disappeared into Charlotte like he disappeared into the Panthers' cavernous locker room. He didn't have much in common with married teammates, so he hung with local teenagers he identified with and mentored. Many had single moms like Carruth, whose mother and stepfather broke up in Sacramento when he was 14. He took them to the mall in his Mercedes, or to his five-bedroom home to play video games. Afterward he went to strip clubs.

In 1998, a broken right foot kept him out of the lineup, and by last season, when a sprained left ankle sidelined him after just five games, he had more time than he knew what to do with. And the more time he had, the more friends he collected. One of them, William Watkins, was a 44-year-old New Yorker with a rap sheet steeped in violence. Watkins was part of a crowd that brought Carruth to a birthday party in the spring of '99, where he met Adams, who'd come with friends from her real estate job. Within a couple of months, she was pregnant with his child and no longer dancing at The Diamond Club.

She wasn't his only interest. "Rae was a popular, intelligent, good-looking

guy, and he was sleeping with just about every woman who approached him," says a source close to his defense team. "After a while, it became a chase to see who'd end up with him." There was one from Colorado, who lived with him for a time; another in Charlotte, whom he started dating in September; a girlfriend in Atlanta, whom he was talking with on his cell phone at the time of Adams' shooting; and a beautician with whom he fled after Adams' death.

Maybe Carruth didn't see a problem. But juggling so many relationships would invite trouble for anyone. Adams wanted someone to go to birthing classes with, to be part of her baby's life. The other Charlotte woman was floored to learn the man she was seeing three times a week had impregnated someone else. The Atlanta girlfriend was unhappy with them all. Carruth is reported to have told each of them he wanted to settle down. But for a young, single athlete used to hot-and-cold running women—whether strippers, groupies, cheerleaders or just plain dates—monogamy isn't just scary. It's a lot like kicking a drug habit.

"If you ask me, it's about money, not love," says Big Gus. "These guys don't understand the money they've got. They're blind. You gotta be, if you think you're gonna find love in a topless club. But they have more money than sense. They think they can get out of anything."

Now, Big Gus and his neighbors have to wonder whether it was all worth the growing pains. City councilwoman Lynn Wheeler thinks the Hornets' bid for a new publicly financed arena is D.O.A. "The climate is abominable," she says. But she also admits that sports have helped put Charlotte on the map, and she thinks the crime Carruth is charged with could happen anywhere. "It shouldn't reflect on Charlotte, or on pro sports," she says. But, of course, it does.

And always will. Stacy Robinson, who runs the counseling network for the NFL Players Association, is weary of the subject. "We've seen it all before," he says. "You go to a lawyer and say you want to settle, or do nothing and wait for the paternity suit." But what about murder? "It's too incredible to believe."

Maybe. Or maybe in a world where companionship is often a game of blind-man's bluff, it was inevitable. ☹