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Athletes, schools also are guilty, jurors say

By Adrienne Drell April 16, 1989 Publication: Chicago Sun-Times Page: 11 Word Count: 455

Federal jurors who convicted sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom** on corruption charges involving college sports said schools and athletes were just as guilty. "I feel the universities are just as much to blame for all of it as everyone else," observed juror Doris Schloeman. "They knew what these kids were doing, and all they cared about was having a good football team, making money and if these kids could send them to the bowl games."

For nearly 40 hours spread over six days, the 12 jurors deliberated before rendering verdicts Thursday against **Walters**, 56, and **Bloom**, 29.

The jury gradually concurred in finding the two men guilty of **racketeering**, mail **fraud** and conspiracy for enticing college football stars to sign post-dated contracts in violation of eligibility rules. They also concluded that the defendants had threatened mob retaliation if their clients tried to fire them.

"It was a a very deliberate process," explained jury foreman Marjorie Benson, a fund-raiser for the University of Chicago. "Yes, we think both men were guilty, but there were no innocent bystanders here. It's not just the agents, it's the schools themselves. They need to take a look at what they are doing just as much."

During the five-week trial, defense attorneys had attacked the government's argument that the

agents defrauded universities out of scholarships awarded athletes.

The defense forced officials from at least two schools - the University of Iowa and Michigan State University - to admit they had overlooked players' poor academic records and even criminal convictions just to keep them eligible.

The jury acquitted Walters and Bloom on mail fraud charges involving the two Big Ten schools.

"Yes, we wanted to send a message," acknowledged Benson. "We left them out on purpose."

On the other hand, the panel rendered convictions on other charges involving frauds against the University of Notre Dame and the University of Michigan because of government witnesses who testified they did not tolerate any infractions of the rules.

The novel mail fraud theory troubled jurors because the agents themselves never sent the students' false eligibility statements to the Big Ten conference. The universities sent in the forms.

Jurors said they rejected the defense contention that prominent sports attorneys had advised the agents it was not illegal to sign athletes early - merely a violation of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules.

"They didn't tell the lawyers everything, that they coached the students to lie about the forms," said juror Linda Dishroon, who processes copy for R. R. Donnelly.

The government's star witness was Michael Franzese, a self-described captain in the New York-based Colombo organized crime family. Franzese, who testified he funded Walters' business, said he also helped intimidate would-be roving clients.

"Why would he lie?" asked juror Karen Curley. "He's behind bars already."

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