

Wednesday, May 30, 2012

Some NFL dreams never die

By Rick Reilly
ESPN.com

It's not every day that the Washington Redskins call up a man convicted of rape and ask him if he'd agree to a one-day workout, but it happened Tuesday.

Oh, and the Kansas City Chiefs called Tuesday, too. And the Miami Dolphins. And they were three days behind the Seattle Seahawks, who will work him out on June 7.

Why are all these NFL teams eager to check out a convicted sex offender, a man who served five years in prison and wore a GPS ankle bracelet for another five?

Because Brian Banks didn't do it.

A judge in Long Beach, Calif., threw out his kidnapping and rape conviction last week after looking at a videotape of his accuser admitting she lied. After 10 years, he was suddenly a free and innocent man.

"My mouth hurts from smiling so much," Banks told me Tuesday night. "Unbelievable."

Banks was 16 in 2002, the bluest of blue chips out of Long Beach Poly High School, an NFL feeder if there ever was one. He'd already been offered a full-ride scholarship at USC by then-coach Pete Carroll.

But on a summer day that year, he and a girl named Wanetta Gibson decided to go make out in a stairwell at school. When they came out, she accused him of rape.

No semen traces in the rape kit. No witnesses. And yet Banks' attorney insisted he cop a plea, saying his size, age and race would mean a sure conviction of 40-plus years. He said no, no, a hundred times no and finally, reluctantly, yes.

Banks got six years. He served 62 months.

When he got out, he had to wear a GPS ankle bracelet at all times. He had to register as a convicted sex felon. Couldn't go near schools, parks or zoos. Couldn't get a job. He was lucky to get a few hours a week unloading docks.

What did Gibson get? A \$750,000 settlement from the school.

But then, last year, a chunk of luck fell from the stars. Out of the blue, Gibson, then 24, sent Banks a Facebook friend



Brian Banks holding a paper with the best news of his life. His wrongful conviction of rape and kidnapping was overturned when his accuser recanted.

request.

Banks slammed the laptop cover down and jumped out of his chair. Was somebody playing a joke on him?

He looked again. Amazing. Gibson had typed, "Let's let bygones be bygones."

Easy for her to say. She didn't watch 10 years of her life go by.

"She was adamant about meeting me," Banks says. "I asked my brother [Freddy], 'What should I do?' He said, 'Whatever you do, make sure you play chess, not checkers.'"

Banks' first move: To get everything she said on tape. He hired a private investigator and met Gibson in the man's office, where every conversation was secretly videotaped. The tape recorded Gibson saying, clearly, "No, he did not rape me."

Was he nervous she wouldn't say it?

"I didn't have to get her to say anything," Banks said. "She came into the room expressing herself. She even came back the next day. The investigator asked her again, point blank. 'Did Brian rape you?' 'No.' 'Did he kidnap you?' 'No.'"

And why would Gibson meet with Banks in the first place? Was it a trap? Was it guilt? No. Banks thinks Gibson -- are you ready for this? -- was hoping to get back together.

"You read the texts and that's the only conclusion you come to," says a source who worked on the case. "She seems absolutely clue-free about what she did to him."

Getting evidence is one thing, getting your rape conviction flipped is another. Banks called the California Innocence Project in San Diego. They agreed to help. It was the first time they'd taken a case of a man already out of prison.

"As soon as we met him, we had no doubt," says Justin Brooks, the lead attorney. "We could see this was a kid who had a big future ahead of him, one that had been lost."

On Thursday, May 24, in a Long Beach courtroom, Banks got his future back.

What's the first thing he did, besides cry at the courtroom table? Snipped off the stupid ankle bracelet, the scarlet letter of our age. "Oh, man, when that thing came off?" Banks says. "There are no words."

Then he went with Brooks' wife and kids to a place he couldn't have gone the day before -- Sea World.

"It's so crazy to go from being labeled a monster to seeing your phone light up with all this support and offers and love," he said. "It's, really, a little hard to get used to."

And what does Banks want most now? Retribution? Revenge? Gibson's head on a serving platter? No. He's not even demanding Gibson give the money back. While he is suing the state for \$100 for each day he was falsely imprisoned, what he wants back most is football.

Thanks to the best Tuesday of his life, he has now got a chance at it.

None of the four teams are offering any guarantees for a spot in training camp, nor is Banks asking for any.

"I'll make 'em happy," says Banks, who's been training non-stop since October. "After all I've been through these last 10 years, I can still do some things that will impress you."

Like ... dead-lift 545 pounds, box jump 55 inches flat-footed, broad



Banks celebrates his exoneration and freedom with his mother, Leomia Myers.

jump 10-plus feet and run a 4.6 40, all at 6-foot-2 and 245 pounds. NFL trainer Gavin Macmillan, who has volunteered to train Banks for free, says he has a shot. "You see him run and you can see why USC wanted him."

And if the NFL doesn't pan out? Banks already has all kinds of job offers. One of them is to "work in the front office and explore other sports opportunities" for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

"I about fell out of my seat when I read that one," Banks said.

I don't know about you, but I can't remember another story that made me want to alternately punch something and hug something like this one. The way Banks has handled himself, without bitterness or bile, with grace and guts, makes you wish he were running the U.S. Senate. If it were me, I'd be stomping around, waving lawsuits and screaming, "I TOLD you I didn't do it!!!"

"I know my story makes people angry at first," Banks says. "That's where I was, too, at first. But where would it have gotten me to stay mad for 10 years? It's like when you're a little kid and you cry about having to clean your room. You can cry and cry, but it doesn't get your room cleaned."

Brian Banks' room is clean again. His heart is spotless. He's holding on to nothing but his dreams. He lost a full decade of his life and now all he wants in exchange is an NFL jersey.

C'mon, Miami Dolphins. Who's had more "Hard Knocks" than Brian Banks?