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Probe bares 'sleazy' business

By Toni Ginnetti May 31, 1987 Publication: Chicago Sun-Times Page: 87 Word Count: 615

Bears middle linebacker Mike Singletary recalled in his autobiography the experience of being "recruited" by agents. "As a business major, I'd always questioned the need for agents, particularly after college experiences of being wooed with sleazy promises of cash, cars and women if I would sign with certain 'big name' agents," he wrote.

Singletary's words were no revelation to players, agents and general managers who long have known what goes on when it comes time for an athlete to move from amateur sports to the multimillion-dollar world of the pros.

But the underside of the business never was the subject of federal investigations until a New York theatrical agent, **Norby Walters**, four months ago aroused suspicions when he sued six collegiate players for breach of contract, charging they reneged on deals with him.

The suits brought to light that **Walters**, who until two years ago represented only entertainers such as Luther Vandross and Janet Jackson, had provided the players with front money and held post-dated contracts with them, in violation of NCAA rules on amateur eligibility.

Walters and a partner, **Lloyd Bloom**, who run World Sports & Entertainment in New York, at first freely scorned their critics, saying college coaches and officials were hypocrites who long have looked the other way while agents like **Walters** and **Bloom** made contacts with college athletes.

But the situation changed when federal authorities began looking into related allegations by

some players that the pair used enticements and threats to get them to sign and stay with Walters and Bloom. The two declined requests for interviews.

The FBI in Chicago began its own inquiry after the March 16 beating of an assistant to sports agent Steve Zucker, whose represents a number of Bears including quarterback Jim McMahon. Zucker's assistant, Kathe Clements, allegedly had been threatened in January at the Senior Bowl by Bloom to stay away from Nebraska fullback Doug Dubose, whom Walters' firm also coveted.

Clements' assailant has not been found, and Walters and Bloom have denied any connection.

But that initial investigation has grown into a full-scale grand jury probe of Walters, Bloom and players involved with the two. More than 60 players and a number of collegiate officials have been subpoenaed to testify before the grand jury, whose wide-ranging inquiry is expected to take months to complete. Among those subpoenaed are former University of Iowa star Ronnie Harmon, now with the Buffalo Bills, whose attorney is demanding immunity in exchange for his testimony; Rod Woodson of Purdue; Tony Woods of Pittsburgh; Dubose; and Edwin Simmons of Texas.

Informed sources said the grand jury is focusing on several areas, including:

Allegations of extortion against players who reneged on signing with Walters and Bloom.

Tax evasion on the part of the players who may not have reported payments made to them from Walters in order to avoid jeopardizing their eligibility.

Fraud on the part of players who may have accepted federally funded Pell Grants, given to financially needy college players, without disclosing the payments they were receiving from Walters.

Conspiracy between the agents and the players, who may have been told by Walters not to report the money he was paying them.

Possible prosecution under the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, normally used to prosecute organized crime cases. The so-called RICO law gives authorities a 10-year statute of limitations to find and prosecute patterns of corruption and conspiracy and also enables prosecutors to seize the assets of those convicted.

Ironically, because **Walters** is not registered with the NFL Players Association, he is only able to represent rookies in contract negotiations because they are not yet members of the union.

Bloom is registered with the union, but the grand jury investigation could jeopardize his standing.

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