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Right and wrong a blur - In trial of agents, color NCAA's role in shades of gray

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Ahobbled **Ronnie Harmon** was in his dormitory room in **Iowa** City, **Iowa**, in March, 1985 wondering whether he ever would play football again when his telephone rang with an offer he couldn't refuse. The voice on the other end of the line was that of **Lloyd Bloom**, an aggressive, 24-year-old sports agent calling from New York City, **Harmon's** home town. It was the first time the two had ever spoken.

"This is your lucky day," **Bloom** told **Harmon**, according to testimony in the first week of a federal trial in which **Bloom** and his fellow agent, **Norby Walters**, are charged with ripping off nine of the nation's largest universities by signing football players before their eligibility expired.

Bloom told **Harmon** that he and **Walters**, a well-known musical entertainment agent, then 54, wanted to become **Harmon's** sports agents. He bragged about how **Walters** represented major black talent, such as the Commodores, Kool & the Gang and Luther Vandross. He asked the heralded, young black running back from Queens to come to New York right away and join **Walters'** stable of stars.

It was crunch time for **Harmon**. He knew it was against regulations for him to accept money,

gifts or anything of value from anyone outside his immediate family. He knew he would be ineligible to play in his senior year if anyone ever found out he had signed with a sports agent while he was still playing for the Iowa Hawkeyes.

But Harmon also was acutely aware he had broken his leg in two places on Nov. 3, 1984 in a game against Wisconsin during his junior year. In fact, he had just gotten his cast off. Though he was confident he could recover from the injury and regain the form that had prompted experts to project him as a possible Heisman Trophy winner, could he really be certain?

Within seconds, Harmon decided to go to New York. Bloom immediately sent the plane tickets via Federal Express. They were the first of more than \$54,000 in cash and benefits - including a new Mercedes Benz - Harmon would receive from the agents over the next year. He would repay them only \$5,000.

The limousine waiting at the airport in New York took Harmon straight to Walters' highrise Manhattan office whose big picture windows framed an impressive view of Broadway. There, the slender, gray-haired, bespectacled "Uncle Norby" greeted him. Walters pointed out the gold and platinum records and superstar posters hanging on his office wall. A few minutes later, the limo ferried Harmon to his parents' home in Queens.

The next day, a Saturday, would seal his fate. Harmon and his father took the subway to Walters' office.

With him Harmon brought a microcassette tape recorder, which he used to record Walters' brilliant, high pressure sales pitch. Neither Walters nor Bloom apparently saw the tape recorder sitting on Harmon's lap during their 45-minute meeting, nor noticed when Harmon flipped over the tape when one side ran out.

The tape later became a key piece of evidence in the government's case against Walters and Bloom. The government played it on the first day of testimony.

That day, "Uncle Norby" was in rare form. In a distinctive Brooklynese reminiscent of a garment district honcho, he spewed forth a 45-minute sales pitch. Touching on his own humble beginnings, he noted continuing race discrimination in America, particularly to black athletes. He boasted of knowing crooked corporate executives who would give his clients millions of dollars in endorsement business if he would kick back to them part of his commissions. And he promised that he alone could help Harmon rake in the millions of dollars he deserved as a

black sports star.

"Norby Walters is doing it today. For Patti LaBelle, Dionne Warwick, Commodores, the Whispers, Shalimar, Kool & the Gang, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," Walters railed. "I'm doing it for everybody, everyday, making deals with everybody because I have the entry for all these different situations over here.

"I know how to make deals with Coca Cola, Dr Pepper, Pepsi Cola. I know who the people are. I know the ones that are willing to make the deals and I know the ones who are willing to take the cash. Can you dig it?

". . . I know the guy who will give me the deal for a half a million dollars a year for 'em. Now, that guy knows I'm going to get my commission (normally 10 percent) and he says to me . . . you want to split the commission. I say, 'You got it, my bro.' "

Walters also played on the issue that black sports stars don't receive the same endorsement opportunities as white stars.

"Now, as you know, and as quiet as it's kept, America ain't ready for black," Walters said.

"They were never ready for black. They still don't want black. They'll take it only reluctantly when it's shoved down their throat like good medicine."

"The answer to that is me," Walters boasted. "This company is at the forefront every day and I have been breaking the barrier every day these past many years, making deals for black artists with big white companies that have never been done before I started doing it.

"I have gone to white America, the advertising sponsorship endorsement deals that go on for white America, and I'm now forcing the issue for black talent," he said.

Most sports agents, Walters continued, don't want to pursue endorsement deals for black players.

"The football agents of America aren't hip enough or sophisticated enough or ballsy enough or hungry enough or socially conscious enough to want to do it," he said.

Of the 43 athletes Walters and Bloom eventually wound up representing, all were black and many were poor.

With that, Walters placed \$2,500 in cash on his desk, told Harmon he would send him \$250 a month by wire transfer on the first of each month, and asked him to sign a representation contract postdated to Jan. 2, 1986, which would be after Harmon's college eligibility expired.

And he expertly rationalized some pangs of guilt expressed by Harmon's father.

"That's what America's all about," Walters said. "To the cop on the beat who takes . . . you slip 'em a few, to the guy who fixes a ticket, to the governments who give money in situations, and to the Lockheed and Boeing companies that pay off governments to get deals. Am I right or wrong?"

Harmon signed. He kept the deal a secret, received his scholarship and led his team to the Rose Bowl that year, dropping out of school shortly after Iowa lost to UCLA in the game. In the meantime, Walters gave him \$29,000 for a down payment on a Mercedes Benz.

Here's the crux of the issue: The government's case hinges on whether it can convince the jury that Walters and Bloom defrauded the university out of the scholarship money it gave Harmon after he signed with them in violation of NCAA rules.

The defense argues the school made millions of dollars because of Harmon's athletic performance, that he didn't get much of an education, and that the school lost nothing when he signed with the agents.

Harmon was drafted by the Buffalo Bills in the first round of the April 1986 National Football League draft. He soon fired Walters and Bloom, hired a new agent, and signed a multi-year contract with the Bills for \$1.3 million. An arbitrator ordered him to repay Walters and Bloom \$5,500. He walked away with the other \$49,000, which Walters and Bloom unsuccessfully contended were loans against his NFL contract. The arbitrator called the \$49,000 an "inducement" to sign with the agents.

Harmon and other players have been given immunity from prosecution in exchange for their testimony against Walters and Bloom.

But if Walters and Bloom were guilty of skirting the NCAA rules, then so was the University of Iowa, according to Bloom's defense lawyer, Dan K. Webb, former U.S. Attorney.

In the first week of the trial, Webb successfully shifted the spotlight from the agents to the school itself, in effect putting the NCAA on trial, if not before the jury, then in the court of public opinion.

Webb sounded like a prosecutor as he skewered the University of Iowa for allowing Harmon to slide through school taking no-brain courses and generally making a mockery of the term "student-athlete."

Harmon not only took courses in bowling, billiards, water color painting and fundamentals of military organization; he also boosted his meager grade point average (either 1.69 or 1.96 on a scale of 4, depending on whom you believe) by receiving several "A" grades in Intercollegiate Football participation courses. Even though he received grades for an activity traditionally thought of as extracurricular, he wound up on academic probation shortly before his senior year. Yet Iowa's registrar certified him as eligible to play in his senior year.

Webb's tactics forced Howard Pearl, the government prosecutor, into the unenviable position of defending to the jury Iowa's handling of Harmon's academic situation. What could the jury of eight women and four men, none of whom follows sports carefully, be thinking?

Three other athletes - defensive back Devon Mitchell, also of Iowa, now with the Detroit Lions; running back Robert Perryman, then of Michigan, now with the New England Patriots; and defensive back Rod Woodson, then of Purdue, now with the Pittsburgh Steelers - also admitted signing with Walters and Bloom and accepting money from them while they were still playing for their colleges.

The big unanswered questions are the source of the money the agents were spreading around to the players and the involvement of Michael Franzese, a reputed crime syndicate member allegedly used by the agents to keep the players in line through intimidation.

Was the money provided by organized crime, which runs the nation's gambling rackets? And with players in debt for thousands of dollars to Walters and Bloom, would they have been willing at some point to shave a point or two in exchange for forgiveness of the debt?

See you in court.

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