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Covert: My Years Infiltrating the Mob
By Bob Delaney, with Dave Scheiber
Union Square Press. 256 pp.

On the court, NBA referee Bob Delaney is easy to spot; he's the ref with the face like former Secretary of Education William Bennett, but tougher and less pompous.

You'd think easy to spot might be the last thing he'd want. Decades ago, Delaney infiltrated the New Jersey Mafia, spent three years gathering evidence, then sent more than 30 mobsters to prison

Informants wind up with prices on their heads and cement on their feet, but Delaney's background groomed him for this job. He'd grown up in working-class Patterson, N.J. seeing plenty of suffering, and this instilled compassion for victims of crime.

When he dropped out of college to join the New Jersey state troopers, his first encounter with criminal brutality was the rape, mutilation and murder of a 16-year-old farmgirl. That, he reports, is when he truly grasped the suffering of innocent victims.

He had a sharply-honed sense of good guys and bad when a year later, 1973, he was asked to join Project Alpha, a joint operation with the F.B.I. to break up Mafia control of the Jersey waterfront. Delaney had ideal credentials to gain the Mob's trust. The only Irish kid in an Italian greater New York neighborhood, he grew up versed in Gambino family values. "I became familiar with many of the nuances of Italian culture, little things that you only know when you live inside a way of life."

First, he needed a name. After searching records for a male named Robert born in New Jersey with an Irish surname in the early 1950s and who had died soon after birth, Project Alpha found Robert Allen Covert, an alias as subtle as a Kevin Garnett slam dunk.

He let his hair and beard grow: "I became like every other undercover agent—an armpit with eyes." He began frequenting the Sting Lounge (the ironies in this story never stop) to meet bad guys, hinting he dealt in stolen truck cargo.

When one of his undercover partners quit and left, the Mob thought Delaney whacked him, earning him their trust.

Project Alpha floundered until a Patrick John Kelly came to police attention, a consigliere to the DiNorscio crime family. Bluffed into thinking police had massive evidence against him, and faced with either prison till decrepitude or turning informant, Kelly joined Project Alpha. He knew the Mob's weak links, how to help Delaney blend in.

That's when Delaney's story, written by expert sportswriter Dave Scheiber, becomes more tense than overtime in the playoffs. Wiseguys hung around Delaney's fake trucking company for years, watching game shows on TV, bragging of pillage and bloodshed.

But "I was getting ... tired of being in the constant presence of Mob guys.... Talking like them, acting like them, thinking like them to fit in and survive.... I started to lose sight of the line where Bob Delaney ended and Bobby Covert began." Knowing one mistake could cost his life, Delaney experienced stress symptoms and signs of a heart attack. After three years of this, Delaney had enough evidence to bring the racketeers to trial and testify before Congress.

The secret agent was left shaken, not stirred. "I couldn't just go back to being Trooper Robert J. Delaney. Bobby Covert and the wiseguy world were now part of who I was.... I'd never felt more miserable and alone."

Barracks camaraderie eluded him. Other treated him like a Bob Delaney he no longer was. Some felt petty jealousy for the attention Project Alpha brought him.

Veteran cops, including Joe Pistone, a.k.a. Donny Brasco, recognized Delaney's post-traumatic stress and urged counseling and a new way of life. He found it in "hoops therapy." He'd been All-State forward at Blessed John Neumann High and captain on the Jersey City State College team. His playing days were over, but as a trooper he "had to be able to spot trouble in a heartbeat, recognizing the people who violate the rules and disrupt the orderly flow of things." Sometimes that's a mobster, sometimes a double dribbler.

He entered hoops law enforcement in a summer pro league that employed coaches like Hubie Brown and Rick Pitino, and in 1987 he joined the NBA. The skill, strength and speed of players at that level proved daunting. What two 7'2",

275 pound centers call merely “bodying up” can look to the untrained eye like an earthquake.

Public exposure actually made him feel safe and restored his sense of place in mainstream life. “Changing how I want to live my life or hiding from the bad guys would be giving them a power over me that they certainly don’t deserve.”

Echoes remained from his undercover days. Fans yell, “Hey, Covert, after that call they should put YOU in the Witness Protection Program.” In a church communion line he tensed when he heard hard breathing by his ear and a raspy voice say, “I don’t know what the hell you’re prayin’ for, but I’m prayin’ you get some calls right tomorrow.” It was the voice of Milwaukee coach Mike Dunleavy.

Delaney says, “We all have personality flaws, and one of mine is thinking I can fix everything for everybody.” His empathy for victims made him get the National Basketball Referees Association to help victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, and he organized a post-9/11 tour of NY firehouses giving first responders NBA gear. Some of these refs have stayed in touch and take firefighters to Knicks and Nets games.

The descriptive gifts of St. Petersburg Times writer Scheiber render these moments poignantly and capture amusing occasions too: how mobsters loved the Godfather films and even imitated Brando and Pacino, how a crime boss in prison solved the puzzle of how to have sex with his girlfriend during her visits while his men shielded them from view. As Delaney’s wife tells him, “Dave tells your story, not his version of your story.”

In that story, basketball is the latest chapter, not the main one most of this riveting book relates. Happily, Delaney says, “There are far too many NBA recollections to recount here. They’ll have to wait for another book.” If Delaney and Scheiber write it, I’ll buy it.
