Repaying by the Hour

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ABOUT 100 TEENS are chattering and fidgeting in the bleachers at the Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club in Seattle when a video of Marion Jones' free fall into hell starts playing on the big screen before them. The former track star-turned-WNBA guard watches from outside, through the gym's glass windows, as the worst scenes of her life play out for her mostly black and Latino audience: Jones denying using performance enhancers, the tearful confession on the courthouse steps, getting grilled by Robin Roberts on Good Morning America. When the video is over three minutes later, the expression in Jones' eyes is so grave that she looks like she's about to walk into a wake. But she summons a smile and strides up to the podium.

"About 10 years ago, I was on top of my game," Jones, 35, tells the assembled. "I was a superstar athlete, on the cover of magazines like Vogue, Time and Sports Illustrated." Some of the teens are still chitchatting, but Jones presses on, and by the time she mentions that she was making millions and meeting presidents and celebrities, the kids are nearly silent. "Never in a thousand years would I have guessed that I would have gone to prison," she says. She then reveals that the 49 days she spent in solitary confinement -- punishment for a fight with another inmate -- nearly broke her. Gasps fill the air.

These were her darkest days, when she served six months at a federal prison in Fort Worth, in 2008, for lying to federal investigators about her PED use and for her role in a check fraud scheme. Her sentence included 800 hours of community service, and she's turned that court-mandated commitment into a full-blown mission, traveling the country and reciting her story to schools, churches and groups like the one gathered before her now.

Take a Break, the name of Jones' community-outreach program, is also a refrain in her tale. The message: Pause to consider consequences before making a tough decision. Or, you know, check yourself before you wreck yourself. "It's far easier to make good choices in your life if you hang out with people who are making good choices in theirs," she says. "Look to your left." She waits. "Now look to your right. Are they always complaining? Are they always getting in trouble?"

Uncomfortable giggles fill up the room, followed by contemplative faces. Jones' message is sinking in.

TO MANY FANS, community service is a get-out-of-jail-free card for the privileged that the rest of us can't afford. Saints tackle Shaun Rogers, arrested in April of last year for having a
loaded .45 in his carry-on at Cleveland's airport, got a 10-hour weapons course and 40 hours of community service. Colts punter Pat McAfee received eight hours of community service after being arrested for public intoxication in October. NASCAR driver AJ Allmendinger: 24 hours of community service, 18 months of unsupervised probation, a 60-day suspended sentence and a $100 fine plus court costs after pleading no- contest to DWI charges in October 2009.

Then there's Donte' Stallworth, the Ravens wideout, whose plea bargain in June 2009 for DUI manslaughter became a lightning rod for celebrity justice. He pleaded guilty, paid an undisclosed amount of money to the victim's family and got 30 days in jail (he served 24), two years of house arrest, eight years' probation, random drug testing, a lifetime driver's license suspension, $5,000 in mandatory donations to charities and 1,000 hours of community service. Given that he was facing 15 years in prison without any deal, many thought the NFL star got off easy. "The public looks at cases like these as a corruption of justice," says Chris Uggen, a criminologist at the University of Minnesota. "It offends our sensibilities because we feel the law should be applied to all citizens equally."

The reality of these cases, though, is far more complex. Community service is one of the most mysterious aspects of the U.S. justice system. Sentences depend on multiple factors, including state law, prior criminal history, the sentencing philosophy of the judge and the offense itself. "If you looked at 100 cases," says Richard Lapchick, a longtime expert on social issues in sports at the University of Central Florida, "there'd probably be 50 different applications of what community service meant."

Adding to the confusion, in the aftermath of a sentence the details of actual service often go unreported, and not always due to the media's lack of interest. Some athletes simply aren't eager to promote their attempt at atonement, since doing so reminds the public of the offense. "Maybe they're afraid of being defined by that mistake," says Jones, who lives in Austin with her husband, former sprinter Obadele Thompson, and three children. "By disappearing, perhaps you're thinking it'll fade from people's memory."

Stallworth knows better, knows he'll forever be linked to his crime in some folks' minds, no matter how he approaches his service. He says he's completed about 150 hours so far by filming a PSA, working with the Special Olympics and helping at Alonzo Mourning's youth center. The receiver acknowledges that he feels a sense of purpose in speaking about drinking and driving. "When I speak to the kids about making the most of second chances and persevering through difficult times, I feel that my story can validate that for them," he says. "The fact that I'm a professional athlete gets their attention."

Maybe you think Stallworth is truly making amends. Maybe you think that if he's not in jail, he should be doing something a lot tougher than giving speeches, like cleaning trash on the side of a highway. Either way, this debate is nothing new. In the 45 years since community service was first introduced in an Alameda, Calif., courtroom -- as an alternative to putting traffic violators into overcrowded jails -- legal experts have been arguing about what its goals should be. Should community service punish? Act as a deterrent? Rehabilitate? All of the above? "You don't want super easy and meaningless community service, nor do you want service that's super hard, humiliating or demeaning," says Gordon Bazemore, director of the Community Justice Institute
at Florida Atlantic University. "Then they're just saying, Oh god, only 20 more hours and I'll be done."

One sentencing strategy gaining currency in some courts is restorative justice. That's when the community service assigned is directly related to the victim and the crime committed. Imagine if instead of going to jail, Michael Vick assisted for two years in a vet emergency room, or helped nurse his damaged dogs back to health. The idea is that he still gets punished while his victims, directly or indirectly, benefit from the punishment. When offenders are engaged in their service, their self-esteem is built up, as is their connection to the community -- all of which helps prevent recidivism. Minnesota judge Kevin Burke, who doled out 30 hours of helping alcohol abusers at a detox facility to running back Moe Williams -- one of the Vikings from the infamous "Love Boat" incident in 2005 -- buys into the idea. "There's a benefit to other people, and that's better than just locking you in a room and saying, Okay, now you've been in jail."

Still, in our legal system, where punishment rather than restitution remains the dominant philosophy, restorative justice is more ideal than typical practice. "I think restorative justice makes sense," says Burke.

"However, the judiciary is an inherently conservative profession. We're not readily open to change."

Some offenders, though, are more than open.

**COMMUNITY SERVICE HAS** had many different meanings for Jones. At the height of her stardom, it was voluntary. The Marion Jones Foundation, now defunct, raised funds for sports complexes in Belize, her mother's native country. But Jones admits that she wasn't personally involved in the day-to-day operations. "It was very loose," she says. "I believed in it, but to be honest, that aspect of service really wasn't the most important thing to me at that time. It was all about winning races, running fast, making money and people telling you that you're great."

When Jones was sentenced in 2008, she had some say in the type of service she performed. But she was under close scrutiny. "I had to run everything by my probation officer, who always consulted her boss because I was a public figure," Jones says. "They didn't want me doing something that might make the probation department look bad." At first, the athlete logged hours mentoring at junior high and high schools in Dallas and filming a PSA about good decision-making. Over time she turned her speaking engagements into the Take a Break program. At the end of the two years it took to complete her 800-hour obligation, Jones realized she wanted to continue the work. "My goal is to transform the lives of young people," she says.

There are today and always will be people who don't buy her "I didn't know what I was taking" explanation for her steroids use, folks who wish she would just admit she was trying to get an edge. There will always be those who feel that her 2010 confessional-toned book, On the Right Track, was just an attempt to put money into her bank account, and that Take a Break is more image rehab than Good Samaritanism. Jones knows she won't ever do right again in some eyes.
So all she can do, she says, is focus on the positive. "Doing this is absolutely part of a healing process," she says. "There are days when I wake up and the first thing I think about is, [whispering] Marion. Why? Why did you ... ? And then I pull myself up and come to an event or go and speak. People sometimes come up and just hug me. When I get that, it's like, Okay, that's my energy boost. That's what I needed today."

These days, Jones is training for her second season with the Tulsa Shock, while her advisory team is working on securing sponsors to create a larger platform for Take a Break. By expanding the program's reach, Jones is hoping to remind even more kids that no matter the slip-up, a second chance is within reach. That's the bigger message throughout her speech to the Boys & Girls club.

"Whenever you mess up in your life -- and you will at some point in your life -- don't quit," she says. "Don't give up. Don't be defined by your mistakes."

When Jones wraps up her talk, the kids give her a raucous round of applause. She hangs out for a bit afterward, fielding thank-yous and exchanging embraces with her newfound fans. The emotion expressed in her eyes now might fairly be described as gratefulness.