



AGENT OF CHANGE

Tank Black is out of jail and out to prove in new book that he didn't defraud sports stars



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William H. (Tank) Black stared out the tiny window of his cell, watching a heavy snow fall against the barbed wire fence surrounding the Milan Federal Detention Center, wondering how he had fallen so far and so fast. Fat snowflakes illuminated by the prison spotlights glowed as they landed on the prison basketball court. Tears streamed down Black's cheeks. He had never felt so alone.

Tank Black had been the NFL's top agent not long before that sleepless night in a cell just large enough to accommodate bunk beds, a toilet and a sink. His sports agency, Professional Management Inc., was a \$100 million company that represented five first-round picks in the 1999 draft. He was a successful African-American businessman who had become a role model for a younger generation of black entrepreneurs. He owned a fleet of luxury cars, leased a jet he used to whisk clients to exotic destinations, and lived in a sprawling brick home in an exclusive neighborhood near Columbia, S.C.

But none of that mattered in the winter of 2000, in a lockup 45 miles south of Detroit and hundreds of miles from his friends and family in South Carolina. Tank Black was the key figure in what authorities were calling the biggest case of agent fraud in sports history — an allegation Black spent much of his time in prison trying to disprove and now flatly says wasn't true.

"It was tough, because I didn't do what they said I did," says Black, who served nearly eight years of an almost 12-year sentence before his release in May 2008. He has lived quietly for the past 15 months, splitting his time between Co-

lumbia and Dallas, exploring entrepreneurial opportunities and preparing to launch a career as a motivational speaker. But Black is breaking his silence this week.

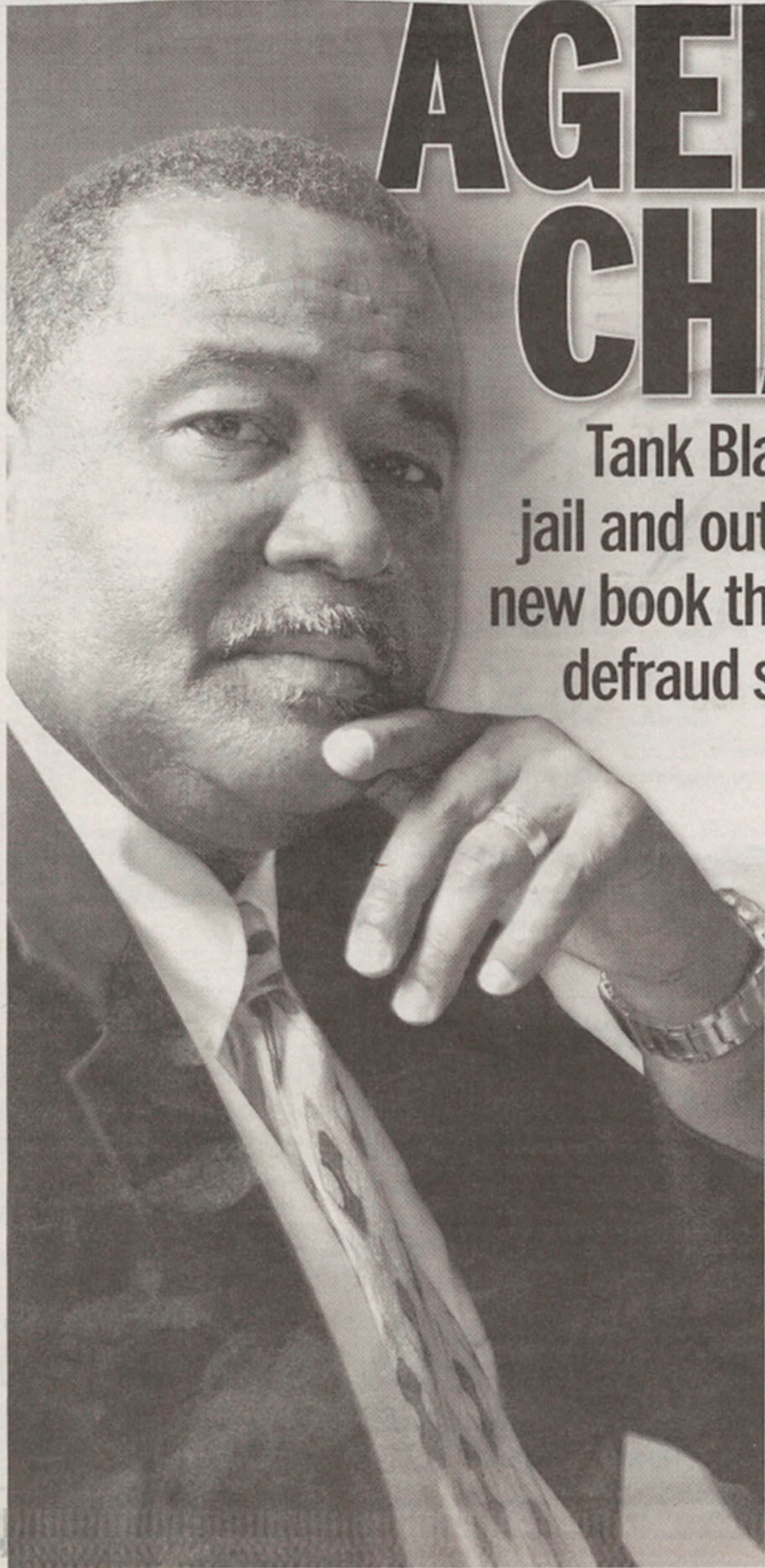
In his book "Tanked!" — to be released tomorrow — Black says he was not a villain but a victim, railroaded by federal prosecutors and the NFL Players Association.

Black became infamous a decade ago as the agent who scammed the pro athletes who trusted him to invest millions of dollars they'd earned, ripping them off for as much as \$14 million.

Now, Black is embarking on a publicity tour he hopes will convince people that he is a good man who made some bad mistakes, listened to the wrong people and fell victim to his own hubris.

Black had been incarcerated for months before that snowy night almost 10 years ago, but it wasn't until then that he realized that he was facing a long prison term and the end of a flamboyant career. Black had reached the lowest point of his life. He cried. He prayed. He promised God he would use his time to become a better man.

The laundry list of crimes Black was accused of committing was a long one. He had pleaded guilty to



money-laundering charges brought by federal prosecutors in Michigan who claimed he had helped cocaine traffickers move drug proceeds to offshore bank accounts. Justice Department officials in Florida had charged him with bilking Giants receiver Ike Hilliard, Jaguars running back Fred Taylor and other clients out of \$14 million. The Securities and Exchange Commission was on his trail, alleging fraud in a civil suit.

"It was the first time in my life that I couldn't pick up a phone and make a problem disappear," Black, now 52, said in an interview this week. "I was in a federal prison and I realized this stuff wasn't going to go away. I couldn't help my kids do their homework. I couldn't talk to my friends and family. I lost so much."

Black says he was no angel — he admits he lied to federal investigators and violated NCAA and NFL Players Association rules by doling out money to college ballplayers — but he insists he did not cheat his players out of millions of dollars or knowingly launder drug money, as the government charged.

While his convictions were never overturned, Black says he has indisputable evidence to prove he wasn't guilty of those charges — government court documents that he says clear him of bilking his clients and knowingly helping drug dealers launder money. Black says he was barred during the various investigations into his business activities from reaching out to clients like Hilliard and Taylor, who he says he loved like a son. He says he couldn't explain that he had been duped by people he trusted and that he'd made bad decisions because he was frightened and desperate, not because he was a crook.

"Tanked!" is his way of explaining what happened, Black says. "I crossed lines I should have never crossed," he admits. "But I did not steal from my clients."

Justice Department and SEC officials declined to comment on Black's claims or his book. But Jerry Sanford, the now-retired assistant United States attorney who successfully prosecuted Black in Florida, says the evidence laid out at the Gainesville trial indeed proved that Black stole millions of dollars from about a dozen players, including Hilliard, Taylor and running back Duce Staley of the Philadelphia Eagles.

Sanford says Black took advantage of the players' trust, especially that of Taylor. Taylor testified that he entrusted his future, and the future of his daughter, to Black. Instead, he told the court, Black robbed him blind.

"I trusted Tank that he would do right with the money," Taylor testified. "Every so often I would check how it was doing, and I got a check sheet that said a bunch of money was reinvested and reinvested, but it was make-believe." Taylor welled up in tears when he testified about how he viewed Black as a father figure, Sanford says. "It doesn't surprise me that he's coming out with a check. From what I could tell, he was a very enterprising man, very hard-working, very engaging. But he got caught up in greed. He saw easy money and he took advantage of it."



Ike Hilliard and Fred Taylor (inset) were just two of the players authorities say former agent Tank Black bilked out of \$14 million. Black says he never stole money from those clients and can prove it. Daily News and AP photos

tage of it."

The NFLPA, meanwhile, viewed the Tank Black prosecutions as a wake-up call. In 2002, the union created a program for vetting and monitoring financial advisers, and began offering players rookie symposiums on financial issues. "We do everything we can to be vigilant about protecting our current players," NFLPA spokesman George Atallah says.

However, in an interview and in his book, Black blames many of his problems on the union.

He says he crossed now-deceased union chief Gene Upshaw and NFLPA general counsel Richard Berthelsen after one of his clients, then Packers tight end Sterling Sharpe, filed a grievance challenging Green Bay's severance offer. The Packers offered Sharpe \$300,000 after he suffered a career-ending neck injury; Black felt Sharpe, who would have earned more than \$3 million if he had played the entire season, deserved more. Berthelsen was out of the office when a former NFLPA lawyer

named Grady Irvin filed a grievance on Sharpe's behalf. Berthelsen was livid, Black charges, because he says the lawyer was in cahoots with management.

According to a clause in the NFL's collective bargaining agreement, half of Sharpe's salary would have counted against Green Bay's salary cap. Berthelsen, Black says, was more interested in giving Green Bay payroll flexibility than representing Sharpe.

Black says rival agents close to Upshaw and other NFLPA officials also complained that the one-time South Carolina assistant football coach was paying college players to sign with him, a violation of NCAA rules and NFLPA guidelines. Black says he was unfairly singled out — most agents who compete for top players provide cash to prospective clients, he says. The NFLPA decertified Black in 1999 for three years, the stiffest penalty ever meted out to a football agent.

The University of Florida police also launched an investigation into allegations that Black had operated as an agent without being licensed

in their state, a felony. The police raided Black's offices in South Carolina, seizing computers and files. Black was not charged — he says he was legally licensed in Florida — but the police shipped everything they seized to the Players Association in Washington. Black also says an NFLPA official, Trace Armstrong, sat in on interviews the police conducted with Jevon Kearse and other players suspected of taking cash from Black. A South Carolina judge later ruled that the records were improperly seized.

Atallah, the NFLPA spokesman, declined to comment on Black's allegations about the union's role in the Florida investigation.

But Black had bigger problems than NCAA rule violations. A Florida investigator had unearthed evidence that Black had become an investor and officer in a company that manufactured a game that celebrated prominent African-Americans called "Black Americans of Achievement." Black, according to the SEC, received two million shares of company stock

on behalf of clients who he falsely claimed had done promotional work for BAOA. Black then sold the stock, which had been valued between four cents and 28 cents a share, to clients who were supposed to get it free, charging up to \$1 a share. He promised to refund his clients' money if the stock price didn't climb within two years.

Black also pushed his clients to invest in an enterprise called Cash 4 Titles, a company that offered high-interest payday loans to people who put their cars up as collateral. Black says PMI counsel Jim Franklin convinced him that it was a legitimate investment opportunity. Federal investigators in New York, however, found evidence that Cash 4 Titles was actually a massive Ponzi scheme. To make matters even worse for Black, he invested money in Cash 4 Titles from partners in a real estate deal in Detroit. Those partners, Black says he later learned, were the kingpins of a major cocaine distribution ring.

Federal prosecutors in Michigan charged Black with money laundering, and he was sentenced to 82 months in prison in June 2001. He was convicted of defrauding the NFL players by a Florida court in January 2002 and sentenced to 60 months in prison after he completed his Michigan sentence.

In interviews and in his book, Black says a pre-sentence report prepared by the U.S. Probation Office says there was no evidence that he knew the money he invested from his Detroit partners came from cocaine sales. The criminal complaint filed against Cash 4 Titles executive Michael Gause includes wiretap transcripts that suggest Black believed it was a legitimate business and did not know it was a pyramid scheme.

Perhaps most gratifying for Black is a federal judge's order in the SEC lawsuit. The Florida court ruled in favor of the SEC in December 2003, claiming the matter had been settled in the criminal case and ordered Black to repay more than \$2.6 million to his clients. Black then filed his own petitions with the court, arguing that he had repaid his clients at least some of their money.

"Black makes a compelling argument that he should be credited for the BAOA funds returned to his clients," wrote U.S. District court Judge Richard A. Lazzara in a 2004 decision. "He also makes a compelling argument that Cash 4 Titles transactions were not the substance of illegal gains. The SEC fails to sufficiently counter Black's arguments."

The court did order Black to pay \$240,000, money he says is interest. He claims the decision cleared him of allegations that he bilked his clients. The decision didn't get him back the time he spent in prison (his sentence was reduced because he appeared on the television show "America's Most Wanted" when it aired a segment about one of the cocaine dealers who had been his partner in the Detroit real estate deal). But he says he isn't bitter. Prison taught him what is important in life, he says.

"I was going so fast I couldn't enjoy it," says Black. "But I'll make more money and I'll have more fun in the future than I did in the past."

A few tidbits from 'Tanked'

In addition to presenting Tank Black's side of the criminal case that landed him in prison for almost eight years, "Tanked!", the book Black has written about his case, is full of other interesting tidbits:

■ Black says his only NBA client, Vince Carter let his mother, Michelle Robinson, control his finances and other aspects of his life. Black writes about a payoff he says he made to a woman on Carter's behalf to keep a relationship secret from the player's mother, and he writes that during his incarceration, Carter refused to pay the agent his commission for negotiating his contract. Black said Carter and his mother may have thought that it would be difficult for Black to come after them while he was incarcerated, but he hired an attorney and took the NBA star to court, winning a judgement of more than \$5 million. "It would be a first step on my path to redeeming myself and restoring my reputation," Black writes.

■ Black says client Rae Carruth, the Carolina Panthers receiver who was convicted in 1999 of conspiring to kill his pregnant girlfriend, had nothing to do with the slaying. The former agent says Carruth had no reason to plot against the girlfriend, Cherica Adams; the real killers were dope dealers who were furious that Carruth backed out of a big marijuana purchase.

■ Black gives a blow-by-blow description of the night that pop singer Lisa (Left Eye) Lopes torched the home of her boyfriend, Atlanta Falcons receiver Andre Rison, in a jealous rage.

■ Black portrays many clients as hopelessly unprepared for the millions of dollars they earned playing in the NFL — some couldn't even balance a checkbook, he says. He writes that he told players not to blow their earnings on cars, mansions and other luxury items.