

A Look Back at Minnesota Twin Kirby Puckett's Divorce

It was 10 years ago this past month or so so that Minnesota Twins Fans woke up and learned that our favorite little outfielder, the plucky fireplug who was the perfect major league ballplayer, was, perhaps, not quite so perfect. Of course, I'm talking



Mugshot picture

about Kirby Puckett and his legal troubles. Kirby, who needs absolutely no introduction to anyone vaguely familiar with the Minnesota Twins or Major League Baseball, was charged with sexual assault of his past longtime mistress at a dance club in the Minneapolis suburbs (which the stall where it allegedly happened is still standing). While there are already a number of great articles that document his personal collapse (and his successes) that's not really what I'm going to write about, instead I want to look at his divorce from Tonya Kirby and what a person going through a divorce can do to avoid following in his same footsteps. Before you think how can this possibly relate to me, a middle income-non-famous person and click the back button, I think you will be surprised that many of the mistakes Kirby made can and do apply to non-professional athletes too.

For those that may not know the then favorite Twin, a little background: Kirby was from the projects of Chicago, a poor kid who was an inspiration about how a person of no means growing up in a tough environment pulled himself up by his bootstraps with hard work, dedication and his ability to play baseball. He joined the Minnesota Twins and stayed there for his entire 12 seasons of baseball, even working in the front office for a spell after a stray pitch hit him in the eye, ending his baseball career (technically it was a diagnoses of glaucoma that ended his career, but that pitch was his last MLB at bat and if you're from Minnesota we always put that hit in head as the day his MLB career ended). He helped the Twins win 2 World Series, with a truly spectacular effort in the 1991 World Series, game 6 (ESPN cites this series as one of the [best World Series ever played](#)). He was, quite possibly, Minnesota's favorite athlete. Ever.

While his last major league at bat was almost 20 years ago we may have forgotten what a superstar he was at the time. Kirby was the first ever major league baseball player to earn \$3M a year. His earnings peaked his last year of playing ball earning \$7.2M in 1997. He married Tonya in 1986 and divorced in 2002 and as you can suspect, the divorce was costly, both to Kirby, his reputation and in legal fees. With no prenuptial agreement in place (that has been disclosed in my research at least) the case finally resolved with Tonya Puckett receiving the \$1.3M household in Suburban Minneapolis, custody of both the kids, \$4,000 a month payment for child support with an additional \$6,000/ year for camps and extra-curricular activities. I suspect there was also a significant maintenance payment, but that was never disclosed publicly. While you could argue



Kirby In Better Days

that this was not much money for the wife of a former ballplayer earning \$7m a year, remember, in 2002 Kirby wasn't working, his income was a fraction of what he made only 5 years before. If you put it in that context of a non-athlete divorce, Here we have an unemployed middle-aged man and has to pay \$10,000 a month, that could be a tough pill to swallow.

I believe a few key mistakes were made in this case, some by Tonya and some by Kirby. It's hard and not useful to look who to blame, but dealing with high profile people is difficult. I have represented a fair number of wealthy/celebrity types and can attest that F. Scott Fitzgerald was right when he said "The Rich are different than you and me." They can be demanding and since they are so used to being around yes men, when they have to face the reality of bad news some don't take it so well.

Lesson here: Shut up. Even for non-athletes, don't talk about your case to friends, family, etc. Keep it

Mistake 1: Not buying the silence of both Tonya and the Mistress.

The first mistake I believe that Kirby made was letting the mistress speak to the press. There are way to ensure silence (and I'm not talking Soprano style here!) a non-disclosure agreement would have worked wonders. We know that Kirby had an affair with a woman named Laura Nygren who spoke out frequently and appeared to do her best to tarnish his, up to this point, stellar reputation. Ms. Nygren made public statements that basically said Kirby was a bad person, who didn't care about his fans, Minnesota or (gasp) sick kids! Now for many professional athletes it would not have mattered if an ex-mistress comes out and claims you're a jerk, but remember this was Kirby Puckett. The pride of Minnesota Sports.

This was the man who had a street in Minneapolis named after him. The man who won the 1996 Roberto Clemente Man of the Year award, who won the 1993 Branch Rickey Community Service Award, who was inducted in 2000 into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame and perhaps the most ironic of all, was voted the MLB's friendliest player in 1993 and was voted in the hall of fame in 2001. In effect his entire persona, and consequent value, was as being known as the little friendly ballplayer who cared about Minnesota and his fans! And his ex-mistress did her best to ruin that with Kirby apparently doing nothing to stop her.

So what could Kirby have done differently? Well it's very easy to play Monday morning quarterback a decade later, but this is a good case study, why a quick non-disclose agreement with a reasonable payment would have made a lot of sense. For example, offer an agreement where she signs non-disclosure statement about the relationship between Ms. Nygren and Kirby for say \$50,000 and have severe economic penalties if she violates

or make two payments 12 months apart to ensure compliance. This would have eliminated one big element of the case, that the media had a deep well to go back to and get quotes from.

The other public speaker was Tonya Puckett, who spoke quite about about the divorce, with press conferences and interviews. This is a little trickier because I suspect the reason Tonya spoke to the media was to get some traction for settlement. Some reports seem to indicate that Kirby would not sign the MTA (Marital Termination Agreement) and her only recourse was to apply pressure either in court or in the court of public perception to get him to get the case resolved. For Tonya it did indeed work, the case settled, but I wonder did her comments, her frequent public appearances and statements diminish the value of Kirby Puckett and the value of the marital estate.

Mistake #2: Not quickly settling.

Most people don't recall that the year before the divorce, Kirby was a Vice-President in the Twins organization as well as being named a Goodwill Ambassador for the Twins, these jobs paid a combined \$500,000 per year. Not a bad a gig for a washed up ballplayer. This doesn't take into account the money from autographs, appearances, memorabilia, etc. By not settling quickly it ensured that the media would follow this and Tonya's quotes and would be on the front page of the paper on at least a weekly basis.

Through both court filings and Tonya's quotes and interviews we learned that while Kirby was the face of his brand, Tonya did all the heavy lifting to make Kirby so beloved in Minnesota. For example, we know from interviews that the University of Minnesota scholarship fund in Kirby's name was done almost entirely due to Tonya's hard work in raising the startup funds, also the celebrity charity pool tournament that raised \$4M over 11 years was organized by Tonya. We learned, after Tonya hired a PI, that Kirby was having numerous affairs and these were publicized as well, all of which were factors that made Kirby not quite the hot commodity he was a few years before.

And that doesn't even include the real unpleasantness that was publicized, the loaded gun Kirby put to Tonya's head, strangling Tonya with a cord, locking her in the basement, using a power saw to cut through the bedroom door to name just a few of the unseemly accusations made against Kirby. While many non-athletes, may not care what the public thinks about them in this case his entire value is perception and to a large extent "many" normal people would also benefit by not having their reputation tarnished in the community.

The real tragedy in this case is that Kirby was 41 when the divorce was finalized and for the next few years he was dealing with a sex scandal and assault charges and died 4 years later at age 45 from a stroke.

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