

Agents' Trial Begins

Defense: athletes are ones at fault

By Ron Berler

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Chicago — The attorney for sports agent Lloyd Bloom, charged with Norby Walters of racketeering and mail fraud, told jurors in a packed federal courtroom yesterday that big-time football colleges and their players — not agents — are to blame for the abuses that have tarnished college sports.

In his opening remarks, former U.S. Attorney Dan K. Webb described a systematic pattern whereby universities — driven by the prospect of millions of dollars in potential revenues — recruit athletes and protect their athletic eligibility at whatever the cost, often in direct violation of NCAA rules.

He also alleged that it is not uncommon for highly regarded players to sign with two, three or more agents, collecting bonuses and payments from one agent, and then breaking the contract and signing with another.

"Are the universities really victims?" he asked. "When they tell you they were cheated, that's simply not true."

Webb told the jurors how Miami of Ohio, one of seven schools the agents are accused of defrauding, allowed running back George Swarn to take courses in racquetball, tennis and choral union in order to maintain eligibility. When Swarn was placed on academic probation, he was permitted to take a course called "Trees and Shrubs" to improve his grades. Swarn is with the Browns.

Walters, 58, of New York, and Bloom, 29, of Sherman Oaks, Calif., are accused of enticing 44 college athletes to sign professional contracts with them in violation of NCAA rules and then threatening with bodily harm some of those who wished to terminate their contracts. According to prosecutors in Chicago's U.S. District Court, they concealed these arrangements by postdating the contracts so the athletes could retain their college eligibility. If convicted, each face a maximum of 70 years in prison and \$2 million in fines.

The case represents the first time agents have been tried under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act.

The chief prosecutor, U.S. Attorney Anton R. Valukas, insisted to jurors that athletics aren't on trial, but the alleged criminal acts of Walters and Bloom.

Valukas outlined their dealings with 12 of the athletes expected to testify in the trial — most of whom are in the NFL. One of those was Ronnie Harmon, of Bayside, University of Iowa, and now a running back for the Bills. Valukas told the jurors that in March, 1985, when Harmon was a junior, Bloom called him and said, "We want to talk to you. We're the agency of the stars."

According to Valukas, Walters and Bloom then flew Harmon and his father to New York to convince them to hire the agents. Unknown to the agents, Harmon was wearing a hidden microphone. Valukas plans to play a 40-minute tape of their conversation to the jury today, when Harmon is scheduled to testify. According to Valukas, Walters told Harmon not to worry about signing a postdated contract with him, that it was "like cheating on taxes."



AP Photo

Lamar Hunt's invention, the WCT, may not survive after a 22-year run

Was It WCT Finale?

The WCT Finals in Dallas last week was highly charged with lingering controversy, spectacular shot-making and, sadly, an emotional salute to the event's rich history now that the future of Lamar Hunt's once-maverick tour is in jeopardy. "No WCT?" former pro Dennis Ralston said. "That just wouldn't seem right."

But WCT events at Forest Hills and Detroit are excluded from the calendar proposed by the Association of Tennis Professionals when it assumes control of the men's circuit in 1990. And organizers of the Dallas event did not apply for a spot on the ATP schedule because they would not have been allowed to keep their eight-player championship format — the forerunner of the Nabisco Masters.

And so the WCT, a pioneer in men's pro tennis, may not survive.

"We have several options," said Owen Williams, chief executive officer of the WCT. "Nothing has been decided as of now. I hate to sound cute, it's just that we don't want to speculate just yet."

But there is some hope for the WCT's future. Individual tournaments could be kept alive as special events, and Williams is negotiating with the ATP to hold the new tour's season-ending event — to be called the ATP Finals — at Dallas' Reunion Arena. The WCT, remember, basically invented the idea of matching the top eight players in a championship event, back in the era of white tennis balls in 1967.

With tennis about to grow from an amateur pastime to a professional sport, millionaire Hunt signed up his first group of players, who soon became known as the "Handsome Eight" — Cliff Drysdale, John Newcombe, Butch Buchholz, Pierre Barthes, Nikki Pilic, Tony Roche, Roger Taylor and Ralston. The WCT eventually grew to 32 players barnstorming the country in what was one of the earliest pro tours.

"I remember one night in Kansas City, they put the court over the ice," Ralston said. "I chased down one ball and stepped off the court where it met the ice and slipped and almost killed myself. Another night in Orlando we played in front of 28 people. I know, because I counted them."

The WCT was the first circuit to link a series of events to a points race that was capped with an eight-man playoff, a concept later borrowed by the worldwide Grand Prix tour. The WCT also introduced colored tennis clothing and was the first circuit to use the tiebreaker system extensively. The tennis always was good, too.

That didn't change much in a turbulent few days last week when Brad Gilbert, a last-minute replacement for flu-ridden Boris Becker, advanced to the finals, where he

lost to John McEnroe. Ivan Lendl had earlier outlasted Jakob Hlasek in a five-set match that lasted four hours and 37 minutes and included four tiebreakers. And then there was Andre Agassi mysteriously defaulting his quarterfinal match to an enraged McEnroe.

That turmoil was right in the tradition of the WCT's infancy, when showers didn't work and players dressed in rooms that were normally reserved for the livestock in rodeo shows. "I would hate to think that after all that," Ralston said, "we'll be saying 'Adios' to the WCT."

Coming and going

Tracy Austin is making a comeback, at 26. Pam Shriver is tired of tennis, at 26. It's ironic.

They turned pro five months apart in 1979 and although they once were among the best women tennis players in the world, their careers have headed in opposite directions ever since. Austin is playing in the Virginia Slims of Indian Wells, Calif., this week, her first singles event in five years. Shriver is entered at Indian Wells, too, but she plans to curtail her schedule.

Except for an occasional doubles match, Austin has not played professionally since 1984, when recurring back and neck injuries plus a lack of desire all but ended her career four years after she was briefly ranked No. 1. She spent most of her unofficial retirement doing charity work and appearing at tennis clinics, just the kind of slow pace that must seem inviting to Shriver right now.

Shriver's case of fatigue isn't much of a surprise, considering the hectic pace she's kept up for 11 years. In 1987, for example, Shriver played in 33 singles and doubles events while serving on the board of directors of the Women's International Tennis Association.

Now she is vowing not to play just for the sake of playing to avoid becoming just one more victim of overwork and pressure — like Austin.

Baseline burnout?

A final thought on the strange case of Bjorn Borg from former pro and now TV commentator Mary Carillo: "Look at most of the people who have burned out. Borg. [Andrea] Jaeger. [Tracy] Austin. What do they have in common? They were all baseliners. Why do baseliners seem to be the ones with these problems? I don't know. Now Mats Wilander is starting to go through it, too."

Exclamation point

Hana Mandlikova, returning to the glamour and fame of the tour after a six-month self-imposed exile to recover from a divorce and injuries, on her new perspective: "Now I look at the other girls and think, 'If they never find out what real life is like, then I feel sorry for them.'"

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