

# FOURTH DOWN IN DUNBAR

Guns, Drugs, and NFL Dreams

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University Press of Florida

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## Tape's Time



Ronnie Lee Tape, as a sixth-grader trying to win a two-mile run, started off sprinting as if he were running the 100-yard dash.

“You know what happened next, right?” Tape said.

As he slowed to a jog on his way from the Fort Myers Country Club to Fort Myers High School’s Edison Stadium, he could only watch as the field of runners passed him.

Gerald Copeland, Tape’s physical education teacher at Fort Myers Middle Academy, encouraged Tape.

“You just don’t know how to pace yourself, Ronnie,” Copeland told him.

The lack of pacing led Tape to trouble. More than forty years later, Tape had spent almost half his life in prison. Even so, by April 2013, Tape did not look like a drug dealer who once had received a life sentence for selling crack cocaine, living in an 8' × 10' cell with one to two roommates. When the fifty-four-year-old emerged from the doorway within the minimum security prison in Coleman, Florida, and into the visitors’ room, there were only two telltale signs as to the fate that befell him.

No. 1, Tape wore an army-green prisoner uniform. No. 2, Tape entered a room full of about one hundred prisoners, who were talking to friends and family members on a Monday morning.

Tape looked healthy and trim, not overly fit or fat for his age. He continued his favorite exercise of running, only from within the barbed-wire complex, where the scent of fresh-cut grass mixed with the stench of sweat from the daily basketball games played outside on a concrete court. Tape wore a pair of eyeglasses and would have resembled an intellectual or a professor had he not grown his hair into long dreadlocks that gave him the aura of a retired reggae star.

Born on January 23, 1959, Tape grew up aspiring to be a professional in music, not in football or sports. The musical roots were handed down from his father. Tape favored jazz and popular rock. He learned to play the drums, keyboards, and bass guitar and how to program beats and operate a studio mixing board in a recording studio.

During the mid-1980s, Tape traveled often to Hollywood, California, where a friend connected him with Little Richard's producer, Bumps Blackwell. The album with Tape's band, Slip-n-Slide, never got recorded, but Tape often stayed in Los Angeles. He leased a six-bedroom home with a pool in Beverly Hills, just down the street from Burt Bacharach, the acclaimed pianist, composer, and music producer who worked with Elvis Costello, Dionne Warwick, Dusty Springfield, and Dr. Dre.

Tape also connected with Berry and Terry Gordy, the sons of famed music producer Berry Gordy. The Gordy brothers, whose father worked with the Jackson 5, the Supremes, the Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and many others, took an interest in Slip-n-Slide. They liked Tape until a defecting band member informed the Gordys of Tape's secret life back home in Fort Myers. They soon learned Tape's truth: he was dealing drugs. They dropped their talks with Tape, who then regrouped.

The mid-1980s were kind and thrilling to Tape, who relocated his recording studio from the California home he had been leasing to a building he remodeled on Melrose Avenue. He installed state-of-the-art equipment, including an \$800,000 soundboard that later would become part of his undoing. Tape paid for it in cash, and that caught the attention of federal agents back in Fort Myers. Tape began to meet more of the music industry's top producers, enabling him to cross paths

with Michael Jackson, Eddie Murphy, Sheila E, Herb Albert, Jermaine Jackson, and a host of Paramount Pictures executives among other Hollywood power players of the era. Lionel Richie remixed his song “Don’t Stop” in Tape’s studio. Vanessa Williams, in her infancy as an entertainer, visited that studio as a prospective client but never recorded there.

Tape had his hands in real estate as well. He once purchased a \$1.2 million home in West Hollywood. For his twenty-sixth birthday, he bought a showroom Rolls Royce. He met real estate investors who taught him how to buy high-end homes in Beverly Hills, remodel them, and then flip them for at least \$300,000 or more in profits, all with bank financing. Tape sold a \$4.2 million home in Bel Air and received 6 percent of the sale.

All the while, Tape maintained his drug-dealing business in Fort Myers. Tape didn’t just sell drugs. He had amassed, in his mid-twenties, one of the largest cocaine and crack cocaine distribution networks in the nation, headquartered in then-tiny Fort Myers, where the sprawl south of U.S. 41 had yet to connect with Naples and where the college football recruiting machine had yet to truly take hold. Deion Sanders was still a half year away from his high school graduation.

Tape had his accomplices manage the drug trade during his trips to California, but he took many a red-eye flight home to oversee his empire on the streets of Dunbar.

“I was able to avoid any serious violence, because in the beginning, I set the tone by going after anyone that robbed my workers,” Tape said.

Tape or someone close to him would beat up the rival dealer if he had to. Then Tape would turn around and befriend him, employing him in his ring.

“That gained respect back then, so they basically left my workers alone,” Tape said. “Plus, I would give him a job if he wanted one. There was very little violence back in the day. Dealers were more focused on making money.”

When Tape peaked as a moneymaker, he had amassed an arsenal not of weapons but of high-end cars. At the time of his arrest, Tape’s fleet of cars included a 1981 Cadillac, a 1984 Datsun 300 ZX, a 1982 Jaguar, a 1983 Jaguar, a leased Mercedes 560 SEL, a Mercedes 190 E, and that

1985 showroom model Rolls Royce, according to courthouse records detailing Tape's case.

The court records revealed Tape's bank account information as well. In 1983, he had \$24,040 in deposits. The numbers rose from there: \$133,759 in 1984, \$762,328 in 1985, and \$575,145 in 1986.

And that was only what Tape had in the bank. He dealt mostly in cash. During the mid-1980s, about \$100,000 cash would change hands every day in Dunbar. Tape estimated that during 1985, he made about \$20,000 cash per day.

Tape's drug dealing all began at one of the few places of legal business in Dunbar, the since-removed Star Service Station on Anderson Avenue. Tape graduated from Riverdale High School in 1978. He once got suspended at Riverdale for fighting in what he described as a race riot in the school cafeteria. Tape picked up a chair and smashed it onto a white student, who was threatening to throttle Tape as well.

From Riverdale, Tape began working at the gas station, making about \$350 a week, plus an occasional bonus.

With savings from his legally earned salary and bonus money, Tape bought his first new car, a showroom-floor 1979 Z-28 Camaro, maroon with black and gold stripes.

In 1979, construction of Interstate 75 began. The four-lane, divided highway had no stoplights and a speed limit of 75 miles an hour. It shaped Dunbar in two significant ways. It gave much easier access for college football coaches to recruit in Southwest Florida. It also gave Tape and other drug dealers a faster way to transport their products.

That same year, Tape began dealing drugs. In selling cocaine, Tape became a user. Soon, he couldn't make the payments on his beloved Camaro because he spent too much of his money on using his own product. The Camaro ended up being repossessed. The cocaine gave Tape a surge in confidence, but he knew he needed to kick his growing addiction if he wanted to control the drugs versus the drugs controlling him.

Tape said he began using the drug only to test it for its purity. He continued selling ten-dollar bags of cocaine on the streets of Dunbar, hand to hand. As his profits grew, so did his connections to suppliers in Miami, Jamaica, and Colombia. Tape began to get other people to

work the streets for him. His product began to take over the streets, where he met some resistance from other drug dealers who had been entrenched in the area. But Tape and his team of workers stood their ground. They continued to overcome their competitors by bringing in a bigger and better product. By 1983–84, Tape’s drug business had taken off. He employed even more workers and expanded to the Tampa Bay area.

This is when Tape’s jet-setting to Los Angeles began, and when it did, it opened Tape’s eyes to Dunbar’s destitution and its lack of businesses. Tape said he made plans to eventually drop the drug dealing. He used much of his drug-dealing profits to begin buying land off Anderson Avenue. He also bought a nightclub from a friend. The Phase II Lounge had a swimming pool that Tape had transformed into an aquarium for exotic fish, placing a glass dance floor on top of it. It had a venue for teenagers to get together on one side and for adults to party on the other.

“I didn’t really want the nightclub,” Tape said. “I bought it as a favor to a friend.”

What Tape really wanted was for Dunbar to have a grocery store, chain restaurants, and other businesses. He envisioned a shopping center, and he began to plan twenty-two places of business, including a two-screen movie theater and a bank.

“I did the studies,” Tape said. “We had the demographics.”

Sitting in that Coleman prison visiting room, Tape pointed to imaginary spots on a white table.

“You had downtown here,” Tape said, pointing to one spot representing downtown Fort Myers. “You had I-75 here. We had the people. Once the shopping center was built, I was going after franchises like McDonald’s, Burger King, KFC, and others to create jobs in the Dunbar community off Anderson Avenue.”

Tape hired an architect to get the project rolling. Fort Myers city councilwoman Veronica Shoemaker soon got wind of Tape’s plan. That resulted in an article in the *Fort Myers News-Press* soliciting developers and offering incentives to build the shopping center. Three developers submitted their bids, plans, and proposals. Tape won the bid.

“I don’t know why I had to go through all of that,” Tape said. “Maybe the city was trying to save face for neglecting the Dunbar community for all these years.”

While Tape’s long-term vision of a prosperous Dunbar seemed noble, his short-term, disruptive, and destructive business of selling crack cocaine caught the attention of the federal government.

In 1987, the federal government dispatched prosecutor Douglas Frazier to Fort Myers.

“I came down here to open the office,” said Frazier, who started that job at age thirty-seven. By age sixty-two, he had advanced to a U.S. district judge of the Twentieth Judicial Circuit. “I was the first federal prosecutor here. I had an office at the old courthouse across the street. There was no security. Congressman Connie Mack, the elder (and the grandson of the Hall of Fame baseball manager), was a congressman and not a senator yet. He was in the building. And the FBI had a couple of agents.

“There were several things going on. One was the smuggling going on in Everglades City. Two, there was the crack cocaine epidemic here. I came from New Orleans, and we never really saw crack cocaine. We saw PCP, cocaine, and heroin.

“Fort Myers was kind of unique. The quantities and the quality of the crack cocaine here were incredible. People came here from all over the South to get it. It was a geographic phenomenon in some respect. You had the proximity of Miami with powder cocaine. They could transport it across Alligator Alley or across U.S. 41. You had a distribution network in the black community that was based on cocaine and heroin, boy and girl. They would wrap it in foil. The point was, the way they did the math, the way they cut up the drug, they had moneymaking capability.

“Geographically, it all came together here in a perfect storm.”

Tape said he did not fully realize the harm he did to his community. He just wanted to make money. As a young child and as a young man, dealing drugs seemed the most logical way to do it. There were very few businesses in Dunbar. Those who grew up in the neighborhood and attained college degrees and successful careers as doctors and lawyers or as professional athletes rarely returned to the community. Positive role

models existed in teachers and in law enforcement officers, but there were not enough of them. They were outnumbered and overwhelmed.

“At the beginning, I couldn’t see the devastation of the Dunbar community, because I was born in it,” Tape said. “So that was a normal way of life to me, seeing the community that way. I wasn’t blinded by the money. The problem existed way before me, and it still continues to exist to this day.

“My reasoning was that alcohol ruined my mother’s life, therefore I figured that drugs were no different or worse than alcohol. That type of thinking is what blinded me.”

Tape, who insisted he wanted good for his community, had his eyes shut to the damage he did to his hometown. The federal government did not. On May 25, 1988, the federal government came down hard on Tape and his accomplices, charging Tape with nine counts of violating federal narcotic laws with intent to distribute and distribution of cocaine base and crack cocaine.

“We brought in undercover agents from Milwaukee and St. Petersburg,” Frazier said of the period just prior to when the arrests were made. “We put together a combination of tax evasion and a drug indictment.”

The feds never found Tape in possession of the drugs. They didn’t need to. About a dozen of Tape’s accomplices were given plea-bargain deals, lesser sentences, in return for their testimony against Tape.

“When we did the takedown, we took down everybody,” Frazier said. “We set up at the old pistol and rifle range, off Anderson, almost to the interstate. We set up there. Everybody went out and hit these people. Ronnie left that night. He had a Mercedes. He got away. Then we put all of our guys after him. They started tracking him. We got a tip.”

Tape recalled seeing a shooting star on the night he was arrested. A tip led law enforcement to a trailer park near Sanibel Island. An officer with a K-9 unit found Tape, who recalled hiding in the bedroom closet of a trailer. The deputies broke open the unlocked door. Tape held his hands outside of the closet, acknowledging his defeat. Tape said after the officers cuffed him, they let the German shepherd bite him in

the leg, in the arm, and almost where it counts—in the groin between his legs. According to numerous media accounts, then-Sherriff Frank Wanicka fed the dog ice cream for dinner as a reward.

On April 18, 1989, Tape received a life sentence, which was reduced on June 3, 2008, to 360 months (thirty years). Tape had an estimated release date of September 24, 2014, which moved up to November 2013 after he completed a ten-month drug-education class. In between, both of Tape's parents died, and his seven children produced twenty-one grandchildren. Tape would see some of them in prison visits, and he followed their lives from afar. While in prison, he plotted one of the first things he would do upon his release: take his family to the beach.

"It's a sad thing for Mr. Tape at thirty or thirty-one years of age and with an engaging personality as shown to me by the witnesses who appeared here, a heart that is almost as big as his wallet, which was quite substantial as a result of his dealing in drugs—in the community that is just crying out for some kind of relief from this," Judge Lee Gagliardi said at the Tape's sentencing in 1989. "It is a tragic story to see people in that neighborhood, whether they are on drugs or not, I don't know, but they are certainly affected by it over there. And it is a sad thing, and it's not going to get any better.

"I would like to think this particular case was going to wipe out drugs in Dunbar, but I am sure that there are others willing to take the gamble that Mr. Tape took in enriching himself because the profits to be realized from this illegal sale are one of the great crises in our country.

"We are not going to solve it in the courts, unfortunately. But perhaps we can deter somebody from following this path. And that is what these sentencing guidelines are designed to do, to show that you shouldn't be involved in the first place. If you are involved in it, you are in trouble. And if you are caught and convicted, you are in even greater trouble. That's the sad story of this particular case, the case of Ronnie Tape and his associates."

On a bad day, Tape and his crew made \$10,000. On Friday, payday, they would make \$40,000. The temptation to deal was real. But so was serving the time for doing the crime.

Gagliardi wasn't finished.