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# Rozelle set precedent for accused agents

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*By Barry Cronin April 2, 1989 Publication: Chicago Sun-Times Page: 18 Word Count: 551*

It was Nov. 28, 1959 when the telephone rang in the New York City hotel room of Billy Cannon, the famous Louisiana State University running back who had just won college football's prestigious Heisman Trophy. On the other end of the line was Pete Rozelle, then the general manager of the Los Angeles Rams, with a sweet proposition for college football's best player.

Their conversation and the series of actions that followed sound strikingly similar to those of New York sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom**, who are on trial here in federal court for mail **fraud** and **extortion** in connection with representing college players.

Rozelle wanted to give Cannon a \$10,000 bonus check to sign with the Rams, who expected to make Cannon the No. 1 pick in the NFL draft a few days later, according to court records dating from 1960 and newspaper articles from that era.

There was one complication: Rozelle's proposal, if consummated, would violate NCAA rules. And if anyone were to find out that Cannon had signed with the Rams, he would become ineligible to play for LSU in the Sugar Bowl coming up on New Year's Day. LSU coach Paul Dietzel begged Rozelle to wait to sign Cannon until after the game.

The complication was resolved easily. Rozelle used the same method **Norby Walters** would use 25 years later: he and Cannon agreed to keep their deal a secret until after the game, and postdated the contract until Jan. 2. Cannon signed, took the check, and a month later played in

the Sugar Bowl.

In January, 1960, Rozelle was named NFL commissioner, a job from which he only recently announced his intention to resign. Meanwhile, Cannon signed a second secret pro contract on Dec. 29, 1959 with the American Football League's Houston Oilers for twice the money, which led to the court battle.

Lawyers for Walters and Bloom sought unsuccessfully to introduce the foregoing information in court last week to place the actions of their clients in perspective. U.S. District Judge George Marovich refused to let the jury see the evidence, saying it was not specifically relevant to the pending charges.

The defense also wanted to bring in as a defense witness well-known former sports agent Michael Trope, who quit the business in 1985 after 12 years. Their aim was to establish that what Walters and Bloom did in 1984, when they began recruiting potential clients, was no different from common practice for a quarter century.

The defense would have liked to have informed the jury that:

LSU never was penalized by the NCAA after Cannon's early signing became public;

No government police agency ever accused Rozelle or the Rams of defrauding LSU out of Cannon's scholarship money;

Most players, coaches and sports agent regarded NCAA eligibility rules as so lax as to be essentially meaningless.

Marovich did not let Trope testify.

In a telephone interview Friday, Trope said, "The agent business was a business in which nobody took the NCAA rules seriously. They were viewed as a joke. The players were paid, they were given money, they were given women by their coaches who recruited them out of high school. They players think they're supposed to get money. Coaches were setting up players with agents.

"When I met (Nebraska running back) Johnny Rodgers, he had a fur coat and a wad of \$100 bills in his pocket."

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