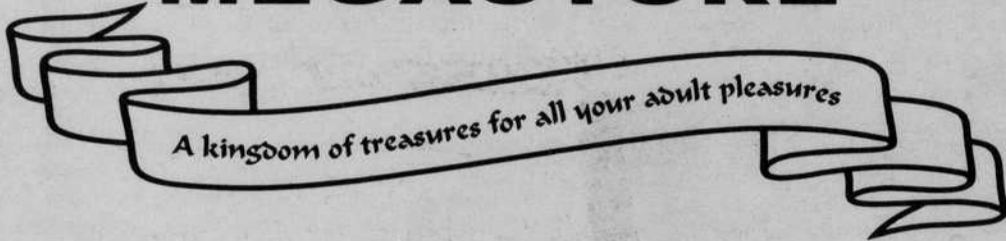


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QB Aikman's career with Dallas finished

IRVING, Texas — The Dallas Cowboys waived Troy Aikman on Wednesday, no longer convinced that the quarterback who led them to three Super Bowl titles is healthy enough to be their starter.

"We always shared a mutual respect for what was in the best interest of Troy and the Dallas Cowboys," owner Jerry Jones said. "In the end, it was in the best interest for him to have a timely opportunity to entertain all of his options."

"He'll be missed on the field at Texas Stadium. He'll always be a Dallas Cowboy and always be a very important part of this organization," Jones said.

"As far as what's in the best interest of this club long-term, the right thing was done," Aikman said in a conference call.

"My desires are to continue to play," said Aikman, who spent 12 seasons with Dallas and suffered 10 concussions.

The 34-year-old couldn't say if he'd be playing in 2001 or who that team might be.

Jones had to make the move by Thursday or else pay Aikman a \$7 million bonus and extend his contract through 2007. He will still take up \$10 million of Dallas' \$67.4 million salary cap this season.

"This was as much a salary-cap casualty as it was anything else," Aikman said. Jones also said the salary cap was a factor in the decision.

Aikman said that if it were as simple as a health issue "a decision would have been reached long ago."

"I believe it's more to do with how do you work the pure numbers that were involved where it makes sense to not jeopardize the future of the Cowboys down the road," Aikman said.

"Troy's loyalty to this organization was involved. The future makeup of our team's roster was involved," Jones said.

Dallas also agreed to re-sign linebacker Dexter Coakley for \$25 million for six years, with a \$5.5 million signing bonus. To clear cap room, the Cowboys were expected to release veterans Erik Williams and Chad Hennings.

As much as Jones might have wanted to keep Aikman — the first player he ever drafted — the owner apparently decided the Cowboys couldn't prepare for the 2001 season with such a fragile, expensive quarterback.

The six-time Pro Bowler, who holds practically every Dallas passing record, sustained two concussions in 11 games last season and twice needed epidural injections to relieve back pain.

The last play of his career in Dallas ended with a concussion in the first quarter of a Dec. 10 victory over Washington. With the Cowboys deep in Redskins territory, Aikman rolled out to his right and was slammed to the turf on a crushing, leaping tackle by linebacker LaVar Arrington.

Other teams might be scared off by Aikman's past injuries, which could then prompt him to retire. However, tests done before last season showed no long-term damage from his previous concussions. The fact that his wife is pregnant with their first child apparently hasn't added to his fear of severe injury.

One possible landing spot is San Diego, where close friend Norv Turner is the offensive coordinator. The Chargers also could use Aikman to groom Michael Vick, should they make him the first pick in the upcoming draft. San Diego's starting job is open because Ryan Leaf was released last week.

Once the highest-paid player in NFL history, Aikman is coming off his worst season since the Cowboys went 1-15 his rookie year.

The Associated Press

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