

Best Buddies

Tom Scotto speaks out in O. J. Simpson's defense



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Tom Scotto and his best man, O.J. Simpson, at Scotto's wedding in September
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Exclusive

Oct 30, 2007 | Updated: 6:55 p.m. ET Oct 30, 2007

O. J. Simpson's "best friend" Tom Scotto is a forgotten man in the Juice's disastrous Las Vegas caper. Scotto was the Miami body-shop owner and Simpson golf buddy who asked Simpson to don a tux and serve as the best man at Scotto's Vegas wedding. But before Scotto could tie the knot, the disgraced football star assembled an entourage of golf and wedding buddies to recover a load of supposedly stolen football memorabilia from two dealers at the Palace Station Hotel. By the time police arrested Simpson, Scotto was safely married (with O. J. doing his bit), and the happy groom and his new bride were preparing to jet off to a romantic Hawaiian honeymoon, far from the media glare.

Now Tom Scotto is breaking his silence to defend his old buddy. As Simpson and two co-defendants prepare for next week's preliminary hearing in Las Vegas on a dozen charges that could send Simpson to prison for life, Scotto remains "crushed" that the Juice was charged in the case at all. He's angry with prosecutors for targeting Simpson and cutting plea deals with several co-defendants to get him. "(Authorities) don't want any of these people," he says. "They want O. J.—it's pretty obvious." And he's even angrier with Simpson's erstwhile friends who have agreed testify against the Juice in exchange for lesser charges. "They'll say whatever the police want them to say," Scotto complains.

Simpson, along with Clarence Stewart and Charles Ehrlich, both 53, faces 12 counts including kidnapping, robbery, and assault with a deadly weapon. The two

men who have told the authorities they had guns in their possession during the alleged robbery—Walter Alexander, 46, and Michael McClinton, 49—cut tentative plea deals on lesser charges in exchange for their testimony. Charles Cashmore, 40, has already pleaded guilty to charges of accessory to robbery in exchange for his testimony. Police gave memorabilia dealer Thomas Riccio, who helped Simpson arrange the meeting, immunity from the beginning; he has never been charged in the case, which involved an attempt to recover sports memorabilia from Bruce Fromong and Alfred Beardsley in room 1203 of the Palace Station Hotel.

Scotto is particularly angry with Alexander, the first man arrested by the Las Vegas Metro police after the alleged robbery—and the first to cut a deal with Clark County prosecutors. Alexander, a Mesa, Ariz., realtor and Simpson golfing buddy, told the cops the night he was arrested trying to catch a flight at Las Vegas's McCarran Airport that he had carried a gun into the hotel room at Simpson's request, though he says he kept it on his person.

Scotto claims Alexander's testimony may be tainted because he reached out to Scotto seeking money, NEWSWEEK has learned. A few weeks before he cut his plea deal, Alexander left a message on Scotto's phone machine identifying himself as "the Golden One," a reference to Alexander's nickname, Goldie. "You told me to call if I needed some help," the man says in the recording, which Scotto played for NEWSWEEK. "If I get some help, then I don't have to make deals, which I haven't yet ... If I can get some help, I can help our boy. I think I can help a lot."

The message was a demand for money in exchange for his silence, Scotto believes. Scotto says he never returned the call. "I'm not getting involved in something like that—bribing a witness," Scotto says. "That's extortion." Scotto tells NEWSWEEK that he turned the tape over to prosecutors a few weeks ago, shortly before Alexander announced he'd cut a deal. Clark County prosecutors declined comment. So did Simpson attorney Yale Galanter.

Alexander's attorney, Robert Dennis Rentzer, doesn't dispute that his client made the call. But Rentzer denies that his client aimed to trade money to alter his testimony. He says Alexander simply sought financial assistance to pay for legal help he couldn't afford if his case went to trial. "He called Tom (because) he was trying to raise funds to consider defending the case," Rentzer told NEWSWEEK. "Tom told the (Clark County) DA he had told Walter if he ever needed any help to call him, so Walter was just following up on that gracious offer."

Rentzer claims that prosecutors have promised Alexander they will recommend he receive no jail time. Although Alexander admitted to the police that he carried a gun during the robbery, he says he kept it hidden on his body and never threatened either of the two memorabilia dealers who were the target of what Simpson called his "sting operation."

Like many Simpson loyalists, Scotto believes that Thomas Riccio deliberately set a trap for Simpson by arranging the meeting at which Simpson could confront Beardsley and Fromong and recover goods that included Simpson's signed All-American football from his USC days. As evidence he cites the fact that Riccio made a secret audiotape of the confrontation and then sold it to celebrity scandal site TMZ.com. An attorney for Riccio, Mark Haushalter, rejects Scotto's allegations and says the recording had nothing to do with O. J. "This was not a setup," he tells NEWSWEEK. "Mr. Riccio was recording [the meeting] to safeguard himself against Mr. Beardsley, who he did not trust and who he's had dealings with in the past."

Scotto asserts that Riccio, a convicted felon who has not been charged in the robbery, is a confidential informant working with the feds, though what interest federal investigators have in O. J. Simpson remains obscure. ("Ridiculous," says another Riccio attorney, Ryan Okabe.) Riccio spent the afternoon of the robbery getting Simpson drunk, Scotto says. "This guy Riccio was out by the pool (at the Palm Hotel) buying him drink after drink," Scotto says. "This was somebody who is supposedly a friend." (A Riccio lawyer denies that Riccio bought drinks for Simpson.)

Scotto, who met Simpson at a boxing match seven years ago and travels and golfs with him, thinks he knows why his friend's in trouble: he's too trusting. "Nobody really knows O. J.," Scotto insists. "He's a really sweet, really good guy." He says the new legal troubles disturb Simpson. "He's up and down," says Scotto. Some days he's "really depressed."

But despite the uproar in Vegas, Simpson did at least one good turn for his friend. In the hours before the wedding, Simpson put on a brave face—and certainly did not let on that he might be worried about being arrested. After returning from his honeymoon Scotto asked him about this. "I said, 'Why didn't you say anything?' and he said, 'Because it's your wedding. I didn't want to ruin your wedding'." Now, that's a pal.