Written by Jordan Kobritz
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Fifty million dollars. That's one estimate of how much the federal government spent to convict Barry Bonds of obstruction of justice. And on Friday, eight months after his conviction, MLB's all-time home run champ was sentenced to 30 days of house arrest, two years of probation, 250 hours of community service, and a $4,000 fine. That's not much of a return for "our" investment.

But perhaps the sentence was fitting, given that Bonds wasn't guilty of the charge on which he was convicted.

The case for obstruction stemmed from a response Bonds gave to one question during his grand jury appearance. When prosecutors asked whether he had ever received anything from his friend and trainer, Greg Anderson, "that required a syringe to inject yourself with?" Bonds initially responded, "I've only had one doctor touch me." He then made a rambling, 13-sentence, 234-word statement about his friendship with Anderson, how he grew up as a "celebrity child" - his father, Bobby Bonds, was also a Major Leaguer – and said that he minded his own business. The entire soliloquy consumed approximately one minute of the four hours Bonds spent before the grand jury on December 4, 2003.

After Bonds finished speaking, prosecutors quickly asked, "…but no other individuals like Mr. Anderson or any associate of his (has ever injected anything into you)?" To which Bonds replied, "No, no."

That exchange led to two of the four counts against Bonds at trial, one alleging perjury based on the reply, "No, no," and one count of obstruction based on his meandering response to the original question. In other words, even though Bonds gave the prosecutors the answer they were looking for – they expected the "No, no" response and felt certain they had evidence to prove otherwise - he didn't respond quickly enough to suit them.

The jury failed to convict Bonds on the perjury charge – or on either of the other two perjury charges - but returned a verdict of guilty on the obstruction count, even though both prosecutors and the presiding judge admitted that Bonds answered the original question. When Bonds' attorneys argued that his statement did not interfere with the government's investigation – the legal definition of obstruction - because he answered prosecutors' questions, the judge admitted the issue was "debatable."

Apparently, the government can spend eight years and $50 million on a personal vendetta against Bonds – investigators and prosecutors demonstrated a strong bias against the slugger - and that's not considered a waste of time and money. However, by requiring prosecutors and the grand jury to wait one extra minute for a direct response, Bonds "interfered with the government's investigation," which resulted in his felony conviction.

What the judge – and the jury - should have said was there was no obstruction, certainly not based on the charge in the indictment. However, it was clear to even a casual observer that Bonds' prickly personality was on display during his grand jury appearance. He lived up to his reputation of being evasive, argumentative and less than forthright. As a result, Bonds wasn't convicted of obstruction based on his one-minute diversion, but on his entire testimony. In other words, he was convicted of being Barry Bonds.

Many commentators are heralding the Bonds sentencing as the end to the BALCO investigation, a government probe of a California drug lab which led to evidence that athletes in a number of sports were using steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. That characterization is premature. Bonds still has his appeal which could take upwards of 18 months or more.

But regardless of how the Bonds case ends, no one should forget the government's detestable and illegal actions during the BALCO and related investigations, which included misrepresentations in affidavits used to obtain search warrants, repeated attempts to intimidate Anderson's wife and mother-in-law in an unsuccessful effort to convince the trainer to testify against Bonds, and incarcerating Anderson for his silence on three separate occasions. The Bonds case hardly stands as law enforcement's finest hour.

In reality, Bonds' conviction is a sham which the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals should overturn.

Although Bonds' attorneys are confident of a reversal, the odds of success are less than 50-50. The only certainty is that the government will continue to spend our money foolishly during the appeal.

Jordan Kobritz is a staff member of the Business of Sports Network. He is a former attorney, CPA, and Minor League Baseball team owner. He is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at Eastern New Mexico University and teaches the Business of Sports at the University of Wyoming. He looks forward to your comments and can be contracted, here
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