

← Back

NCAA hypocrisy is to blame for the scourge of Walters

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I think it's time somebody said something nice about Norby Walters. Oh sure, you can hardly pick up the newspaper these days without finding him accused of paying off some college athlete or being accused of fraud, extortion, racketeering and maybe worse.

Well, nobody's perfect.

But before a federal grand jury finishes its investigation of Walters, and without presuming to judge whether he has employed the mafia-like tactics alleged to him, I think we owe the man a small vote of thanks.

With little more than the judicious use of some relatively paltry sums of money, Walters has managed to show the world of big-time college athletics for what it is. And unless I miss my guess, he has that world frightened in a way no recruiting scandal ever could.

Last week, two of the biggest football schools in the country were rocked by the news their athletes were involved with Walters. Ohio State had to declare Cris Carter, the leading pass-catcher in its history, ineligible for his senior year because he had signed an illegal contract with the agent. And Notre Dame had to explain what it knew about reports wide receiver Alvin Miller had been subpoenaed to testify in front of a grand jury investigating Walters.

Ohio State's loss was the worst - Carter is a two-time All-America who has scored 27 touchdowns - but Notre Dame, a school that prides itself on running a clean program, was

hardly thrilled to have its good name brought up in this context.

A number of other college athletes are also reported to have been declared ineligible for taking money from Walters, and as many as 60 are said to have been subpoenaed to testify. The iceberg has surfaced, it would appear, and may be heading rapidly toward the Titanic of intercollegiate athletics.

But the most important aspect of Walters' handiwork does not have to do with the number of athletes he has suborned, or with the prestige of the schools implicated, but rather with how cheaply he was able to accomplish his ends.

Carter, a likely first-round NFL draft choice, sold out a year of eligibility for a \$5,000 promissory note and \$150 a month for less than a year. That's less than \$8,000 - more than half of it a loan - in exchange for a senior year that, had he performed the way he did last season, could have rocketed his stock with the pro scouts into the stratosphere. Whether Miller also took money remains to be seen, but we can

be sure he didn't get much.

Walters never pays anything close to what the top college athletes can get from the pros, in fact. "On the average, I probably pay \$10,000 to get a contract," he told the Sun-Times' Art Petacque not long ago.

So why do the athletes do it? Why do so many of them risk the most important moments of their college careers for such small rewards?

The answer is simplicity itself. It is the NCAA's institutionalized hypocrisy that gives Walters an argument big enough to drive his checkbook through. It is the system that allows everybody connected with college sports to chase after every dollar that isn't nailed down as long as he can prove he didn't actually play the games that created the money in the first place.

It is not hard to imagine what Walters tells the athletes he wants to sign. Any of us could construct at least as good a sales pitch as he uses.

"How much money did your coach make last year?" he probably asks them. "How much in salary and how much from his radio and television shows and how much giving lectures and how much from his summer camp and how much from making you wear a certain brand of

shoe?

"How much did the athletic department make off what you and your teammates did? How much from ticket sales and how much from television and radio and how much from luxury box sales and how much from that bowl game you went to and how much from concessions and parking and booster club donations from alumni who get so excited by the games you play?

How much did your school make? How much in free publicity and how much in increased public awareness and how much in greater admission applications from impressionable high school seniors? How much did the games you played help add to the physical plant at your school?

"And what did you get? A scholarship? Nice, if you graduate, although most football and basketball players don't. Room and board? Laundry? A few trips? Dreams of a career in professional sports? Swell, about what you would have received if you'd joined the Army, isn't it? But what will any of it buy you? What is any of it worth in relation to what other people - the same people who tell you it's illegal to take a dime - are getting?

"Here's a couple of thousand dollars. Buy a car. Buy some clothes. Take your girlfriend out on the town. Send some money home to your mother. Sign here. It's just a loan. You can pay me back. Do it. They're doing it. They're making money off you. Why shouldn't you make money off you?"

Norby Walters may be a bum. He may be a thief and and a racketeer and all those other things people say about him.

But he is one other thing as well. He is a businessman who is filling a need.

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Date: July 20, 1987

Page: 125

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