

# Players sue NFL, union over scheme

ATLANTA (AP) - Seven current and former NFL players have sued the league and its union to recover \$20 million they lost in an alleged fraud scheme, claiming the union endorsed the services of an investment firm even though its manager had liens against him.

In a lawsuit, filed Friday in U.S. District Court, the players said the league and the NFL Players Association are liable for the losses because of investments with hedge fund manager Kirk Wright.

The suit says the union recommended Wright

through registration in a union investment program even though Wright and his partner, Nelson "Keith" Bond, had active state and federal tax liens against them.

The players also say that the union failed to certify that Wright was properly insured as required by the program, and failed to notify the plaintiffs about those matters.

NFL spokesman Greg Aiello said Tuesday the league regards the lawsuit as unfounded and without merit.

"We will review the matter with our attorneys and

look forward to responding as directed," he said.

He added that only one of the players, Blaine Bishop, asked for a background check, and only for Bond, and that a database reviewed by the league's security department found no record of any liens or relevant information.

NFLPA spokesman Carl Francis said his group was looking into the matter.

"We don't have all the facts," he said. "Once we do, we will address it."

Wright was arrested in Miami Beach in May on federal fraud charges. He also faces a lawsuit filed by the Securities and Exchange Commission against him and his company, International Management Associates.

Among the clients deceived by Wright are former Denver Broncos players Steve Atwater, Ray Crockett, Al Smith and Bishop, as well as former Philadelphia Eagles player Clyde Simmons, authorities said.

The five players are plain-

tiffs in the lawsuit against the NFL and players' union, along with Marco Coleman, who has played with six teams including the Broncos, and Carlos Emmons, who currently plays for the New York Giants.

The players are asking in the suit for compensatory and punitive damages as well as an injunction to ensure that the NFL and its union have adequate practices in place for performing background checks and protecting players from fraud by registered

financial advisers.

According to authorities, Wright and his company collected as much as \$185 million from at least 500 investors since 1997 and misled some of them to believe the value of those investments was increasing using false statements and documents. As recently as Jan. 25, the firm reported \$166.6 million in assets spread across five hedge funds it manages and advises. That money is now missing, according to the SEC.

## NCAA considering expanded tourney

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) - In a perfect world, college basketball coaches would nearly double the size of the 65-team NCAA men's tournament field. Realistically, they'd accept a smaller victory. Motivated in part by George Mason's remarkable Final Four run last season, coaches will urge the NCAA to expand its most lucrative championship event during the men's and women's basketball committee meetings in Orlando, Fla., this week.

"They'd love to see the tournament double to 128," said Jim Haney, executive director of the National Association of Basketball Coaches. "It's based on several things. First, there are a lot of good teams worthy of making the NCAA field, and second, the size of 64 or 65 has been in place for a number of years." Potential models range from minor adjustments to major changes.

When Haney met with NCAA officials last month, he proposed the 128-team field in part because postseason bids may help coaches keep their jobs.

At this year's Final Four, though, Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim said he supported expansion on a smaller scale. Boeheim and others suggested adding three to seven teams, a move they claimed would allow as many as four opening-round games to be played in Dayton, Ohio, instead of the one now played between the two lowest-seeded teams in the field. Some believe such a schedule would create a more realistic tournament environment since first-round sites also play four games on the first day.

But changes don't appear imminent. In March, NCAA president Myles Brand said he didn't see much support to expand the field and vice president for men's basketball Greg Shaheen reiterated that point Friday.

"Many, many people believe the size of the championship is just right," Shaheen said. "A lot of people think there's enough recognition of teams that did well and there's a logical and timely conclusion to the season."

Shaheen said this week's discussions, which end Thursday, will mark the first time expansion has been on the agenda in several years. The reason?

After a four-year legal battle with the National Invitation Tournament, the NCAA agreed to buy the tournament for \$56.5 million last August.

Expansion also faces additional hurdles. If the NCAA opted for a 128-team field, the number of first-round sites would double and an extra week of play would likely be added. Plus, Shaheen said the NCAA would have to debate how best to provide maximum television coverage.

Shaheen said changes would also have to be made in conjunction with the women's tournament.

"There is no one model that is obvious here, and that's something we need to contemplate," he said. "The other issue is how the women's tournament would be similarly impacted here and they need to coincide."

The coaches, however, contend there are many reasons to expand. Among their arguments:

— The number of Division I teams has increased significantly. (See NCAA, Page 15)

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