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HEADLINE: QNS. DA'S PRO-POLICE REP MAY TAKE HIT

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BODY:

LONG BEFORE Sean Bell was killed in a barrage of bullets outside a seedy strip club, Queens had been roiled by cases involving police wounding or killing other unarmed men of color.

Federico Pereira was choked to death in 1991 while handcuffed. Lebert Folkes Jr. was shot in the face and survived in 1996. Steven Excell died after being shot in the back of the head the same year.

All of the police officers involved in those cases were cleared of wrongdoing under the jurisdiction of Queens District Attorney Richard Brown.

In his 15 years as Queens' top prosecutor, Brown has developed a reputation to some as being pro-cop, particularly in cases where the stakes are the highest.

But in securing indictments against three NYPD detectives in the Bell shooting, Brown has an opportunity to change that image, real or perceived.

"Everyone in Queens knows he's a thoughtful and intelligent district attorney," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University. "There was no rush to indict . . . He defined the process, instead of letting external players do it."

The real challenge for Brown will come at trial - because other investigations involving cops in Queens typically end at the grand jury level.

In 1996, police wrongly thought Folkes had stolen a car and confronted him in Far Rockaway. They described the shooting as an accident. An officer's gun went off as Folkes struggled with the officers, police said.

Queens prosecutors presented evidence to a grand jury, including conflicting accounts of what happened. No charges were filed.

Prosecutors also presented testimony surrounding the death of Excell to a grand jury but didn't get an

indictment.

An officer said his gun discharged accidentally as he tried to pull Excell from beneath a parked car in Jamaica. Excell allegedly was hiding under the car from cops called to check a report that he beat his wife.

"Dick Brown's reputation is one of excessive favoritism to the police," lawyer and radio commentator Ron Kuby said. "He has promised evenhanded justice but has rarely delivered in cases of police shootings."

In the choking death of Pereira, a grand jury did indict Officer Anthony Paparella in the murder of the suspected car thief. Four other officers were alleged to have played lesser roles but were indicted for murder for "acting in concert" with Paparella.

After reviewing the case, Brown successfully petitioned a judge to drop the charges against all but Paparella, citing insufficient evidence. His office took Paparella to trial on a lesser charge of manslaughter - but Paparella was acquitted in a non-jury trial.

Yet political consultant Norman Adler noted Queens has changed.

"Its traditional white, Catholic ethnic base has been diminishing for years, so if you are going to be an elected leader, you have to be sensitive to the minority voters who may very well be a majority," Adler said.

Either way, there's little dispute that Brown - whom many call "Judge" in a nod to his years on the bench, including a stint in the Appellate Division - will carry out his mission to enforce the law.

As Moss noted, Brown "comes across as a guy who is trustworthy." pdonohue@nydailynews.com