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Will Tank emerge as a new man?

Friends say the Bears' Johnson has learned lessons behind bars

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On the Bears

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More than freedom will greet Tank Johnson on Sunday when he walks out of Cook County Jail after spending 60 days behind bars.

Responsibility, freedom's companion with which Johnson hasn't always been on good terms, will be waiting too. They go everywhere together.

Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life, Tank.

The new reality could be as challenging as it will be exhilarating for Johnson, who can use the last two months spent in jail either as a crutch or a platform for personal growth.

The most important directive Johnson will receive in the near future will not come from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, with whom he is to meet Wednesday in New York. It won't come from Bears coach Lovie Smith, or any Bears official or teammate. It will come from within.

This is one call only Tank Johnson can make.

"It comes down to, 'Here's the situation you're in Tank; you can go either way, and it's up to you,' " Bears team chaplain Harry Swayne said.

It's up to you.

Is Johnson up to the challenge?

Swayne and several others who have spoken with Johnson recently answer yes, unequivocally, and believe he will embrace responsibility as firmly as he will freedom. They detail changes in Johnson that go beyond cutting his dreadlocks and getting rid of his guns and his pit bulls. They point to charitable efforts Johnson has begun organizing from jail that are expected to be announced in the coming month.

Brenda Hanserd, Johnson's mom, naturally is one of the believers. A woman who looked forward to this Mother's Day more than most, Hanserd expects her son to "resume his life without much interruption" after being freed.

In an e-mail exchange, Hanserd praised the Bears for their organizational support but reaffirmed the idea that "TJ," as the family calls Johnson, understands the onus for making personal improvement falls squarely on him regardless of how big the circle is around him.

"He has accepted responsibility for whatever decisions he had made that were not in his best interest, [and] while the Bears were a big part of him accepting responsibility, the primary reason is that he

knows he is responsible for himself and likes to be responsible for himself," Hanserd said. "He is ready to live his life and getting ready to have a successful season with the Bears."

Johnson has turned down several interview requests through his family and his lawyers since his incarceration began March 16. Teammates and friends have been tight-lipped publicly, but the 15 Bears players who have visited Johnson have repeated the same message to Swayne and others at Halas Hall.

"All the guys who have come out of there after seeing Tank have said the same thing, that the last thing to come out of his mouth has been a complaint like, 'I'm getting a raw deal,' " Swayne said. "This is his wake-up call. He accepts that."

Maybe spending 60 days sleeping on a hard bed in a small cell forced that acceptance. But Swayne and other Johnson confidants believe it was embedded deeply in Johnson's psyche the night his best friend and bodyguard, Willie Posey, died Dec. 16 in a shooting at Ice Bar.

"You could see his perspective started to change then," Swayne said. "He could have taken a nose dive. And he didn't."

Manley's been there

To avoid a downward spiral after surviving a 60-day jail term, Johnson needs to avoid the temptation of viewing himself as a victim of the justice system, according to Dexter Manley, a former All-Pro defensive lineman for the Washington Redskins who gained such perspective by serving two years in prison for a 1995 drug conviction. Manley, 48, now runs a mortgage company in Virginia.

"If he doesn't get the message and hit his knees and stay humble, it could be devastating," Manley said. "It's all about hell. Hell is still only a step away. But I chose not to step into it. Believe me, he's going to feel bad about himself. His self-esteem is going to be down. I know what he went through as a professional athlete, and I think some sort of therapy couldn't hurt."

Manley, whose cocaine addiction resulted in a lifetime ban from the NFL, used his time behind bars to find humility and prepare for a new reality. U.S. Justice Department numbers show that more than half of all inmates are back behind bars within three years of release, and Manley says introspection kept him from becoming a recidivist.

"I was so humiliated in jail because I didn't feel I belonged, but in a way I needed it to get away, from myself, from everything," Manley said. "I had to get away from my belligerent denial. I had to realize it can happen to me, and it can happen again if I don't change."

Johnson had more than 150 visits to break up the monotony over the last 60 days. But Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson, 54, a former Dallas Cowboys linebacker, hopes he found enough quiet time to enlighten himself the way Manley did.

"It'd be good for him if he had a moment of clarity in jail, he might have asked himself, 'Damn, how'd I get here?' " Henderson said.

Henderson, who spent 28 months in prison on a 1984 drug charge, now runs a youth outreach program in Austin, Texas. He offered to mentor Johnson to help him avoid falling back into a cycle of self-destruction that once resulted in four incidents with police in a two-year period before he was jailed.

"Boys who are not fathered or nurtured can become lethal weapons. That's one of my favorite sayings," Henderson said. "I don't think this is [Johnson's] first rodeo. He must understand he suffered consequences of his own making. If he does that, jail could have been a great classroom for his life."

Bitter or better?

Prison is where Bill Glass has studied human behavior for the last 35 years.

A former Cleveland Browns defensive tackle, Glass, 71, founded Champions for Life in 1972 and it grew into the nation's largest evangelical prison ministry. His calling has brought him to Cook County Jail five times, including several years ago for a presentation with Mike Singletary. Glass has visited the facility often enough to know that even a relatively short 60-day sentence can have a profound effect on a 25-year-old wealthy NFL player.

"Shame, rejection, punishment, failure-- he has gone through all four," Glass said. "His time in jail can make him bitter or make him better. He has to take responsibility for his actions and be determined to make something good out of it. It's the epitome of football. You get knocked down, but you have to get back up and make the play."

Sports analogies are sprinkled all over Glass' message, and he regularly urges prisoners to consider their jail sentence as halftime. In other words, make adjustments or lose something bigger than a game.

"I tell the inmates, the second half [of your life] will matter most," Glass said. "Don't let this be wasted time you spent in here."

Glass' words to prisoners often parrot what Ford Motor Company founder Henry Ford once said: Failure is just the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently. In some cases involving athletes, the failure that resulted in a jail sentence hasn't defined a person as much as it has redirected him.

Bulls coach Scott Skiles acknowledged in an interview with the Detroit Free Press last week that the 15-day jail sentence he served in 1986 for a probation violation was "the greatest thing that could have happened to me." Similarly, Cleveland Browns running back Jamal Lewis, then with the Baltimore Ravens, credited his 30-day prison term in 2005 with teaching him lessons about life "not something taught in the classroom or home."

What did Tank Johnson learn behind bars?

"He has shown us his willingness to make changes for the betterment of himself and the people he cares about," Lovie Smith said. "We believe in him."

Johnson's long journey toward justifying that faith starts Sunday with a few small steps out of Cook County Jail.

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