

Two Sports Agents Convicted of Fraud And Racketeering

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April 14, 1989



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A Federal jury today found two sports agents guilty of five counts of racketeering and fraud in connection with payments made to college athletes. The jury acquitted the agents of two counts of mail fraud.

The charges against the agents, Norby Walters and Lloyd Bloom, involved defrauding universities of scholarship money paid to athletes who became ineligible by signing with the agents before their college eligibility expired.

United States Judge George M. Marovich, who presided over the monthlong trial, set the week of May 23 for sentencing. The agents face a maximum of 55 years in prison and \$1.5 million in fines, but lawyers who have followed this case think that 10 years in prison would be a severe punishment. The agents remain free on bond until their sentencing.

Mr. Bloom, 29 years old, also faces a forfeiture of up to \$200,000 under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations statute, known as RICO, while Mr. Walters, 58 years old, could lose up to \$500,000. There is no way to estimate the actual amounts. Attorneys for both defendants promised what Mr. Walters's attorney, Robert Gold, termed a "vigorous appeal."

After the verdict, a somber Mr. Bloom left without comment. Mr. Walters, who had been ebullient throughout the trial, left the courtroom with a salute and a "so long" to bystanders. He told reporters: "We lost the first round but there is another round. We'll be vindicated on the next go-round."

United States Attorney Anton Valukas disagreed. "This was an extraordinary verdict by an extraordinarily conscientious jury," he said. Asked whether he thought the verdict would lead to

guidelines to regulate the conduct of sports agents, Mr. Valukas said: "Some people think we prosecuted the case to create a new law. But it was initiated because we felt two people were involved in criminal acts." 40 Hours of Deliberation The verdict came at the end of six days and more than 40 hours of deliberation. The jury found the defendants guilty of one count of racketeering conspiracy, one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, wire fraud and extortionate acts, one count of racketeering and two counts of mail fraud involving the defrauding of the University of Michigan and Purdue University.

The jury found the defendants not guilty of defrauding the University of Iowa and Michigan State University.

During the trial, the defense contended that the universities had not been defrauded because the agents lacked the requisite criminal intent to defraud. The defense suggested that athletes attending the universities should have been declared ineligible before they even met Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom because of the athletes' academic records and extracurricular actions.

The jury appeared to agree with this latter argument. The academic records of the former Iowa football stars Ronnie Harmon and Devon Mitchell were presented to the jury in detail, and the defense introduced evidence indicating that Mark Ingram, a former Michigan State University wide receiver, had been granted a scholarship despite a felony conviction for breaking into the rooms of several students at the school. Two-Year Investigation

In finding the agents guilty under the RICO law, the jury indicated that Mr. Walters had engaged in a pattern of racketeering involving his association with an organized crime figure, Michael Franzese. Mr. Bloom was found to have defrauded Paul Palmer, a football player whom he represented, of \$145,000 and also of making extortionate threats to his former clients Everett Gay and Maurice Douglass.

The RICO law, passed in 1970, permits prosecution of those engaged in an "enterprise" that has engaged in "a pattern of racketeering activities."

The verdict appeared to justify an expensive two-year investigation by the Government, while refuting the plan the agents had conceived in 1984.

The plan seemed so simple. Mr. Walters, a prominent music booking agent, would join forces with Mr. Bloom, an enthusiastic young former football player, and together the two men, both white, would woo black college athletes with the promise that they could do for the athletes what the booking agent had done for such black entertainers as Luther Vandross and Kool and the Gang.

What happened? The plan ran into problems almost immediately.

When Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom made their initial field trip to the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala., at the end of the 1984 season, they discovered that most of the college football players they wanted to sign had entered into agreements with other agents months earlier, apparently before their college eligibility expired. 58 Athletes Sign Not to be deterred, the agents, with the help of attorneys, devised the system that would eventually land them in court. They too would sign athletes before their eligibility expired, but they would postdate the contracts. In addition, as an inducement to signing they would lend the athletes money.

The agents would recoup the loans from the money the athletes received after signing their professional sports contracts. Their attorneys told Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom that although such a plan would violate National Collegiate Athletic Association regulations, it broke no criminal statutes.

In the next three seasons, Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom signed 58 athletes from 32 schools, an estimated 50 of them before their eligibility expired. It was a costly endeavor. According to Mr. Walters, the loans, consisting of money, cars and airplane tickets, totaled some \$800,000.

Given the opportunity to negotiate the professional contracts for the athlete-clients, the agents would no doubt have recouped their advances and earned healthy commissions. But when unsubstantiated rumors of Walters's Mafia connections surfaced, athletes began to abandon Mr. Walters, a former New York nightclub owner, before they were drafted. Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom eventually sued several of the athletes for breach of contract. A Novel Indictment

In March 1987, at about the same time investigative reporters from The Atlanta Constitution revealed the terms of some of these contracts, Kathie Clements, an associate of Steve Zucker, an agent who signed some of Walters's former clients, was beaten in her office outside Chicago.

According to the United States Attorney's Office here, there was evidence linking Mr. Walters to the beating. It was this combination of newspaper accounts of the contracts and the criminal investigation of Ms. Clements's beating that led to the yearlong investigation resulting in the indictment of Mr. Walters and Mr. Bloom.

The indictment was a novel one. At its heart were four counts of defrauding the universities. But the investigation of the agents had also turned up other activities that the Government contended were criminal: alleged threats made by the agents to athletes who terminated the agreements; Walters's long-term association with Mr. Franzese, and Mr. Bloom's apparent defrauding of Paul Palmer, one of the few athletes whose contract the agents actually negotiated. The result was additional counts alleging racketeering under the RICO statutes.

The jury, which was unavailable for comment after the verdict at the judge's instruction, will return Friday, at which time it may hear arguments concerning the forfeitures required under the RICO statutes.

A version of this article appears in print on April 14, 1989, Section 1, Page 1 of the National edition with the headline: Two Sports Agents Convicted of Fraud And Racketeering. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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