

# Players, Sports Agents at Odds

## Claiming threats occurred, SMU athletes cooperating with FBI

By Danny Robbins  
and Manny Topol

Four former Southern Methodist University football players, three of whom are top NFL prospects, are cooperating with authorities in an FBI investigation into alleged threats of violence against college players by two New York sports agents.

The four players — Jerry Ball, Ronald Morris, Jeff Atkins and Terence Mann — have been questioned by the FBI about the activities of New York sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom**.

The FBI is investigating alleged threats made to Morris by **Bloom**, who allegedly told Morris that he would break Morris' legs and hands if Morris dropped **Bloom** and **Walters** as his agents to sign with a different sports agent.

**Walters** and his firm, World Sports and Entertainment Inc., have filed lawsuits against several top college athletes of various schools charging breach of contract. Documents in many of the suits indicate that **Walters** may have given the players large amounts of money while the players still were eligible to play, a violation of NCAA rules.

Despite the many lawsuits, the FBI investigation, which sources say is in its basic stage, seems to be centered in Dallas, and is based on Morris' complaint of the threat by **Bloom**.

In a telephone interview with Newsday from his Beaumont, Texas, home, Ball said Morris told him that **Bloom** had threatened him.

"On two occasions, Ron told me that **Bloom** said he was going to break Ron's hands," Ball said. "Then he [Morris] said, 'Well, I'm going to have a tape made. When he [**Bloom**] calls back, I'm going to get him to threaten me again,' and he [**Bloom**] did. And the reason he did was because Ron signed with [sports agent] Sherwood Blount." Ball said he was not present when the tape of the threat was made.

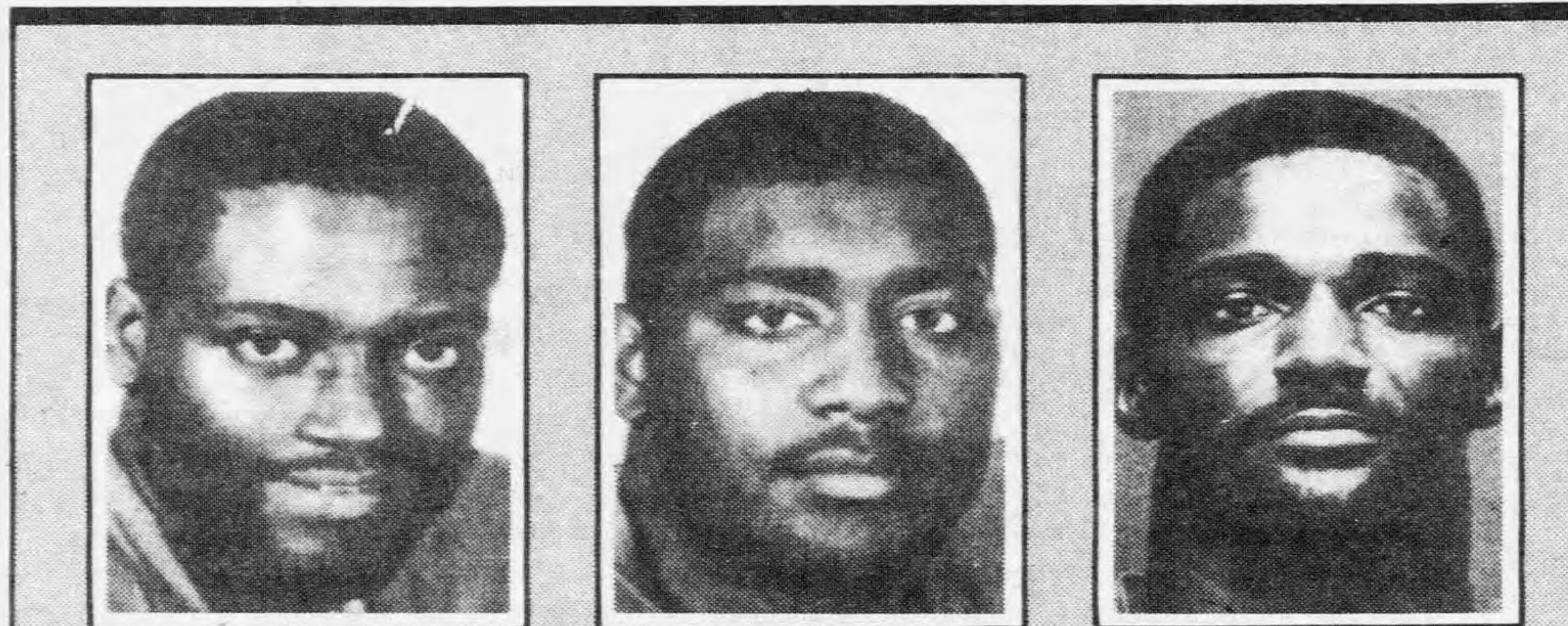
Ball said an FBI agent interviewed him at his home April 13 about the recruiting of players by sports agents, and specifically whether he had received any threats or had witnessed the threat against Morris.

In the Newsday interview, Ball admitted he signed a promissory note with **Walters** in December, 1985, shortly after his junior season at SMU. It was the first time any player for SMU had admitted publicly receiving money from a sports agent — Blount or **Walters** — while playing for SMU. Ball said he took the loan from **Walters** shortly before his 21st birthday. Ball said his wife was pregnant and added, "I needed some type of help so I could concentrate on school. I wasn't able to work [under NCAA rules] and my wife couldn't work. So I looked for a loan."

He said he sought a loan from a bank and was turned down. Then, Ball said, he was turned down for a loan by SMU coach Bobby Collins. He said that Collins told him, "When we recruited you, we didn't recruit your wife."

Ball then turned to **Walters**, whom he had met through Mann, for a loan. Ball said **Walters** gave him about \$15,000, with no interest involved, and no strings attached.

Ball wrote a termination letter to **Walters** — a copy of which has been obtained by Newsday — in which Ball said, "I, myself heard one of your employees tell my teammate, Ron Morris, that his legs would be broken and he



Jeff Atkins

Jerry Ball

Ron Morris

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— Jerry Ball

would not be able to play if he tried to leave the firm . . . My parents were very much upset when I told them about his remarks, and were very upset to learn that I had signed with your firm when I was 20 years old without their knowledge." Ball told Newsday, however, that he was told by Morris and Atkins about the threats and did not directly overhear them.

In his two-page letter, Ball acknowledges the loan agreement with **Walters** and writes about a partial payment that **Walters** made on an insurance liability policy. Ball had expected **Walters** to pay for the policy in full. "Both you and **Lloyd Bloom** told me this policy had been paid," Ball wrote.

"I have a letter stating that the insurance company and agent are expecting me to pay them the balance of \$7,000 or more upon my signing an NFL contract," Ball wrote. "Both you and **Lloyd Bloom** definitely told me this policy had been paid."

Ball said he sent copies of the letter to the National Football League Players Association and to National Football League commissioner Pete Rozelle.

Ball told Newsday that other agents have offered inducements to get players to sign before the players' college careers are over. "In all honesty, there are other agents offering money, no different than **Norby Walters**," Ball said.

"I've had agents just call and tell

me, 'Jerry, we'll give you money and a car to sign,' and it didn't take three minutes [of conversation] for them to get to that," Ball said.

**Walters** and **Bloom** are executives of the World Sports and Entertainment Inc., which has a staff of 42. **Walters** has been an entertainment agent for 30 years and his firm has represented, among others, such entertainers as trumpet player Miles Davis, pop band Kool and the Gang and singers Luther Vandross and Janet Jackson. **Walters** and **Bloom** entered into the sports-agent field two years ago.

Ball said it was his understanding that Morris, Atkins and Mann had contracts with **Walters** firm and broke away to sign with another sports-management firm, Athletic Associates in Dallas, a firm headed by former SMU player, Sherwood Blount. It was because of that move that the alleged threats were made, especially against Morris, according to one source.

Steve Endicott, an agent with Athletic Associates, confirmed that Morris, Atkins and Mann are cooperating with the FBI. Endicott said when the players first told him about three weeks ago that they had been contacted by the FBI he advised them to cooperate.

Endicott said, ". . . Obviously the FBI is involved. That's fairly serious."

Blount was banned from dealing with the SMU athletic program for life after the NCAA determined he provided a \$5,000 payment to the family

of a recruit, offensive lineman Sean Stopperich of Pittsburgh, in 1984 — the primary violation in SMU's August, 1985, probation. Sanctions included a loss of all scholarships in 1986.

In February, SMU football received the so-called "death penalty" from the NCAA and won't field a football team during the next two seasons. The school and the NCAA found that 13 players received monthly payments totaling \$61,000 during the 1985-86 academic year and the fall of '86. The Dallas Times Herald subsequently reported that Morris, Ball and Mann were among those 13 players and that Blount controlled the fund.

Both Mann and Morris have declined to comment and Atkins could not be reached for comment.

**Walters** and **Bloom** have refused to discuss the allegations against them and **Walters** has not returned phone calls to his office or hotel rooms. In a copyright story last month in the Atlanta Constitution and Journal, **Walters** denied threatening any of the players, but did not deny making cash payments to collegiate football players before their eligibility had expired, a violation of NCAA rules.

Sources familiar with **Walters'** method of operating his sports-agent business said it was a standard practice of **Walters'** to sign players still in college and to advance cash loans in an effort to sign them as clients. The contracts were postdated to go into effect after the players' eligibility expired.

NCAA rules forbid a player from entering an agreement with an agent, accepting cash or discussing money terms before completing his college eligibility. The NCAA could penalize the school if it turns out that school officials knew or should have known the payments were made, but such penalties generally are not invoked.

Legal documents filed as part of court suits by **Walters** against several top college players show **Walters** may have given the players promissory notes for several thousand dollars.

One of the players who has been sued for breach of contract is Buffalo Bills running back **Ronnie Harmon**, formerly of Bayside. The agents claim they gave **Harmon** more than \$54,000 in cash and loans during his last two years at Iowa. **Harmon** reportedly signed a contract in 1984 with the agents that was postdated to Jan. 2, 1986, the day after the 1986 Rose Bowl. He allegedly received periodic loans, as well as a loan that was paid for by **Walters** for a Mercedes 650 SL.

**Harmon** was selected by the Bills in the first round of the 1986 NFL draft. **Harmon** has refused to comment. His attorney and new agent, Martin Rauch, has said that **Harmon** was "misled" into believing there were no restrictions against taking the money.

Other players include Purdue cornerback Rod Woodson who allegedly accepted \$21,606 in payments from **Walters**. The agent is suing Woodson for \$500,000 in damages, alleging that Woodson broke a representation contract with **Walters'** firm. According to court papers in New York, Woodson signed a promissory note for \$4,000 during his junior year at Purdue.

The other players include Auburn running back Brent Fullwood, and Tony Woods, University of Pittsburgh defensive lineman. The promissory note against Fullwood indicates he was given \$4,000 last August, before the start of the football season.