

SPORTS

A Tough Lesson for All Sports Agents : Trial of Walters and Bloom May Help Clean Up the Business

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CHICAGO — No matter what verdict is reached in the trial of Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom, it will help clean up the sports agents business, insiders said Monday as jurors deliberated a third day.

"I think the business is really starting to change now, and the indictments are a major reason for this," said Steve Zucker, an agent whose clients include Chicago Bears quarterback Jim McMahon.

Bob Woolf, a Boston-based sports attorney whose clients include Larry Bird, Joe Montana and Doug Flutie, said he expects the verdict to have "a very positive impact" no matter what it is.

A finding of guilty "would certainly be a sobering message to a lot of people out there . . . to a lot of the unscrupulous agents," he said.

"If they're found innocent," he said, "the message is still out there. That abuses will not be tolerated."

The case of Walters, 58, and Bloom, 29, went to the jury last Thursday after five weeks of testimony before U.S. District Judge George Marovich. Jurors took the weekend off before resuming deliberations Monday morning. They went home at 5 p.m. CDT without a verdict, and were scheduled to resume deliberations Tuesday.

The New York-based agents were accused of defrauding six universities and breaking other laws in signing college athletes to secret contracts before their college eligibility had expired. They also were accused of using threats to keep the athletes in line.

Prosecutors said the agents defrauded the schools -- Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Notre Dame, Purdue and Temple -- of scholarship money by signing the athletes to contracts that violated NCAA rules.

Defense attorneys argued that universities often kept athletes in school, despite poor grades, to promote their sports programs. They said Walters and Bloom were the victims of "double-dealing" athletes who took their money and later backed out of the deals.

Attorneys for Walters and Bloom also said the defendants were merely engaging in practices long accepted in the sports world.

NFL players who testified at the trial included Romie Harmon of Buffalo, Paul Palmer of Kansas City and Mark Ingram of New York. They are among the 43 players who signed with Walters and Bloom and avoided prosecution with pretrial agreements to perform community service and reimburse portions of their scholarships to their universities.

Fourteen states already have laws or proposed legislation that would make it a crime to pass money to athletes before their college eligibility has expired, Zucker said.

Two years ago, before the case of Walters and Bloom went to trial, only California and Oklahoma had such laws, Zucker said.

But Woolf also said new state laws aimed at regulating sports agents may mean a bureaucratic jungle.

"What has happened is all the states now are passing laws governing agents so it's almost impossible for an individual to cope with all the rules and regulations in each state," he said.

"There's no question that there are a lot of unscrupulous (agents)," Woolf said. "But there's a lot of good ones and we all get painted with the same brush."

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