




The FBI, IARP and corruption in men's college basketball, explained



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"We have your playbook."

On Sept. 26, 2017, William Sweeney, assistant director-in-charge of the FBI's New York office, said those infamous four words at a news conference announcing the arrest of 10 individuals stemming from a federal investigation into corruption in college basketball. The FBI, at the time, put the sport on notice for its failure to curb long-suspected illegal recruiting practices at the highest levels of men's college basketball.

Kurtis Townsend.

It was the last action of the Independent Accountability Resolution Process (IARP), which was created in 2019 as an alternative to the NCAA's traditional infractions process. Several schools impacted by the FBI investigation opted to have their cases adjudicated by the IARP. In August 2022, however, the NCAA announced it was discontinuing the IARP for, essentially, taking too long and spending too much money to resolve cases.

In the end, not only did the FBI not have college basketball's playbook, many of the criminal charges filed against the 10 individuals -- and the NCAA allegations that followed -- are now broadly legal under name, image and likeness (NIL) legislation.

"The cheaters were protected by the government and judicial rulings that hid not just the dark, dirty truth but protected the blue-blood elites," said Detroit attorney Steve Haney, who represented aspiring business manager Christian Dawkins in two federal criminal trials. "Corrupt FBI agents spearheaded a misguided investigation where the real bad guys slid out the back door like cowards."

Before we close this chapter in college basketball, ESPN looks back at how we got here and what might be the lasting effects on the sport. -- *Jeff Borzello*

What prompted the FBI investigation? What is the timeline of events that followed?

In August 2016, Marty Blazer, a Pittsburgh-based financial adviser who had been charged with wire fraud and other crimes by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), offered to provide information to the FBI about possible corruption in college basketball in the hope that he could avoid serious penalties in his own case. Blazer became a confidential informant, and connected the FBI to Munish Sood -- another financial adviser who would eventually be at the center of the bribery scandal -- along with coaches and contacts in college basketball.

EDITOR'S PICKS



Kansas, Self avoid big penalties; 2017-18 erased

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Everything you need to know about "The Bag Game," a podcast on college hoops' bribery scandal



In November 2016, months after pleading guilty to the SEC's charges, Blazer met with Rashan Michel, a suit salesman, and former [Auburn](#) assistant Chuck Person, who had promised to funnel some of his players to Blazer and other financial advisers once they turned pro. Person agreed to accept a \$50,000 bribe. Unbeknownst to Michel and Person, Blazer wore a wire.

With Blazer posing as someone who would fund the scheme, Sood, Dawkins -- a middleman and business manager -- Adidas executive James Gatto, Adidas consultants Merl Code and T.J. Gassnola and grassroots coach Brad Augustine worked together to compel coaches to push recruits toward specific schools and financial advisers in exchange for money, according to the FBI's criminal complaint.

In February 2017, Sood and Dawkins began to funnel money to former [Arizona](#) assistant Emanuel "Book" Richardson and others.

Blazer also asked Michel, who had introduced him to Person, to help him meet other coaches who might be interested in accepting cash to push prospects toward specific financial advisers and specific schools that were backed by Adidas. Throughout 2017, multiple college basketball coaches accepted cash as part of the scheme. The money was funneled to players and their families. For example, the family of Brian Bowen II, a five-star prospect who made a surprise commitment to [Louisville](#), accepted payments on his behalf, [according to testimony](#) given in the federal criminal trial of Dawkins, Gatto and Code in 2018.

Between Blazer's information, wiretaps and financial information, the FBI began to put together a massive case that would lead to the Sept. 26, 2017, news conference when Sweeney announced the arrests of 10 people, [including former Division I assistants Tony Bland, Lamont Evans, Person and Richardson](#) in connection with the investigation.

On Oct. 16, 2017, [Louisville fired Rick Pitino](#) two weeks after the FBI claimed the school had funneled money to a pair of prospects, including Bowen.

In late 2017, Blazer pleaded guilty to securities fraud, wire fraud, identity theft and other crimes that combined could have carried a 67-year sentence, but avoided jail time, instead receiving [one year of probation when he was sentenced in 2020](#).

In 2019, all four Division I assistants were sentenced after pleading guilty. Richardson and Evans were sentenced to three months in prison, while Bland and Person received probation and community service. Sood avoided jail time. Dawkins was sentenced to a

year in prison. And charges against Augustine were subsequently dropped.

In the months and years that followed, multiple schools would be hit with varying levels of infractions by the NCAA as a result of the FBI investigation. -- *Myron Medcalf*

What is the IARP and what was its role in this investigation?

The Independent Accountability Resolution Process (IARP) was rolled out by the NCAA in August 2019. The intention behind the initiative was to set up a more independent and less adversarial enforcement process for major investigations -- of which there were many stemming from the FBI's efforts.

[The first case taken under review](#) by the IARP in 2020 concerned former [Memphis](#) star James Wiseman. However, the new process was soon faulted for being just as time-consuming and opaque in its methods as the NCAA's previous in-house enforcement efforts.

By the time the NCAA announced it was taking steps to streamline enforcement in 2021, the IARP's entire rationale was being called into question. In June of that year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the NCAA could not prohibit college athletes from receiving benefits. For the better part of two years prior to the court's ruling, red and blue states alike had been enacting legislation allowing name, image and likeness payments (NIL) within their jurisdictions.

With the world at large accepting and indeed insisting upon the premise that athletes should share in the substantial wealth generated by their college programs, the "A" in the IARP's original mission had in large part vanished. There's little need to hold programs "accountable" for engaging in those behaviors sanctioned by state and federal law. -- *John Gasaway*

What were the results of the investigation?

While many more schools and players were [named in documents uncovered in the FBI's investigation](#), just 12 programs received notices of allegations from the NCAA and were investigated or received sanctions. Each received different rulings:

A [Alabama Crimson Tide](#): Associate athletic director Kobie Baker [resigned in September 2017](#) after receiving money to set up a meeting between the father of an athlete and a financial adviser. He was given a 10-year show-cause order in 2020, while Alabama was placed on three years of probation. Star guard Collin Sexton was [briefly ruled ineligible](#) and served a one-game NCAA suspension in the 2017-18 season opener due to a violation of NCAA rules.



Arizona Wildcats: Former assistant coach Emanuel "Book" Richardson was one of four coaches arrested in September 2017; he [pleaded guilty in federal court](#) to one felony count of conspiracy to commit bribery after being accused of accepting \$20,000 to steer Arizona players to what the FBI called "corrupt financial managers." He was sentenced to three months in prison.

[During Christian Dawkins' federal trial](#), prosecutors played an FBI-intercepted call in which Richardson told Dawkins that head coach Sean Miller was paying \$10,000 a month for former player Deandre Ayton. There were further allegations involving former guard Rawle Alkins. Miller has consistently denied paying players to attend Arizona, saying in 2018 that he has "never knowingly violated NCAA rules while serving as head coach of this great program. I have never paid a recruit or prospect or their family or representative to come to Arizona. I never have and I never will."

The school [received a notice of allegations in October 2020](#) that included five Level I violations, saying Miller did not demonstrate "that he promoted an atmosphere for compliance and monitored his staff." It also said that Richardson and fellow assistant Mark Phelps "committed intentional violations."

Two months later, Arizona [self-imposed a one-year postseason ban](#), a decision that ultimately allowed for lesser sanctions from the NCAA down the line. Miller was fired at the end of the 2020-21 season.

In December 2022, the IARP panel ruled the school must vacate all wins in which two former student-athletes participated, but Miller -- now at [Xavier](#) -- [avoided any sanctions](#) and the school wasn't given any further postseason ban. Richardson and Phelps were hit with 10-year and two-year show-cause penalties, respectively, with the IARP panel stating Richardson did not cooperate with the investigation. It also found that Richardson paid \$40,000 for a fraudulent transcript to help an athlete remain eligible.



Auburn Tigers: Former assistant coach Chuck Person was among those arrested in September 2017 and [charged with accepting bribes](#) from a financial adviser working as an informant for the federal government. Auburn self-imposed a postseason ban for the 2020-21 season. [The NCAA then placed the program](#) on four years' probation and suspended head coach Bruce Pearl for two games for failure to monitor Person and not promoting an atmosphere of compliance.



Creighton Bluejays: Former assistant coach Preston Murphy was given a [two-year show-cause penalty](#) for accepting improper payments. A federal indictment accused Murphy of accepting a \$6,000 payment from an undercover FBI agent in a

meeting with Christian Dawkins; Murphy allegedly agreed to steer players to Dawkins' management company. The school was hit with two years of probation and Murphy resigned in 2019.



Kansas Jayhawks: Kansas was initially accused in September 2019 of five Level I violations tied to its relationship with Adidas. There were three primary accusations. Former Adidas executive James Gatto was accused of working with former Adidas consultant T.J. Gassnola to facilitate \$90,000 from Adidas to the mother of former Kansas forward Billy Preston; the two also allegedly agreed to pay \$20,000 to the guardian of former Kansas forward Silvio De Sousa. The NCAA also alleged that [Gassnola provided \\$15,000 to an unidentified individual](#) to give to the mother of star recruit DeAndre Ayton, who ultimately signed with Arizona.

Coach Bill Self has denied involvement, although in interviews for [ESPN's 30 for 30 podcast "The Bag Game,"](#) which was released in April, Preston said he encountered Gassnola in Self's office in 2016, and that assistant coach Kurtis Townsend said he would introduce Preston's mother to Gassnola. Preston's mother told ESPN that Self was present. Self and Townsend didn't respond to requests for comment for "The Bag Game" or for requests for comment Thursday.

In November 2022, the school self-imposed sanctions, suspending Self and Townsend for four games. [In October 2023,](#) the IARP placed Kansas on three years of probation and ruled the Jayhawks had to vacate its 2018 Final Four appearance. The panel downgraded the five Level I violations to two Level II violations and two Level III violations for the school, one Level II violation and one Level III violation for Townsend, and one Level III violation for Self.

At a [news conference](#) Wednesday Self said, "I'm very happy that it's over. I'm certainly happy with the end results, and at the same time, don't feel like a celebration mode because this is exactly what we thought the end result would be years ago, and it's taken such a long period of time to get here. But I am pleased with the findings because the findings are accurate."



Louisville Cardinals: One of the epicenters of the investigation, the FBI alleged [former coach Rick Pitino worked with Adidas](#) to funnel \$100,000 to the family of Brian Bowen Jr. to sign with the school. Pitino was placed on administrative leave the same day the FBI investigation was made public and fired less than one month later. Assistant coaches Kenny Johnson and Jordan Fair were also placed on administrative leave less than one week after the investigation was announced. The NCAA's notice of allegations, [which included one Level I violation and three Level II violations,](#) said Fair "was knowingly involved" in providing between \$11,800 and \$13,5000 in impermissible

benefits to Florida-based grassroots coach Brad Augustine, while Johnson was accused of "knowingly" providing a \$1,300 extra benefit to Bowen.

In November 2022, Louisville was placed on two years' probation but was spared any major punishment.

Bowen meanwhile [was ruled ineligible at Louisville](#), then transferred to South Carolina and was ruled ineligible for the Gamecocks. He never played a game in college. Pitino was hired by [Iona](#) in 2020 and then made the move to [St. John's](#) in the spring.

LSU **LSU Tigers:** According to [documents obtained by ESPN](#) in August 2020, the NCAA's enforcement staff received information that former head coach Will Wade "arranged for, offered and/or provided impermissible payments, including cash payments, to at least 11 men's basketball prospective student-athletes, their family members, individuals associated with the prospects and/or non-scholastic coaches in exchange for the prospects' enrollment at LSU."

[LSU fired Wade](#) on the eve of the 2022 NCAA tournament after the school received a notice of allegations from the NCAA detailing five Level I violations and a Level II violation involving him. He was also previously suspended shortly before the 2019 NCAA tournament after reports revealed a federal wiretap [captured him discussing a "strong-ass offer" for a recruit](#).

In June 2023, after being hired by [McNeese State](#), Wade was given a [two-year show-cause order and a 10-game suspension](#) for three Level I violations. The LSU program received a Level II violation for failure to monitor and was placed on three years' probation.

Former associate head coach Bill Armstrong was fired the same day as Wade, after being accused of one Level I violation and one Level II violation, but the IARP said it did not have enough credible evidence to find any violations for Armstrong.



NC State Wolfpack: Former head coach Mark Gottfried was given a [one-year show-cause order](#), while former assistant coach Orlando Early was given a six-year show-cause order after he was accused of helping facilitate a \$40,000 payment from former Adidas consultant T.J. Gassnola to the family of former star guard Dennis Smith Jr. NC State was placed on one year of probation. Gottfried was hired by [Cal State Northridge](#) in 2018, but placed on administrative leave in 2021 and later replaced as head coach.



Oklahoma State Cowboys: Oklahoma State was the [only program given a postseason ban](#) by the NCAA as a result of this investigation. It was placed on three years of probation and [ultimately banned from the 2022 NCAA tournament](#) after

appealing the original decision in the summer of 2020. Former associate head coach Lamont Evans allegedly accepted between \$18,150 and \$22,000 in bribes to steer players from Oklahoma State and South Carolina, where he also spent time as an assistant coach, to certain agents and financial advisers. He was sentenced to three months in prison and given a 10-year show-cause penalty by the NCAA.



South Carolina Gamecocks: South Carolina was charged with one level I allegation relating to Evans allegedly accepting between \$3,300 and \$5,800 in bribes from Dawkins to help set up meetings with former Gamecocks star guard PJ Dozier. The [program was placed](#) on two years of probation.



TCU Horned Frogs: Former TCU assistant coach Corey Barker was given a five-year show-cause order after being accused of accepting \$6,000 to steer players toward Dawkins' sports management business. Dawkins testified during a federal criminal trial that Barker returned the money to him. TCU fired Barker in March 2019. [The program was placed](#) on three years of probation.



USC Trojans: Former USC assistant Tony Bland was one of the four assistant coaches arrested and charged in September 2017; he reached a plea agreement in December 2018. The government alleged Bland accepted a \$13,000 bribe to steer USC players to certain agents, and helped facilitate payments to former USC guard De'Anthony Melton and recruit Taeshon Cherry. Bland admitted to accepting a \$4,100 bribe as part of his plea agreement.

[USC was placed](#) on two years of probation and Bland was given a three-year show-cause. Melton didn't play for the entire 2017-18 season due to an eligibility issue related to the case; the school suspended him in January 2018 after it was determined a close family friend received an extra benefit. -- *Borzello*

How did this investigation affect the sport?

There was fear throughout college basketball when the FBI announced the initial charges in 2017. While federal officials urged coaches and officials to offer information or face the brunt of the organization's authority, there were few tangible impacts on the sport beyond the legal and professional damage on those who were arrested and essentially banished from the sport. Richardson's prison sentence and 10-year show cause were the worst outcome.

But what else really happened beyond that? Pitino is on his second job since being fired by Louisville. Self remains largely unaffected. Mike Boynton's Oklahoma State faced a postseason ban from the NCAA even though former coach Evans was investigated, and has no ties to any current members of the program. The IARP process was largely viewed as a waste of time. As a result, any lingering fear of the FBI disappeared. And today, the FBI would not have much to investigate, since NIL money is legal and players can now hire representation.

The investigation highlighted the NCAA's inability to manage schools or streamline the investigative process. Even with access to an FBI investigation, the NCAA, in the end, did little beyond vacating wins and handing down lesser Level II and III penalties and other slap-on-the-wrist punishments.-- *Medcalf*

Mark Schlabach and Paula Lavigne contributed to this story.