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Agents' trial changing face of college athletics

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Sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom** haven't even been convicted of a crime, but their eye-opening six-week federal **racketeering** and **fraud** trial here already has colleges, athletes and agents undergoing rehabilitation. The public images of all three groups took a savage beating during the trial, in which defense lawyers, led by former U.S. Atty. Dan K. Webb, sought to explode the myth of amateurism in big time college football.

Now, a 12-member U.S. District Court jury must decide whether the agents were criminals or merely cynical participants in what their lawyers portrayed as the corrupt, money-driven system of American college football.

The jury of eight women and four men got the case at noon Thursday deliberated until 4 p.m., came back Friday morning and cogitated all day until voting to adjourn for the weekend and to resume Monday.

Walters and **Bloom** are charged with signing players to representation contracts before the expiration of their college eligibility. That's a violation of NCAA rules that in theory would have disqualified them from competition had their schools known about it.

Prosecutors argued that the agents committed a **fraud** when the players they signed submitted false forms indicating they had not broken NCAA rules on signing early, but subsequently

accepted scholarships under those false pretenses. They committed **extortion** when they threatened violence against players who left them to sign with other agents, the prosecution charged.

In the meantime, the agents, the NCAA and the athletes are changing the way they go about their business and are doing a bit of image building.

"There has been a tremendous change in the college players," said Steve Zucker, a prominent Chicago-based agent whose top client is Bears quarterback Jim McMahon.

"Normally when you contact players at this time of year they say, 'I've already signed, don't bother,' " Zucker said. "This year, most of the players are uncommitted. They're making visits with their parents, their accountants or their advisers. They're trying to see what's out there in the way of people available to represent them. Still, you get the feeling that some of them have committed too early."

St. Louis-based agent Jim Steiner said, "The case already has had an impact. You always used to be concerned about players who signed early. These days, the better quality players are leisurely sifting through their information about agents and being more careful about the selection process."

Chicago agent Herb Rudoy said he believes college players from impoverished backgrounds should be eligible for stipends, because they are prohibited from holding jobs on campus. The stipends would make the economically disadvantaged players less vulnerable to unscrupulous agents, he said.

Sports agents, often viewed somewhat suspiciously by coaches, universities and the public, are trying to clean up their act, too. Many favor federal regulation of their industry.

Zucker and Steiner favor federal regulations whereby agents would have to disclose background information, including any criminal or financial problems.

"The way it is now, anybody can be an agent," Zucker observed. "You don't even need a client."

Fourteen states, including Illinois, have passed laws regulating the sports agent business, but Zucker said a federal law is needed because agents operate nationwide.

To spruce up its tarnished image, the NCAA ran a series of self-promoting TV commercials during the NCCA basketball tournament in which several prominent athletes exhorted the value of college sports and said the incidence of cheating in the NCAA is rare.

In another development, University of Iowa president Hunter Rawlings said last week that he would act alone to bar freshmen from participating in sports during their freshman year unless the NCAA acts within three years.

Officials at Big 10 schools overwhelmingly favor freshman ineligibility but have been reluctant, either individually or as a group, to lose their competitive edge by unilaterally barring freshmen, most of whom would migrate to other schools in order to play as soon as they could.

"I can accept freshmen not playing is sound in football and basketball," said Bump Elliot, Iowa's athletic director.

Freshmen were ineligible to play in the NCAA until 1973 when colleges voted 94 to 67 to let them compete.

The key argument in favor of letting freshmen play was cost efficiency - getting the most benefit possible out of a four-year scholarship athlete, said Richard Evrard, director of legislative services for the NCAA.

If a scholarship athlete were to sit out his freshman year and graduate in four years, he would only play for three years, meaning that the university would have paid for four years of college but received only three years of athletic participation from the student.

Will that ever change?

"Freshman eligibility has always been an issue, but I don't sense that the rule is going to be changed," Evrard said.

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