



**POWER LAWYERS 2025**

## **‘JOE TACTICAL’ RESTS HIS CASE**

*With the brawling courtroom style showcased in his winning defense of A\$AP Rocky, Joe Tacopina has become one of the world’s most sought-after trial attorneys (just ask onetime client Donald Trump): ‘He may be the best cross-examiner I’ve ever seen’*

**BY JULIAN SANCTON**



### Man of the \$2,000 Hour

With his stunning string of courtroom triumphs, attorney Joe Tacopina has been hired by high-profile defendants who can afford his sky-high rates, including Donald Trump (top with Tacopina and Boris Epshteyn) and A\$AP Rocky (above).

**ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 22, 2022**, Rakim Mayers, the 33-year-old Harlem rapper better known as A\$AP Rocky, returned to Los Angeles from a long vacation with his superstar girlfriend, Rihanna, in her home country of Barbados. After stepping off the private jet at LAX, Mayers was arrested by LAPD officers and thrown in jail. He was charged with two felony counts of assault for allegedly firing two shots that grazed the knuckles of Terrell Ephron, a former member of Mayers' hip-hop collective A\$AP Mob who went by A\$AP Relli, during a scuffle at a West Hollywood parking garage the previous November. Out on bail, Mayers rejected a plea deal to serve just six months in prison, opting instead to fight the charges in court. Faced with a career-ending, life-shattering maximum sentence of 24 years, Mayers turned to a high-profile hometown lawyer known for successfully defending rappers and entertainers, including Michael Jackson, Foxy Brown, Meek Mill and members of the Wu-Tang Clan: the swaggering \$2,000-an-hour New York litigator Joe Tacopina.

With his scrapping courtroom style, booming Brooklyn baritone and flair for custom suits tailored to his massive build, Tacopina had earned a reputation as one of the fiercest and most effective trial attorneys in the country. His stunning victories in defense of such unsavory figures as Aruba murder suspect Joran van der Sloot, The Sopranos actor and accused cop killer Lillo Brancato, and ex-NYPD officer Kenneth Moreno — who was acquitted of rape — prompted the New York Post to call him “the Devil’s advocate.” Tacopina wears the designation as a badge of honor. On the wall of his 35th-floor midtown Manhattan office is a framed 2007 GQ profile showing him mugging in front of his Maserati, with the headline, “1-800-SAVE-MY-ASS.” Tacopina has five children, but the only photograph on his desk is of him and perhaps his most famous former client, President Trump.

The A\$AP Rocky case went to trial in L.A. on Jan. 24, 2025, presided over by Judge Mark Arnold. Unlike most of Tacopina’s battles, it would be filmed. Tacopina tells me he “fought vigorously against cameras ... because I saw what happened in other courtroom trials that are televised — people act like lunatics.” Yet the proceedings — the first highly publicized case under L.A.’s new district attorney, Nathan Hochman — would turn out to be a four-week infomercial for Tacopina, as clips of his riveting cross-examinations were endlessly scrutinized in podcasts and on social media. Well-known before, the attorney would become a bona fide celebrity and an improbable thirst trap. One Australian podcaster named Miss Shorty released a line of merch dedicated to him — mugs, T-shirts, hoodies, leggings — emblazoned with the nicknames A\$AP Joe and Mr. Flexback,

referring to the V-shaped silhouette hundreds of thousands of Court TV viewers would recognize from behind.

The evidence against Mayers was sparse, mainly consisting of a few indistinct and inconveniently angled surveillance videos. One shows a tussle, another shows Mayers pulling what looks like a firearm out of his waistband. A nearby Nest camera captured the pop-pop sound of two gunshots. LAPD detectives who combed the parking garage immediately after the report of the incident found no sign of a shooting, but Ephron later presented 9-millimeter shell casings he claimed to have found when he returned to the scene.

Mayers said the firearm he used was merely a prop gun, a starter pistol the rapper had gotten while shooting a music video with Rihanna and had kept on his person for security. He'd fired it to break up a fight between Ephron and another A\$AP crewmember, he said.

"It's a reasonable doubt case," Tacopina tells me. "Because no one knows for sure: Was it real, was it a prop?" Since the prosecution largely hinged on Ephron's word, Tacopina would focus most of his efforts on demolishing his credibility. He would cast doubt on the gravity of his wounds (or "knuckle scrapes," as Tacopina called them), on his testimony and on his motives.

Ephron was far from an ideal witness. Jurors heard a recording of a phone call in which Ephron appeared to tell a friend of Mayers' that he would "walk away" and disappear to an island somewhere if Mayers paid him \$30 million (the same amount Ephron and his lawyers would ask for in a separate civil defamation lawsuit against Mayers and Tacopina, filed in 2023). Ephron would later suggest the audio was created by AI. But Tacopina couldn't leave anything to chance. The dismantling of the prosecution would require him to ferret out inconsistencies and contradictions in Ephron's testimony in cross-examination.

This happened to be his specialty.

"By intimidating the witness but still maintaining credibility with the jury, he has succeeded marvelously in the art of cross-examination," says Andrew Napolitano, a retired jurist and longtime Fox News legal analyst. "He may be the best cross-examiner I've ever seen."





Camera Ready  
Tacopina, flanked by partner  
Chad Siegel, addressed press in  
May 2023 outside the Manhattan  
courthouse where his client  
Donald Trump stood trial for  
sexually abusing E. Jean Carroll.

**IN THE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE IS A FRAMED** photo of A\$AP Rocky with Tacopina. On the rapper's wrist is a gold Patek Philippe watch that retails for \$75,000. When my eye goes from that to Tacopina's own timepiece, the lawyer smiles, flashing gleaming white teeth. "This is not that," he says of his green and white Richard Mille Le Mans, which sells for nearly half a million dollars.

"It's my one vice in life," he says of his watch collection. "It's the one thing I treat myself to." Though he's not exactly depriving himself, either. He's also treated himself to an ownership stake in a number of Italian soccer teams over the years, including AS Roma (his father's favorite squad), Venezia FC and — since 2021 — the Serie C club SPAL. He was knighted in 2019 in Venice, largely for his contributions to soccer.

It was a landmark achievement for the son of Italian immigrants, born in Brownsville, Brooklyn, in 1966. Then, as now, the neighborhood was among the poorest in New York and largely African American. "I just thought I was a light-skinned Black guy growing up, honest to God."

Tacopina played ice hockey at Skidmore College, serving as the team's captain and its enforcer. He retains the college's record for most time in the penalty box. Given the chance to play for the AHL on the New York Islanders' farm team, he chose instead to pursue a law degree at University of Bridgeport (now Quinnipiac University), encouraged by his debate club coach.

*"Trump himself once asked me who I thought the best trial lawyer in New York City was, and I said Joe."*

**ANDREW NAPOLITANO, FOX NEWS LEGAL ANALYST**



**Tactical Advantage**  
In 2007, Tacopina got rapper Meek Mill (center, with the attorney) released from prison, where he had been held for parole violation since the previous year. The entertainer coined the nickname “Joe Tactical.”

Upon graduating in 1991, he worked his way to the DA’s office in the Eastern District of New York, where he served as a junior prosecutor. He soon switched sides to become a criminal defense attorney, a job he’d wanted ever since he’d read the classic true-crime book *Fatal Vision*, by Joe McGinnis, about a Green Beret accused of killing his wife and two daughters in 1970.

“One page, I was like, ‘Wow, this guy’s guilty, he killed his family.’ Next page: ‘He’s so fucking innocent, it’s unbelievable.’ ” He thought, “I want to do this, yeah, this is what I want to do.”

The bulk of his clients at first consisted of NYPD cops. In an early victory, he helped score the acquittal of one of the policemen connected to the assault and rape of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima. When former NYPD commissioner Bernie Kerik was accused of corruption in 2006, Tacopina got him a sweetheart plea deal, admitting to two misdemeanors.

One day, Johnnie Cochran cold-called him with an offer to collaborate. Given Cochran’s notoriety as lead defense attorney in the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Tacopina suspected it was a crank call. But the offer was real, and Cochran became a mentor. To this day, Tacopina uses strategies he learned during his apprenticeship with the master showman of the courtroom.

Over time, thanks to his string of rabbit-out-of-a-hat triumphs in court on behalf of notable clients, Tacopina would come to challenge Cochran for the title.

He became known to fight as hard as anyone for his clients, on one occasion almost literally. According to the Daily News, he “had to be physically restrained from brawling with another lawyer” at a 2013 arbitration hearing for his client, Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez, who’d been accused of using performance-enhancing drugs. In Tacopina’s telling, the opposing lawyer had defiantly stood up during a heated exchange, and he’d merely followed suit, refusing to back down. At any rate, the incident did little to dent his reputation; if anything, it helped.

“Trump himself once asked me who I thought the best trial lawyer in New York City was,” says Napolitano, “and I said Joe.”

In 2023, Tacopina would join Trump’s legal team in the civil case brought against the president by journalist E. Jean Carroll, who claimed that Trump raped her in the mid-1990s. (The jury cleared the defendant of rape, but found him liable for sexually abusing and defaming Carroll; the judgments are under appeal.)

The attorney also initially joined Trump’s defense in the criminal case brought by the Manhattan DA in the Stormy Daniels hush-money affair but made headlines when he abruptly withdrew from the legal team in January 2024, without citing a reason.

Tacopina still considers the Manhattan case — which resulted in 34 felony convictions against Trump — to be a “political witch hunt” that “should never have been brought.” Asked why he left, he allows only that “I just had to follow my moral compass at the time. It was a combination of, I couldn’t fulfill certain requests, I couldn’t be involved in certain cases, and I just had a slew of other things happening.”

Tacopina’s defense of Trump is no more an endorsement of MAGA politics than his defense of accused murderers and fraudsters is an endorsement of their values. Asked how he can look himself in the mirror while working with scandalous and potentially criminal figures, Tacopina cites a speech he’s given titled, “How can you defend those people?”

“You don’t need a law degree to know that it is a measure of character and integrity in a lawyer to represent someone who is despised,” he says. “The state needs to meet a force, a resistance — it should be difficult to convict someone. Not easy to put someone in jail. Listen, Mr. Prosecutor, you want a conviction here? You’re going to have to work to get it. And my job is to make it as hard as possible to get it.”

*“You can’t fake cry, you know? And I would never do that because it looks bullshit.”*

**JOE TACOPINA**





### Heavy Hitter

Tacopina has defended numerous notorious New Yorkers, including Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez (above) and former NYPD commissioner Bernie Kerik (below).



**HE CERTAINLY MADE THINGS DIFFICULT FOR** the prosecutor in the A\$AP Rocky case, L.A. County Deputy DA John Lewin. Tacopina had begun working Ephron, the accusing witness, a year before the trial in the preliminary hearing. Without a jury to observe him, there was no need for him to appear sympathetic in his exchanges with Ephron. “He was just really angry, and I was going right back at him, right back in his face, as effusive as he was,” Tacopina boasts. “At the trial, my strategy was going to be very different.”

With that heated first round, Tacopina had primed Ephron to be similarly combative during the trial itself: “What I did was I let him do all his antics. Calling me ‘bro.’ Calling me ‘Tacopina,’ throwing a water bottle, saying ‘fuck’ in a courtroom. The judge started coming down, and me? I stayed calm as a cucumber. Of course, that was my ploy, to let the jury see how bad he is. Let him just hang himself, with his credibility literally dwindling by the question.”

Over the course of several hours, Tacopina methodically broke down Ephron’s story and forced him to acknowledge inconsistencies in his testimony.

Tacopina relentlessly needled Ephron with questions about why he had not been forthcoming about visiting an L.A. gun range two weeks before the shooting — where he could conceivably have gathered the shell casings the defense suggested he could have later planted at the scene. (Ephron vehemently denied having falsified evidence.)

“You think you’re slick, and I’m onto you — you’re not gonna keep tripping me up,” a visibly frustrated Ephron blurted out, causing the judge to rebuke him, “Just stop

talking!” The jury took it all in. Even Ephron acknowledged he’d been soundly defeated. “I’m getting screwed,” he said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes as Tacopina looked on, arms crossed.

“Joe does not get the credit he deserves,” says attorney and lecturer Larry Pozner, author of *Cross-Examination: Science and Techniques*, the seminal book on the art of interviewing witnesses. “People see his size and they hear his deep voice, and they assume that what he’s doing in cross is bullying witnesses. But what he’s doing is extraordinarily subtle cross-examinations. They’re elegant, they are deeply researched, they are thought out well in advance.”

Every hour on the stand requires 25 hours of preparation, confirms Tacopina, living up to the nickname given to him by former client Meek Mill: Joe Tactical.

His tactics clearly rattled the prosecutor, who appeared to lose his temper several times during the trial and repeatedly accused Tacopina of being unethical, accusations Tacopina gamely returned.

“One more thing out of him, and we air everything that’s happened in this case!” shouted Deputy DA Lewin.

“Ooh, I’m so threatened by you,” said Tacopina, waving his hands in the air.

“You should be, Joe.”

It all made for great TV.

Tacopina’s summation was 112 pages long. To get it into his head the morning of, he performed his usual ritual: He isolated himself in the courthouse, put on a headset and rehearsed the materials to the rhythms of The Smashing Pumpkins and Grateful Dead.

Reciting it in front of the jury took five and a half hours. He made sure to lock eyes with every juror “and the alternates.” By the end of it, when describing the devastating toll a guilty verdict would take on Mayers’ family — including Rihanna and their two young sons, who were watching from the front row — he teared up and struggled to compose himself.

Several jurors welled up as well. That’s when he knew he had them. Even Judge Arnold was moved: “That indicated to me that he was speaking from the heart,” he says.

Notes Tacopina: “It can only be powerful if it’s real. You can’t fake cry, you know? And I would never do that because it looks bullshit.”



When the clerk brought the verdict to the bench on Feb. 18, Judge Arnold looked at it and asked the jury to confirm it. Tacopina felt his heart drop. “In my experience,” he said later, “you only have a jury confirm a verdict upon conviction.” For what seemed like an eternity, Tacopina swayed back and forth, shoulder to shoulder with Mayers, whose life hung in the balance.

Finally the clerk read the words “not guilty,” and the room exploded in squeals. Mayers spun around and seemed to fly as he dove headfirst into Rihanna’s arms. “That was maybe the most surreal moment I’ve had in the courtroom,” says Tacopina.

Rihanna embraced Tacopina, burying her tear-soaked cheek into his chest and smearing what the lawyer jokingly described as “the whole fucking Fenty palette” onto his tan suit. The couple told Tacopina they would call their next child A\$AP Joe.

“He is truly a genius and a caring person,” A\$AP Rocky tells The Hollywood Reporter. “He will always be family to us. Inside the courtroom, if I ever felt nervous, I simply would look at Joe and feed off the supreme sense of confidence that he has.”

*“Inside the courtroom, if I ever felt nervous, I simply would look at Joe and feed off the supreme sense of confidence that he has.”*

**A\$AP ROCKY**



Freedom Isn't Free  
A\$AP Rocky  
embraces Tacopina  
following the Feb.  
18 not guilty verdict  
in his case. A  
framed version of  
this photo sits in  
the attorney's  
office.

**SINCE THE A\$AP ROCKY TRIAL, OTHER** embattled celebrities have come knocking on Tacopina’s door, hoping for him to work his magic. Among them is talk show host Wendy

Williams, who in March hired the attorney to represent her in her fight against the guardianship imposed on her following a series of health struggles. Tacopina told the press the situation was “a true injustice” and that “murderers have more freedom than Wendy.”

And then there’s perhaps the most disgraced celeb of them all these days. Diddy’s team has asked Tacopina multiple times to defend the mogul against charges of racketeering and sex trafficking, with a trial set to begin in May. As Tacopina told the hosts of The Breakfast Club podcast in March, he has repeatedly turned down Diddy, citing bad blood between the defendant and several of Tacopina’s friends, like Jay-Z, and clients.

But Diddy’s team has persisted. When I meet with him in his office, Tacopina shows me his phone with yet another plea. Is he going to reject it again?

“I’m going to speak to him. I’m not saying yes or no. I’m just going to listen.”

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TRUMP: ANDREW KELLY-POOL/GETTY IMAGES. ROCKY: PATRICK T. FALLON - POOL/GETTY IMAGES.  
THIS SPREAD: TACOPINA: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES. MILL: JEFFERSON SIEGEL/NY DAILY NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES.  
RODRIGUEZ: ANTHONY DELMUNDO/NY DAILY NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES. KERIK: ENID ALVAREZ/NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE  
VIA GETTY IMAGES. ROCKY: DANIEL COLE-POOL/GETTY IMAGES.