



SPRINT FOR JUSTICE: THE MARION JONES STORY

By Kimberly Gadette

(Ed. Note: This is the first of a multi-part series chronicling former Olympic sprinter and the now imprisoned Marion Jones, her involvement with steroids, and why the book was thrown at this mother of small children. Come back to Set-Magazine.com every week for a new installment)

"This American system of ours...call it Americanism, call it capitalism, call it what you like, gives to each and every one of us a great opportunity if we only seize it with both hands and make the most of it." - Al Capone (1899–1947), U.S. gangster.

Time and again, both Mr. Capone and Marion Jones seized that "great opportunity" held out by the American system, the American dream. And when the law couldn't convict either one of them for their crimes, the IRS found a loophole. For Capone, it was tax evasion. For Jones, it was a minor involvement in prior boyfriend Tim Montgomery's role in a check-kiting scheme that forced her to ultimately admit to perjury regarding steroid abuse.

Thanks to the IRS, two criminals were successfully taken off our streets. Al Capone, crime boss, racketeer, smuggler and murderer—and Marion Jones, female black athlete.

It seems that the justice system is as guilty as Jones of a wild misstep.

As Capone puts it, we should seize every opportunity to succeed. Jones started early, writing on her blackboard at the age of nine, "I'm going to be an Olympic champion." But setting off on a path of superstardom, for superstardom's sake, is akin to running on empty. If we chase after the American Dream, and win, we're praised to the skies. If we lose, we're accused of flying too high, scorned as we plummet back down to earth. But what happens if during our climb, some of us find ways to cut a corner or two? Given the increasing numbers of athletes who have been found to indulge in a little cheat here, a little lie there, it seems that the lure of untold fortune, fame and universal love is far more potent than any steroid ever sold.

Jones did more than just write out her goal on the blackboard—she ran full tilt toward it. And was triumphant. Following in the footsteps of prior cherished Olympic women athletes, her face and figure featured on the covers of Time, Newsweek, even stylish Vogue, she became the penultimate female icon, a mix of beauty, victorious athleticism and, with her quiet demeanor, modesty. (Unlike Olympians Amy Acuff and Amanda Beard, who bared it all for Playboy.) The first woman to win five medals in track and field at the same Olympics (Sydney, 2000), this pretty Jones girl with the wide, toothy smile – half-woman, half-exuberant kid – easily outran her famous Olympian predecessors. Mary Lou Retton had graced the cover of Wheaties boxes, but she was more elfin child than ideal woman. Flo-Jo had plenty of flash along with her beauty and success, but her strong sense of ego often distanced the public. Wilma Rudolph, the three-time gold medallist of the 1960 Rome Olympics, would have given Jones a literal run for her money, particularly because of the human interest factor of her overcoming polio—but a black female athlete making a splash in 1960 was just a drop in the bucket compared to the media tidal-wave times of today.

Jones' well-loved persona of "America's Sweetheart" kept her in favor with the public: a good girl, raised by a devoted mother, a college basketball star before turning to track and field, her wide smile beaming on all her adoring fans. She didn't speak much, except to protest her innocence when faced with charges of steroid abuse. Passing all polygraph and drug tests, she combated the so-called lies of her steroid usage by suing her accuser, Victor Conte, founder of the renowned steroid factory Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative (BALCO). She was, in a word, perfect.

But for all the records of perfection that Jones set her sights on capturing, she didn't even try for this one. The one that ended up capturing her. A prison record.