

ARCHIVES

Means Falls Victim to Chargers' Pursuit

L.A. TIMES ARCHIVES
MARCH 1, 1996 12 AM PT

FROM STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

The San Diego Chargers have said they'd use any means possible to get Miami Dolphin defensive end Marco Coleman.

But nobody outside the organization dreamed that included Natrone Means.

Means, a 1994 Pro Bowl player who led the San Diego Chargers in rushing for the past two seasons, was released by the club Thursday in a shocking move that helped clear room under the salary cap to add Coleman, who signed a three-year, \$9.6-million offer sheet Thursday. The offer, which Miami has seven days to match, includes a \$4-million signing bonus.

The Chargers also released wide receiver Shawn Jefferson and tight end Duane Young to get under the salary cap. **Ronnie Harmon**, an 11-year veteran running back who is an unrestricted free agent, will also not return to the Chargers.

It was a day of wheeling and dealing in the NFL. A second high-profile player, Pittsburgh Steeler quarterback Neil O'Donnell, left his team, and a third, New York Giant running back Rodney Hampton, agree to sign an offer sheet to do the same.

O'Donnell, who took the Pittsburgh Steelers within a drive of winning the Super Bowl, became the quarterback of the New York Jets, the team with the NFL's worst record.

O'Donnell signed a five-year, \$25-million contract that includes a \$7-million signing bonus.

"I gave Pittsburgh every opportunity to sign Neil O'Donnell," said the quarterback, a native of Madison, N.J.

Hampton reached agreement with the San Francisco 49ers on an offer sheet which would give the free agent \$16.4 million over six years, including a \$3.6-million signing bonus, according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

The newspaper said the 27-year-old Hampton, who has rushed for 1,000 yards in five consecutive seasons, would sign the offer sheet as soon as it is prepared, probably by today.

Hampton was classified by the Giants as a transition player, which means New York will have a week to match San Francisco's offer to keep him.

A source close to the Chargers said the release of Means had to do with more than money. His acrimonious relationship with the organization after a contract dispute last season was also a key factor.

Charger General Manager Bobby Beathard said the move was made because of financial restraints and the emergence of second-year running backs Aaron Hayden and Terrell Fletcher.

However, Beathard conceded that the relationship with Means was a struggle.

"Our team chemistry wasn't what it could have been during this season," Beathard said, who added that the Chargers had tried unsuccessfully to trade Means.

"I felt like I was liked in the city," Means told XTRA radio. "I felt I was especially liked by my teammates. But I guess a lot of things will never be known."

NFL Notes

In other moves, cornerback Mark McMillian, who spent the last four years with the Philadelphia Eagles, signed with the New Orleans Saints, and Arizona center Ed Cunningham signed a two-year, \$1.5-million contract with the Chicago Bears. . . . Tennessee's Legislature sent Gov. Don Sundquist a bill to issue \$55 million in bonds for the state's share of building a stadium for the Houston Oilers in Nashville, and the city's Metro Council approved a financial package for the team, despite protests, including a petition, that the \$149 million should be spent on schools, sidewalks and the like. . . . The Oakland Raiders have again sued the NFL, this time for \$200 million, claiming they were forced out of Los Angeles and back to Oakland because their negotiations for a new stadium were undermined.