

Lomax not all shook up by subpar years



Don Pierson

On pro football

Don't count out another strike

Management and labor are quiet on the eve of the expiration of football's collective bargaining agreement. That doesn't mean there won't be a strike.

It might be a quiet strike. It might be a short strike. It might be a stupid, pointless strike. But don't count out a strike. For a while, it appeared management negotiator Jack Donlan and union director Gene Upshaw were such good friends that everything would work out. But you have to recall a quote by Upshaw some two months ago:

"Every time we've ever met at the crossroads, management has always tested us and always forced some type of work stoppage. I don't see this round being different."

If management doesn't believe the players are serious about their demands, management doesn't concede anything. The only way players can convince management they are serious is to strike.

In 1982, players struck for 57 days. They wound up settling for approximately the same thing management offered before the strike. But at least they got management's attention.

This year, management looks at the average player salary of \$205,000, compares it to 1982's average of \$90,000 and wonders: "Who wants to strike?"

According to the players' union, which is currently making its rounds of each team, the players are solidly in favor of walking out if management continues to stall. The union calls management stupid if it underestimates the resolve of the players.

The collective bargaining agreement expires Monday night, but the players cannot strike until at least Sept. 15 because of a 60-day notice filed July 15. That means the Sept. 14 Bears-Giants Monday night opener appears out of jeopardy. That's a good idea, considering the Bears-Giants game might be the highlight of the season anyway.

A strike could wipe out the rest of the season and fans could still say: "Remember that Bears-Giants game back in 1987?"

Management is proposing a standard wage scale for incoming players, something the union wouldn't mind. How it might work:

Every player entering the league would get the same base salaries of \$50,000, \$55,000, \$60,000 and \$70,000, regardless of the round in which he was drafted. The player could sign for two, three or four years.

Signing bonuses would vary according to the draft round.

Incentives for playing time and individual and team accomplishments could be factored into the scale. The point is to save the millions of dollars paid every year to untried rookies while productive veterans watch with envy. Already this year, signing bonuses of close to \$30 million have been paid to first-round draftees alone before any of them play a down. History says some of them never will, but they will continue to gain yardage to the bank.

According to union sources, management wants the players to agree in principle to such a wage system before supplying details. This is where it gets sticky.

Veterans wouldn't mind the idea if they could be guaranteed that the money saved on rookies would go to them. It doesn't do Mike Singletary or Otis Wilson any good to complain about Brian Bosworth's contract unless they can cash in on the money a team would save with a wage scale.

So far, management sounds more interested in saving money on rookies than spending it on veterans.

A wage scale has additional possibilities. It would keep large chunks of money out of the hands of agents who prey on rookies. That might enable teams to pay some of their scouts more than a few bucks per diem for meal money on the road.

A scale would discourage **Norby Walters** and others from signing underclassmen, because even if they didn't go to class, most underclassmen would realize they don't need agents to negotiate wage scales.

So if the union agrees to a wage scale, what does management give in return? Free agency? That would do it in a minute. But owners have two words for free agency: no way.

It would seem reasonable that some compromise allowing more freedom for players to switch teams could be linked to a wage scale for incoming players. It also would seem reasonable that it wouldn't take a strike to reach that compromise.

But the Bosworth contract of \$11 million for 10 years throws reason to the wind. Why would veterans want to gamble on a wage scale or free agency when owners are paying out that kind of money? Why bother to strike when all the veteran defensive players have to do is take the Bosworth contract into their next negotiations and all the veteran offensive players have to do is take the Vinny Testaverde contract into theirs?

As sage Lester Hayes of the Los Angeles Raiders remarked, Bosworth's teammates should be outraged that the Seahawks, owned by the Nordstrom family of Seattle's leading department store, would pay that kind of money.

"If I was Steve Largent or Kenny Easley, I would stop shopping at Nordstrom's," Hayes said. "I would not shop at Nordstrom's again in my life. No more Nordstrom's shopping. That's null and void."

Drug testing is another arguing point in bargaining. Management wants random testing. The union fears invasion of privacy and claims that football already has a system allowing random tests "upon reasonable cause."

The Los Angeles Rams announced this week that running back Charles White, who had a recurrence of dependency problems he experienced with the Cleveland Browns, will undergo tests every day. If he fails once, he's gone. He is believed to be the first athlete to undergo daily testing.

By Mike Kiley
Chicago Tribune

MEMPHIS—Don't be cruel, to a heart that's true.

This is Elvis' city. If only Elvis were alive, St. Louis quarterback Neil Lomax could request that song on one of these steamy summer nights at Graceland. The words speak so aptly to Lomax's vacillating career.

The Cardinals have moved their training base here from Charleston, Ill., for the last couple of weeks of the preseason. And as the team prepared to play the Bears Monday night in Soldier Field, Lomax worked on winning back the hearts and minds of his teammates and fans.

He has run the musical gamut from "Blue Suede Shoes" to "Heartbreak Hotel" in the last three years, starting out as a dandy and then becoming a dunce.

In the New York Times in the winter of 1984, Giants coach Bill Parcells called the then-fourth-year pro one of the top three quarterbacks in the National Football League.

A front-page headline in the Sporting News in September, 1985, blared "The Next Great Quarterback" over a story about the aspiring phenom from Portland State.

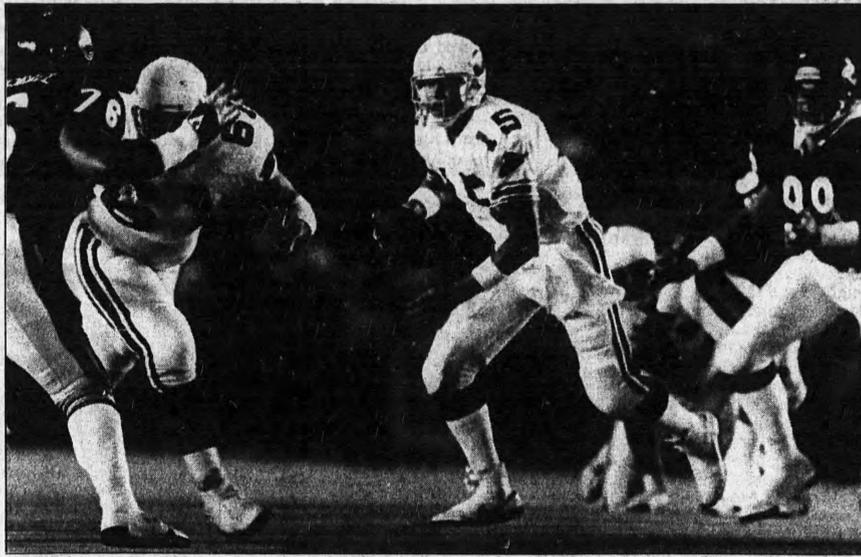
The praises vanished in 1985 and 1986. After St. Louis and Lomax trod on their league playoff promises of 1984 with a combined record of 9-22-1 the last two years, he was transformed into "The Great Quarterback Fraud."

Jim Hanifan was driven out as head coach after the disappointing 1985 effort and former Dallas Cowboys assistant Gene Stallings took control of a bad situation.

This year, the Cardinals drafted quarterback Kelly Stouffer from Colorado State with the sixth draft pick. Lomax, at home in Portland, Ore., described his reaction succinctly: Grrrrr. He even gritted his teeth here last week when he made that noise.

Rumors abounded that Lomax would be traded. Reportedly, he was turned down by San Diego, Seattle and the Los Angeles Raiders, none of whom would give up a second-round draft pick for him.

Stouffer remains unsigned, re-



St. Louis quarterback Neil Lomax will be looking for job security as well as receivers when the Cardinals face the Bears in Monday night's exhibition game at Soldier Field.

jecting the Cardinals' offer of \$1.8 million for four years, and yet Stallings believes he has already made a strong contribution to the team.

"Neil will say no, but I think it's made a difference in him that we drafted Stouffer," Stallings said. "It's a certain threat."

"But I think Neil realizes I didn't make the choice. If I did, it makes a little bit more of a difference to him. Our scouting department just picked out who they thought was the best player at that spot."

That's another story in this byzantine organization, where the head coach had virtually no approval power in the draft.

Stallings wouldn't admit it, but he probably agrees with Lomax that St. Louis should have used its first-round pick to plug a hole in a listing ship loaded with leaks.

"This big quarterback controversy they talked about. Well, here I am. Where is everybody else?" Lomax challenged.

"I didn't think quarterback was the area we needed to improve ourselves. I was surprised they drafted him. We needed help in the lines, tight end and

defensive backs."

What do you think goes through management's mind?

"Don't ask me that," Lomax said. "Coach Stallings doesn't even know sometimes. He asks for help and doesn't get it. I'm just a pawn in this game of chess. This team is unique."

"Look at Jim McMahon on the Bears. To me, McMahon is a good athlete. But he gets way too much credit for the things they do. That's no stab at him. But Chicago has a great team without him."

St. Louis doesn't have a great team with or without Lomax. That supports the point Lomax emphasizes about his situation—that quarterbacks can't do it all.

"Neil didn't have as good a surrounding cast last year as he needs if he's going to be good," Stallings said.

"He was at a real disadvantage. We'd bring receivers in on Sunday who'd only been with us a few days. When you lose receivers like a Pat Tilley and a Roy Green to injury, you're going to have problems. We did."

"I know very few quarterbacks who throw the ball well laying down. There are very few out-

standing quarterbacks without outstanding receivers.

"I wouldn't say our problems are corrected yet, but it's getting a little closer. We're protecting Neil a little better now, he has confidence in his receivers, and he's had a good summer."

Lomax should test the Bears' secondary after piling up impressive passing totals in his first two preseason games. He's 19 of 27 for 224 yards and three touchdowns.

But don't tell him he's back. Lomax doesn't see it that way.

"I picked up the paper the other day and the headline was 'The New Neil Lomax.' What is this? I take it right in stride with the comics section. It's great humor," he said without the trace of a smile.

"I understand what I have to do, what this team has to do. It's too bad a lot of media people don't understand what goes on. We didn't have a good football team the last two years, me included. I wasn't a good quarterback."

"I tried to do so much more than I was able to do. I tried to be the hero. Tried to call my own plays, throw the bomb, do

it all by myself. I found out I can't.

"In 1984, when we were successful, I wasn't being the hero. I was just executing my position."

"All the hoopla about me going into 1985 hurt the team, not me. We started out a little overconfident. We go 2-0, then 3-1, and everybody was writing more good things about us. Then we lost eight of the next nine games and we got back to reality real quick."

"I've learned to handle some pressures I'd never experienced. I used to be able to use the excuses that I was young and inexperienced. Now, after going to the Pro Bowl in 1984, I can't use those excuses anymore. The media won't let me alone."

He refreshes himself every off-season in Oregon. Stallings was displeased Lomax didn't stay in St. Louis and work out with other committed teammates, but Lomax claimed his chances of burnout were greater if he hadn't returned to Portland.

"I prepare myself physically, mentally and spiritually to play a season," he said. "If I don't do that well, I won't have a good season. I think I've done these things well this past off-season. Maybe that's what people are seeing in me—all this new Neil Lomax stuff."

"I have a lot of ministries I'm involved with back home in Portland. My church work helps me to give something back to the community. I work with kids, and not because of who I am but who I'm not. I'm not anybody special."

"We in the NFL are very spoiled. We get a lot of perks. We don't deserve all of these things, but that's the way the world is. So if I can help these kids, it puts value on life for me. It sounds like goody two-shoes, I know, but that's the way I feel."

"My wife, Laurie, has helped me tremendously to handle things the last year. She keeps me within boundaries, so I don't get mentally burned out."

"God has a plan for us. We can't deviate from that plan. It's not what the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wants, or USA Today wants, or even Coach Stallings. It's bigger than that."

Bigger than the NFL? Neil Lomax does have some funny ideas, doesn't he?

Gault has leg up on the competition

Bear star not spinning his wheels

By Don Pierson

Wind sprints again and Willie Gault is smiling. His legs get to run some more. It's as though they are being fed. They can't get enough. They never tire. They make it look so easy.

After wind sprints, Gault runs to the locker room, where it is suspected he puts his legs on a rack and gives them an oil change. Nobody has verified this. He's too fast.

Speed defined Gault when he joined the Bears. Speed still provides his best introduction. But the wide receiver has long since proven he is more than a sprinter in shoulder pads. His durability alone separates him from normal trackmen who often find it difficult to get through preliminaries and finals without straining a fragile muscle.

Gault has survived all the preliminaries pro football can dish out. In his four seasons, he has never missed a game, seldom a practice, rarely a dash downfield. Wide receivers run more during one practice than many other players run during a week. Pulls and aches are normal; Gault is abnormal.

Genes are largely responsible. Gault realizes his speed is "God-given" and admits he is "blessed."

Clyde Emrich, the Bears' strength coach, said he has never seen Gault work on his legs in the weight room.

"Our goal is to improve, and if you've already got it, why mess with success?" Emrich said.

It's not that Gault doesn't take care of his legs.

"I train year-round. I never get out of shape," he said. "We played Washington in last year's playoffs on a Saturday. On Sunday we had a meeting and on Monday I was running. That went on every day with one day off a week."

Greg Landry, the Bears' receivers coach, started playing quarterback in the National Football League in 1968. The fastest receiver he ever played with? "I think probably Willie," Landry said.

Landry played one game for the Bears in 1984, the year the

Bears needed six quarterbacks.

Gault was counting up the number of quarterbacks who have thrown to him in his Bear career and he barely had enough fingers.

"It's incredible; I've had to adapt to 10 different quarterbacks," Gault said.

And they have had to adapt to him. Only one, Vince Evans, was able to consistently throw farther than Gault could run.

When Mike Tomczak audibled his 31-yard touchdown pass to Gault last week against Pittsburgh, Gault thought the ball was overthrown.

It was a good sign. Usually, he has to slow down and let the ball catch up to him.

"It feels good to go after one," Gault said. "I'm almost always a step or two faster in games than in practice because of adrenaline. I tell Mike, 'Just try and overthrow me.' If they try and overthrow me, then I know I can get there."

It's not the easiest thing for quarterbacks to learn. Tomczak worked on his mechanics during the off-season and improved his footwork.

He said he has trouble now only "when I rush myself, when I know I've got Willie going deep and I've got to get the ball off."

Gault has impressed Landry as more than a long-ball threat.

"Last year, he showed really great leadership and work habits," he said. "I can't remember when he last missed a practice. And he has really improved his blocking. He's going after people."

Gault has endured criticism for dropped balls, sloppy routes and liking mirrors better than the middle—all petty challenges compared to his record of dependability and effectiveness.

"He is showing maturity," Landry said. "Most teams that face the Bears try to stop the run and not leave Willie too much one-on-one."

Humility is not a necessary ingredient for wide receivers. A psychiatrist once called them the movie stars of a team, especially appropriate for would-be movie



Wide receiver Willie Gault hasn't missed a game in four seasons with the Bears.

star Gault, who has signed with the William Morris talent agency in California and has a couple of movie possibilities on the back burner.

Gault also expects to compete on a bobsled team in the Winter Olympics in Calgary, since he remains ineligible to try out his legs in the Summer Olympics in Seoul.

He is entering the option year of his Bears' contract and figures if the Bears don't want to pay him now, they can pay him later. Football isn't exactly a hobby with him, but he suggests, "There are bigger and better things ahead."

He is enjoying his career without limiting his horizons.

"I like what I've done. I like most of all the type person I am, the fact I'm a very giving person," Gault said.

Meanwhile, back at training camp, Gault carries his own electric juicer to lunch and patiently peels oranges, plums, peaches, even grapes.

"I try to eat right," he said. "I squeeze my own juice so I know what's in it. It's natural."

"I don't eat red meat, only fish and chicken. Have done it since college. I drink no pop or sodas, no alcohol whatsoever, no beer or wine. Never have."

"I figure this is the only body I have. I treat it right and it treats me right. I give my engines tuneups."

Just as suspected.

Verdi

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the Super Bowl champions?

"I was very hurt when they let my best friend, Jerry Vainisi, go," Ditka said, referring to the Bears' departed general manager. "I cried the day I spoke about it; I cried for the three weeks before, because I knew about it. I've had my cries on this job. I still don't completely understand why it happened, and if it had been my decision to make, I wouldn't have made it."

"And when it happened, yes, I did consider going elsewhere to coach. I thought about leaving. You see things like that, and you think to yourself: 'What's going on here? Is it all worth it?' But the more I travel around, the more I see how insignificant we all are, how we can all be replaced, including me. And there are only 28 jobs like the one I've got in the whole world, and I'm blessed to have this one, because this is the most special of them all."

Ditka felt that way long before he had it, when he was a veteran player and then an assistant to Tom Landry with the Dallas Cowboys. Ditka had a Bear tattooed on his chest even then, and when he broached the subject of returning to Chicago with George Halas, the crusty grandfather of the NFL listened intently. They had fought more than Ditka and McCaskey ever will, but the common wavelength was there.

"There was something in my mind about being here in Chicago, playing here, leaving here, then coming back here," Ditka said. "Mr. Halas told me I would have to take the initiative, and by God, I don't write many letters, but the one I wrote him in 1981 was the most important I ever wrote. I had a feeling he would give one of his old guys a shot at the head coaching job if it opened up. I just had a feeling. I didn't know it would be me, and I had no idea things would turn out this well."

Ditka isn't talking only real dollars here, because he's set for life with golf balls. What he's talking is psychic dollars. For all the aggravations and tempests he endures—some would suggest he ignites half of them with his spontaneous combustion—Ditka senses a bond between this city and this franchise that defies rationality. He chooses to be part of it and enjoy it rather than dissect or explain it.

"I couldn't if I tried; I couldn't explain it," he said. "I just know that 1985 was the warmest winter

we ever had in Chicago. People didn't care if there were six feet of snow on the ground, they wanted to get to Soldier Field on Sundays. I have nothing to prove it, but I'll bet the crime rate here was down that year, too, because of the Chicago Bears."

"I remember the secretary, Marge Anderson, after she typed up the letter to Mr. Halas. She said, 'Good for you.' Was she ever right. I don't deserve the salary that Chuck Noll or Don Shula or Tom Landry makes, because they've paid their dues. They've been around a long time; they've been great. But none of them has what I have with this team and this city. It's special."

From Day 1, Ditka put his drive on display and hoped that his players would jump aboard. Rough about the edges, Ditka has launched some incredible flying clipboards and stuck fists through storage lockers and worn his moods on his mustache. But he's wheedled, intimidated and cajoled, and if ever a team reflected its coach's personality—right down to the occasional craziness—it's these Bears. Suggest that he's one of the last to administer through fear and he says, no, he merely has a heap of talent.

"The one thing the players know is that winning is very important to me," Ditka said. "Not winning enough games to contend, but winning Super Bowls. Jim Finks got some good football players here; we've gotten some good football players here. We've got a great coaching staff. We've got the best fans in the world. Michael McCaskey is under a lot of pressure from a lot of sides, and if you think that doesn't touch me, you're wrong. We go through more crap here than any other place—San Francisco, Dallas, New York—and I can't explain that, either. But, what the heck. It's all part of the game."

Just then, the private line in his office rang. He spoke for a minute or two.

"That was my mom, Charlotte, calling from Aliquippa, Pa.," Ditka said. "She wanted to know if it was all settled, and when I told her it was, she was crying. This is unbelievable, you know, what's happened to me. There's a lady who was an expert on putting a patch on top of a patch. Now, people pay me to wear their pants. This is an unbelievable place, Chicago and the Bears."

Because of that, Michael McCaskey had only one choice, but so did Mike Ditka. Saturday didn't mean that they won't argue again, but that they will, and there's something comforting in that sense of continuity.