



Sweeney and Kuhn, part of the 1978–79 Boston College basketball point-shaving scandal.

The fix is in

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

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When the largest theft ever from an airport went down, the FBI sprang into action. Focusing on the Lucchese crime family and the murderous and brutal Jimmy “The Gent” Burke, the FBI slowly built its case.

Burke, feeling the heat, took to heart the criminal adage that dead witnesses don’t talk and ordered the murders of all who participated in the Lufthansa heist. Henry Hill, one of the participants, read the tea leaves and agreed to break the rule of Omerta. That he also faced additional and unrelated serious drug charges made his decision to rat out his bosses and confederates easier.

The U.S. attorney handling the case, Ed McDonough, thoroughly questioned his newfound and highly valuable witness. In his de-briefing, Hill casually mentioned traveling to Boston. When asked what he had been doing in

McDonough's hometown, Hill's response floored the feds and set in motion an entirely new and unforeseen investigation.

Hill revealed he came north to make tons of money for himself and his cohorts by fixing college basketball games. The scam was simple: have the team favored by so many points score fewer. No need to even throw the game; just don't win by as much. Everyone goes home happy: the team won, the gamblers won, and the players making it all go down were paid off. No one would be the wiser. Until Hill flipped.

The plan started in Pittsburgh, with small-time gambler brothers Rocco and Anthony Perla recruiting Rocco's high school friend Rick Kuhn — a 6-foot-6 senior forward and starter who looked more like a football player than a basketball player — for the 1978-1979 Boston College Eagles.

With visions of becoming big-time players, the Perlas approached a local con, Paul Mazzei, who in turn contacted Hill, whom he had met earlier while the two were serving time together in federal prison.

A supportive Hill went up the chain of command, running the scheme by his friend and boss, "Jimmy the Gent" Burke, with the hope he would arrange protection, finance the operation, and identify the bookies around the country to be exploited. The fact that Burke heavily gambled only ensured his interest and sponsorship.

With the further support of the head of the Lucchese crime family, Paul Vario, a nationwide operation born in Pittsburgh, set up in New York, and run in Boston came into being.

On Nov. 16, 1978, members of the gang — Hill, Mazzei, Tony Perla and Kuhn — met in the Hilton Hotel at Boston's Logan Airport to finalize the plan. Kuhn brought along a teammate, Jim Sweeney, the team's star junior point guard and co-captain, a boy-next-door type whom you'd want your daughter to marry.

Whether Sweeney was an enthusiastic participant has never been resolved. He admitted his involvement but said it was under fear and intimidation. Others, meanwhile, say he willingly and gladly participated. Regardless of where the truth lies, there is no doubt he cooperated and assisted. Indeed, Hill alleged that when

the group discussed which games to throw, Sweeney provided the team's schedule, with all the games listed.

On Dec. 6, 1978, BC played Providence. As BC was favored to win by six or seven points, Kuhn was told to keep the final score below that amount. BC won by 19.

Enraged at the outcome, Burke, Hill, Mazzei and the Perla brothers huffed and puffed and threatened Kuhn and Sweeney, telling them that another player had to be added to the mix. The team's nationally regarded leading scorer and other caption, Ernie Cobb, was recruited.

Or was he? To this day, his involvement is an open question, with many believing that he was an innocent patsy.

Regardless, 10 days after the Providence game, BC, favored by 12 to 13 points, played Harvard. BC won by three. Sweeney was the leading scorer, while Cobb scored half his season's average. Thousands flowed to the Mob. A pittance, allegedly \$2,500, was given to Kuhn to distribute. How much he distributed is open to question.

On Dec. 23, in a game against UCLA, the Mob won again. The good times were rolling.

But they would not continue. Over the course of the next six weeks, six more games were targeted. The Mob won two, lost two, and tied two (with money neither won nor lost).

The big game was the last one, with Burke and his cohorts going all in. It was the game of the year — BC vs. their then-archrival Holy Cross, which was favored. While the rivalry has since cooled, at the time it was as fierce and intense as any in the nation.

Nationally televised, the game was heavily bet. BC just had to do as they were told.

The game was going well for Burke's gang, until BC's best player and alleged point-shaving participant Cobb caught fire, scoring eight points in the final minute. Despite his heroic efforts, BC lost by two points.

Irate at the ending and reportedly losing \$50,000 (nearly a quarter of a million in today's dollars), Burke destroyed the television set he had been watching. For him, this was the end: College players could not be relied on. Ultimately, though, he came out ahead, along with Hill and others, winning hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Perlas and Mazzei did not fare nearly as well.

Epilogue

At the end of the season, Boston College finished a respectable 22-9. Cobb and Kuhn graduated. Cobb fulfilled his dreams by being drafted into the NBA. Sweeney played one more year, still the team's starting point guard and captain. Nationally recognized, he won the Frances Pomeroy Naismith Award as the best college player in the nation under 6 feet tall. He was the first BC player to win the prestigious award. The school heralded his accomplishments, nominating him as a Rhodes Scholar and awarding him the Heights Athletic Achievement Award for excellence both on the court and in the classroom.

In 1980, Hill started cooperating. He was sent into the witness protection program with his family (his request to have his two girlfriends join him was denied). He lasted seven or so years before being kicked out.

In 1981, The Boston Globe blew the sordid tale wide open. A month later, Sports Illustrated, which paid Hill \$10,000 for his explosive version, followed suit.

Once the story came out, Cobb was blackballed in the NBA. Criminal indictments followed. With Hill and Sweeney not charged, they, along with Kuhn's then-girlfriend, a 23-year-old nurse, testified against the Perla brothers, Mazzei, Kuhn and the big fish the feds were most interested in — Burke. All were found guilty and given hefty sentences: Burke, 20 years; Kuhn, Mazzei and Tony Perla, 10 years; and Rocco Perla, four years. Burke would die in prison after later being convicted of murder in an unrelated case. He was never indicted for his suspected role in the Lufthansa theft.

Like the uncharged Hill and Sweeney, Kuhn agreed to testify, after having his sentence cut to 28 months, against Cobb. The jury heard them all. They believed Cobb, who was found not guilty.

Boston College, for its part, exiled, forgot and buried Sweeney, who left the area, started a business, and made a fortune. In 2014, The Tampa Bay Times named him one of the “Top 10 most intriguing people” of the area for that year.

Hill died in 2012. Shortly before his death, he reconciled with the man he testified against, Paul Mazzei.

Kuhn followed a dozen years later, passing in 2024 of cancer. Cobb, exclaiming “life has been good,” played basketball overseas for 17 years before returning to the states. He settled in Arizona, becoming a well-respected teacher, coach and counselor to at-risk youths.

The above column is based on a 2014 “30 for 30” documentary “Playing for the Mob,” appellate court decisions, and other internet sources. When he isn’t writing, Kantrowitz is of counsel to Soraya Law and a mediator for REBA DR. He can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.