

Review of crime reports shows NFL arrest rates consistent with general population

by Brent Schrotenboer

Shortly after 2 a.m. March 13, a Scottsdale, Ariz., police officer noticed a gray Chrysler luxury sedan make an illegal right turn in light traffic.

The officer followed and noticed the sedan drift over the lane markers, slow down abruptly and then cause another vehicle to swerve. Sensing trouble, the officer pulled the car over and walked to the driver's side. "I immediately smelled the odor of an intoxicating beverage," the officer's report stated.

The officer asked the driver what he had to drink.

The driver, Jerramy Stevens, a tight end who played for the Seattle Seahawks the past five years, said he had "four or five margaritas at Salty Seniorita," a restaurant in Scottsdale.

Stevens was arrested, taken to jail and charged with drunken driving - his second such arrest in four years and at least the 98th driving-under-the-influence arrest among National Football League players in the past 87 months.

The spotlight on legal issues involving NFL players has intensified in recent weeks with the suspensions of Adam "Pacman" Jones and Chris Henry for violating the NFL's personal conduct code as the result of numerous high-profile arrests.

But Stevens' case - an early morning traffic stop that led to a DUI arrest of a player who had a prior record - is far more typical of the problem.

The San Diego Union-Tribune reviewed hundreds of news reports and public records since January 2000 and found that the league's biggest problems with the law are in many ways just as ordinary: drunken driving, traffic stops and repeat offenders.

In addition, contrary to public perception, the arrest rate among NFL players is less than that of the general population, and fueled by many of the same dynamics, analysts say.

According to the Union-Tribune review, there have been 308 arrests or citations, not including minor traffic

infractions.

Of those 308 incidents:

- The most prevalent charge was driving under the influence, which accounted for almost a third of the arrests. Over half of all incidents came after traffic stops or were vehicle-related, including DUIs and searches that turned up drugs or guns.

- Almost 40 percent (122) were committed by 50 players with multiple arrests, including DUI and other offenses.

- Some teams are clearly better behaved than others. The St. Louis Rams (three incidents involving two players) might have something to teach the Minnesota Vikings and Cincinnati Bengals, who combined for at least 44 incidents since 2000.

- The most troublesome positions were defensive back and wide receiver, which accounted for 130 incidents. By contrast, offensive linemen and quarterbacks combined for 41.

To analysts and those who study crime and race in society, this all adds up to one thing. They say it's a media-amplified microcosm of America, where rich young men like to party and, because of complex environmental factors, where the rate of incarceration for blacks in the United States is five times that of whites.

"You can say for sure the athletes have a problem, but athletes are not the problem," said Richard Lapchick, director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. "They are representative of society where many of these issues are epidemic."

They are problems society hasn't solved, let alone the NFL. And while new NFL measures - including a ride-home program for drinkers - are expected to help, analysts expect old habits and larger environmental forces will be hard to crack unless teams can be as adept at screening character as the Rams. Yet even the Rams feel at least a little lucky entering the annual college draft.

"I don't think we go around beating our chests about (our low arrest rate), because you never know when something's going to happen," Rams spokesman Rick Smith said.

To provide some background and context to the numbers, analysts contacted by the Union-Tribune underscored the issues of alcohol, race and recidivism.

ALCOHOL

While drunken driving arrests were the most common arrest among NFL players, the arrest rate was below that for males under 30 in the United States, which is roughly 2 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In the NFL, it's about one DUI arrest per 144 players (less than 1 percent), based on the review.

Mix in lots of money, fame and expensive cars, and perhaps it's no surprise that drunken driving is the NFL's most common arrest charge. Among people ages 22-34 in the United States, DUI and drug-related offenses are the two most common charges, according to the FBI.

"With the attention these players get, it's not like, 'Gee, it's Friday night, and I don't have anything to do,'" said Dr. Robert Troutwine, an industrial psychologist who helps NFL teams develop personality evaluations of players. "Compared to some of us who have more pedestrian social lives, partying is part of the culture if you're young and you make a lot of money."

The car culture is part of it, too.

Right before he was shot by an off-duty police officer in September (and later charged with drunken driving), San Diego Chargers linebacker Steve Foley had been driving a customized Oldsmobile Cutlass. In 2004, Houston Texans defensive back Marcus Coleman crashed his new Mercedes near a bar and was charged with drunken driving. Last year, Kansas City Chiefs defensive end Jared Allen was driving his new red Dodge Charger in Leawood, Kan., when he was pulled over and charged with drunken driving for the second time in the year.

"It makes sense for these guys to take a cab or take a limo," said Dan Lazaroff, director of the Sports Law Institute at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. "I don't know why you'd want to put yourself in harm's way. Maybe somebody has an expensive car and doesn't want to leave it behind."

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has pondered the same thing. He issued a more hard-hitting discipline policy designed to clean up crime in the NFL - a policy highlighted by the yearlong suspension of Jones.

The policy hits on three major trouble areas: drunken driving, repeat offenders and bad-behaving teams. A "ride-home" program for NFL employees is now mandated. Previously, some teams did this only on a voluntary basis. Such programs can even make sure players' vehicles get home safe, too.

"Clubs are going to be required to implement a program where employees have access to transportation if they're out drinking," NFL spokesman Greg Aiello said.

RACE

On Nov. 10, Jacksonville Jaguars offensive lineman Khalif Barnes was driving his 2007 Mercedes when he was pulled over and arrested on suspicion of speeding and drunken driving.

A police video camera captured the arrest, with Barnes claiming he was unfairly targeted.

"It's all racist," Barnes said. "That's all that was right there. All racist."

Of the 308 incidents, unofficially only 29 were involving whites, including three with kicker Sebastian Janikowski. That means about 90 percent of the incidents involved black players, who make up about 70 percent of the league.

Blacks compose about 13 percent of the U.S. population but comprise 30 percent of those arrested and more than 40 percent of those in prison, according to recent studies.

"The disproportionate numbers of African-Americans (on the list of incidents) is largely representative of what happens to them in the general population," said Alejandro del Carmen, chair of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Such figures owe to one of society's unsolved vicious cycles: A disproportionate number of blacks live in poverty, and because poverty can help breed criminal behavior, the arrest rate is higher for blacks.

Meanwhile, those behaviors don't always just disappear upon signing a lucrative pro contract.

Racial profiling in law enforcement enters the equation, too, and has been documented in studies pertaining to traffic stops.

"The whole issue of driving while black is not a figment of somebody's imagination," said Peter Roby, director for The Center for Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. "If (police) are on the lookout and sensitized to looking for certain people, they're probably going to find that."

But Roby, who is black, said that doesn't absolve players of personal responsibility.

"I hope they look themselves in the mirrors and ask themselves what's their responsibility to themselves, their family and their community in terms of trying to make better decisions," he said.

How the media reports the arrests can complicate the problem and feed stereotypes, Lapchick said. USA Today recently showed photos of 41 arrested players on its sports cover; two were white. If the media doesn't put that into context by documenting how societal problems feed disproportionate arrest rates by race, Lapchick worries the casual reader or viewer forms an uninformed impression.

"You really had to look hard to find the two white faces, and if you just took a glance at that, and if you want to have the feeling that we have a problem with African-Americans, you're going to reinforce that feeling real quick," Lapchick said.

RECIDIVISM

Well before Pacman Jones and Chris Henry, the NFL had a long history of repeat offenders. Among them: Chiefs cornerback Eric Warfield (three DUI arrests), Chargers defensive lineman Leonardo Carson (four arrests) and Colts cornerback Joseph Jefferson (two DUI arrests, plus a gun charge).

Others had incidents before entering the NFL. Stevens, a free agent not expected to return to Seattle after his recent arrest, had pleaded guilty to a hit-and-run in 2001. Allen of the Chiefs also was arrested for DUI before entering the league.

Such trends make personality profiling and character screening premium issues on the eve of the draft.

Theoretically, if you can screen out a few crime-prone players, you can save yourself a lot of trouble.

The numbers, in the NFL and in society, bear this out.

Take away 50 repeat offenders in the NFL since 2000, and you eliminate almost 40 percent of the incidents. It's the same phenomenon that led 67.5 percent of prisoners released in 1994 to be rearrested within three years, according to a study cited by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"If you look at any given population, the troublemakers tend to be small in number," said Sheldon Zhang, a sociology professor at San Diego State. "Others dabble in criminal activities, but then most will graduate out of that process. A small number tend to be stuck in a developmental lag and can't get out of it. They tend to be more active in criminal behavior."

Recent media attention focused on the lengthy records of Jones and Henry has amplified the issue publicly, much more so than even four years ago, when Carson was arrested for the fourth time since 2000 and hardly drew any media attention (only one arrest led to conviction).

Strikingly, the arrest rate for the general population (about one per 21 people) is higher than the NFL's, which has averaged about one incident per 45 players per year since 2000, according to the review. The NFL has been making note of this fact for years, especially after 1998, when authors Jeff Benedict and Don Yaeger came out with a book entitled "Pros and Cons, The Criminals Who Play in the NFL."

The NFL acknowledges it has an image problem because of these incidents, much more so than it has a criminal epidemic. If successful, the NFL's new discipline policy would wipe out the biggest source of its arrests since 2000.

"Repeat violations of the personal conduct policy will be dealt with aggressively, including discipline for repeat offenders, even when the conduct itself has not yet resulted in a conviction of a crime," the new policy states.

"When any player gets into trouble, it's a problem for the entire league," Aiello said. "As the commissioner says, 'One is too many.'"

Lapchick, for one, called this policy "fantastic."

"Sometimes," he said, "athletes think they are above the law because that's how society has treated them."

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