

# Look Closely At Fix Allegations

Given that Major League Baseball already is neck-deep in problems, ranging from the owners' claims that six to eight teams might go belly up to former players' charges of rampant steroid use, the threat of another strike and the specter of another lost World Series, it's no wonder that baseball and the Yankees want the vague allegations of game-fixing that former Colombo crime family capo Michael Franzese made on Tuesday's edition of HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" to just go away.

By yesterday, a backpedaling Franzese wanted to quash parts of the story, too. But is that a good enough reason to let it slide?

It was almost — almost — a funny slip of the tongue when Franzese's Nashville-based manager, Rob Michaels, said Franzese didn't mean to start a firestorm or bring disrepute to any specific players or any specific team, in part because "Michael is a Yankees fan. Do you know members of his family — his biological family, I mean — called him up and said, 'Michael! What are you doing?'"

Better that Franzese's biological family put in those admonishing calls, not the wiseguys and mob hoods Franzese used to run with.

Before he turned state's evidence in the late 1980s, did two stints in jail and quit the mob, Franzese was the admitted New York-based head of the Colombo mob's gambling operations. He was a man who, among other things, provided the "muscle" for convicted sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom in the 1980s as they recruited a stable of athletes with the idea of reaping rewards for their gambling operations.

The tempest involving the Yankees started when Franzese told HBO that players on a major-league team in the 1970s that he wouldn't identify owed money to his crime family. HBO reported that an "independent" source said the team was the Yankees. Then Franzese acknowledged that some Yankees back then "had some gambling issues."

Still not naming names, Franzese said he told some players who had debts, "You got to work this out, get the money, borrow the money, do whatever you have to do. And if all else fails, I got another way for you to make it up: You're going to help us win a game."

By yesterday, 48 hours after the show aired, the story had transformed into some splitting of hairs and a few attempts to kill the messenger.

Franzese isn't necessarily denying that the game-fixing incidents he described are true. He's just emphasizing now that he never fingered the Yankees specifically.

Yankees spokesman Howard Rubenstein said yesterday that he

had "nothing to add" to his original statement that "the charges made by Franzese are absolutely beyond belief. He's a discredited former hoodlum, and it's an outrage that any credence would be given to him with his bad reputation as he seeks personal publicity."

Baseball's security chief, Kevin Hallinan, said Franzese's claims are new to him and that he plans to talk to Franzese, though Hallinan hasn't had that conversation yet, a Major League Baseball spokesman said yesterday.

Why the wait?

Baseball is stuck between two equally ugly choices: Give this rapidly dying story new impetus by launching a serious investigation. Or try to discredit and brush off the accusations of a man whom baseball and other major sports leagues have found credible enough to employ on a freelance basis to speak

to players about gambling and organized crime. Franzese may be a reformed mobster, but he came to baseball on the recommendation of the FBI. On the speaker's bureau Web page listing his qualifications, one of the testimonials for Franzese comes from none other than Hallinan.)

Fay Vincent, whose most famous move as commissioner was upholding baseball's ban of Pete Rose for gambling, thinks if baseball doesn't look into Franzese's charges, it's making a grievous mistake.

"I think Bud [Selig] has to investigate it," Vincent said yesterday. "And I think he has to put somebody in charge of it from the outside, as we did with John O'Dowd in the Rose case. Have an outside investigator look into it because you don't have the same credibility if you do it any other way. This is serious stuff. I hope it's not true. But I think you have to look into it. Otherwise, you act as if it couldn't possibly happen. And I think we all know the 'impossible' does happen. When we looked into Pete Rose, we felt that way. When he first came in, we didn't think it could possibly be true. As it turned out, it was. We've seen game-fixing in other sports, too."

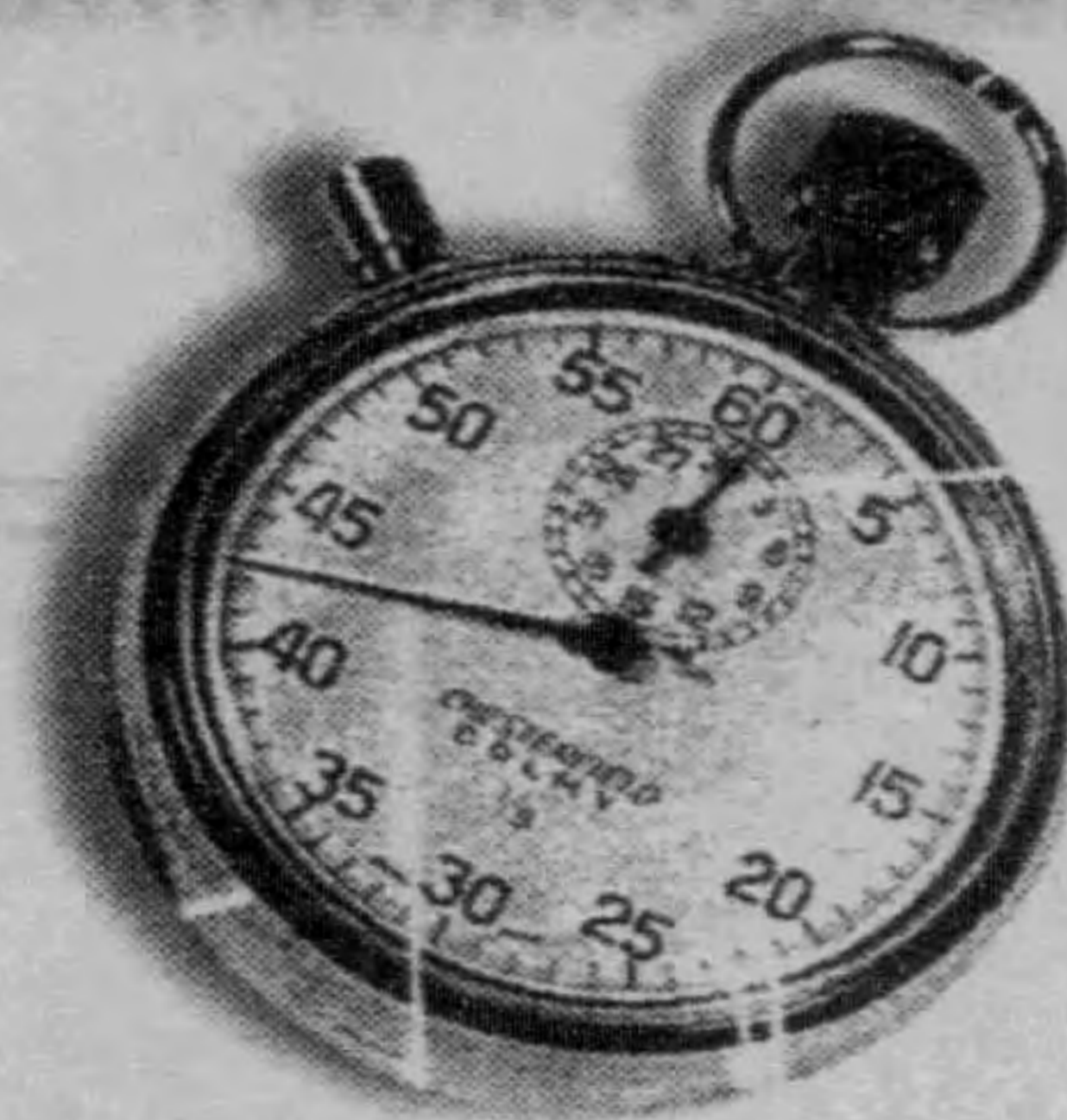
A government agency would almost have to get involved in any meaningful investigation because baseball lacks subpoena power. Though a lot of time has passed, Vincent said that wouldn't necessarily doom an inquiry into Franzese's comments because "if the government looks into it, I think someone will talk. It wasn't very hard to find evidence in the Pete Rose incident. . . . There would be little puffs of smoke if something did happen. And where there's smoke, there's fire."

Vincent is right, of course. But given that Selig is in charge, don't hold your breath.



Johnette Howard

# TWO-MINUTE DRILL



## BAD BLOOD? NOT IN PADS, ANYWAY

It was only two plays into the first practice of Giants training camp when Michael Strahan got his first clear shot at Tiki Barber. Would the moment yield a physical confrontation worthy of the offseason feud between the team's best defensive and offensive players?

Uh, no. Strahan beat a blocker as Barber cut upfield, and Strahan simply ran past him, as he is supposed to do in a no-pads morning practice. Later, Barber came around the edge and saw Strahan waiting for him. Strahan let him go.

"If he wanted to make an issue out of it, he could have," coach Jim Fassel said of Strahan. "I talked to both those guys last night, and for them, it's a non-issue and they're going to be extra careful that nothing happens. Sorry to ruin all of your [reporters'] stories."

Strahan and Barber have not been on speaking terms since March, when Barber lambasted Strahan for rejecting a lucrative contract proposal and for publicly criticizing the team's offseason approach. Upon arriving at training camp Wednesday, both said there will be no carryover on the field.

"I know you [reporters] were going 'Oh' when I ran by Tiki a few times," Strahan said. "What did I tell you? I'm not an idiot. I'm not a dummy. I want to win games, and he's the type of player we need to win games."

Barber said: "I wasn't thinking about it. I was looking for open field, like I always do. I never thought it would be an issue, and I don't think Michael did either."

In the afternoon, the players donned full pads, which allows for some hitting but no tackling. The truce held.

— Neil Best

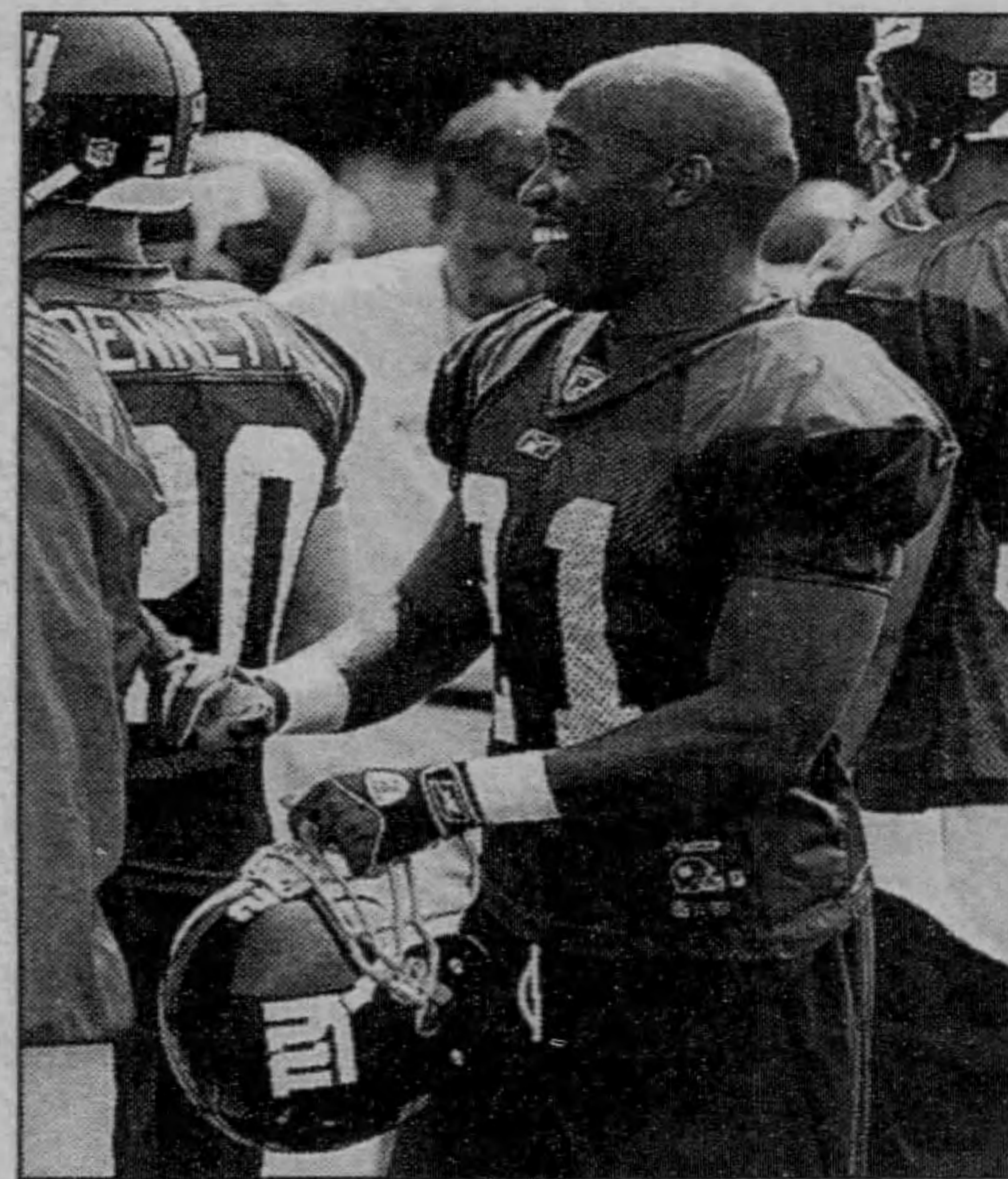


Photo by Richard Harbus  
Tiki Barber got a pass from Michael Strahan during the first day of camp.

## THE DAILY RANT

"Nobody seems to understand that the Mets need their backs pressed firmly against the wall before they come alive. . . . Could be it's some psychological thing. . . . or maybe they only get religion when they're under .500."

Michele E. Garafolo, Glen Oaks

Send your rant by fax to 631-454-6892 or by e-mail to rant@newsday.com. Please include your name, hometown and telephone number.

## WHO'S HOT


David Ortiz. The Minnesota designated hitter has been on a tear, hitting .484 with five home runs and 12 RBIs in his last seven games.

## WHO'S NOT

Freddy Garcia. Since his appearance in the All-Star Game, the Seattle righthander is 0-2 in four starts with a 6.46 ERA.

## THIS DATE IN SPORTS

July 26, 1952 — Bob Mathias of the United States wins his second Olympic decathlon in Helsinki, Finland.



**TOUR DE FRANCE:** For complete coverage of the Tour de France, including links to updated daily coverage, past champions, multiple champions, winners sorted by country and an interactive map of the overall course, visit a special Web page at [www.newsday.com/sports](http://www.newsday.com/sports) on the Internet.



The Jets are thinking this might be the year. So am I. "This is the most talent I've been around in my career," said running back Curtis Martin, who went to the Super Bowl with the 1996 New England Patriots.

See Bob Glauber on A80