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Valuable free-agents on auctioning block

■ **FOOTBALL:** Several NFL teams may change drastically with off-season free agent signings

(AP) — Need a quarterback? Jim Harbaugh, the NFL's leading passer this season, is available. So is the man who guided the Pittsburgh Steelers to the Super Bowl, Neil O'Donnell.

Is the linebacker corps a bit shaky? How would Bryan Cox, Kevin Greene or Cornelius Bennett look on the roster? They're available, too.

Don't forget about Eric Swann, Darren Woodson, Mark Chmura, Eric Davis, Aeneas Williams, Gary Zimmerman and Leslie O'Neal, all Pro Bowl players in 1995.

Free agency begins Thursday and the crop is exceptionally strong. Weak teams such as the New York Jets and Giants, Arizona Cardinals and Jacksonville Jaguars should be active partici-

pants. If Jimmy Johnson can uncover some money, the Miami Dolphins may be lively in the marketplace. And if Dallas and San Francisco can work their cap magic once again, Woodson and Davis might stay put, while other attractive players head to the Cowboys or 49ers.

"Darren would very much like to stay in Dallas, so if we could do a deal with the Cowboys in the next couple of weeks, we would do it," said agent Lee Steinberg, who represents many of the marquee names on the market. "We have a long-standing relationship with the Cowboys."

Rarely do things go smoothly in free agency. Most coaches and personnel directors make it clear they believe the players lost much more than those gained.

The 49ers would be hard-pressed to argue. The departures of running back Ricky Watters and cornerback Deion Sanders helped stop them from being repeat Super Bowl champions.

The flip side is what happened in Buffalo, where linebacker Bryce Paup signed, led the league in sacks and became the league's Defensive Player of the Year.

"Everybody thought he could be a good player and would help us," Bills defensive coordinator Wade Phillips said. "I don't think anyone expected him to be the player of the year. But we're glad he is."

Teams willing to spend money — the expansion Jaguars and Carolina Panthers have plenty, as do the San Diego Chargers and Green Bay Packers — will find some savory items in free agency.

Just looking at the secondary, any free-spending team could wind up with Williams, one of the game's best cover men, and Larry Brown, MVP of the Super Bowl, on the corners — or Davis and Phillippe Sparks.

Any club looking to rebuild its offensive line can turn to Will Wolford, Kirk Lowdermilk or Leon Searcy, all of whom played

in the AFC championship game this year. If the defensive line is the highest priority, available are solid players such as tackles Swann, Russell Maryland and Shane Dronett, ends O'Neal, Chris Doleman and Alonzo Spellman.

The one position seemingly lacking impact performers is running back. No Emmitts, Barrys or Marshalls around.

But Terry Allen, Rodney Hampton, Harvey Williams and Garrison Hearst each rushed for more than 1,000 yards in 1995, and would be strong additions for many clubs.

Much of the focus for the next few months will be on available quarterbacks. Will O'Donnell remain with the Steelers now that offensive coordinator Ron Erhardt has joined the Jets? Will Pittsburgh open up the vault for O'Donnell, coming off his best season, while Kordell Stewart seemingly awaits an opportunity to supplant him?

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