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College Sports

Prosecutor's View of Agents

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DID the news media and observers in the courtroom and around the country miss something important in their extensive coverage and analysis of the recent trial of the sports agents **Norby Walters** and **Lloyd Bloom**?

Yes, says Anton Valukas, the United States Attorney here, who prosecuted the case. On April 13, a Federal jury found **Walters** and **Bloom** guilty of **racketeering** and of **defrauding** universities by signing student-athletes to contracts before their college eligibility expired. In his first interview since then, Valukas said he was not trying to clean up college sports so much as deal with what he saw as the serious threat of organized crime.

"I think everybody got caught up with putting college athletics on trial and that when Michael **Franzese** testified there was no focus on what was the most insidious and ugliest part of this whole thing, the organized-crime aspect," Valukas said last week. "That should have given people a lot more concern than whether **Ronnie Harmon** was making good grades at Iowa."

The sorry academic performance of **Harmon** and several other athletes who entered into agreements with the agents received a great deal of attention at the trial, as did the often weak explanations by university administrators of how the student-athletes were students as well as athletes.

Franzese, an admitted captain in the Colombo organized-crime family, also made headlines when he testified at the trial that he was a longtime business associate of **Walters** and had exerted pressure on **Walters's** clients in his music booking agency.

But, said Valukas, his additional

testimony that he was a silent partner in the sports agency, having given **Walters** \$50,000 in cash for a 25 percent stake in the profits, did not generate the concern it should have.

"The heart of this case was the organized-crime aspect," said the prosecutor. "What we looked at was the penetration of college athletics by a major New York organized-crime family through the operations of **Norby Walters** and their use of traditional organized-crime techniques."

Such penetration, Valukas said, could ultimately lead to **extortion** of the athletes and the possibility that the outcome of athletic contests could be affected.

Noting organized crime's longtime involvement in illegal gambling, Valukas painted a scenario in which someone aware that a star college player has signed a contract with an agent discloses that information on the eve of an important game, causing the star to lose his eligibility.

Athletes 'Vulnerable'

"That's one of the things you have to be worried about: the ability to affect a game simply because you're into these people," said the prosecutor. "These athletes are now vulnerable to you."

Valukas refused to speculate on whether athletes associated with a sports agency with organized-crime ties would ever be called upon to throw or fix contests, but added:

"Our experience is that there is no limit to what organized crime will do to earn money and no limit to what they will do to put pressure on people. How would you ever know why it is that someone **fumbled** the ball or why someone didn't play up to par in a game, whether that had something to do with the fact that the people supplying the money came from the mob."

Acknowledging that as "a private

citizen" he sees "a lot of problems in college sports that should be addressed," Valukas said he had not been motivated to bring the case, as many people have suggested, to reform college sports.

"We are not in the business of staging morality plays," he said of the United States Attorney's Office. "This crime warranted prosecution primarily because of the organized-crime aspects and because of the **extortion** that was involved."

The extortion involved telephone calls made by **Walters** and **Bloom** to Tony Woods, Maurice Douglass and Everett Gay, three former college football stars who indicated they no longer wished to be represented by the agents. In two of those calls, according to testimony, **Bloom** stated he knew people in Las Vegas, Nev., or California who might do physical harm to the athletes if they did not remain with the agency or repay money the agents had loaned them.

While the defense characterized those calls as merely the angry chatter of a man who feels he has been wronged, Valukas differed, stating that **Bloom** knew that **Franzese** was a partner in the agency and the calls reflected traditional organized-crime techniques.

"First you hook the guy and then later on when he doesn't comply, you threaten to expose him," Valukas said. "Or if things get a little uglier, you threaten to break their legs or have people come down and do it as was threatened to Gay and Douglass." The jury found **Bloom** guilty of **extortionate** acts in making these calls.

Valukas indicated that prosecutors in New York were conducting an investigation of the agents, but he refused to discuss the details of that inquiry. **Walters** and **Bloom** are to be sentenced in Chicago during the week of May 21.