



TUNING IN

BY BOB RAISSMAN

Irvin poison to sponsors

MICHAEL IRVIN still awaits his day in court, but he's already facing trial in the court of public opinion.

And corporate America is watching. Some companies that have contributed to Irvin's estimated \$750,000 a year in off-the-field income have already broken their ties. Some who were considering doing business with the Cowboys' flashy receiver before he was indicted on drug charges have now changed their minds.

Yet Nike, which has a groundbreaking partnership with the Cowboys and a prominent relationship with Irvin, hasn't disowned him.

"It wouldn't be prudent to rush to judgment," said Erin Patton, Nike's public relations manager. "More than anything else we take a wait-and-see approach and let the court system run its course. We don't make any hasty moves."

Yet industry moles say Nike's planned national ad campaign featuring marquee members of its football stable no longer includes Irvin, who signed with the shoe giant when he turned pro in 1988.

A variety of sports marketing mavens believe even if Irvin is found innocent, his career as an endorser has been irreparably damaged.

"The whole house has burned down," said **Brandon Steiner** of Steiner Sports Marketing. "But the damage wasn't totally done by the latest sequence of events. He's never really gotten anything large on a national scope because he's created problems for himself over the past few years with his attitude."

Though Irvin still is entitled to the presumption of innocence, corporate America's attitude toward him is hardly surprising.

"In the marketing world, sometimes the presumption that you *might* have been involved with something could be just as dangerous, just as harmful, to your marketing than if you're actually guilty," said **Steve Rosner**, exec VP at Intergrated Sports International.

"Unfortunately, that has

happened to a client of mine — **Warren Moon**."

Rosner explained that Moon, who was exonerated of spousal-abuse charges, has retained some of his endorsements, but has had trouble securing new ones.

"All the hoopla and attention Warren's case received left some advertisers with a negative perception," Rosner said. "Say Irvin is found to be innocent? There still will always be advertisers who will remember what they heard or read about his case. In their mind, he will still be guilty."

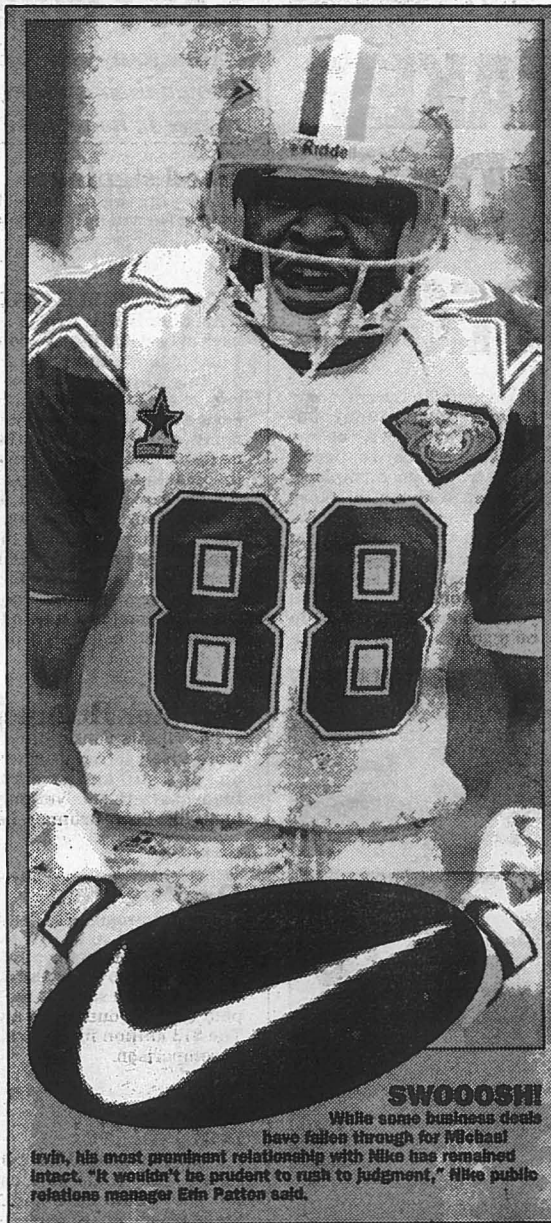
Because Irvin is a member of the high-profile Cowboys, his case could have a trickle-down effect to teammates seeking endorsement monies — and the NFL's overall marketing effort.

"Whenever you see these problems pop up, the first question sponsors ask themselves is, 'Who's next?' Everything gets generalized," Steiner said.

Said Rosner, "If something like this happened in Phoenix or Seattle, it wouldn't get that much attention. But this is the Dallas Cowboys. The attention won't go away."

Perhaps Irvin's best shot at endorsement survival is with a shoe company. This is why Nike, a company that has traditionally stood by its athletes who have encountered legal problems, hasn't publicly bailed out on Irvin.

"As a billboard he'll survive," said **Steve Herz** of Manhattan-based GMM Sports. "Because every time he scores a touchdown, you see the Nike shoes and he's wearing the insignia. Let's say he's on 10 nationally televised games and he's on camera 30 times a game. That's 300 impressions for 30 million viewers. Even if they (Nike) paid him \$250,000, that's pennies on the impres-



SWOOOSHI!

While some business deals have fallen through for Michael Irvin, his most prominent relationship with Nike has remained intact. "It wouldn't be prudent to rush to judgment," Nike public relations manager Erin Patton said.

sion."

SPAR WARS

They staged the heavy-weight tripleheader at the Garden on Friday night, but an early undercard bout took place at Yankee Stadium that afternoon, before a press conference updating **David**

Cone's condition. Spies say **Barry (Slugger) Stanton**, columnist for Gannett Suburban Newspapers, was outraged when his chair was moved by a TV cameraman. Ch. 2 cameraman **John (Hammer) Haygood** came to the defense of the man who moved Stanton's chair. Stanton connected on Haygood's camera, which

went flying. Haygood shoved Stanton, who went flying. A melee ensued. Fortunately, the doctors in attendance were not needed to provide medical attention to the combatants, who might expect a call from Garden boxing czar **John (Johnny Cigar) Cirillo**, a man always in search of good undercards.

SCHMOOZE UNALERT

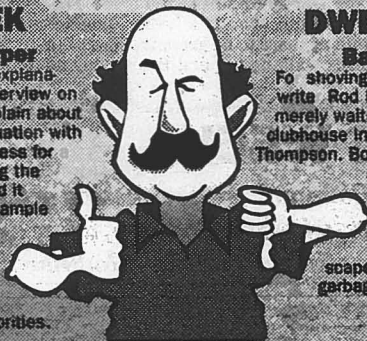
WFAN's **Steve Somers** spotted in a midtown eatery last week chowing down with Ch. 2 weatherdude **Ira Joe Fisher**. Maybe the Wizard of Weather can introduce Somers to Ch. 2's medical reporter. Somers came off as a dunderhead Wednesday, referring to Cone's aneurysm as a "clot." "And **Russ (Salzberg)**, you know when it's usually found? It's usually found in an autopsy," Somers oozed. In situations like these, you consult a medical expert so you don't fall prey to Somers' sin, which was giving inaccurate info. . . . **John (Jam Master J) Sterling** must have stunned a lot of folks as he opened Wednesday's Yankees radiocast saying: "There's wonderful news concerning **David Cone**. . . . He has an aneurysm, but it's treatable." Of course it was good news that Cone's condition is treatable, but calling it "wonderful" news is **Pollyanna** reporting. Kind of like saying the rush-hour traffic isn't so bad — if you're in Omaha.

. . . It was only a matter of time before Fox Sport boss **David Hill** had his troops backtracking on his statement that any Fox baseball broadcaster who mentioned a dead player on the air would be "sacked." Fox PR honcho **Vince (Spinmeister) Wladika** explained that Hill shouldn't have been taken literally. The real reason for the spin-cycle trip? Fox knows if Hill's edict was for real, **Tim McCarver** wouldn't make it through the fifth inning of the network's June 1 opener. . . . Microphone stars of the NBA playoffs so far are TNT's combo of **Danny Ainge** and **Verne Lundquist**. These guys are cooking with chemistry. As always, Lundquist is the pro's pro, while Ainge is highly opinionated and funny. . . . **Tony Bruno** update: ESPN Radio's resident weasel still hasn't walked the walk — as promised — to Syracuse.

DUDE OF THE WEEK



Derek Harper
For his refreshing explanation during NBC interview on why he didn't complain about his contractual situation with the Knicks — or press for renegotiation during the season. Harper said it would set a bad example for his 11-year-old son, **Darius**. In this "me, me, me" sports era, Harper showed some welcome priorities.



DWEEB OF THE WEEK

Barry Bonds
For shoving US today baseball writer **Rod Beaton**, who was merely waiting to do a press clubhouse interview with **Rod** by **Thompson**. Bonds accused Beaton, and other reporters, of jolting. Truth is, **Bobby Bonilla**'s pal is guilty of littering the baseball landscape with his churlish garbage, and it stinks.



Q&A

Q: Will ESPN boss **Steve Bornstein**, who has moved in to run ABC Sports, shake things up?

A: Probably. Spies say the innovative **Bornstein** met with ABC staffers last week and wasn't shy about offering some pointed criticisms. **Bornstein's** words left many veteran ABCers very uneasy.