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10 Notorious Tax Cheats: Girls Gone Wild Founder Joe Francis

[Girls Gone Wild](#) founder Joe Francis seems to have few admirers, although his [official website](#) is laudatory, making him appear to be a legal and social pioneer. Mr. Francis has said one reason he is attacked is that men are jealous of him. His tax evasion case was only one of many legal battles roiling his controversial empire. There have been numerous civil suits and brushes with the criminal law too. He has his own version of his rags to riches tale, and his business and legal life, the authoritative [Joe Francis, biography, and legal story](#).

Numerous women have sued Francis and his Girls Gone Wild entity over filming them without consent, filming them as minors, and more. Some of the complaints have been more serious. In 2013, Francis was convicted of false imprisonment, assault causing great bodily injury, and dissuading a witness. He was [sentenced](#) to 270 days in jail, 36 months probation, anger management and psychological counseling. His statements to the media thereafter were controversial. His post-trial interview with the [Hollywood Reporter](#), called the jurors “mentally ... retarded,” saying they “should be euthanized,” though he later apologized.

He has also gone up against casino billionaire Steve Wynn, who sued Francis for defamation. In early 2012, a judge awarded Mr. Wynn \$7.5 million for defamation. Later the same year, a jury awarded [Steve Wynn](#) \$20 million for claiming that Wynn had threatened to kill him over a gambling debt. The jury added \$20 million in punitive damages, but the judge reduced Steve Wynn's \$40 million award to \$19 million, noting that the jury disliked Francis.

Francis has been a plaintiff too, claiming that Panama City Beach officials violated his First Amendment rights by stopping his filming. Francis was [arrested for racketeering](#), and although most charges were dismissed, he pleaded guilty to record-keeping violations, paid a fine, and served community service. With his considerable legal pedigree, he was probably less bothered by criminal tax charges than most people would be.

His taxes gone wild case dates to April 2007. He was indicted on two counts of tax evasion over \$20 million in allegedly false deductions. He pleaded not guilty and blamed his former accountant, who ended up claiming a whistleblower recovery from the IRS. Yet the charges were serious enough that he could have faced 10 years in prison.

In the end, though, Francis plead guilty to misdemeanor counts of filing a false return and bribery. He paid \$250,000 in restitution to the IRS. Then, on September 1, 2009, a lawsuit was filed claiming that three of his employees had embezzled millions from his company. The lawsuit may have helped Francis' tax case. The full contents of the Mantra Films lawsuit are available [here](#). In Francis' own lengthy account of the case, he says that:

The US Department of Justice asserted that Francis claimed over \$20 million in false business deductions on his corporate tax returns during 2002 and 2003. Francis' attorney at the time, Jan L. Handzlik, said, "The government has chosen to make a criminal case out of what we believe to be, at most, a civil tax dispute." Francis didn't know what the source of this IRS attack was, and was unable to effectively defend against it from his jail cell. But something wasn't right about this sudden attention from the government. To Francis, things simply didn't add up.

Michael Barrett became an employee of Girls Gone Wild in 2001. Referred to Francis by BDO Seidman, a large and well-regarded accounting firm at the time, Barrett was a smooth-talking CPA with a seemingly impressive resumé who gained Francis' trust and was put in charge of handling all of the company's finances as well as Francis's personal taxes. Francis trusted Barrett and followed his recommendations, unaware of how much damage this misplaced trust would eventually cause him. See [Legal Story](#).

The alleged Girls Gone Wild employee embezzlement and other legal battles illustrate the often interconnected ways in which criminal tax cases emerge. Often, as with [Queen Of Mean Leona](#)

[Helmsley](#), civil legal battles can actually serve to bring about tax cases. In Joe Francis' case it may have gone the other direction, yet another respect in which he has been fortunate. As his own [Business Bio](#) reads:

Joe Francis, founder of Girls Gone Wild ®, has grown accustomed to being a lightning rod for discussions ranging from First Amendment rights to personal freedom to obscenity to simple Hollywood gossip. But Francis's most impressive role is frequently overlooked: that of the consummate businessman. The details of Joe's phenomenal success don't often make it into the media, but it is a story worth telling.

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