





I ney proce into pairs, faming 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*.

Cn-on, ne mought. This is gonna de daa.

BRANGOM JGHNSOM FELT out of place the momenthe arrived at the University of San Diego in the fall of 2005. The campus, overlooking miles of blue-green coatfile and celebrity mansions, was a world away from the easely Houston neighborhood of his youth. As he watched students unloading their suitcases from expensive SUYs, the hoops recruit file embarrassed by his two worn backpacks, which carried pheto accent that he hid behind mumbles. It does some effort for him to remind hismself why he'd come to the skeyty Roman Catholic college: *Th agoing 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 walled off the life he left behind in Houston, referring to the rap sheets of family members in only the vaguest terms. Then he molded the young Toreros in his own image: fast and fearless.

USD went 18-12 in 2005-06 and nearly knocked of powerboses Gonzaga in the WCC tournament semifinals thanks to 19 points from its frehman Al-Lancrian. As a sophomore, Johnson became a taskmater as well as a playmaker, leading the team in assist and to 18 wins. When two newcomens were suspended for violating team rules, he told the team: "Were going to get on 'm. Were going to be their dadies and mominies now."

In 2007, USD, looking to jolt the program, replaced coach Brad Holland with longtime Gonzaga assistant Bill Criert, and Johnson thrived in the new up-tempo offense. Thousands of fans filled the Jenny Crafg Pavilion to see the juniore grant Preset the school's single-season scoring record. Handsome, with high cheekhones and a vell-manicered gatter, Johnson was now the face of his university. Teachers weed to him when he went to chass. Girks 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 Calhoan 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 giffriend 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-endine 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, who'd largely seen Johnson only on film, now saw before them inter-looking, alsow-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 looker room. Weeks later, the Torcros got blown out of the second round of the 2010 WCC tournament as Johnson lumbered up and down the court, scoring just serve points.

CONSPIRAC

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 if fell like to be a 23-yau-old diather playing alongside teenage boys, he turned to a former formore assistant ranned T.J. Brown. Brown was a Kanasa native who'd played to get into coaching and worked his way through the assistant ranks at USD. He lost his job during the coaching change that horough 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 holiday there, and he grinned when Brown introduced lim as this little brother. In 2006, when Brown's drinking got the best of him and be sought treatment. Johnson stuped in close contact. The two men shared almost everything, and by Johnson's teshist remoiry save, that included his complaints about his coach and the team and his increasing obsession with finding



money to send back to Houston for his baby hoy. Brown, meanwhile, had moved from one addiction to another and was now betting upward of \$5,000 a week on college baskethall. As Johnson's grievances got Joader, Brown began throwing money on the Toreves 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 booke was Steve Goria, a pudgy man partial to shiny suits who stood out on the surfer attreets of San Diego. He was known to wave around thick wands o'hilds, hango out with strippers and jet to Las Vegas on weekends. "He had this hunge condominium, marble floors, gold fattures in the bathrooms, a full bar," says David Gates, his former bodypared. Gates describes Goria as a halfneardel tough gay, the alymolyd kings to beat them up with bas or ruin their cars or nothing," says Gates, before adding. "I ouly did II biks three times."

Goria may have been suspicious of Brownis luck, but be didit vaut to lose bit business entirely. In February 2010, the two met at a San Diego diner, where Goria told Brown that held pay 82,200 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 tun for the saure thing.

When the Toreros went on a crucial read trip the following week, Brown called Johnson to learn what he could. The point guard admits that he knew Hrown was betting on college boops and didn't have an issue with it, he'd grown up around gambles in Houston. And if he could help Brown gain inside information, well, that's what friends were for 35 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 113-point underdogs. Brown immediately called up Gorán- The Portland and hy the points', he said. San Dieso lost the rame 70-56. But hefore The bookie at the center of the point-shaving conspiracy was Steve Goria, who, unfortunately for Johnson, doubled as a drug dealer.

Goria 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 Goria; he just shook Goria's hand and sat on the couch plaving PlayStation while Brown moved to another room to speak to Goria, out of earshot, Finally, Brown emerged with his \$2,500 curled in a stack. He approached Johnson and gave him a grand off 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, Goris's next big by twas on Feb. 18, when San Diego played Saint Mary's Johnson admits eight-point underdog—but insists it was only a coincidence that he shot just 6-for-16 from the floor. In any event, his teamnates were even worse. The Toereros hit only 33% of their shots, and Saint Mary's won 61-49. Corin amade \$40,000 from that game, Brown received bio,000 - and Johnson \$1,000 of that. Two weeks later, Goria decided to plow his winning from the previous week into a USD home game against Loyloh Marymount. Brown called Johnson to sy that he and Goria were taking the visiting Lions, who were 3½-point underdogs. According to interviews and court documents, Brown didn't need to say anything more for Johnson to understand the underlying message. If Goria and Brown won big, there would be another thousand bucks waiting for the eurad.

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 LUB 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 sorce quickly and bring the Torresot 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 get 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 as hard, with that many games, to detect when a fix is in. But according to a study published in the peer-eviewed 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 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

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 by 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 progreads 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 regularseason granss involving 114- 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 was the fields to core. Tellingly, and as the authors had predicted, this anomaly was not seen in postseason games with 114-point spreads. With all the extra attention in March, the outcomes followed



WOULD

the same distribution pattern as the rest. This wasn't the first study to suggest a game within the game for bettors. In 2006 economist Justin Wolfers estimated that point-shaving occurred in about 7% of games with large spreads, or as many as 30 games a year—roughly the number Diemer and Leeds came un 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 found dead in her hed 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-Stevin 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, Varez 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 Ragland and Justin Crosgile-who are suspected of manipulating games.

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

^G SPiracy

get lucky, which is exactly what occurred when two FBI agents in San Diego began trailing a drug dealer suspected of moving large amounts of pot across state lines.

THE FBI'S San Diego headquarters lie in a heavily gated office building on the outskirts of the city, where 250 full-time agents police everything from Mexican drug cartels to corruption in Southern California's defense industry.

In 2009 Nicholas Cheviron was one of the office's new gents. He'd come from Bloomington, III, where he worked as a beat cop, and was paired with a veteran investigator anamed Greg Houska on the organized crime squad. Late that year, the duo got a file dropped on their desk about a routine traffic heckspoint in which a suspect was stopped in a Camry that reked of weed. The U.S. Border Farton agant who looked in the trunk found \$104,900 in \$200 bills, along with a may of Euroka, a Northern California city known for growing high-grade pot.

The suspect was Steve Goria, and his troubles explaining where the cash came from led the Feds to seize the money and landed his file with Cheviron and Houska. Seeing him as a possible conduit to a larger drug-trafficking outfit, the agents put his photo on their corkboard. Every few weeks, they followed him as he made weekly visits to his mother's house, his local church and a social dtub where he played poker.

One thing they learned quickly was that Goria lowed to brag. He talked about how much money he was making peddling dope, his sideline as a bookie and all the giftrifends he had. But what really caught the agents' attention was when an informant told them that Goria was boosting about having a USD player on his parroll. They were already looking at a conspirate, thange involving drug-running and bookmaking. Now were already looking at a conspirate, thenge involving drug-running and bookmaking. Show hey had a new element to throw in: sports bribery: They also had a new name to give their operation: Hookhot.

AT THE VERY moment Cheviron and Houska were expanding their investigation, the mystery player they were searching for was in North Dakota. Bismarck in the winter is about as far away from San Diego as you can get, and after being selected by the Dakota Wizards in the second round of the NBA's 2010 developmental draft, Johnson had struggled to adjust to his new surroundings. In fact, he was almost relieved when his left knee started swelling and the Wizards sent him back to Houston for several weeks to rest it.

While Johnson was trying to begin the next chapter in his life, the FBI agents were closing in on his previous one. First, they subpoenaed Goria's phone records and found he'd been making hundreds of calls to Brown. Then, in December 2010, after they got permission from a federal judge to begin wiretapping phones, they asked an informant who knew Goria to call him and discuss Brown.

On the phone, Goria told the informant that he paid Brown roughly \$30,000 the year before in exchange for fixing three games. But recently he said, their scheme seemed to have stalled. The problem wasn't Goria's willingness to keep paying Brown. The problem was that he didn't think Brown had aryone on the current squad how was as malleable as Johnson had been. "The thing is, I think he's hulls—ing about this year? Goria said.

If Goria was frustrated, the agents were even more so. They didn't want to rely just on wiretaps, they wanted to catch their asspects committing a crime. So she divided to turn up the heat by having the informant–a cocaine dealer who was looking for help with his own case—encourage Goria to rekindle his scheme. The informant even offered to kick in several thousand backs if Goria could find a USD player willing to listen to on offer A about sharing points. Goria relayed the offer to Brown, and on Jan. 20, 2011. Brown made the call the acents

Jan. 30, 2011, Brown made the call the agents were waiting for. Johnson was watching TV in his Bismarck

Journson was watching 1 within basiliarcs, apartment when Riown phonds to let him in in on the data. "How much them $n \rightarrow trying to put$ on that game?" Johnon asked, according to agovernment transcript of the call. Brown saidthe going price was \$30,000 a game. Johnsonwas astonished. Brown said, "Man, if they can $go two, two ("en, $60K out the door, <math>n = a^2$ Johnson agreed to help Brown find a current Johnson agreed to help Brown find a current With only two games left in the 2010-11 season, the informant gave Brown one last pitch. As Brown soon explained to Johnson on the phone: 'I was just chilling and these n-s just came over in a Bentley, like talkin' big, big s-. [For] two games, they're like \$70K. S-, these n-s was talking."

Johnson, who was in an airport traveling with his team, listened, stunned. After the call, he reached out to a Toreros sophomore he'd remained friendly with, a 65° forward named Ken Rancifer, A little while later, Johnson called Brown back. "I think I got this n-a to be down, bro. He hi tim e, he just text me."

"Oh, hell yeah," Brown said. Cheviron and Houska looked at each other, wide-eyed.

Oh, hell yeah.

EARLY IN THE evening of Feb. 23, 2011, the agents idled outside the doorway of a Qwik Korner Mart in Pacific Beach, eavesdropping on the meeting inside.

Brown had arrived with Johnson's recruit, Rancifer, and they'd gone inside to meet Goria and his partners. But the vibe was strange; Rancifer was drenched in sweat.

"There was some small talk," Brown says. "Then [Goria] said to [Rancifer], 'You know, if this doesn't work out, it's not going to be me knocking at your door.'"

The idea that Goria was willing to bring in muscle clearly alterned Rancifer. According to the wiretaps, the player through the was getting money to listen to an offer, not get threatened by a wiseguy. Without accepting the cash, Ranciffer field be scener, running right past Cheviron and Houska. Soon after that, Brown called Johnson in a foul modo to be thin know what had happened. "In heated, $n-a_{i}$ be said. "I car't even believe this s-"

"This n—a a bitch, bro ..." Johnson replied. "I'm about to text that boy [to say] ... 'F— idiot n—a, you so stupid!"

The two men ultimately agreed the whole thing had been a total waste of time. But it wasn't to the FBL Six weeks later, on April 9, Cheviron rousted Johnson in the early-morning raid and brought him back to Houston headquarters. Johnson still wasn't sure what the



Coach Bill Grier thought Johnson was the ideal teammate. "You'd never think he could be thinking those things," he says of Johnson's point-shaving.

arrest was about. Then Cheviron played the wiretaps and Johnson heard his voice, and it all began to make sense.

"Look," Johnson said, "that's not what it sounds like."

Maybe not. But Johnson was all over the tapes, agreeing to help revertit Randfer and boasting about how he was going to destroy the program held put on the map. Full of rage at his teammates from his final season, he had said to Rowa to ace point. When all them white boys started filing up our program, I was like, man, if - these n=-5" troios at Göre, he had said: "F- Coach. N-a, I can makes some momey right now. =, let a n= aet ..."

Worst of all, he had brazenly offered to fix games right up to the very end. "Actually, go ask them if they want me to throw a D-League game," he heard himself telling Brown on the wiretap. "I'll throw that s— so quick, man."

JOHNSON WAS ARRESTED on federal conspiracy charges regarding point-shaving on April 9. He was kept incommunicado in a Houston jail for two days, waiting to see a judge. On April 11, nine other people were taken into custody in San Diego on various conspiracy charges. That included Goria, who was arrested and indicted on drug and bookmaking conspiracy charges.

"It was crazy," Johnson says now. "I was being talked about with drug dealers. I didn't know about any of that other stuff."

At a packed news conference on the 11th, the US, Attoreys, Larun Duffy, accused Johnson of a "betrapal" that was 'not merely disappointing—ti is criminal and worthy of prosecution." On the USD campus, no one was more devastated than Girts. When Cheviron and Houska visited him before the news conference to describe what was about to unifold, he had to go to his kitchen and stand over his sink. "This is a dist who came to noy office three times a week to talk," Gires rays." On the floor, he was so frantie times, you'n even think he could be thinking those things. That's why it was so hard for me to get my arms around it."

As the evidence collected by Cheviron and Houska mounted, the defendants, one by one, chose to plead guilty rather than risk going to trial. Goria admitted to using Brown to bribe Johnson and received a 30-month sentence on drug, bookmaking and sports-bribery charges. Two of his partners and his bodyguard, Gates, took deals as well.

Finally, late in 2012, Brown and Johnson became the last to fold and admit that they too

were part of the sports-briltery conspiracy. Brown received a variang sentence that was due to expire on March 3, while Johnson received a six-month term that ended in November 2013. They admitted to plotting to throw games by recruiting Randfer, who was not charged in the case. But they went to jail insisting that they never threw games at USD themselves. (The US. Attorney decided not to press that aspect of the case.)

DHE GAY THIS past November, having recently left a halview house, Johnson walks into a Denny's, sits down and tries to pinpoint where things went wrong. "I used to be cocky, self-centered and too confident," he says. "But I never hald bail intentions. While the college kids were leading college lives, I had to make every decision for myslef. I warnted them to be like me, to be tough and survive. I used to look at them and think, Just toughen up. But I had a hard time delivering that message, I did have anger inside of me. I became coldbaerted to a lot of people and hardened my heart to survive."

He peers out through the driving rain onto the streets of Houston. "I can see a kid thinking: I'm broke. I'm at a school where all these other kids are successful," he says. "And the opportunity seems so easy ..."

He stops himself there, seemingly on the verge of admitting to point-shaving. But then he throws up his hands. "I don't know what it will take for you to believe me," he says. "I didn't shave noints."

He insists that he's different than he used to be and that he car's very necessize be voice on the FBI tapes. But the former star has no answer for why, in an unguarded moment, he tool Brown, T wish twoulds did every game. The best he can obe slaught 16 ff as solore and say. We was just two gays blowing off steam. The not exactly a mac calpab, but it be one rough to got A chanson back into basketball. He has a new agent and a contract to play with the Jacksorville Giants of the ABA. Looking out the window of the dimer one more, he even dings to the idea that he'll be welcomed back to USD nor day. " area them and off amenories: he says **G**

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