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Agent convictions to deter mob efforts

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The federal jury that convicted **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom** on **racketeering** charges last week also slammed the door on mobsters trying to gain entry to the NFL by indenturing top college football players. **Walters** and **Bloom** were convicted Thursday of five counts of **racketeering** and **fraud** in connection with using cash and gifts to persuade the players to sign representation agreements before the expiration of their collegiate eligibility. Both face up to 55 years in jail, \$1.5 million in fines and confiscation of up to \$700,000.

The key man in the case was Michael **Franzese**, a captain in the New York-based Colombo crime family, who had made a lucrative career in gambling and loan sharking for the mob. Some think the case would have been little more than a simple **fraud** if not for the shadow **Franzese** cast over the proceedings.

In 1984, **Franzese** invested \$50,000 in World Sports and Entertainment, the sports representation firm set up by **Walters** and **Bloom** to do business as sports agents. **Franzese**, previously an intimidator for **Walters'** entertainment agency, thereby became a silent partner in the **Walters-Bloom** operation.

Soon, **Walters** and **Bloom** began signing 58 players, all of them black, many of them poor, some of them lame, most of them uneducated. All were aware their football performances were earning money for their schools while they were barred from earning pocket change.

Walters said he spread \$800,000 among his stars, who hailed from Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Temple, Notre Dame, Colorado and Purdue, among others.

For the players, the decision was easy. They signed early in violation of NCAA rules, took up-front money and the promise of future cash, and later submitted falsified eligibility forms to their schools indicating they had not signed with agents. In conspiring in a lie with Walters and Bloom, they defrauded their universities of scholarship money.

Then, many of the players borrowed thousands more from the agents against their anticipated NFL earnings, becoming more deeply indebted to Walters, Bloom and the mobster lurking in the background.

And what did the mob, which runs the nation's illegal gambling rackets, expect in return for its investment in college football players? What would be the "juice" on the \$54,000 Ronnie Harmon of Iowa had accepted from the agents against his future earnings?

Prosecutor Howard Pearl raised the issue in his closing argument.

Could certain of a player's debts be forgiven in exchange for fumbling the ball at a key moment in a game? How much could be forgiven in return for providing inside information on player injuries unknown to anyone else that might give mob gambling operations a better edge on the odds? The syndicate could stand to rake in millions.

The scheme might have worked had the players not heard rumors about Walters' mob connections. They began deserting the two New Yorkers, who subsequently threatened them with exposure and physical harm.

Several players abandoned Walters and Bloom for Chicago agent Steve Zucker. In March, 1987, Kathy Clements, then Zucker's assistant, was slashed and beaten by a masked man believed by investigators to be connected to Walters. No one has been charged in the assault.

It was at that point that the government began its long, expensive investigation. The case ended with Franzese, now serving time on unrelated racketeering charges, taking the witness stand against his former associates in hopes of having his prison time reduced.

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