

SPORTS

Little guys are big winners in free agency

By Dave Goldberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The New York Jets spent \$25 million on Neil O'Donnell, making him the NFL's fourth-best paid player, not the fourth best player.

It's an indication of the equalizing nature of the salary cap.

For in the first fortnight of free agency, it's the have-nots making the moves — the Jets, the Cardinals, the expansion teams. And it's the haves, like the Cowboys and Steelers, who are losing their players.

"The top four teams are really up against it under the cap," said Leigh Steinberg, who negotiated the deal that pried O'Donnell loose from the Steelers and sent him to a team whose 3-13 record was the NFL's worst last season.

"The salary cap breaks up happy marriages."

The O'Donnell signing also demonstrates the growing gap in cash, one of the factors that's causing franchises to seek stadium deals at home or to the highest bidding cities.

Pittsburgh isn't going anywhere, but the Steelers are a family-owned team with limited cash available for signing bonuses; Leon Hess, who owns the Jets, has made hundreds of millions in the oil business.

It's not always the agents. Steinberg is one who would prefer to have his top clients stay put. He's renegotiated Steve Young's contract with the 49ers and Troy Aikman's with the Cowboys half a dozen times each to give those teams cap room to augment their rosters.

"If you can give your player a chance to play on a Super Bowl team, you do it," he said.

That, of course, doesn't apply to the Jets. Or the Cardinals. Or the Panthers and Jaguars.

But they're throwing money around. The Jets have spent \$52 million spread over five years for O'Donnell, plus tackles David Williams and Jumbo Elliott to protect him. They're all risks — O'Donnell may only be as good as his supporting cast; Elliott has a back problem and Williams' wife might give birth again on game day.

But for the time being, the Jets are better, meaning they may double their win total next season. They get even better if they use the first pick on the draft on Keyshawn Johnson, the USC receiver who's the latest "next Jerry Rice."

Arizona's coup was keeping its two best players, defensive tackle Eric Swann, who was made the franchise player, and

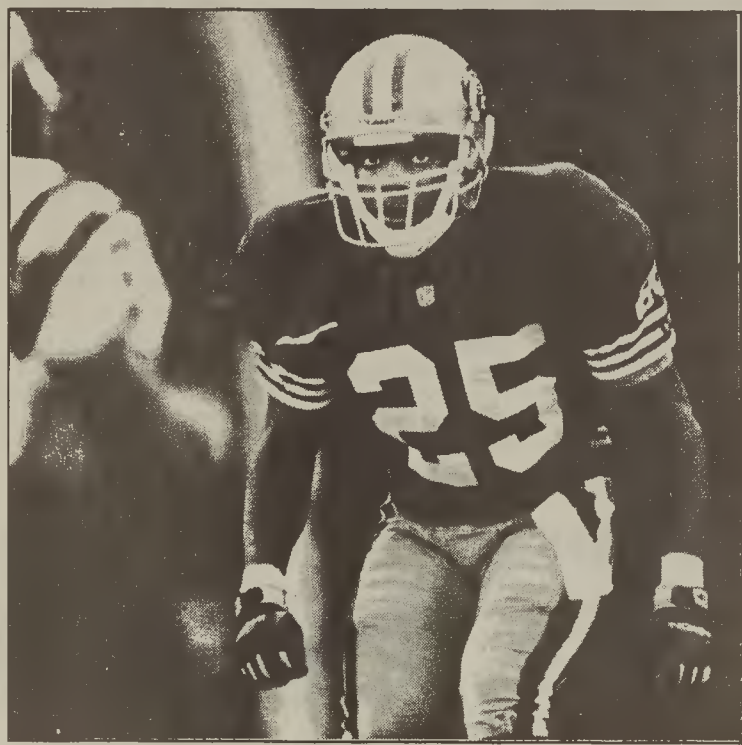
cornerback Aeneas Williams, who could find no one else willing to give him a \$6 million signing bonus.

Then they added Lomas Brown, probably the best left tackle on the market, for \$9 million over three years, a safer deal than the \$14.8 million over five the Jets gave Elliott.

But the most impressive signings may have been by the expansion teams. In fact, other teams are suggesting that the NFL take away the extra draft picks Carolina and Jacksonville get this year because they already have extra money to spend on free agents.

Carolina, whose seven wins last season were three more than any expansion team, is continuing its policy of staying respectable with veterans. So

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PHOTO/CAROLINA PANTHERS

Eric Davis signed with the Carolina Panthers for four years at an average of almost \$3 million. Tackles and cornerbacks are the en vogue positions for teams building through free agency.

Lessons pay off for Rams

By Herbert L. White
THE CHARLOTTE POST

A little experience has gone a long way for Harding's Rams.

The Rams used a fourth-quarter rally Tuesday to beat Providence 76-64 in the first round of the N.C. 4A boys' basketball regionals. Harding (21-4), which lost to East Mecklenburg last season in the western semifinals, plays Asheville Reynolds today at 8 p.m. at East Burke.

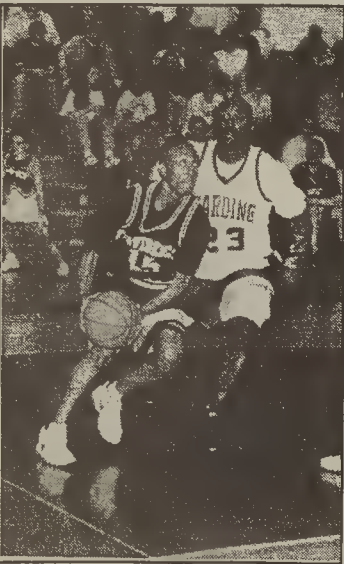
"They've been in close ball games," Harding coach Gosnell White said. "A lot of these guys played on the team last year and played a lot, so when the game got tight, they knew we had to score, especially our leaders. They made sure we got good shots and good looks at the basket."

The best looks were made by senior guard William McNair, who drilled home 21 points against the Panthers, including nine in the last five minutes. Remembering last year's disappointment, the Rams weren't about to let a Providence team they'd swept in regular season play knock them out. The thought was too close to run from.

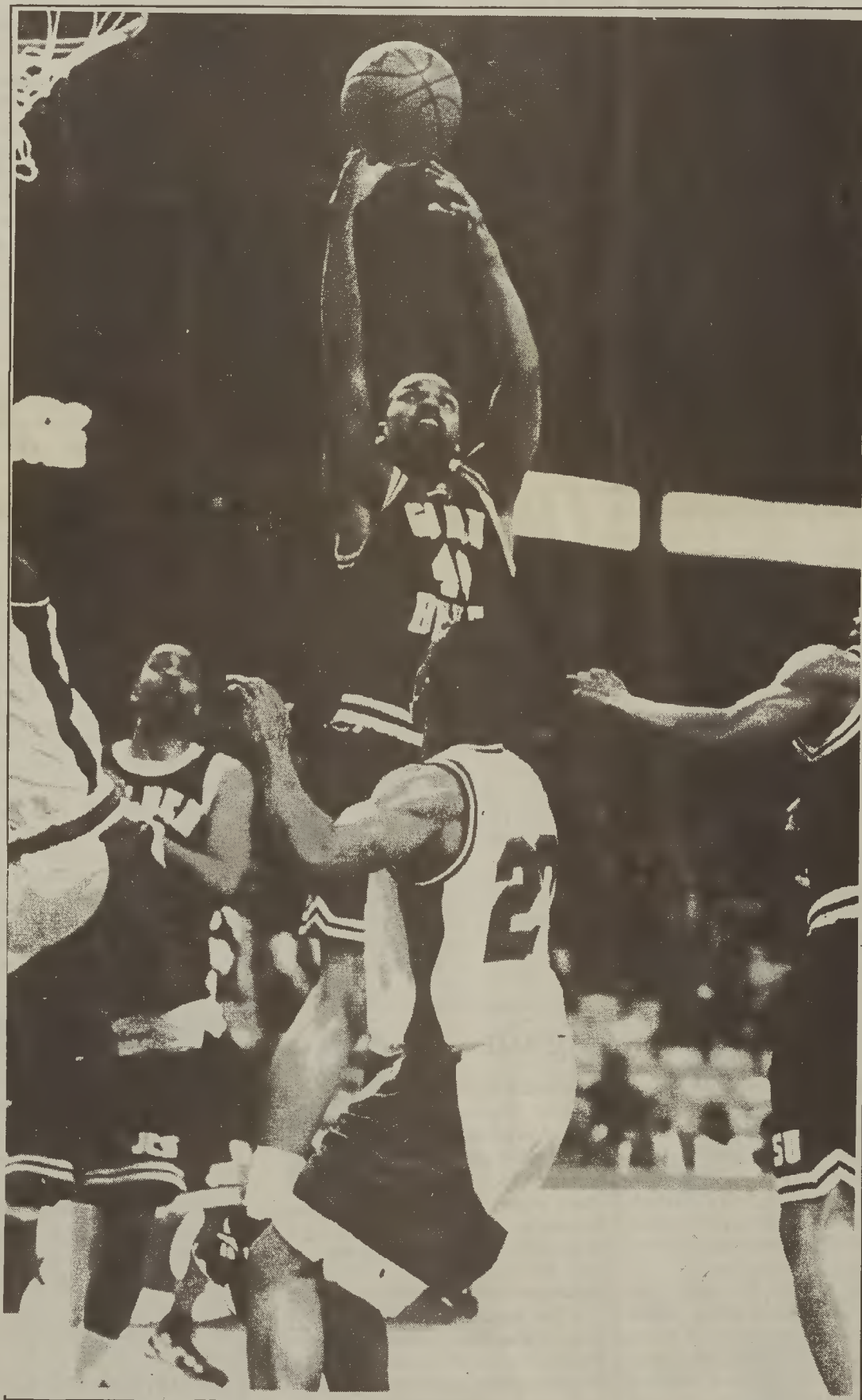
"They were ready. They were well-prepared to win," White said. "Those are the worst ones (to try to win). We lost the sectional final to a team we swept last year. I tried not to mention it, but it was in the back of my mind."

Harding also had to shake off an upset loss to West

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Providence's Chris Rogers drives around Harding's Jerrold Woods (23) in the first round of the N.C. 4A basketball playoffs. Harding won 76-64 to advance to the second round today at East Burke.



PHOTO/WADE NASH

Ahmed Evans, a CIAA all-rookie team selection at forward, is part of Johnson C. Smith's nucleus for returning the program to national prominence. The Golden Bulls finished 11-16 this season after a run of three NCAA playoff appearances and time in Division II's top 20.

Smith looks to 1997

By Herbert L. White
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith's basketball team will be markedly different next season, and coach Steve Joyner can't wait.

The Golden Bulls, who finished

the season at 11-16, had a down season filled with inconsistent play. With some of the best players in school history gone, Joyner had to get by with a team that was short on experience and emotional toughness.

"Every coach makes a realistic evaluation of his team going into the season," he said. "We had reached a point where we had cycled through our best players without bringing in people to replace them."

Smith return two key players in forwards Ahmed Evans and Alex Thompson as well as point guard Erasto Hatchett. Evans, a CIAA all-rookie selec-

tion, and Thompson, an all-conference pick, give the Bulls experience and potent inside scoring. They'll be the building blocks to the future.

"We think we've got the nucleus to build a team around," Joyner said. "But we certainly have to have a good recruiting year."

Smith, which hadn't been able to replenish its talent pool while the Bulls were winning big, has a head start on rebuilding with three high school teammates — Warrick Scott, Girard Foster and Rashard Wall of Martinsville, Va. Scott, a 6-4 guard-forward

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Negro League serves as fan's field of dreams

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SHELBYVILLE, Tenn. — When Bob Hayden returned home to Huntsville from Vietnam and serving on President John F. Kennedy's Honor Guard, he taught school for 22 years.

He now lays bricks for a Shelbyville construction company. His free time though is spent researching the history of the Negro Baseball League and seeking information about the old players who survive.

Hayden has spent most of his spare time over the past two years to this cause.

His tongue spills off the names of baseball greats as swiftly as a cunning base stealer, identifying the histories of Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Roy Campanella and Jackie Robinson with researched pride.

But there are many other names in Hayden's catalog of greats — Henry Kimbro, Buck O'Neill, Cool "Papa" Bell, Satchel Paige — players who might have earned riches and glory except for their chance of birth.

They were black men in a white man's world, shunned from prosperity because of the color of their skin.

Yet even though these players never gained the glory of the Aarons and the Robinsons, they were, in Hayden's book, equally deserving of the fame that eluded them.

Hayden grew up haunting the Huntsville sandlots where he got the chance to see many of the early black ballplayers, including those who later were among the first to break the barrier of segregation.

"The Negro League had teams in Indianapolis, Chicago, Louisville, Nashville and Birmingham," he remembers. "Huntsville didn't have a team, but because of the way they traveled, segregation, they had no place (motels) to stay.

"So they'd buy gas in Nashville, stop to play in Huntsville and stay overnight in different homes," he says.

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Magic passes on Olympic hoop dream

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Magic Johnson removed himself Sunday from consideration for a spot on the U.S. Olympic basketball team, saying the schedule is too grueling.

"I've been wrestling with it, you know?" Johnson told NBC-TV. "I really wanted to do it, and then when I saw that schedule and I saw, damn, when is my time going to be with the family, for myself to recuperate to be ready for next season?"

Johnson, a member of the original Dream Team at the 1992 Olympics, returned to the Los Angeles Lakers on Jan. 31. He had retired in 1991 after learning he has HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Fans have been clamoring for Johnson, 36, to be named to the so-called Dream Team III, which will compete at the Summer Games in Atlanta.

Johnson said the Olympic training schedule, coupled with his business and Lakers commitments, would prevent him from spending time with his family and taking them on trips to Hawaii and Europe.

"I want to step back," Johnson said in the interview before the Lakers played the Houston Rockets. "It would be too much because of my family commitments."