

# Commentary: Best and worst of a year of celebrity justice

- Story Highlights
- Celebrity justice dominated the legal headlines in 2007
- Figures from entertainment, sports and politics had their day in court
- Paris Hilton, O.J. Simpson, Michael Vick, Barry Bonds among the defendants

By Kendall Coffey  
Special to CNN

*Editor's note: CNN legal observer Kendall Coffey, a former U.S. Attorney in Miami, Florida, puts the year's legal highlights and lowlights in perspective with his third annual Best and Worst list.*

**MIAMI, Florida (CNN)** -- It was a year that often seemed more legally curious than momentous. In 2007, the coFurts answered questions about Anna Nicole Smith's baby daddy and final resting place, but maintained the status quo on our nation's deepest constitutional issues.

Even if the year did not reach heights of legal profundity, stories like Michael Vick's dog-fighting downfall and the Vegas-style return of O.J.Simpson provided entertainment.

Here's how we'll remember 2007:



Paris Hilton basks in her own reflection as she exits CNN's Los Angeles studios after her first post-jailhouse interview

## THE BEST

### • Revolving cell door Paris Hilton

When Paris Hilton turned her legal break for alcohol-flavored driving into jail time with her bone-headed probation violations, some speculated that her dismal performance in and out of court could cause long-term career harm.

Especially damaging was the uproar over special treatment accorded the rich and famous. The uproar was fueled by activists like the Rev. Al Sharpton after Hilton was abruptly released from a 30-day sentence after only a few days behind bars. He alleged medical concerns sounded a whole lot like a new condition: Stressed Celebrity Syndrome.

Almost as abruptly, though, Hilton was spotted crying in the squad car that chauffeured her back to jail to serve her remaining time, spending a total of 23 days behind bars. Credit: The Public Outcry Doctrine.

### • Get out of jail free card "Scooter" Libby

Yes, he is out of the White House, but at least I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the former chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, is not spending the holidays in the "Big House."

Following a two-year investigation into the leaking of the identity of CIA employee Valerie Plame Wilson, prosecutors won a major victory when Libby was convicted of lying to federal authorities and sentenced to 30 months in prison.

But when the courts refused to let Libby stay out on bond during the appeal, President Bush commuted his sentence, eliminating jail time altogether. Alas, Libby did not make Bush's pardons list this year.

Left with a \$250,000 fine to pay, along with his legal bills, Libby's solution should be obvious. Given his parallels to Martha Stewart's case of "not what you did, but what you fibbed," perhaps he, too, should be considering television and a book deal.

### • Deal of the century O.J. Simpson's co-defendants

Sometimes being judged by the company you keep has its advantages.

When police accused O.J. Simpson and some gun-toting accomplices of storming into a Las Vegas hotel room to confiscate O.J.'s souvenirs, they brought extremely serious charges against everyone. The charges included robbery and kidnapping counts with possible sentences of life in prison.

It seems police were more interested in nailing O.J. than his non-notorious co-defendants. And so three of the alleged accomplices received "deal of the century" plea bargains to get them to testify against the "trial of the last century" defendant.

Instead of facing possible life terms, O.J.'s flipping co-defendants, even the ones who say they had guns, may well bargain their way to probation and community service. In turning state's evidence, like so many other things, it's usually all about who you know.

### • DNA test Larry Birkhead

The news explosion following the death of Anna Nicole Smith spilled across courts in California, Florida and the Bahamas, and added to the pain of a tragic ordeal for her family and friends.

Prompting snickers from legal traditionalists, the unorthodox proceedings in front of an angsty Judge Larry Seidlin in Florida led to a small tourist boom and still more rounds of court proceedings.

Although a number of self-proclaimed fathers rushed forward, the clear winner emerged when photographer Larry Birkhead flashed his own photogenic smile alongside positive DNA tests to claim Dannielynn, the infant daughter of Anna Nicole.

Dannielynn's inheritance may be short on liquid assets but offers a wealth of publicity as well as endless future litigation possibilities against the estate of Smith's late oilman husband.

They judge is already on his way to a television set near you. If Birkhead fails to land a reality show about the life of a single dad, he could still someday score a big pay day for Dannielynn in a courtroom.

## **THE WORST**

### **• Souvenir hunter**

#### **O.J. Simpson**

With all those years as America's most notorious acquitted killer, you'd think O.J. Simpson would have wanted to keep his high-profile mug away from high-risk scenarios.

Instead, The Juice led his band of blunderers into a Las Vegas hotel room to reclaim his "stuff," which can be defined as mostly O.J. Simpson memorabilia. The coercion tactics relied on bullying and -- allegedly -- guns.

Whether O.J.'s F-Troop was armed merely with high-decibel shouting or also waved high-caliber pistols will be for a jury to decide.

Given his remarkable escape from double-murder charges in 1995, O.J. is clearly guilty of criminal stupidity for throwing himself back into the clutches of a justice system that mostly sees him as a villainous monument to getting away with murder

### **• Dog owner**

#### **Michael Vick**

Although animal cruelty is usually a matter for local police rather than the FBI, Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick crossed more than state lines with his dogfighting operation and pit bull executions.

The federal case against Vick was overwhelming and included testimony from informants and plea-dealing co-defendants, as well as the lethal equipment and canine remains found at Vick's Virginia farm property.

As a result, Vick's initial denials gave way to a guilty plea and an uncommon but prudent decision to begin serving his jail time even before his sentence was imposed.

Although he still faces state charges for criminal cruelty, Vick's head start on his 23-month federal sentence reflects his hope that he can eventually return to the NFL instead of ending his quarterbacking days in a real life remake of the prison classic "The Longest Yard."

### **• Second term**

#### **Mike Nifong**

After North Carolina's attorney general dropped all charges against three Duke lacrosse players, the only person who went on trial was Mike Nifong, the Durham County district attorney who won re-election as he launched the sensational but ultimately bogus sexual assault prosecution.

Nifong's trials began with the state bar's ethics hearing. The result was exile from the legal profession due to transgressions that included the failure to promptly disclose DNA testing that exonerated the defendants.

Next came Nifong's criminal contempt trial which led to his conviction and a day in jail for failing to deal honestly with the court.

Soon he'll return to court as a civil defendant in a lawsuit for damages brought by the falsely accused Duke students. Whether Nifong's high-profile disaster is sufficient to give other prosecutors a chill is unclear. But, for defendants complaining about politically-motivated, baseless charges, he makes a good poster-boy.

### **• Grand jury performance**

#### **Barry Bonds**

Getting indicted in connection with a four-year steroids probe in San Francisco, California, was actually no small achievement for home run king Barry Bonds. He had, after all, been granted immunity for his grand jury testimony and so, unless he lied, he was home free.

Bonds allegedly feared embarrassment more than the feds. He swore under oath that he had never knowingly used steroids. With Bonds' former trainer still remaining silent concerning Bonds' knowledge of steroids use, the prosecution is relying on not-so-solid witnesses, but some solid test results to prove that Bonds lied.

Meanwhile, the delay in bringing charges allowed Bonds finally to pass Hank Aaron and set the record for career home runs in front of still-friendly San Francisco fans.

The indictment is apparently knocking Bonds out of the ballpark permanently and could land him in jail if convicted. But at least at trial, he'll enjoy home field advantage one more time.

Given the history of California juries and celebrities, some fans on the jury could help him get across the plate.

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