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Harmon's Deal Heard On Tape

By Ron Berler
Newsday Special Correspondent

Chicago — In U.S. District Court yesterday, federal prosecutors played a secret tape recording of sports agent Norby Walters offering concealed cash payments to then-Iowa running back Ronnie Harmon. Harmon was to receive the payments upon signing a representational contract before his college eligibility expired.

On the tape, made by Harmon during a March 10, 1985, meeting in Walters' New York office, Walters offered the then-college junior a \$2,500 signing bonus plus monthly checks of \$250 until he signed an NFL contract, all in violation of NCAA rules.

Harmon testified that Walters then laid \$2,500 in cash on his desk and left the football player and his father alone in the room. When Walters returned, Harmon said, he pocketed the cash and signed the contract — post-dated Jan. 2, 1986, after Harmon's athletic eligibility expired — knowing he was potentially placing his scholarship and eligibility at Iowa in jeopardy.

Walters and his partner Lloyd Bloom are charged with racketeering, mail fraud, wire fraud and extortion.

Harmon told jurors he tape-recorded 40 minutes of his hour-long meeting with the agents on a micro-cassette recorder he held on top of his lap while sitting across from Walters at his desk. Walters and Bloom were unaware they were being taped.

The agents talked candidly, in a rapid-fire street patois, of how they planned to conceal Harmon's contract from University of Iowa officials.

"Let's put it this way," Walters said. "If we sign a piece of paper [contract] and we do a piece of business, I mean there's four of us here [Walters, Bloom, Harmon and Harmon's father], and then there's mama. That's the end of that."

When Harmon's father at one point questioned why Walters couldn't wait until Harmon's college eligibility expired before signing him, Walters replied, "Hey, I'm going to put my business on the line [in order to sign Harmon in violation of NCAA regulations], and hope he doesn't give me up."

Harmon turned over the tape to prosecutors after he struck a pretrial arrangement with them to repay \$6,000 in scholarship money to the University of Iowa, perform 250 hours of community service and to testify for the prosecution at Walters' and Bloom's trial. He did not explain why he made the tape.

After jurors heard the tape, Harmon testified that he received his monthly \$250 payments in the form of Western Union money orders sent to one address outside an Iowa City bus depot and another outside of Iowa City. "I didn't want no one to find out I was receiving money," he said.

Harmon also admitted receiving at least \$1,000 and perhaps as much as \$1,500 from Bloom for helping him recruit and sign Iowa teammate Devon Mitchell.

Bloom's defense attorney, Dan K. Webb, challenged Harmon's character, not his testimony. He accused Harmon of breaking his contract with the two agents while they were in the process of negotiating a \$1.3-million contract for him with the Bills, and of refusing to repay them money they had loaned him.

"You took the famous Norby Walters to the cleaners, didn't you?" Webb challenged him.

"How could I take him to the cleaners?" asked Harmon. Said Webb: "You took \$49,000 of his money."

"He was gambling," Harmon replied. Harmon said Walters "said he was gambling on me. I didn't say I was gambling on him."

"I don't think I stiffed him," Harmon added.



Ronnie Harmon

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