

Boris Becker, Ex-Tennis Star, Facing Prison On Tax Charge

By MARK LANDLER

FRANKFURT, Oct. 23 — Boris Becker, the onetime tennis wunderkind whose star has been dimmed by scandal, could face three and a half years in jail on charges of tax evasion, in a trial that began today in Munich.

Mr. Becker, who paid roughly \$3 million in back taxes and interest last week in a bid to have the sentence commuted to probation, admitted wrongdoing.

"I take responsibility for mistakes I made 10 years ago and I know I have to pay for it," Mr. Becker said today in a crowded courtroom.

But German state prosecutors told the judge in the case that Mr. Becker deserved the sentence for evading payment from 1991 to 1993. They said Mr. Becker, 34, had deceived the authorities by claiming that his principal residence was in Monaco, when he was actually living in Munich.

A verdict is expected on Thursday.

Mr. Becker, who has gone from Wimbledon icon to tabloid curiosity since his retirement from professional tennis in 1999, pleaded today for a sense of proportion. He said his apartment in Munich had not been a residence, but a place to sleep during the rare times he was not playing in tournaments.

"There was a bed, but there wasn't even a cupboard, kitchenette or a refrigerator," he said. "It wasn't a real apartment."

His prosaic description of his living quarters adds another installment to a life story that has become uncomfortably public for a man who first caught the hearts of Germans in



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Boris Becker, the former tennis star, is accused of trying to evade taxes from the 1990's by falsely claiming to be a resident of Monaco.

1985. Then, as a 17-year-old with a booming serve, he became the youngest player to win a Wimbledon title.

Last year, Mr. Becker and his wife, Barbara, divorced after seven years of marriage, in a bitter battle that consumed acres of newsprint and much of his fortune. He also agreed, after a seamy dispute, to support a child born to a Russian woman with whom he admitted having had a fleeting affair.

Today the trial convened after lawyers for Mr. Becker could not reach an agreement with prosecutors on a penalty. Mr. Becker's lawyers say he should not be sentenced to more than two years, commuted to probation.

"Putting Becker in jail would be senseless and unfathomable," said one of his lawyers, Klaus Volk.

The prosecutors said Mr. Becker had broken the law in a premeditated manner and withheld large amounts of money. They said he confessed only after seven years, when it be-

came clear that the case was not going away.

"This was a last-minute confession," said the prosecutor, Matthias Musial, noting that he could have asked for a five-year sentence.

Like other wealthy athletes and celebrities, Mr. Becker established residency in Monaco, a tax haven, to avoid Germany's high income tax rate. To qualify as a foreign resident, he was required to live outside the country for more than half the year — which prosecutors said he did not.

Since his retirement, Mr. Becker has appeared in commercials for AOL Time Warner and Daimler-Chrysler. His forays into business — a sports Web site and a management agency for athletes — both failed.

"If he was not so well known, the prosecutors might have asked for four or five years," said Michael Rietz, a lawyer in Münster who has represented people in tax-evasion cases. "But I think he has a very good chance of getting a two-year sentence of probation."