

# FBI May Have Abetted Steinbrenner's Dealings

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NEW YORK, Aug. 10—George Steinbrenner's connections in the FBI's Tampa division gave him confidential information on Howard Spira and other business associates and helped the New York Yankees' principal owner obtain a presidential pardon in 1989, former FBI agents said this week.

The report comes amid speculation Steinbrenner might be seeking substantive alteration of the agreement he signed in conjunction with Baseball Commissioner Fay Vincent's finding that Steinbrenner's \$40,000 payment to Spira for information about former Yankees outfielder Dave Winfield constituted conduct "not in the best interests of baseball."

Steinbrenner already has been rebuffed in a bid to have the agreement changed for what his attorneys described as tax and legal purposes. So far, Vincent has given no indication he would be receptive to a request for any other changes.

Unidentified investigators told the New York Times that background checks made for Steinbrenner were part of a long pattern of assistance orchestrated by Phillip McNiff, a former FBI agent who is now a vice president at American Ship Building, which Steinbrenner owns.

The agents said that Steinbrenner reciprocated by inviting bureau officials to his personal box at Tampa Bay Buccaneers games and offering high-paying positions to those who were especially helpful.

According to the Times report, the most unusual assistance given to Steinbrenner came in 1979 when he applied for a presidential pardon for his 1974 conviction for making illegal contributions to Richard

Nixon's presidential re-election campaign.

In a routine investigation, an applicant is taken to the FBI office to be fingerprinted and questioned, and an extensive background check is performed.

However, an investigator was sent to Steinbrenner's house on a holiday because "it would be convenient for George," one agent told the Times.

"The idea was to help George breeze on through with his application," the agent said. President Reagan pardoned Steinbrenner in 1989.

McNiff, the special agent in charge of the Tampa office at the time, later became one of three FBI agents, including John Lawn, a former Drug Enforcement Agency chief, to work for Steinbrenner.

Duties McNiff performed for Steinbrenner boss included spearheading the investigation of Spira that led to Steinbrenner's ouster from baseball on July 30. McNiff reportedly used his contacts to get access to FBI computer files.

The paper also reported that McNiff, who plays basketball with agents in charge of the Spira investigation, pressed a U.S. attorney for an indictment against the admitted gambler.

The agents told the Times that they came forward because they felt Steinbrenner had hurt the reputation of the FBI.

Neither McNiff nor Steinbrenner returned phone calls to their offices.

Spira was indicted on charges of attempting to extort money from Steinbrenner and threatening Steinbrenner and Winfield.

Allen McCreight, the current head of the Tampa office, denied any wrongdoing on the part of the bureau or its agents.