

Manning shouldn't have made efforts to 'manipulate' draft

By Steve Kelley
Seattle Times (KRT)

SEATTLE — Eli Manning picked a bad week to manipulate the draft.

In the same week former Arizona Cardinals safety Pat Tillman made the ultimate selfless sacrifice — surrendering his life fighting for his country — Eli Manning was the ultimate in selfishness.

In the same week Tillman was killed in the hellish desolation of Afghanistan, Manning whined to the Chargers that he wouldn't play for them. He said he'd sit out the season and make himself eligible for the 2005 draft rather than play for San Diego.

So when San Diego took Manning with the first pick in Saturday's NFL draft, he refused to smile and petulantly held the Chargers' jersey as if it were toxic.

He ignored the offer of the Chargers hat and looked as uncomfortable on the midtown Manhattan stage as Rosie O'Donnell in "Grease."

An hour later Manning was all smiles.

He no longer was a Charger. The New York Giants drafted Philip Rivers and traded him and a gaggle of prime draft picks for Manning. And Manning's smile beamed across the country as if he were named the winner on "American Idol."

"I don't think so," Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren answered when asked if he would have let the Mannings — Eli and his father Archie — manipulate him as they did the Chargers. "And after I got off my initial shock and maybe my stubbornness, well, I can't imagine that happening. I really can't."

"I'd think there would be some way I could fix that. I think I'd kind of dig in my heels. I don't know the whole

story on this one, but on the surface I don't understand this one too much. I would think San Diego would be a pretty cool place to play."

Yo, Eli. A little perspective here.

Pat Tillman died Thursday and his death touched every American, football fan or not. He believed in his country's war on terrorism so much he gave up the good life, gave up his three-year, \$3.6-million contract with Arizona to be part of that war.

Tillman believed in something other than himself.

"Every time you see a player get busted for drugs or a player getting arrested for beating his wife, I believe it reflects on all of the NFL," former NFL quarterback Hugh Millen said Saturday. "But now we take so much pride in what Pat Tillman has done, his sacrifices. He is the best the NFL can offer."

"People will remember him. People will know about Pat Tillman. I have kids who are 1 and 3, and I'm going to put a picture of Tillman on my desk and tell them he's the finest example this league has ever had."

Tillman believed in loyalty so much he once turned down a five-year, \$9-million contract offer from the St. Louis Rams and accepted the Cardinals' \$3.6-million deal because he thought he owed allegiance to the team that drafted him.

The draft meant something to Tillman. He understood how important it has been to the league's success.

The draft has helped make the NFL enormously profitable and, in part because of the draft, you will be offered a \$15 million signing bonus by the Giants. Before you take your first snap, you and your family will be secure for life.

A little perspective, Eli.

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Fewer visa 'slots' in U.S. creates problem for MLB

If Major League Baseball and the U.S. government do not come to an agreement, it could hinder international signings

By Kevin Baxter
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

MIAMI — The national pastime and another defining element of American society, the national bureaucracy, are at odds over one of the hot-button political issues of the day, immigration. And unless the two sides can work out a compromise in next few weeks, baseball may have to change the way it does business.

For years the U.S. government has granted the 30 major league organizations approximately 1,400 visa "slots," which the teams have used to bring foreign-born players to the United States for spring training, instructional camps and the minor league season. And if a player got hurt or wasn't performing well, the club could send him home and use that "slot" — essentially the same temporary work visa — to call up another player.

But a Congressional mandate that quietly went into effect this year has changed all that. Under the new directive, the Department of Labor cannot issue more than 66,000 temporary visas for 2004, 13,000 fewer than a year ago and a limit it reached in early March. Many of those went to agribusiness, the construction trades and other traditional employers of seasonal workers, and the government says no new visas will be issued until Oct. 1, after the minor league seasons have ended.

And that has clubs who have invested considerable time and money in their international operations concerned.

"If Major League Baseball does not reach an agreement with the government, then all international scouting this year will be for naught," says Charlie Wilson, manager of minor league operations for the Toronto Blue Jays.

The new rules do not impact major league players such as Luis Castillo, Pedro Martinez or Ichiro Suzuki, who are on their team's 40-man rosters and have P-1 visas, reserved for individuals deemed by the government to be "outstanding in their profession." But it could threaten the careers of nearly half the 6,117 minor league players under contract with U.S. clubs since those players cannot come to the United States without the H-2B temporary work visas the government is now limiting.

"It hurts those foreign players because instead of being able to get over here and be able to show what they can do here in the States, they're going to be restricted," says Tim

Purpura, the Houston Astros' assistant general manager and director of player development.

And it virtually rules out the signing of Japanese professionals, Cuban defectors or other foreign-born free agents.

Major League Baseball is currently lobbying the government for relief and hopes to have some sort of exemption in place before the new law disrupts June's amateur draft. Canadians, as well as Puerto Rican and U.S.-born players, must register for the draft before they can sign professional contracts, and as many as 45 Canadians are generally selected in an average year. But since Canadians need visas to work in the U.S., some clubs appear unwilling to spend a draft pick on a player they can't use until the winter instructional leagues — if then.

"It looks to us like we won't be able to sign Canadian players," says Wilson, whose team, through based in Canada, must adhere to the same U.S. immigration rules that govern the other 29 teams. "We can draft and control, but at this stage we can't sign a Canadian kid or have him get involved this summer."

The biggest change, however, will be in how teams evaluate players, mostly Latin Americans, already under contract. In the past, clubs have used their academies in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela to audition raw prospects, then used visas to bring the most promising of those to the U.S. for closer inspection. It was also common for teams to release players who had failed in their minor league trial, then use that visa to check out another prospect. That, too, has been eliminated by the new law.

"It will make us evaluate quicker when we start to put our roster together for spring training," says Wilson. "Sometimes we would wait to see how some of those players did in winter ball. Now we won't be able to do that."

A Major League Baseball official in New York confirmed that heavy lobbying is underway and says the commissioner's office is "cautiously optimistic" a compromise with the government will be reached. And so is Rafael Perez, the manager of baseball's Dominican operations, who is refusing to push the panic button yet.

"It is still too early," says Perez, who will meet with international scouts early next month to brief them on the new law. "My understanding is that baseball is thinking about different alternatives to make sure that those guys that are supposed to go to the States, but for some reason or another couldn't, that something is done on their behalf."

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'Streaky' Thome is enjoying quick start to season

The Phillies' first basemen has had a productive first month after breaking a finger

By Todd Zolecki
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

ST. LOUIS — Jim Thome doesn't know exactly why he's enjoyed such a nice April.

Maybe he was due.

Maybe it was his broken finger.

"I've had some Aprils when I've hit

home runs," Thome said. "I've had some Aprils when I've hit .100. But I've always said you want to stay on water in April. A hit a day. If you can get a hit a day you stay on water."

He's on water, and without the help of water wings even. Thome is hitting .344 with a .429 on-base percentage, five home runs and seven RBIs.

His early numbers certainly are notable. Consider:

Thome broke his right middle finger after the first Grapefruit League game in Florida early last month,

and had just 17 spring-training at-bats. Thome said at the time that he had no idea how much the injury might affect him, but he always said he liked having around 50 at-bats every spring to get himself tuned up and ready to play.

He still can't completely bend the finger. He still wears a small splint for it.

He also has had what he termed a "deep bruise" on his left thumb ever since Cincinnati's D'Angelo Jimenez ran into him at first base during a double play. Bowa said it bothers

Thome more than he lets on.

Thome has a reputation as a slow starter. He entered the season with fewer career home runs (40) and RBIs (133) in April than any other month. His .268 average in April is slightly better than his .260 average in September.

"To explain it? I don't know," he said. "But I'm glad that it happened. Because you always want to get off to a nice start. But would I give up a nice start personally for a good start for our team? Yeah. That's what you want."

Back to the busted finger. Bowa has said recently that it might have been a blessing in disguise for the big man.

Perhaps it shortened his swing.

Perhaps it slowed him down.

"I think so," Thome said. "Maybe a little bit, yeah. I'm an aggressive hitter anyway, but maybe it did slow me down a little bit. I'm glad it did, if it did."

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