

# The Miami Herald

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## TONY MARTIN ACQUITTED

### Dolphins player gets a second chance



CARL JOSTE / Herald Staff

**THANKFUL:** Flanked by lawyers Howard Srebnick, left, and Hy Shapiro, Dolphins receiver Tony Martin expresses gratitude for the family and community support he received.

## Friend convicted in laundering case

By JAY WEAVER  
Herald Staff Writer

Tony Martin, the Miami Dolphins' great hope in their long drive for a Super Bowl victory this season, felt as if God had blessed him Thursday afternoon.

As he sat still with a bad case of what he later called the "butterflies," a federal jury of eight women and four men found the All-Pro wide receiver not guilty of laundering money from the drug operation of his childhood friend, Ricky Brownlee of Opa-locka.

"Oh, man, I just want to praise the Lord right now and give Him all the glory," said Martin, 33, thanking his

*'It was all or nothing.  
My whole career flashed  
before me as I sat there.'*

**TONY MARTIN,**  
Dolphins receiver found  
not guilty of money laundering

family, friends, teammates and coach.

The jury's acquittal on the five counts, delivered after three days of deliberations, gave Martin a second chance at a pro football career marked by extreme highs and lows during the

past decade for the Liberty City native.

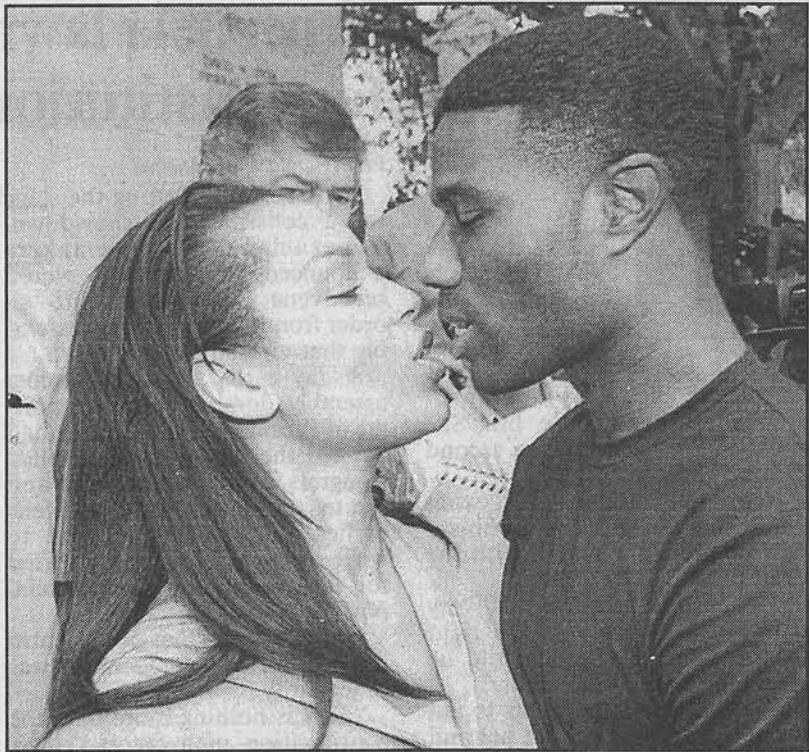
His co-defendant was less fortunate. Brownlee was convicted of drug trafficking and money-laundering.

A split second after the verdict was read, Martin's attorney reached over and hugged the Dolphin wide receiver, who raised his fists to his eyes as if he were about to cry.

"Praise God," Martin's father, Hal, rejoiced from the first row in the courtroom. "Hallelujah."

Martin rose from the wooden chair in which he sat for more than three

PLEASE SEE ACQUITTED, 26A



**BILL COOKE / AP**

**CONGRATULATIONS:** After his acquittal, Tony Martin and his girlfriend, Lisa Raye, share a kiss.

# Dolphin acquitted of federal charges in laundering case

## ACQUITTED, FROM 1A

weeks of his federal trial and embraced his mother, Sarah, who had no doubt about her son's innocence. "I believed in him all the way," she said. "I wasn't nervous because I believed in Jesus Christ."

Dozens of supporters followed Martin — who once tied an NFL record with a 99-yard touchdown reception with the San Diego Chargers in 1994 — out of the courtroom as if he had just made the biggest play of his life. Martin admitted to having "butterflies" throughout his 3½-week trial.

"It was all or nothing," Martin told a mob of media outside the U.S. District Courthouse. "My whole career flashed before me as I sat there [in the courtroom]."

### Childhood mentor

Martin's childhood mentor, Brownlee, was not as fortunate as the boy he helped steer toward a life in football, starting as a quarterback at Northwestern High School. The jury found Brownlee guilty of conspiring to launder profits from his drug business to lease luxury cars and to retain an attorney after he was charged with distributing cocaine and heroin early last year.

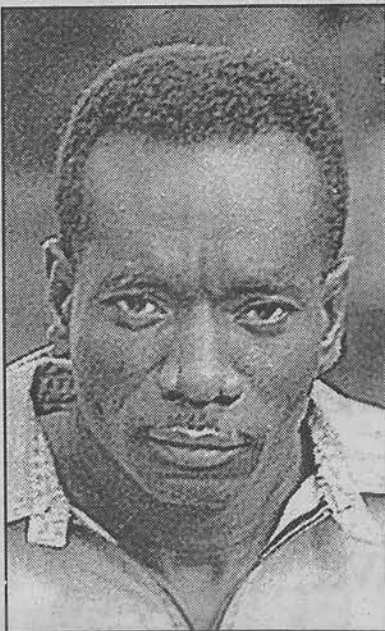
Jurors, who refused to talk to reporters, found that Brownlee masterminded the money-laundering scheme from the Miami Federal Detention Center. On taped phone conversations, the twice-convicted drug dealer was caught arranging for his Opa-locka associates to secure him an attorney for his third drug-trafficking offense.

Martin, who also was recorded on those tapes, lent a hand by agreeing to give \$25,000 of Brownlee's cash to the attorney as a down payment and to write a \$175,000 check to his law firm. In exchange, federal prosecutors said, Brownlee gave Martin \$100,000 in cash — with a promise of paying him back the rest.

Martin put a stop payment on the check to the law firm of attorney Milton Hirsch and returned the cash to Brownlee after he learned the feds had seized the football player's bank records.

Federal prosecutors also said Martin took \$44,786 from Brownlee to lease three luxury cars for him — an Acura Legend and two Mercedes Benzes.

Martin's defense attorneys, Howard Srebnick and Hy Shapiro, succeeded in planting enough reasonable doubt in jurors' minds to find Martin innocent. Their strategy aimed to show that Martin thought Brownlee's cash came from his possible legitimate businesses, including a restaurant and convenience store in Opa-locka.



### CONVICTED: Martin's friend, Rickey Brownlee.

Martin had no reason to believe the cash-for-check swap involved dirty money, they argued.

"Twelve people from the community heard the evidence — not rumor, nor hearsay," Srebnick said.

But jurors convicted Brownlee on all five counts of money laundering, believing the prosecution's case that he was still a drug dealer. As part of their verdict, they found Brownlee guilty of one count of conspiring to distribute cocaine and heroin and a second count of drug trafficking. He was acquitted, however, on four other counts of distributing drugs.

Martin, visibly relieved over his own acquittal, had little to say about his friend's conviction. "It hasn't really sunk in," Martin said.

Brownlee, 43, told his attorney, Mel Black, that he was going to appeal his conviction. Because the verdict marks his third conviction, Brownlee faces a life sentence in prison. His sentencing hearing is set for Nov. 9.

"He was disappointed that the jury did not see its way clear to accept his innocence on all counts," Black said. "[But] he's absolutely thrilled for Tony Martin — happy that he's able to go on with his life."

The U.S. Attorney's Office, which relied on a mountain of videotapes, phone recordings and government snitches for their celebrity case, declined to comment after the split verdict.

Martin, a notorious spendaholic who filed for bankruptcy earlier this year, can now look forward to enjoying the rewards of his four-year, \$14.2 million contract with the Miami Dolphins. The Dolphins could have voided his contract if he was convicted.

## Back to the beginning

Last spring, he returned to the team with which he started his NFL career a decade ago. Because he failed to fulfill his promise on the field, the Dolphins traded him in 1994 to the San Diego Chargers, where he blossomed into a star receiver. Last year, they dished him to the Atlanta Falcons, who reached the Super Bowl partly because of Martin's heroics.

But the Falcons waived Martin after he was indicted on the money-laundering charges last February. Then the Dolphins signed him as an unrestricted free agent. His new teammates stood behind him at his trial — including testimony on Martin's good character from veteran quarterback Dan Marino.

Coach Jimmy Johnson, known for giving players second chances, expressed relief over Martin's verdict at the Dolphins' training complex in Davie.

"It's good to see that the justice system prevailed," Johnson said. "Everyone I talked to who knew Tony — and I knew Tony but not very well — everybody said he was a good person. I called the [National Football] League office to ask about him. And they told me that for 10 years everything was all right with him. It's very hard to find people to play in this league for 10 years and have empty files."

Martin, who left the federal courthouse with his girlfriend, promised to get his life in order with the support of his family. He also said he was looking forward to practice — and that second chance on the gridiron.

"Coach might make me run extra laps," Martin said. "But that's OK, I'm ready for it."

*Herald sports writer Armando Salguero contributed to this report.*

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