

# Jets Speculating

## They're 'selling the future' to free agents

By Rich Cimini  
STAFF WRITER

During a stop in New York on his post-Super Bowl talk-show tour, Larry Brown — the unlikely MVP of Super Bowl XXX — was asked by a local sportscaster if he'd consider signing with the Jets. The Cowboys cornerback, a free agent, responded with a facial expression that usually comes from sucking on a lemon. *The Jets?* Finally, he laughed and said, in essence, "Not a chance."

Another slap at the Jets. To paraphrase Kermit the Frog, it isn't easy being green.

Nothing is easy for the Jets, especially when it comes to luring marquee free agents. After all, they're not exactly overflowing with attractive qualities. The team finished with the worst record in the NFL this past season, hasn't won a division title in 26 years, has a head coach who has lost 20 of his last 23 games, has no legitimate star players and plays on artificial turf in a stadium it can't even call its own.

How tough will it be for the Jets to compete in the free-agent market? Many sports agents, the men who wield considerable clout in the free-agent game, said the Jets face a major battle in trying to overcome the also-ran stigma.

"As an agent, it would be hard to convince one of my clients to go there," said Gary Wichard, who arranged for two clients — Rob Moore and Terance Mathis — to leave the Jets in recent years. "Most players don't want to play for losing teams. Anybody who says they're going to a 3-13 team is going because of monetary reasons, which makes you wonder: Are they driven by money or driven by success?"

The Jets, with one of the lowest payrolls in the league, have plenty to spend — they are approximately \$5 million under the \$38.8-million salary cap. Therein lies their best weapon against the financially strapped upper-echelon teams. The Jets showed their willingness to spend by signing right tackle David Williams to

a five-year, \$12.25-million contract, which included a whopping \$3-million signing bonus.

Some agents believe the Jets overpaid for Williams. Careless spending, they said, could hurt the team in the long run.

"The Jets will have to overpay on everybody," said a prominent agent who requested anonymity. "They can't compete on equal footing. But if they overpay for a guy like [Neil] O'Donnell, they will be behind the 8-ball and lose their salary-cap advantage."

Look what happened last year. Desperate for defensive help, the Jets doled out \$3.5 million in signing bonuses to Tony Casillas, Erik Howard and Todd Scott, none of whom became a steady contributor. Those kind of mistakes can haunt a team for years.

What the Jets need is a watershed year to change the club's fortunes. If they can sign at least two impact free agents — O'Donnell and Lions left tackle Lomas Brown are the primary targets — and field a winning team this season, it would enhance their marketability in 1997.

"If the Jets can put together a winning program, the place would recruit itself," said former Jet Jeff Lageman, who spurned the Jets last offseason to accept virtually the same free-agent offer from the expansion Jaguars. "When you're winning, there's no place like New York. The hard part is to get to that level. They've never been able to do it."

Lageman believes much of the Jets' problem is rooted in coaching instability. Indeed, they've had three head coaches in the last three seasons, which sends a bad message to players around the league.

Despite the constant change and the perpetual losing, the Jets are optimistic they can make a big splash in free agency. "We think we've got a pretty good product to sell," personnel director Dick Haley said. "We've got New York, and our stadium is full every week. We feel we have a good organization, and we know we have a potentially strong defense."

## NFL FREE AGENTS

### Franchise / Transition

Players designated as franchise and transition players (x-franchise player who is under contract and received the designation in a previous year; x-franchise player whose exclusive rights are held by the club; x-franchise player for whom club has established a right of first refusal-draft choice compensation, two first-round selections; y-transition player):

**Giants:** y-Howard Cross, te; y-Rodney Hampton, rb

**Jets:** xc-Johnny Mitchell, te

**Arizona:** xc-Eric Swann, dt

**Atlanta:** y-Jeff George, qb

**Baltimore:** xa-Eric Turner, db; y-Steve Everett, c

**Buffalo:** xc-John Fina, t

**Chicago:** y-Alonzo Spellman, de; Donnell Woolford, db

**Dallas:** y-Michael Irvin, wr

**Denver:** xa-Steve Atwater, s; y-Shannon Sharpe, te

**Detroit:** xc-Kevin Glover, c; y-Bennie Blades, s; y-Jason Hanson, k; y-Herman Moore, wr

**Green Bay:** y-Le Roy Butler, db

**Houston:** xc-Chris Dishman, db

**Indianapolis:** xc-Jim Harbaugh, qb; y-Quentin Coryatt, lb; Will Wolford, t

**Kansas City:** xa-Neil Smith, de; y-Dale Carter, db

**Miami:** y-Marco Coleman, lb; y-Troy Vincent, db

**Minnesota:** y-John Randle, dt

**New England:** y-Vincent Brown, lb

**New Orleans:** y-Willie Roaf, t

**Oakland:** y-Terry McDaniel, db; y-Gerald Perry, g

**Pittsburgh:** xa-Carnell Lake, db; y-Dermontti Dawson, d

**St. Louis:** y-Sean Gilbert, de; y-Todd Lyght, db

**San Francisco:** xa-Steve Young, qb; y-Steve Wallace, t

**Seattle:** xc-Robert Blackmon, db

**Tampa Bay:** xa-Paul Gruber, t; y-Eric Curry, de

**Washington:** y-Tom Carter, db; Jim Lachey, t

### Category 1

Restricted free agents who received qualifying offers from their old clubs and are subject to the first refusal-compensation system. Offer sheets may be submitted to these players no later than 11:59 (EDT) on April 15. (Numbers in parentheses indicate draft choices.)

**Giants:** Willie Beamon, db (1st refusal); Marcus Buckley, lb (3rd); Michael Strahan, de (1st)

**Jets:** Adrian Murrell, rb (1st)

**Arizona:** Chad Brown, de (1st ref.); Chad Fann, te (1st ref.); Garrison Hearst, rb (1st and 3rd); Brandon Moore, t (1st ref.)

**Atlanta:** Ron George, lb (5th); Roger Harper, db (2nd); Lincoln Kennedy, t (1st ref.); Mitch Lyons, te (6th); Darnell Walker, db (7th)

**Baltimore:** Mike Caldwell, lb (3rd); Steve Everett, c (1st); Dan Footman, de (1st)

**Buffalo:** Monty Brown, lb, (1st ref.); Russell Copeland, wr (4th); Thomas Smith, db (1st)

**Carolina:** Bob Christian, rb (1st ref.); Matt Elliott, c (1st ref.); Howard Griffith, rb (1st ref.); Sean Love, g (1st ref.); Jeff Zgonia, dt (7th)

**Chicago:** Myron Baker, lb (4th); Curtis Conway, wr (1st and 3rd); Albert Fontenot, de (4th); Chris Gedney, te (3rd); Barry Minter, lb (6th)

**Cincinnati:** Scott Brumfield, g (1st ref.); Tony McGee, te (2nd); Doug Pelfrey, k (1st ref.); Artie Smith, de (5th); Steve Tovar, lb (3rd); Brett Wallerstedt, lb (6th)

**Dallas:** Brock Marion, db (7th); Darrin Smith, lb (1st); Ron Stone, t (4th)

**Denver:** Jerry Evans, te (1st ref.); Rondell Jones, db (3rd); Jeff Robinson, de (4th)

**Green Bay:** Charles Jordan, wr (1st ref.); Lindsay Knapp, t (5th); George Teague, db (1st)

**Houston:** Micheal Barrow, lb (1st); Blain Bishop, db (1st); John Henry Mills, te (5th); Frank Wyche, te (6th)

**Indianapolis:** Derwin Gray, db (4th); Ronald Humphrey, rb (1st ref.); Devon McDonald, lb (4th); Roosevelt Potts, rb (2nd)

**Jacksonville:** Ben Coleman, t (2nd); Craig Keith, te (7th); Le'Shai Maston, rb (1st ref.); Tom Myslinski, g (4th); Jimmy Smith, wr (2nd); Santo Stephens, lb (1st ref.); Dave Thomas, db (1st ref.)

**Kansas City:** Darren Anderson, db (4th); Victor Bailey, wr (2nd); Danan Hughes, wr (7th)

**Miami:** Terry Kirby, rb (1st)

**Minnesota:** Charles Evans, rb (1st ref.); Scottie Graham, rb (7th); Robert Smith, rb (1st)

**New England:** Vincent Brisby, wr (1st); Corwin Brown, db (4th); Mike Gisler, g (1st ref.); Vernon Lewis, db (1st ref.); Chris Slade, lb (1st)

**New Orleans:** Derek Brown, rb (4th); Lorenzo Neal, rb (4th)

**Oakland:** Raghib Ismail, wr (1st); Richard Stephens, t (1st ref.); James Trapp, db (3rd)

**Philadelphia:** Lester Holmes, t (1st); James Willis, lb (5th)

**Pittsburgh:** Andre Hastings, wr (3rd); Kevin Henry, de (4th); Willie Williams, db (1st)

**St. Louis:** Chuck Belin, g (5th); Troy Drayton,

te (2nd); Greg Robinson, rb (1st ref.)

**San Diego:** Lewis Bush, lb (4th); Eric Castle, db (6th); Joe Cocozzo, g (3rd); Dwayne Gordon, lb (1st ref.); John Parrella, dt (2nd)

**Seattle:** Carlton Gray, db (1st); Mike Keim, t (1st ref.); Michael McCrary, de (7th); Dean Wells, lb (4th)

**Tampa Bay:** Chidi Ahanotu, dt (6th); Curtis Buckley, db (1st ref.); Demetrius DuBoise, lb (2nd); Michael Husted, k (1st ref.); John Lynch, db (3rd); Dave Moore, te (7th); Lamar Thomas, wr (3rd)

**Washington:** Reggie Brooks, rb (2nd); Terry Crews, lb (1st ref.); Sterling Palmer, de (4th)

### Category 2

Players with four or more accrued seasons designated as franchise players. The old club has a right of first refusal and compensation of two No. 1 draft choices (offer sheets may be submitted to the old club until 4 p.m. (EDT) on July 15):

**Jets:** Johnny Mitchell, te

**Buffalo:** John Fina, t

**Detroit:** Kevin Glover, c

**Houston:** Chris Dishman, db

**Indianapolis:** Jim Harbaugh, qb

**Seattle:** Robert Blackmon, db

### Category 3

Players with four or more accrued seasons designated as transition players. The old club has a right of first refusal, but no right of compensation (offer sheets may be submitted to the old club until 4 p.m. (EDT) on July 15):

**Giants:** Howard Cross, te; Rodney Hampton, rb

**Atlanta:** Jeff George, qb

**Chicago:** Alonzo Spellman, de

**Detroit:** Bennie Blades, db

**Indianapolis:** Quentin Coryatt, lb

**Kansas City:** Dale Carter, db

**Miami:** Marco Coleman, de; Troy Vincent, db

**Oakland:** Gerald Perry, t

**St. Louis:** Todd Lyght, db

### Category 4

Players with four or more accrued seasons who have negotiated rights of first refusal with their old clubs (offer sheets may be submitted to the old club until 4 p.m. (EDT) on July 15):

**Carolina:** Darion Conner, lb

**Chicago:** Ron Cox, lb; Jerry Fontenot, c; James Williams, t

**Cincinnati:** Andre Collins, lb; Tim McGee, wr

**Detroit:** Mark Royals, p

**Jacksonville:** Steve Beuerlein, qb

**Minnesota:** Donald Frank, db

**Oakland:** Jeff Hostetler, qb

**Philadelphia:** Mark Gunn, dt

**St. Louis:** Marv Cook, te; Mark Rypien, qb

**Washington:** Terry Allen, rb

### Category 5

The unrestricted free agents with four or more accrued seasons who are free to sign with any team through July 15:

**Giants:** Michael Brooks, lb; Dave Brown, qb; Chris Calloway, wr; Mike Croel, lb; Stacy Dilard, dt; John Elliott, t; Mike Horan, rb; Arthur Marshall, wr; Mike Sherrard, wr

**Jets:** Kurt Barber, lb; Kyle Clifton, lb; Cal Dixon, c; Roger Duffy, c; Boomer Esiason, qb; Erik Wilhelm, qb

**Arizona:** Mike Buck, qb; Ed Cunningham, c; Bernard Dabney, t; Jamie Dukes, c; Carl Dunbar, dt; Cecil Gray, t; Randy Kirk, lb; Keith McCants, de; Rob Selby, g; Larry Tharpe, t; Andre Waters, s; Aeneas Williams, db; Joe Wolf, g

**Atlanta:** Mel Aage, de; Chris Doleman, de; Brad Edwards, s; Roman Fortin, g; Mo Gardner, nt; Bobby Hebert, qb; Pierce Holt, de; Terance Mathis, wr; Clay Matthews, lb; Rich Miano, s; Jim Ritter, g; Elbert Shelley, db; Chuck Smith, de; Terry Taylor, db

**Baltimore:** Earnest Byner, rb; Gerald Dixon, lb; Brian Kinchen, te; Keenan McCardell, wr; Louis Riddick, s; Pio Sagapolotele, dt; Rico Smith, wr; Frank Stams, lb; Tom Tupa, qb; Tommy Vardell, rb

**Buffalo:** Cornelius Bennett, lb; Billy Brooks, wr; Adam Lingner, c; Mark Maddox, lb; Andre Reed, wr

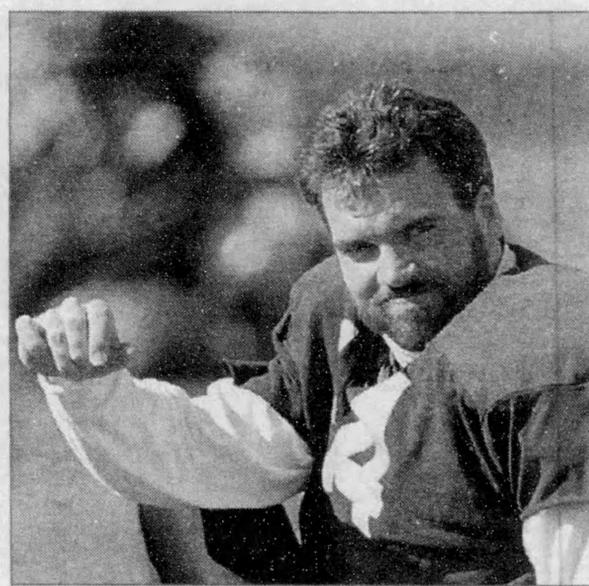
**Carolina:** Paul Butcher, lb; Mark Carrier, wr; Mar' Dennis, t; Brett Faryniarz, lb; Tim McKyer, db; Derrick Moore, rb; Frank Reich, qb; Mark Rodenhauser, c; Rod Smith, cb; Dwight Stone, wr; Pat Terrell, s; Blair Thomas, rb; Mark Thomas, de; Nate Turner, rb; Curtis Whitley, c

**Chicago:** Scott Adams, t; Troy Auzenne, t; Pat Eilers, db; Jeff Graham, wr; Jay Leeuwenberg, c; Nate Lewis, wr; Steve Walsh, qb

**Cincinnati:** Harold Green, rb; Roger Jones, db; David Klingler, qb; Ricardo McDonald, lb; Derek Ware, te; Leonard Wheeler, s; Darryl Williams, db

**Dallas:** Robert Bailey, db; Bill Bates, s; Larry Brown, cb; Scott Case, s; Dixon Edwards, lb; Dale Hellestae, c; Robert Jones, lb; David Lang, rb; Russell Maryland, dt; Erik Williams, t

**Denver:** Elijah Alexander, lb; Tyrone Braxton, db; Shane Dronett, de; Simon Fletcher, de; Clifford Hicks, db; Randy Hilliard, db; Vance Johnson, wr; Reggie McElroy, t; Dave Wyman, lb



Reuter Photo

Signing Neil O'Donnell would enhance Jets' marketability

But why would a proven winner sign with the Jets? Why would O'Donnell leave his Pittsburgh penthouse for the Jets' basement?

"You've seen guys go to teams that you never would've expected," Haley said. "Reggie White decided to go to Green Bay. The process has proven there's no exact science for what motivates a player to sign with a certain team."

Salesmanship is crucial in free-agent recruiting. If the Jets can land O'Donnell and a quality left tackle, they probably can convince Newt Gingrich to become a Democrat. The Jets can't sell their past or the present, so they have to sell the future.

"In every disaster, there's opportunity," said agent Leigh Steinberg, who represents Williams and O'Donnell. "The Jets are laying out long-term plans and offering people a chance to be part of what they hope is a dynasty. You can get in on the ground floor of a rebuilding project."

Williams bought into it. "They're definitely headed in the right direction," said Williams, who hit it off with new offensive coordinator Ron Erhardt. "That's one of the reasons I chose here, just to be part of what's coming in the future."

**Orlando:** s; Alfred Pupunu, te; Harry Swayne, t

**San Francisco:** Cary Conklin, qb; Toi Cook, db; Eric Davis, db; Derrick Deese, g; Ricky Ervins, rb; Steve Israel, qb; Tim Jordan, te; Frank Pollack, t; Alfred Williams, lb

**Seattle:** Duane Bickett, lb; Brian Blades, wr; Tony Brown, db; Stan Gelbaugh, qb; Selwyn Jones, db; Trey Junkin, te; Ray Roberts, t; Rafael Robinson, s; Mike Sinclair, de; Bobby Spitsulski, lb; Robb Thomas, wr; Rick Tuten, p; Brent Williams, de

**Tampa Bay:** Ed Brady, lb; Santana Dotson, dt; Courtney Hawkins, wr; Tony Mayberry, c; Mike McGruder, db; Charles McRae, t; Hardy Nickerson, lb; Todd Philcox, qb; Tony Stargell, db; Mike Sullivan, t; Mark Wheeler, nt

**Washington:** Marc Bouite, dt; Ray Brown, g; Eddie Murray, k; Muhammad Oliver, db; Vernice Smith, g; Keith Taylor, s; Tony Woods, de

### Category 6

Players who are free to sign with any team because their options for 1995 were not exercised or because they have fewer than four accrued seasons and received no qualifying or minimum tender offer from their old team:

**Arizona:** David Merritt, lb

**Baltimore:** Michael Bates, wr; Tim Goad, nt; Dana Hall, db; Tim Jacobs, db; Ed Sutter, lb

**Buffalo:** Herve Damas, lb; Mike Devlin, c; Steve Harvey, lb

**Carolina:** Eric Guliford, wr; Shawn Price, de; Jack Trudeau, qb

**Chicago:** Keshon Johnson, db

**Dallas:** Greg Briggs, db; Jason Garrett, wb; John Jett, p

**Denver:** Willie Oshodin, de

**Houston:** Bryan Addison, db; Kenny Davidson, de; Travis Hannah, wr; Lee Williamson, qb

**Jacksonville:** John Duff, te

**Kansas City:** Lin Elliott, k; Jaime Fields, lb

**Miami:** Kevin Brothen, g; Gene McGuire, c; Robert Wilson, rb

**Minnesota:** James Harris, de; Chris Walsh, wr

**New Orleans:** Derrick Ned, rb; Shane Phuka, db

**Oakland:** Jeff Graham, qb

**Philadelphia:** Mike Chalenski, dt; Derrick Frazier, db; Vaughn Hebron, rb; Derrick Oden, lb

**Pittsburgh:** John L. Williams, rb

**San Diego:** Sebastian Barrie, de; Dennis Gibson, lb; Mark Seay, wr

**San Francisco:** Darryl Hall, db; Rickey Jackson, lb; Adam Walker, rb

**Seattle:** Joe Nash, nt

**Washington:** Olanda Truitt, wr