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Sports agents' trial here has all-star cast

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In November, 1985, star Southern Methodist University football player Ronald Morris fell under the spell of two fast-talking New Yorkers. Wooed with promises of money and entertaining hopes of a berth on a high-power professional team, Morris - although still bound by collegiate amateur rules - signed on the dotted line with sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom**.

A year later, however, when Morris tried to sever his relationship with the agents, he says **Bloom** warned that he would have someone break his legs and he "would never play football again."

Federal court documents say it was also then that **Bloom** reminded Morris that the money he had received came from "bigger backers from Los Angeles who don't care about what they do, including blowing up the house" of Morris' new agent.

Morris, 25, now a wide receiver for the Chicago Bears, is just one of 44 college athletes who allegedly received cash payments or lavish gifts from **Walters** and **Bloom** in violation of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules. Most of the former students have agreed to pay back tuition to their alma maters for breaking the rules.

Later this week Morris will join 13 of the former student players on the roster at the criminal trial of **Walters** and **Bloom**.

An indictment brought last summer by a federal grand jury here alleges that the two agents got the collegians to sign professional contracts before their amateur eligibility expired and then deployed strong-arm tactics to keep them as clients. musical tour by the Jackson Five.

The trial is expected to draw huge crowds to U.S. District Judge George M. Marovich's courtroom (one of the smallest in the Dirksen Federal Building) and to attract nationwide attention.

The testimony is certain to reveal details about a sordid episode in U.S. sports history, and to illustrate how corruption has crept onto many a college campus.

In addition, the trial will feature two of the city's most adroit attorneys - U.S. Attorney Anton R. Valukas and his predecessor, Dan K. Webb, as the two pit their skills against each other.

Valukas and assistants Howard Pearl and Helene Greenwald will appear for the prosecution armed with the seven-count racketeering, conspiracy and mail fraud indictment.

Webb, Steven Molo and George Lombardi will defend Bloom. New York attorneys Robert Gold and Ethan Levin-Epstein, together with Chicago's Robert Stephenson, will provide Walters' defense.

"It's just a trial," Valukas observed last week when asked how he viewed what has been billed the "Battle of the Titans."

But few trials ever feature a lineup of star players such as Morris, Bears teammate Maurice Douglass, George Swann of the Cleveland Browns, Garland Rivers and Devon Mitchell of the Detroit Lions, Paul Palmer of the Kansas City Chiefs, Roderick Woodson of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Mark Ingram of the New York Giants, Everett Gay of the Dallas Cowboys, Robert Perryman of the New England Patriots, Ronald Harmon of the Buffalo Bills, Tony Woods of the Seattle Seahawks and former collegians Alvin Miller and Robert Banks.

And how many trials hold the promise of a possible cameo appearance by superstar Michael Jackson? It wouldn't be the first time Jackson has showed up in federal court here. Four years ago he appeared during a copyright infringement suit. No one is commenting on whether Jackson will be called to testify about a charge that Walters and Franzese tried to shake down the manager of the Jackson Five for a percentage of profits from the group's 1981 concert tour.

Others also speculate that National Football League Commissioner Pete Rozelle could be called or at least cited by the defense to show Walters and Bloom acted in good faith in their dealings with college athletes.

According to a 1960 California federal court opinion, Rozelle, while general manager of the Los Angeles Rams in 1959, signed Louisiana State University star Billy Cannon to a professional contract before Cannon's final collegiate game, the Sugar Bowl contest against the University of Mississippi.

Cannon, however, decided to sign with the Houston Oilers instead and after the Rams sued to enforce their contract, the courts ruled in favor of Cannon.

Defense attorneys would not comment on whether they plan to raise the Rozelle case to rebut the government's fraud claims.

If convicted, Walters and Bloom could receive up to 70 years in prison and \$2 million in fines apiece. Last fall, All-America football star Cris Carter, now a wide receiver with the Philadelphia Eagles, pleaded guilty to criminal charges for lying about taking money from Walters, Bloom and another agent while he was playing at Ohio State University.

The trial of sports agent Norby Walters is billed as the "Battle of the Titans." Credit: Brian Jackson

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