

There's no such thing as bad publicity, right?

Try telling Terrell Owens that. After his Willis Reed-esque performance in last year's Super Bowl, Owens had all the fanfare and media awe in the world. Now? He's only got his agent. What a difference a year makes.

If pressed to choose one moment that started Owens' downward spiral, it would be a particular touchdown celebration that found him in the center of Texas Stadium, spiking a football on one of the most celebrated of symbols in sports: the Cowboy star. Think about what that represents: the quiet brilliance of Landry, Staubach, Aikman, Smith and Irvin. And here comes this guy—who's never even won a ring—and he desecrates it.

And it didn't stop there. If anyone was surprised Owens committed the sin of calling out his quarterback in Philadelphia, they only had to remember Jeff Garcia receiving the first lashing in San Francisco. That was

"In the case of Terrell Owens," he says, "instead of making a big deal out of the Eagles not recognizing his 100th touchdown in a victory over San Diego on Oct. 23, he should have talked to them privately. We'll never know what the result might have been, because he didn't give it a chance."

Even if you're no T.O., if your career is long enough, you'll probably do something that will earn bad publicity. It's not just your mouth that can get you in trouble, but anything—ranging from missing a charity event, taking an ill-advised boat ride with teammates or a DUI. "Facing the music is usually the best way for athletes to deal with mistakes," says Randi Mitnick, a sports publicist who has worked with athletes ranging from Mark Messier to Darryl Strawberry. "When I worked with Lawrence Taylor for the Giants' 10th reunion of winning the Super Bowl, he missed a very important event. He was professional enough to realize his mistake and

THE PRICE OF PUBLICITY

IF YOU PLAY LONG ENOUGH, YOU'RE GOING TO FIND YOURSELF IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATION WITH THE MEDIA. HERE'S HOW TO ENSURE IT DOESN'T GET UGLY

By *Eric Buttermann*

enough, despite Owens' perennial Pro Bowl status, for him to be shipped off to Baltimore. But rather than accept an opportunity with a team not far removed from its Super Bowl glory and poised for a possible return, Owens jawed until he got to his present team—the one that now wants to be known as his former team.

So it all begs the question: Why didn't Owens' atrocious behavior stop that infamous day in Dallas? Why wasn't the first quarterback Owens disrespected the last? Because from the moment Owens signed his Sharpie to his first NFL contract, he wasn't properly schooled in how publicity works. Fact: In the end, an athlete will always be left alone with the media, so he must learn to fend for himself.

"Begin by not thinking of yourself as an athlete, but rather as CEO of your own company," says David Cornwell, a former pro basketball player who has represented the NFL as legal counsel and also worked for agents of the NFL's players. "Every time you approach the media, you have to ask if the message you'll be putting out there will hurt or help you make money. If the answer is 'hurt,' keep your mouth shut. Talk only as long as it will help you. No longer."

Another important point, says Cornwell, is to never use the media to call out the front office or a teammate.

made up for it by doing public service announcements. Taking responsibility is vital."

Obviously, another key is to have the press on your side for the times when you do screw up. Reporters are human, too, and are less likely to condemn someone with whom they have a strong relationship. Take it from someone who knows. Alan Schwarz, a Sunday sports columnist for the *New York Times*, suggests talking with veteran players about beat writers. Ask questions: Are they truthful? Are they always looking to bait—or create something out of nothing? If so, be on your game.

Nobody knows what Terrell Owens will do from here, but Mitnick says we do know one long-term effect. "There's no question he'll have some enemies for the rest of his career," she says. "No amount of damage control can fix that."

In addition, Cornwell sees substantial financial losses, especially under NFL contracts. "Since you can be cut in the middle of your contract, your only major guaranteed money is a signing bonus," he says. "I see teams offering him a minimal bonus, if anything."

Then again, both our experts agree that a quick fix to any negative image is winning a championship.

And to do that, Owens will need a team.