

Lawyer sentenced to 5 years for scamming Barkley, others

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — A lawyer convicted of swindling NBA star Charles Barkley and using the name of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to bolster an investment scam was sentenced to five years in prison Tuesday.

U.S. District Judge Karon O. Bowdre also ordered Donald Watkins to pay about \$14 million in restitution.

Prosecutors had sought a prison sentence of 17½ years for Watkins and 6½ years for his son, Donald Watkins Jr. Both were convicted on fraud and conspiracy charges earlier this year. The two men stole more than \$15 million from investors and a bank, prosecutors said.

Bowdre said she took the elder man's age, 70, into consideration in imposing a lighter sentence, but the term was stiffer than the home confinement requested by Watkins. She then began a sentencing hearing for the son.

During the pair's trial



AP Photo/Butch Dill, File

In this June 1, 2005, file photo, defense attorney Donald Watkins talks on his cellphone outside the Hugo Black Federal Courthouse in Birmingham, Ala., during deliberations in the fraud trial of HealthSouth Corp. founder and fired CEO Richard Scrushy.

earlier this year, witnesses including Barkley testified about losing money in an investment scheme run by the elder Watkins.

Barkley, who grew up near Birmingham and now works as a television analyst, described himself as a friend of the elder Watkins, who has split time living in both Alabama and Atlanta. Barkley lost more than \$6 million in investments and loans, prosecutors said,

and so did other professional athletes including former NFL players Takeo Spikes and Bryan Thomas and former NBA star Damon Stoudamire.

Stoudamire's wife, Natasha Taylor-Stoudamire, spoke at the sentencing and said she couldn't comprehend what Watkins had done.

"I can't even comprehend how Donald Watkins Sr. and Jr. can take money from me or the rest the victims that were trying to have generational wealth for our children's children," she said, according to al.com.

Rice, a native of Birmingham, testified that Watkins wrongly used her name in promoting an energy business at the heart of the case. Prosecutors said Watkins included Rice's name in an email to investors although she had declined to get involved.

Watkins once served as a city council member in Montgomery and helped successfully defend HealthSouth Corp. founder Rich-

ard Scrushy in a massive fraud that nearly bankrupted the company, now known as Encompass Health. He also has worked on civil rights cases.

More than 15 years ago, Watkins drew media attention when he attempted to purchase a major league baseball team. More recently he said he was attempting to purchase the NFL's St. Louis Rams before the team moved to Los Angeles.

Although he portrayed himself as wealthy, prosecutors said Watkins had a net worth of only a few thousand dollars.

Writing in a blog post before the sentencing, Watkins Sr. said he would continue to appeal his conviction and claimed he was innocent.

"Jurors try to do the right thing, more often than not. However, my 46-years of active participation in the American judicial system has shown me (and the world) that well-meaning jurors often convict innocent defendants," Watkins wrote.

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