

NEWS

## SPORTS AGENT CASE PUTS IOWA ON TRIAL, TOO

By John Gorman, Ed Sherman contributed to this report  
Chicago Tribune • Published: Mar 08, 1989 at 12:00 am

Former University of Iowa running back Ronnie Harmon testified Tuesday that he played football his senior year even though he was on academic probation, and that he believed he was in violation of NCAA regulations.

Harmon, the first athlete to take the witness stand in the trial of New York sports agents Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom, also disclosed that he secretly tape-recorded Walters as the agent attempted to persuade Harmon to hire Walters as his agent.

On the tape played in court, Walters could be heard bragging to Harmon and his father, Jesse, that he was the "No. 1 salesman of black entertainment in the world."

At that meeting, Walters and Bloom handed Harmon \$2,500 after he signed a secret contract for Walters to represent him in negotiations for a professional contract.

In all, Harmon testified that he received more than \$64,000 from Bloom and Walters before he dumped them as his representatives a few days before he signed with the Buffalo Bills in August, 1986. Included was a \$29,000 downpayment on a \$64,000 Mercedes that Harmon still drives.

Harmon's disclosures about his academic background and the existence of the tape recording became the focal point of the day's testimony before District Judge George Marovich and a jury.

Walters, 58, and Bloom, 29, are on trial on multiple charges that include extortion, mail fraud, racketeering and obstruction of justice.

The prosecution has charged that the schools were defrauded of scholarship money conferred on the athletes who accepted cash from the agents in violation of NCAA eligibility rules.

Testifying under cross-examination by Dan Webb, an attorney for Bloom, Harmon said that to play football, he had to be on good academic standing with Iowa.

He recalled that after he was put on academic probation in May, 1985, he enrolled in a "water colors painting" course that summer to raise his average. Harmon said he received a "D" in the course.

"So you were on academic probation, but played that fall, played every game. Is that right?" Webb asked.

"Yes," Harmon said.

"Are you aware that the university certified you to play?" Webb asked.

"I know I played," Harmon responded. Then he volunteered, "Are you saying I was ineligible?" Webb did not reply.

Iowa football coach Hayden Fry vehemently denied later Tuesday that Harmon ever played while academically ineligible.

"A lot of guys are on academic probation from semester to semester, but they are still eligible," Fry said. "It depends on what the cumulative

(grade-point) total is; it depends on how much a 'D' would bring it down. It might still be enough to be eligible."

"There hasn't been anyone who's ever played here who was academically ineligible by NCAA rules. No one at the university would permit that."

Webb produced a copy of Harmon's transcripts, which showed that Harmon never graduated from Iowa despite taking courses such as "billiards."

"coaching football," "soccer" and "bowling."

Shortly after playing in the 1986 Rose Bowl game against UCLA, Harmon dropped out of school and began traveling back and forth from Iowa City to his home in New York City. Despite his absence, Harmon received a "B" in one course that final semester, according to his transcript.

UCLA defeated Iowa 45-28 with Harmon fumbling four times, the most of any game in his career.

Fry said Harmon was "an intelligent person who wasn't that bad of a student."

Webb's cross-examination of Harmon served as a harbinger of his strategy to put the schools on trial along with Walters and Bloom.

Earlier, U.S. Atty. Anton Valukas played tapes Harmon secretly recorded of his initial meeting with Walters and Bloom in their Manhattan offices in March, 1985. Harmon's leg, broken in a game against Wisconsin the previous season, was still in a cast.

Bloom called Harmon and told him, "This was my lucky day," Harmon said. "He said he represented big-time stars and wanted me to come to New York."

After receiving a plane ticket, Harmon flew to New York, where he was whisked to the agents' office by limousine. He testified he talked briefly to the agents and arranged to bring his father to a meeting the next day. Then he was taken to his home in Queens by limousine.

The next day, Harmon and his father took the subway to the Manhattan office carrying a tape recorder concealed in a briefcase.

The jurors listened as Walters, in his distinctive staccato voice, gave his pitch: "I grew up in a very poor situation. It gives you a hunger. It gives you a strength to make it happen.

"I'm the No. 1 salesman of . . . black entertainment in the world today. I feel that I'm the No. 1 dealmaker. I make a deal every couple of months. I'll make a multi-multi-megamillion deal for one of my musical people."

Walters lamented the lack of endorsements garnered by black athletes.

"They still don't want black," he said. "They'll take it only reluctantly when it's forced down their throat like good medicine.

"It goes to show you (Dallas Cowboy) Herschel Walker won the Heisman Trophy and got no endorsements and he didn't make any magazine cover except for sports covers. (New England Patriot) Doug Flutie makes the Heisman Trophy and everybody's after him now."

Walters pressed the Harmons to ignore the NCAA rules barring such deals and sign a contract that day.

Harmon's father interrupted, saying, "A rule is a rule, it's just like that . . . They got rules."

But Walters was undeterred. "Yeah, it's just like income tax . . . but the name of the game is we don't give them their money unless we have to,"

Walters said.

Walters, Bloom, Harmon and Harmon's father agreed to keep the contract secret and postdated it to Jan. 2, 1986, the day after Harmon would finish his football career, Harmon testified.

Then the agents urged Harmon to help sign teammates Devon Mitchell, a defensive back, and Larry Station, a linebacker. For setting up a telephone call between Mitchell, who signed up, and Walters, Harmon was paid \$1,000, he said.

Despite an offer of \$2,000, Harmon balked at approaching Station, he said.

After Harmon dumped the agents, they filed suit and eventually settled for a repayment of \$5,500.

"So you took the famous Norby Walters to the cleaners, didn't you?"

Webb asked.

"No, how could I take him to the cleaners?" Harmon responded. "It was an investment for them. He said he was gambling on me."

Webb then asked Harmon if he "stiffed" Walters for \$49,000.

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

"You wound up with \$49,000, didn't you?" Webb asked. "Yes," Harmon replied.

"You set him up from Day 1 with the tape recording, didn't you?" Webb asked.

"I didn't set him up," Harmon replied.

---