

Sport: Tough Message: A verdict on agents and colleges

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Officially there were only two defendants in the five-week federal trial in Chicago. **Norby** Walters, 58, and Lloyd Bloom, 29, New York City-based agents for professional athletes, were charged with reaching into college ranks and illegally plying hot prospects with cash, cars and other perks for signing premature, postdated contracts. But the agents' lawyers maneuvered strenuously to shift the indictment's focus. Their target: the system of big-time college athletics that, with box-office and TV profits at stake, often looks the other way when stars get improper favors and that condones specious academic regimens to maintain those stars' eligibility.

Last week all the accused lost. The jury found Walters and Bloom guilty of racketeering, conspiracy and mail fraud. Each faces up to 55 years in prison and a fine of up to \$1.5 million. As for college athletics, it emerged with more of its idealistic luster tarnished -- just what it did not need after a bruising year of recruiting scandals and crackdowns by the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Players like former Iowa footballer **Konnie** Harmon, now a pro with the Buffalo Bills, told of signing surreptitiously with Walters and Bloom and getting thousands in "loans," meanwhile receiving college scholarship money and taking such courses as bowling, billiards and watercolor painting. The agents used links to organized crime to keep their clients in line. The Chicago Bears' Maurice Douglass testified that when he tried to get out of his contract while a senior at the University of Kentucky, Bloom threatened to have somebody break his legs. The verdict, suggested U.S. Attorney Anton Valakas, sent a different but equally tough message: "I think the message is that the federal criminal laws apply across the board to the universities, to the athletes and to the agents who do business with them."