

Agents' Trial Begins

Defense: athletes are ones at fault

By Ron Berler

Newsday Special Correspondent

Chicago — The two sports agents sat huddled at the defense table in a Chicago federal courtroom yesterday, surrounded by six high-powered lawyers — a far different scenario than they had envisioned five years ago, when they had set out to make fortunes representing the nation's top collegiate NFL prospects.

Lloyd Bloom, 29, originally from New York but now living in California, looked as though he had been punched in the stomach. His partner, Norby Walters, 58, of New York whispered, "This is serious business, very serious business. This is my life at stake here."

Their trial began yesterday in U.S. District Court in Chicago, where they face racketeering and mail fraud charges. They 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.

But an attorney for Bloom countered that if NCAA eligibility rules were broken, it was the athletes, not the agents, who broke them.

Walters and Bloom tried to keep the athletes under their wing with threats, U.S. attorney Anton Valukas said in opening statements to jurors yesterday. The agents threatened athletes by saying, "We're going to expose you . . . we will hold you and your parents up to ridicule," Valukas charged.

But defense attorney Dan Webb, representing Bloom, said NCAA rules may have been broken — but they were broken by the athletes and not by Bloom or Walters. He also said the universities are wrongly portrayed as victims.

"When they tell you they were cheated, that's simply not true," Webb said. The defense attorney also said athletes were not intimidated by Bloom's threat to break their legs, knowing Bloom was "hot-headed" and was angry when some tried to back out of their contracts.

Webb said the two agents gave athletes money, but the money was in the form of loans to be paid back after college. "They [the athletes] were very grateful to Lloyd Bloom and Norby Walters . . . because they needed the money to support their families," Webb said.

Valukas said the company operated by Bloom and Walters, World Sports Entertainment Inc., was backed with \$50,000 from Michael Franzese, who got a percentage of its proceeds.

Prosecutors allege Franzese used his ties with organized crime in New York to intimidate athletes into signing contracts with Walters and Bloom.

Jury selection in the agents' trial was completed earlier yesterday before U.S. District Judge George Marovich.

The players who accepted the agents' gifts and signed their contracts agreed to cooperate as witnesses for the prosecution. The athletes include Brad Sellers of the Chicago Bulls, Buffalo Bills running back Ronnie Harmon and seven players selected in the '87 NFL draft.

Other possible witnesses include NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, singer Peabo Bryson and singer Michael Jackson's father Joe Jackson.



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 play-off, 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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