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Jury Hears Bid by Agent to Sign Iowa Star

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CHICAGO, March 7 — In a secretly recorded conversation, Norby Walters, an agent on trial here on Federal charges of mail fraud and racketeering, was heard persuading Ronnie Harmon to sign a contract in March of his junior year at the University of Iowa.

Harmon's signing of the contract was a violation of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules, which prohibit college athletes from entering into agreements with agents before their college eligibility expires.

Walters is heard saying on the tape that he would post-date the contract, would give Harmon a \$2,500 loan upon signing and would wire the athlete \$250 a month in Iowa. Harmon testified that Walters, in fact, did this.

Federal prosecutors played the tape recording of Walters's dealings with Harmon, now a running back with the Buffalo Bills, as part of the first day of testimony in the trial of Walters and his partner, Lloyd Bloom.

Harmon recorded the tape in 1985 at a meeting in the offices of the two agents after they had flown him to New York City from Iowa. When Harmon's father, who was also present, raised questions about the propriety of the early signing, Walters answered: "The whole thing hinges on some jive semantics. The point is, we won't tell."

Under cross-examination by Bloom's attorney, Dan Webb, Harmon said that over the next 15 months, the agents made payments to him totaling \$54,000, including

Walters was secretly taped by Harmon, now a pro player.

\$1,000 for arranging to allow Bloom to call Harmon's teammate, Devon Mitchell, about representation. During that period, with Harmon playing a starring role, Iowa won the Big Ten championship and played in the 1986 Rose Bowl. The agents eventually did represent Mitchell.

Harmon admitted that university records indicated he was academically ineligible to play that season. According to Webb, the university nevertheless allowed Harmon to play in violation of conference rules.

Under further cross-examination, Harmon testified that he dismissed Walters and Bloom in the middle of contract negotiations with the Bills, and that he repaid only \$5,000 of the \$54,000 that the agents had advanced him.

"You took the famous Norby Walters for \$49,000?" said Webb.

"How could I take him to the cleaners?" replied Harmon, explaining that Walters in his own words had characterized their agreement as a gamble.

Walters's discussions with Harmon to get him to agree to that gamble were peppered with references to the black entertainers Walters had represented. Harmon is black.

"I'm the number one salesman of black entertainment in the world today," Walters

told Harmon on the tape, explaining he had consummated numerous "multi, multi mega-million deals," and was now ready to join forces with Bloom, whom he described as a "football fanatic."

Harmon testified that he believed what he did was wrong and that he had made a deal with the Government under which he would not be indicted in return for testifying truthfully, repaying the scholarship money paid by the University of Iowa and performing 250 hours of community service. He told the prosecution that after receiving the payments, he knowingly provided false information to the university and Big Ten Conference when filling out N.C.A.A. forms before his senior year.

He did so, he explained, so that he would not lose his scholarship, his eligibility to play football or cause the school to be penalized by the N.C.A.A., because he had signed with an agent and accepted money.

Throughout his cross-examination, Webb focused on Harmon's contention that he had in some way defrauded the university by falsely filling out the forms. Webb led Harmon through an explanation of his college transcript, noting that he had not taken any courses in his declared major of communications until his senior year, with the exception of an American film course that he had failed. In noting that Harmon had taken such courses as billiards and coaching football, Webb seemed to be suggesting that Harmon had not entered the university to pursue a degree, but merely to play football. This seemed to reinforce the avowed intention of the defense to put college football on trial.