

Escaping salary cap trouble is a true trick of the NFL trade

BY DAVE CAMPBELL
AP Pro Football Writer

MINNEAPOLIS — New Minnesota Vikings general manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah worked eight years on Wall Street, in between economics degrees from Princeton and Stanford.

Yet he still found himself chasing a challenge, into the controlled-market financial arena of pro football roster building.

The first offseason for Adofo-Mensah with the Vikings will be a tall task. They're facing a \$45 million salary cap charge on the final year of quarterback Kirk Cousins' existing contract, and their current commitments project to be more than \$15 million over the cap.

"There's a little bit of art, and there's a little bit of science. That's what makes the puzzle fun," Adofo-Mensah said. "Honestly, that's what drew me to this sport, and it's why I think all of us love competing at the highest level."

The salary cap for 2022 is projected at \$208.2 million per team, a \$25.7 million spike from last year. The pandemic-related revenue drop during the empty-stadium season of 2020 triggered an unprecedented \$15.7 million decrease for 2021. Contracts negotiated prior to COVID-19's descent on the league were also calculated with the customary rise in mind.

While the overall landscape looks smoother this year than last year, success in the fall and winter will require creative and courageous decisions in the spring. Bigger cap increases are coming once the new media rights deals kick in for 2023, but that windfall won't help the Vikings now.

The same goes for the New Orleans Saints, Green Bay Packers, Dallas Cowboys and Super Bowl champion Los Angeles Rams, the four other teams whose cap situations are the furthest in the red with less than two weeks before free agency begins.

According to figures compiled by Over the Cap, an NFL salary tracking website, as of Thursday the Saints are approximately \$42 million over the threshold, followed by the Packers (\$31 million), Cowboys (\$22 million), Rams (\$21 million) and Vikings. Not only do teams need to get under the cap for compliance, they must save space for draft picks, and that's before signing any new players on the market.

Those five NFC teams went a combined 54-31 last season, and the Packers, Cowboys and Rams



Minnesota Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins (8) runs on the field before an NFL football game against the Chicago Bears on Jan. 9, 2022, in Minneapolis. BRUCE KLUCKHOHN/AP

accounted for three of the NFL's six best records. There's usually a price for contending — and in the case of the Rams, winning it all — that comes in subsequent years in the form of cap challenges.

"The pandemic certainly threw a wrench into everything as far as the salary cap numbers and they'd be so steady for so long," Packers general manager Brian Gutekunst said. "You kind of had that comforting feeling of where it's going to be. When that got changed, with where our team was at, it made it a little more difficult. We're very hopeful we're coming out of that."

The Packers are waiting for word from four-time MVP Aaron Rodgers, whose cap hit of more than \$46 million for 2022 would almost certainly be lowered with a contract extension if he returns. All-Pro wide receiver Davante Adams can become a free agent, so they'd have to fit him in, too.

That means restructuring more veteran deals, as they've already done with defensive tackle Kenny Clark, or flat out releasing accomplished players. Outside linebacker Za'Darius Smith could well be one of those, with cap relief of more than \$15 million if released.

The Cowboys are now dealing with the welcomed-but-daunting ramifications of having a franchise quarterback, Dak Prescott, on his second contract. They could create \$16 million in cap space by cutting wide receiver Amari Cooper and another \$8 million by dumping defensive end DeMarcus Lawrence. The problem is those are two vital players.

"We can have another good roster again, but we're going to have to massage this and we're not going to be able to keep everybody, and we're going to have to be efficient in free agency and we're going to have to be efficient in the draft," Cowboys executive Stephen Jones said.

Speaking to reporters at

the combine in Indianapolis, Jones aptly summed up the annual conundrum for just about every team in the league.

"We could do some things that could allow us to keep most of our guys if we wanted to push it all out, but we'll have a much bigger problem the next year and the year after that," he said.

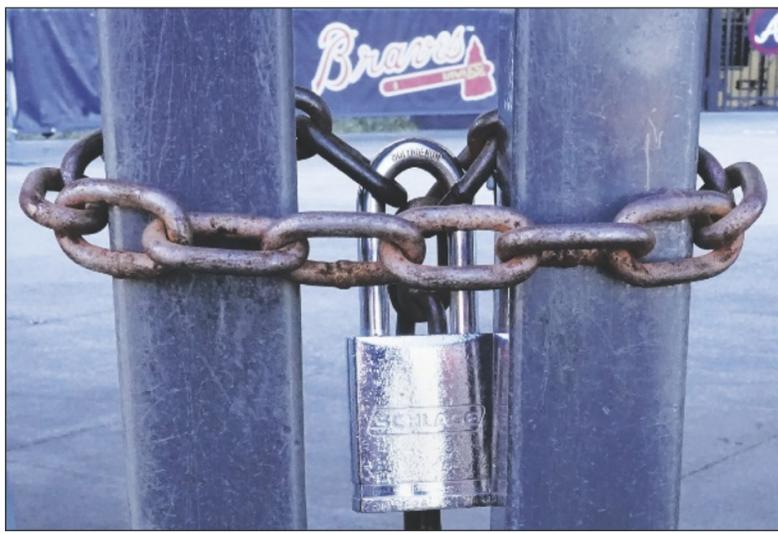
The Rams are a shining example of the benefit of the all-in approach favoring now over then, not to mention the separate issue of trading future draft picks for star players.

Contract restructures for perhaps six of their highest-paid veterans, among them quarterback Matthew Stafford, defensive tackle Aaron Donald and cornerback Jalen Ramsey, are expected this month. Rams general manager Les Snead and his lieutenants have deftly maneuvered through these obstacle courses before, leaving no doubt they can do so again and keep the Rams largely intact for a run at a repeat.

While cap trouble can be a real consequence of short-sighted strategy, rarely it is a deal breaker for a front office. There are always different ways to arrange the salaries and bonuses to fit the best players under the cap. The fans and the media are typically the groups sounding the alarms.

That's why it's possible for a team like the Vikings, coming off an 8-9 finish, to keep a market-rate quarterback in Cousins for at least another season and also upgrade some positions around him.

"We've got our leadership here in place that we are built to be successful right away. We feel very confident about that," owner and president Mark Wilf said. "We're going to work with Kirk as our quarterback and we'll move forward from there, but for 2022, for sure, we're going to be super competitive. Sustained success is the goal, and I think we have it with this leadership."



Locked gates are shown at Truist Park, home of the Atlanta Braves baseball team on Wednesday in Atlanta. With owners and players unable to agree on a labor contract to replace the collective bargaining agreement that expired Dec. 1, baseball commissioner Rob Manfred followed through with his threat on Tuesday and canceled the first two series for each of the 30 major league teams. JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

Column: Don't come back until baseball has been made better

BY TIM DAHLBERG
AP Sports Columnist

The talks are over, at least for now. Opening day is gone, too, and now we're forced to wait to see if we get any baseball at all.

If there was any good news coming out of baseball's labor talks in Florida it was this: At least now we know who to blame.

Here's a hint: It's not anyone wearing a uniform.

No, baseball players aren't blameless in any of this, far from it. They keep wanting more when they historically have always had the best deals in all of professional sports.

But this one is mostly on the 30 miserable, conniving owners who have always cared more about squeezing every last dollar out of the game than they ever cared about the game itself.

Once again, they've stolen from baseball fans. This time they made off with opening day and at least six games out of the regular season.

Sadly, that may just be the beginning. The temperatures could easily hit 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) in Arizona by the time spring training begins, if it ever does.

For what purpose, it's hard to figure out. Yes, the players' union can be demanding and is prone to asking for far more than owners are willing to deliver.

But the issues weren't so complex they couldn't be solved with some more time at the table. And the truth is, there was nothing on that table that would tilt the playing field so badly that franchises around the country would start bleeding money.

It's almost like the owners didn't want the season to start on time — and maybe they really didn't. Outside

of opening day, early season games are not generally moneymakers for owners despite Commissioner Rob Manfred's contention that missing the games would be a tragedy for baseball.

For weeks, owners refused to negotiate at all. When they finally did, it was with warnings of missed games and salaries and, finally, an ultimatum that opening day would be scratched if players didn't agree to a last and best offer.

Afterward, they cried poor, as if anyone believed them.

"The last five years have been very difficult years from a revenue perspective for the industry given the pandemic," Manfred said.

They've been difficult for baseball fans, too, though that's another story. The fact that fans are fleeing the game isn't all economic, but they've certainly grown weary of paying \$75 for a mediocre seat, \$25 for parking and \$18 plus tip every time the beer guy comes down the aisle.

No one should feel sorry for baseball players, either, who make an average of \$4 million a year to play a child's game. Indeed, the argument advanced by the union that they are bargaining for a system where all teams are competitive is simply a smokescreen for higher payrolls on smaller market clubs.

But salaries that once seemed to have no ceiling in the past have slipped a bit in the last few years — a trend players want reversed. That's largely because front offices now use analytics to figure out value and teams know that — except for a few superstars — players are pretty much interchangeable.

No reason to pay a veteran reliever \$15 million a year when teams can bring in young fireballers

at a fraction of the price to replace them without skipping a beat.

"The game has suffered damage for a while now. ... The game has been manipulated," union chief Tony Clark said. "The value inherent and how players are respected and viewed has changed. Players have been commoditized, monetized in a way that is really hard to explain."

What neither side seems to realize is that fans don't really care. Not about revenue sharing, not about how many players get to go to arbitration and not about whether each club has a personal chef in the clubhouse.

They just want to go to the ballpark, drink their \$18 beer and see some baseball.

Unfortunately, there's nothing in the negotiations that will make that baseball any better. While the players and owners argue about economics, the game is dying a slow death because it is simply becoming unwatchable.

So here's a thought. Return to the bargaining table and figure out what to do about arbitration years and luxury taxes. Go ahead and expand the playoffs, put ads on uniforms and adopt the DH in the National League because those are done deals already anyway.

Then stay at the table. Figure out what to do about the shift. Put a limit on the number of pitchers in any game. Come up with a way to speed up the game and reintroduce the strategies — the bunt, hit-and-run and sacrifice — that once made it so interesting.

Do something for the fans for once instead of chasing the last dollar they have in their pockets.

Or, in the alternative, just don't play at all.

After year of deflection, Coach K's Cameron farewell at hand

BY AARON BEARD
AP Basketball Writer

DURHAM, N.C. — Duke's Mike Krzyzewski has spent more than four decades preparing seniors for managing the emotions that come with taking the court a final time at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

This week, the retiring Hall of Famer must do that for someone new: himself.

"Little bit of thinking yesterday: 'This is your last game at Cameron,' Krzyzewski said Thursday, two days before his fourth-ranked Blue Devils host North Carolina to close the regular season. "It's crazy, how did that happen? How is it here? ... I'll have to spend some time, have a meeting with me."

"Maybe a few tough talks about keeping my eyes on the road, so to speak."

The 75-year-old known to many as "Coach K" has spent the better part of a year deflecting questions about his looming retirement and trying to avoid being a distraction or creating additional pressure on his fourth-ranked

Blue Devils. The approach has worked, with a roster led by players with NBA futures securing the program's outright first Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title since 2006.

Now there are no more deflections, no more chances to push questions into the distance. The moment is here, with Krzyzewski down to one home game — fittingly against the rival Tar Heels — and no more than 10 games left in an impressive career.

As Krzyzewski said he told his staff Thursday morning: "Who would've ever thought? It's my Senior Day."

"I think I'm just going to overall — I'm talking to myself right now — just let it happen," Krzyzewski said. "And see what the hell happens. But try not to let it negatively influence anything for my players, because look, for them, it's their game. ... And I'm responsible for making sure that they have the best chance to win that game."

Krzyzewski's resume in-



Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski gestures during the first half of the team's NCAA college basketball game against Pittsburgh on Tuesday in Pittsburgh. Duke won 86-56. KEITH SRAKOCIC/AP

cludes a college-coaching record 1,196 victories to go with five NCAA championships. So much of that success originated in the 82-year-old campus arena, with its cramped confines (9,314 capacity) and rowdy students packed into bleachers practically on top of the court along the length of the sideline to create an intimidating and ear-ringing homecourt advantage.

In all, Krzyzewski has a 572-75 record (.884) in 42 seasons of home games.

His Cameron farewell will be an emotional spectacle, adding another layer to a rivalry that annually commands the spotlight and features neighboring teams with a combined 11 NCAA championships.

The cheapest ticket on StubHub as of Thursday afternoon was \$3,250, with seats climbing north of \$10,000 — including some with asking prices of \$50,000 and, improbably, \$99,988 each. The school expects around 80 of Krzyzewski's former

Duke players to attend, just one example of how his influence on the sport will continue long past his retirement.

Steve Wojciechowski will be among that group.

The former Blue Devils defensive-minded point guard best known as "Wojo" became an assistant on Krzyzewski's staff before spending seven seasons as Marquette's head coach until last year. His enduring Cameron moment came on his Senior Day in 1998, when Duke rallied to beat a North Carolina team featuring future NBA players Antawn Jamison and Vince Carter.

At the horn, Wojciechowski turned and ran straight to Krzyzewski for a firm and lasting hug amid the rare sight of "Cameron Crazies" storming the court to celebrate.

"It's surreal," Wojciechowski said. "How many things in your life have been consistent over a 40-year period, where you know you go somewhere and turn on the TV, there's a constant there that you can depend on? In all of

our lives? Very few. Duke, and Coach K being there, is one of them."

Not every memory is quite as sweet, though.

Arizona State coach Bobby Hurley, the point guard on Krzyzewski's first two NCAA title teams, still remembers Krzyzewski working out the team after a long bus ride home following a January 1991 loss at Virginia.

Current player Wendell Moore Jr., has heard stories like that from former players that came before him, laughing that Krzyzewski has "definitely chilled out with us a little bit, I've heard."

Moore said Krzyzewski was "a little sentimental" with the team this week.

"He's known it's coming to an end," Moore said. "So for him, he wants to cherish every last moment of it. ... I mean, we know where he's coming from. A guy like him, he never thinks it's going to end for him. But he knows his time is coming, so we're doing everything we can just to stay in the moment with him."