

SPORTS OF THE TIMES

SPORTS OF THE TIMES; Was a Crime Really Committed?



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April 17, 1989



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The verdict had been rendered. **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom**, the sports agents, were found guilty of racketeering and mail fraud by a Chicago Federal jury last week. **Walters** said he would appeal. **Bloom** broke down in tears. The jury forewoman, Majorie Benson, an administrator at the University of Chicago, said after answering reporters' questions: "We've told you what we think. What do you think?"

At this, one reporter said, "It was a colossal waste of the Government's time and money to go after **Walters** and **Bloom** when there wasn't even a victim to the crime they supposedly committed."

Is that true? Were there no victims? Was there no crime?

Indeed, there were victims and indeed there was a crime, and more victims and a greater crime than was determined by the conviction of those two men. **Walters** and **Bloom**, who paid college athletes before their eligibility expired in order to represent them as pros, played only a small, though significant, role in the overall picture.

The larger crime, indictable or not, is a corruption of values. It is a crime that tears at the fabric of this country. It involves the overemphasis of sports, and the criminal elements, hanging offenses or not, are these:

Too often, the schools bring in athletes who aren't students and who have no interest in being students, and often the schools have no profound interest in their being students.

So-called student-athletes from Iowa to Seton Hall take courses from billiards and bowling to creative movement, and too few make progress toward a degree, or a degree of substance.

But the athlete is kept by the university because he makes money for the university, much of which is recycled into the athletic department. Sometimes he helps the university earn millions directly, as when he is instrumental in its going to the Final Four in basketball where the huge television money turns the heads of college coaches and regents and presidents, not to mention the players themselves.

The players see all this champagne-and-steak money going to the school while it's little more than black coffee and a bowl of rice for their labors. The stuff about just being on campus and gaining knowledge by osmosis is a gross sham. You don't apply for a job after the games are over by saying that you can read and write and do sums by osmosis.

Some school officials and others say, well, scholarships are given to those who might not otherwise be able to afford to go to college. But there are other students perhaps better qualified for a chance at a legitimate college education than unstudious athletes.

When, for example, Lew Alcindor was graduating from Power Memorial High School in 1965, he received 150 scholarship offers. Not because he was a budding physicist, but because he stood 7 feet 2 inches. The boy who ranked first academically in that class received one scholarship offer.

What about the one who was 2d, or 10th, or 20th?

This is not to demean Alcindor, later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who was a bright lad and a reasonably serious student. But it does point up a strange phenomenon in America, and one that hasn't changed, indeed may have gotten worse, in the quarter of a century since Abdul-Jabbar went off to U.C.L.A.

What about those other athletes, like Ronnie Harmon of Iowa and Mark Ingram of Michigan State, bogus students as revealed in the agents' trial? Were they taking up scholarship space from some kid who, as the argument goes, might have one day discovered the cure for cancer?

The overemphasis on sports and the lesser emphasis on education in our institutions of higher learning send a message across the country. In poor areas, for example, the way out is not through chemistry, but basketball. Or so many are led to believe. But it's distorted. Few become pros, and those who do too often lose everything because they know nothing, and are back hustling on the streets.

It has been said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. With the glorification of sports, it turns out, the edification of students is diminished.

And if education becomes our weakest link, and entertainment our strongest, then there is trouble festering.

The whole idea of big-time sports in our universities has become increasingly repugnant, and dangerous, too. Sure, there is great diversion in watching a thrilling championship basketball game, but don't we have enough with the pros?

Now there will be weekly national television coverage of high school games. Perfect. More circuses, less bread. And thus we are left with the Walters-Bloom problem, which will not end: agents will continue to vie with colleges to corrupt athletes who are working both sides of the street themselves.



Benson, the forewoman, noted something else when talking to reporters after the verdict. Speaking for the jury, she said, "We felt there were no innocent bystanders."

It is conceivable that none of us -from those 12 jurors to their 245 million fellow citizens - are innocent bystanders, either, and as we continue to cheer our so-called student gladiators, we all, sooner or later, may be victims in a softer, and not necessarily gentler, nation.

A version of this article appears in print on April 17, 1989, Section C, Page 5 of the National edition with the headline: SPORTS OF THE TIMES; Was a Crime Really Committed? · [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

