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Illegal Signings on Increase - Series: - THE NFL'S REAL PLAYERS

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It has been five long years since "agent to the stars" Norby Walters made front-page news by being convicted of racketeering, conspiracy, fraud and extortion. For a while, Walters may have been the best thing that happened to agents' recruiting tactics because his downfall made crooked agents fearful of becoming the next Walters. But now Walters is a trivia question instead of a constant reminder of what could happen to an agent who bends the rules in recruiting college players, and recruiting of college athletes has lapsed into a free-for-all once again.

"It's a pendulum business," agent Peter Schaffer said. "After the Walters case, it became much cleaner because everyone was scared. But people have very short memories. It will happen again soon."

At least it should happen again soon.

"Agents are starting (to recruit) earlier and breaking more rules," Ralph Cindrich said. "Tactics are as underhanded as they've ever been."

Part of the problem might be traced to free agency. The top agents, who tend to be more ethical as a group, can make more money by representing veteran free agents than rookies. So they have concentrated more on acquiring and maintaining a veteran clientele and have cut back significantly on college recruiting efforts. The free-agency period and the recruiting period overlap so that full attention can't be paid to both.

This has left the rookies prey for the swarm of agents trying to break through, many of whom are desperate for a client. The results are more violations than ever of the NFL Players Association code of ethics, NCAA rules and state and federal laws.

What percentage of kids coming into the league are bought by agents? Steve Zucker says 80 percent. Frank Murtha says 50 percent. Jack Wirth says 35 percent.

"We have a major problem with agents approaching kids before they're done with their eligibility and getting involved on a financial basis," Wirth said.

It isn't always money that is used to entice a recruit. Sometimes agents send them on trips, pay their rent or take them on shopping sprees.

"Players can be bought with drugs, women, cars, money, entertainment, the glamor life," Colts vice president Bill Tobin said. "The agent might fly the player down to live near them in a big city and corrupt their lifestyles. Sometimes, the player you see in December isn't the same guy you get in July because of what's happened to him with his agent in between."

Bears defensive end John Thierry, a first-round pick last year, said he was offered cars and cash by agents before signing with Rich DeLuca, who appealed to Thierry in part because he didn't offer him anything.

Another first-round pick from last year's class told agent Brad Blank he would sign with him if Blank would buy him a Lexus. Blank told him why he couldn't do that, and the player signed with another agent.

Jaguars cornerback Michael Davis told Wirth, whom he eventually signed with, that another agent had tried to sign him by offering him a monthly fee before his eligibility was up. Every time Davis turned the agent down, the agent upped the amount.

The parents of one top player told Frank Bauer their son would sign with him if he could

provide \$40,000 they needed for a down payment on a house. That was the end of that recruiting effort for Bauer.

But it is nearly impossible for agents to avoid some sort of financial involvement with players who have no incomes.

"Once a kid is signed and he asks you for help clearing up his bills and says he needs a loan for a car, every agent does that," Bauer said. "You have to. How else could you keep the kid? You become the dad. It's the agents that buy kids early by supporting them through their junior and senior years that mess it up."

There is nothing in the NFL Players Association code of ethics that prohibits agents from making loans or purchases for their clients once their clients' college eligibility is expired.

Said agent Eugene Parker, "Agents giving players things is not a major, major issue. When a guy decides he is coming out of school, he'll sign with an agent, and he can get a bank loan anyway. But because this is in the public eye, people make a bigger deal of it than what it is."

In some cases, the athletes are more in the wrong than the agents.

"These are not innocent neophytes being corrupted," Murtha said. "Some are trained hustlers, further along than the agents. Some sign with three (agents) and none of them has any idea about the other."

It's difficult to blame some college athletes for looking for handouts. Many come from low-income households and are struggling to make it through college, so a smiling face and a thick billfold are inviting.

"That was the trap I fell into," said Giants safety Maurice Douglass, who signed with Walters before his eligibility was up. "I came from a single-parent home and didn't have the things I wanted. That's the outlook of society - to strive for worldly things instead of godly things."

Sometimes, college athletes play the role of pinballs to the agents' bumpers and flippers.

Two years ago before his pro career began with the Colts, running back Roosevelt Potts went through four agents. He signed with Joe Courrege, then switched to Cindrich for a day. Then Mike Merkow signed Potts. One problem - Courrege and Merkow were working for the same

company, run by Jerry Lastelick. So Potts left Merkow and ended up with Ted Marchibroda Jr.

It can be a confusing world for college athletes trying to sign with an agent. Jim Steiner estimates the top 30 college players might hear from 70 agents apiece. Thierry had so many phone calls from agents when he was being recruited, he stopped answering his phone. He said his answering machine would be entirely full with messages twice a day.

The process begins before it should and ends after it's supposed to. College athletes aren't supposed to be approached by agents until their eligibility is expired, but Thierry's first contact from an agent came after his first game as a freshman.

"If you wait until the end of a college player's eligibility like you're supposed to, you have very little chance of representing him," Steve Weinberg said. "And it's not just the top players. Seventh-rounders have heard from 70 to 100 agents."

"What we have now is chaos," Cindrich said. "And one of these years, I'm going to sue the NCAA over it."

Once an athlete selects an agent, that doesn't mean he's immune from other agents pestering him. After Thierry signed with DeLuca, seven or eight agents remained persistent about signing him. He said some of them even tried to get members of his family to go against his decision.

In recruiting wars, there is hardly anything some agents won't do to win.

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