

Rodney King: 17 Years After the Riots

Caleb Bacon

Rodney King's near-death plunge to infamy began with a twelve-pack of malt liquor. King's intoxicated, high-speed driving on March 3, 1991 united him a group of Los Angeles Police Department officers. Their boots, billy clubs, and Taser, would beat the 25 year-old King into the history books.

Thirteen months later, on April 29, 1992, LAPD officers, Stacy Koon, Laurence Powell, Theodore Briseno and Timothy Wind, were acquitted of assaulting King. The city's mounting racial unrest ignited. That was the first day of the Los Angeles Riots. More than fifty people would lose their lives, and damages would exceed hundreds of millions of dollars.

King, 44, no longer drinks alcohol or uses drugs. He's ten months sober, and has recently found peace with the LAPD officers who scarred both his life and the LAPD.

March 1992

King had been laid off from his union construction job with C.C. Myers. To make ends meet he had been working as an usher at Dodgers Stadium. While King loved the Dodgers, the work wasn't nearly as fulfilling as union construction .

After six months away, C.C. Myers offered King bridge construction work on the 101 freeway. Full of joy, King, bought a night's worth of booze for himself and friends. He had a twelve-pack all to himself. "I was supposed to go back that Monday," he said.

The Beating

King's Hyundai was speeding west on the 210 freeway north of Los Angeles. His intoxicated mind swam with childhood memories of his father getting "stomped and kicked on by the police," he said. "I never thought I'd get caught up in one of those kind of beatings."

"I knew what kind of dudes followed a police chase," said King. He finally stopped on Foothill Boulevard in Lake View Terrace near Sylmar. Multiple police cars surrounded him. "I knew it wasn't going to be nothing nice."

King was first met by Officer Melanie Singer. Behind her, King could see the other officers readying their billy clubs. "I told her 'tell them they don't have to do this.'" Non-responsive, she walked away as the other officers charged King.

Despite the presence of African-American officers, the words of the charging officers was "straight racist," he said. Standing aside, the African-American officers did not participate in *The Beating*. "Whoever black that was standing around was probably scared for their job. It was like a routine that you just know goes on."

Wrapping his arms around his head, King knew to protect his brain. He told himself “you better live through it.” King recalled being Tasered. “It heated my body so hot to where... I can’t explain it.” As the blows from the officers’ black boots and clubs persisted, King thought he had died.

“I woke up halfway-dead a couple days later,” he said. “It was like dying and coming back.”

April 29, 1992

For King, the LA Riots were both horrific and surreal. “It was scary because people were dying,” he said. “It was like I could see the world right there in front of me, from my TV. The world had gotten so close -- it was all about me, running from those cops, and being drunk that night.”

King’s drinking worsened. “I had to have something to drink,” he said of the time. “It was really wild.” On the third day of the LA Riots, full of emotion and fighting a hangover, King issued his famed plea for peace.

“People, I just want to say, you know, **can we all get along?** Can we get along? Can we stop making it, making it horrible for the older people and the kids?...It's just not right. It's not right.” - *Rodney King, May 1, 1992*