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Reporter's call led to football payoff probe

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'One way the FBI got into it was a phone call from you which brought certain information to our attention," said U.S. Attorney Anton Valukas, singling out this reporter Wednesday at a press conference crowded with reporters from across the nation. The phone call, he said, "was one of the precipitating reasons for the investigation in the beginning and (it) provided information which was of substantial assistance."

It began in March, 1987, when Essee Kupcinet telephoned me. She was concerned that a Skokie policeman had answered when she telephoned the office of sports agent Steve Zucker in an attempt to line up Bears quarterback Jim McMahon for a charity affair.

I put in a call to Zucker's office and spoke to Skokie Police Sgt. Philip O'Keefe, who said Zucker's assistant, Kathy Clements, 32, had been beaten unconscious by a man wearing a ski mask. He said Zucker's office had been ransacked.

I tracked Zucker down in Palm Springs, Calif., where he was vacationing. He was stunned, saying he didn't know Clements had been assaulted.

"Who do you think may have done this?" I asked. Zucker didn't answer.

"Do you have any enemies who have threatened you or tried to cause you problems?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Lloyd Bloom and Norby Walters. They're rivals from New York who are trying to steal clients from me and they have mob connections of some kind, from what I hear."

"You'd better get back here as fast as possible," I said. "Since these guys are from New York, get in touch with the FBI. I'll call for you."

I made the call, and FBI agent George Randolph was assigned to the case by James McKenzie, FBI chief here.

The feds quickly learned that Clements, whose husband, Tom, plays in the Canadian Football League, had been threatened recently by a man purporting to be a business rival of Zucker. At the time, Zucker and the two New York agents were vying to sign Nebraska fullback Doug DuBose.

The threat led them to believe the ransacking of Zucker's office was actually a search for names of athletes who had signed with Zucker or for a list of prospective clients.

Zucker was called before a federal grand jury and, under questioning by Assistant U.S. Attorney Howard Pearl, named the two New York agents and suggested all their activities be scrutinized, sources said. Which is exactly what happened.

The rumored mob connections were verified by the FBI, which traced threats being made to athletes to Michael Franzese of the Columbo crime family. Franzese is serving a 10-year prison sentence for racketeering.

Zucker also suggested to the FBI they should attend a meeting of professional athletes and agents at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles and keep their ears open. It was there that many valuable tips were gathered, it was learned.

More than 60 college football stars who were professional prospects were trotted before the grand jury. Sources said they named Bloom and Walters.

The snakebitten football program at the University of Illinois also took another hit. Safety Craig Swoope, a member of the 1986 team, is charged with conspiring with the agents to keep his illegal contract secret.

It all started with a phone call.

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