



## Norby Walters doesn't regret role in college football scandal

The most notorious figure in a long history of agent misbehavior — “he certainly is the godfather,” sports business expert and author Kenneth Shropshire says — lives quietly in retirement in Los Angeles, far removed in body and mind from the tumult he once helped foment in college athletics. “If I had something to say about the business, I’d say it,” Walters says. “I’m a very vocal person. I have a lot to say about politics and life and religion and a thousand other things. But I don’t have any opinions one way or the other about how sports should go. It doesn’t mean anything to me.

“I don’t know who won the World Series. How about that?”

Told it was a California team, the San Francisco Giants, he says. “Yeah, I guess I saw something about that. I don’t care.”

College sports will always care about him, however. Or at least remember him.

Walters had been a slick and highly successful booking agent in the entertainment field for more than 30 years, representing Janet Jackson, Patti LaBelle and Kool and the Gang, among others, when he decided in 1985 to target athletes on the side. He and partner Lloyd Bloom signed 58 football and basketball standouts to potdated contracts and showered them with cash and other perks while they were still in school in an attempt to ensure their business when the players became pros.

When all but two reneged, re-signing with different agents and refusing to repay Walters and Bloom, the two entrepreneurs sued several of the players for breach of contract. There were claims that the pair also made threats. Federal prosecutors would allege a tie to organized crime.

Walters and Bloom were charged with conspiracy, racketeering and mail fraud and initially convicted, but the verdict was thrown out on appeal. Prosecuted separately, Walters entered a conditional Alford plea to a mail fraud charge, conceding there was evidence to convict him, but the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago overturned it, too.

That was in June 1993. Walters hasn’t worked since then — in sports or entertainment, he says — beyond producing the annual “Night of 100 Stars” Oscar-night party. Now 78 and settled with his wife of 50 years, hence, he plays tennis a few times a week and poker with pals. His lone tie to sports is sitting in on an occasional Los Angeles Clippers game.

“I like rooting for the underdog,” he says.

He spent perhaps 30 months as a sports agent, which Walters remembers as a good idea gone bad. “What’s the line?” he says. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. It turned out to not be. ... It was a combination of events that piled on, and I just got caught up in the middle of something that was a horror.

“But I’ve done many things that turned out very well. So you know, my percentage is high.”

He claims a lifetime of honest work in show business and declines to say why he chose such a less decorous path in sports. He couldn’t care less, he says, that his name remains synonymous with agent chicanery.

He professes no regret: “Everything is what it is. Had I not gone into the sports business and had that problem, I wouldn’t be taking life easy for the last 20 years. I’d still be working like every normal schmuck in the world.”

Bloom wasn’t as fortunate. A former high school football player and onetime bouncer at New York’s Studio 54 before hooking up with Walters, he was shot to death in his Malibu, Calif., home in August 1993. He was 36.

Besides their ignominy, the pair’s legacy might be the Uniform Athlete Agents Act drafted in 2000 as a template for states looking to outlaw what Walters and Bloom did. Forty-two states have enacted some kind of agent-regulating legislation, though the fact they’ve followed up with little enforcement is a point of contention amid the improprieties of today.

Illicit agent activity sent shudders through programs at North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina at the start of this football season. And a man identified as an agent’s recruiter, Kenny Rogers, acknowledges a role in alleged efforts by Auburn quarterback Cam Newton’s father to solicit cash in exchange for his son’s recruiting commitment.

“Among state legislators or at the federal level, on the commission that put (the uniform act) together, I’m sure Norby’s name was mentioned more than any other agent in terms of ‘this is why we need to do this,’” says Shropshire, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of business who has authored or co-authored eight books, including *The Business of Sports Agents*.

All these years later, he gives Walters grudging credit for recognizing that the NCAA could go after errant players but not agents — “the crease that was there to opportunistically be successful in that business.”

“It was probably a fellow agent of Norby’s,” Shropshire says, “who expressed some form of: You don’t understand. He saw a business opportunity, read the situation as a business person would, and he had a pretty bad influence at his side that helped him go over the line. There was a little bit of trying to make you feel sorry for Norby, (that) he didn’t know he’d gone that far overboard.

"I didn't buy it, but there's certainly some degree of that there. Here's someone who entered a world he truly didn't understand and really overstepped, and that's what got him in trouble."

Walters, for one, has gotten over it.

