

Britney Griner – Drug Smuggler?

by

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On February 17th, Britney Griner, a WNBA star, was arrested in Russia on drug charges. Her arrest has stirred up the news media and people here and abroad. As we know the media usually sensationalizes event such as this whenever it is possible to win some sort of recognition. Such is the case with Griner's arrest.

Russia, the US government, and Griner's legal team have remained mostly quiet on the details of Griner's case. If another person, in another country, at another time, were arrested on the same charges, the case would probably not draw much attention.

Here are some facts we know with regard to Griner's background. . .

1. Her father was a Harris County sheriff deputy in Texas and a former marine.
2. Played basketball in high school
3. Attended Baylor University where she was named the AP Player of the Year" and and The 2012 Premier Player of Women's College Basketball.
4. In 2013, Griner started her WNBA career
5. During the WNBA off season, she played for Zhejiag Golden Bulls and Chinese basketball team.
6. Griner is arrested for domestic violence and disorderly conduct
7. In 2016 and 2021, Griner was on the USA Olympic Women's basketball team
8. Since 2014, during the WNBA off seasons, Griner would play for the UMMC Ekaterinburg, a Russian basketball club
9. In 2021 Griner was arrested in Russia for drug smuggling

Following are some facts with regard to her arrest and consequent events.

1. On February 17, Griner was taken into custody in Russia and subsequently charged with drug smuggling.
2. A drug sniffing canine alerted Russian customs officials to possible drugs in Griner's luggage
3. A visual inspection of her carry-on luggage revealed two vape cartridges wrapped in a sealed opaque package.
4. A Russian expert determined that the liquid in the vape cartridges was cannabis oil, a narcotic substance.
5. One cartridge contained 0.252 grams of oil while the other contained 0.45 grams.
6. Under Russian law, simple possession of the oil would be considered an administrative offense, punishable by a fine or detention of 15 days.
7. However, Griner's vape cartridges were in a sealed package, and thus Russian authorities viewed the situation as an attempt to smuggle drugs into Russia.
8. If smuggling charges are not dropped, Griner faces up to 10 years in prison.

9. On July 7th, Griner plead guilty to the smuggling charges. However she preferred her plea as “. . .there was no intent. I didn't want to break the law."
10. Griner also stated that she had unintentionally carried a banned substance into the country because she had packed in a hurry.

Three facts about Russian law should be known.

1. Russian drug laws are widely considered draconian and the country imprisons more people per capita for drug crimes compared with the rest of Europe.
2. Russia has strict laws regarding LGBTQ persons from speaking out on their lifestyle. Any event or act regarded as an attempt to promote homosexuality is an administrative offense. “Distribution of information that is aimed at the formation among minors of nontraditional sexual attitudes, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations, or enforcing information about non-traditional sexual relations that evokes interest to such relations”
3. The Russian courts tend to be more lenient in sentencing if the defendant pleads guilty.

Most American are aware that the majority of countries around the world have stricter drug laws than those in the US. Given Griner’s personal, educational, and professional background there is no doubt that she was and is familiar with the seriousness of drug laws, especially those of Russia where she played professional basketball for more than seven (7) years.

Griner, when pleading guilty, implied that the cannabis oil was for personal use. Since 2013, she was also well aware of the WNBA’s policy banning cannabis and other drugs.

In court, Griner said that she did not intentionally pack the vapes in her carry-on luggage. This is a very questionable statement. It takes about 15 hours to fly from New York to Moscow. Add to that time that most international flights from JFK and LaGuardia airports recommend arriving 3 hours before departure time. Therefore from the time she arrived at the airport to arriving in Moscow she would have spent 17 hours with her carry-on luggage.

During those 17 hours with a 22x14x9 inch carry-on bag, it is reasonable that a passenger would check the bag at least once and more likely two or three times during a flight. But let’s look at what happens before departure. Griner goes through a TSA security check point. Her carry-on may or may not have been opened. But between the check point and boarding, the chances are that she opened up her carry-on at least once. Given that the carry-on was probably opened at least twice before arriving in Moscow, the size of the package (at least 7” x 7” x 1”) that contained the vape cartridges, and what limited items you can have in a carry-on, it is not likely that Griner did not see or at least feel the package in her luggage. At anytime before or during the flight, Griner could have ditched the vape cartridges, but did not do so.

Griner's legal team said that it was Griner's decision to plead guilty. Their statement also read that "She decided to take full responsibility for her actions as she knows that she is a role model for many people."

CNN however told listeners that her family, lawyers and experts discussed the decision. CNN also mentioned that during the discussions it was brought out that Russia has 99% conviction rate in its criminal cases, which undoubtedly played a significant part of Griner's decision.

Apparently there is no viable defense or circumstances as to why Griner had the vape cartridges in her carry-on. It is also questionable that Griner plead guilty because she was taking responsibility for her actions rather than trying to gain a reduced sentence.

One final fact. Griner is in her 30s and is not a 19-21 year old in a foreign country with the belief that "it can't happen to me" attitude. In essence. . .

- She violated WNBA policy
- She is aware of foreign drug laws
- She is old enough to have known better
- She deliberately hide the drugs in a package
- She deliberately tried smuggling the drugs into a foreign country
- She plead guilty to drug smuggling albeit not accepting responsibility

So is Brittney Griner guilty? Yes
Will she learn from this experience? Hopefully