

Promises turn into paydays as NFL business year begins

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

All those promises worth millions upon millions to free agents turned into paydays Wednesday when the NFL's business year began.

Of course, teams needed to clear salary cap space or rejigger their ledgers to make it work, and they'll still be doing so for months.

While the likes of Drew Brees, Malcolm Butler and Andrew Norwell cashed in bigtime, having reached agreements in the past two days before everything became official, some value entered the marketplace.

Arizona released safety Tyrann Mathieu when it couldn't rework his deal. On Tuesday, the Cardinals let running back Adrian Peterson go.

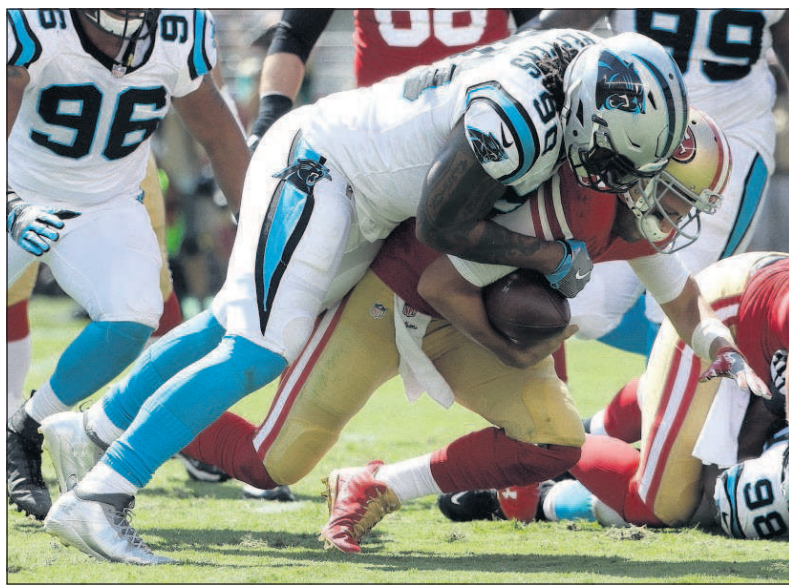
Baltimore cut receiver Jeremy Maclin. Detroit said goodbye to tight end Eric Ebron. Pittsburgh tore up a secondary that often was torn up by opposing quarterbacks, releasing Mike Mitchell, Robert Golden and William Gay.

But Carolina had more success with a veteran, completing a one-year deal with defensive end Julius Peppers.

The 38-year-old Peppers, who contemplated retirement after 17 pro seasons, remains with the Panthers for \$5 million, with \$2.5 million guaranteed, a person familiar with the situation said. The person spoke to The Associated Press on Wednesday on condition of anonymity because the team does not release financial terms of contracts.

"I am fired up to have him back," Panthers coach Ron Rivera said. "It was amazing to have him as part of what we are trying to build and I think he can help us get to the next level."

Cleveland, meanwhile, did nothing more than listen to one of its greatest players, tackle Joe Thomas, announce his retirement. The Browns save his \$10.3 million salary for 2018 and a \$3 million



AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

The Carolina Panthers announced on Wednesday they have re-signed free agent defensive end Julius Peppers to a one-year contract, part of a flurry of signings across the NFL.

bonus but lose their best player and leader in the expansion era (1999-present), a 10-time Pro Bowler.

"This was an extremely difficult decision, but the right one for me and my family," Thomas said. "Playing in the NFL has taken a toll on my body and I can no longer physically compete at the level I need to."

CARDINALS Mathieu was due for \$18.75 million of his contract to be guaranteed when the league year officially begins. By cutting him, Arizona will save close to \$5 million in cap space.

Mathieu became a star in the Arizona secondary after being selected in the third round of the 2013 draft following a troubled college career at LSU. He was an All-Pro in 2015, when he had five interceptions and 17 passes defensed.

But he also has been plagued by injuries and only last season did Mathieu appear in all 16 games.

RAVENS Baltimore frees up an estimated \$5 million in salary cap space by releasing Maclin, who signed on

as a free agent in June. But Maclin missed two games with a shoulder injury, two more with knee issues, and finished with only 40 catches for 440 yards and three touchdowns. The 84 receptions he had over the past two seasons (2016 with Kansas City) are three fewer than he had with the Chiefs in 2015.

Then the Ravens agreed to deals with receivers John Brown and Ryan Grant.

Brown, 27, spent four years in Arizona and is a speedy deep threat, something Baltimore desperately needs. He can also return kicks.

Grant, also 27, was with Washington for four seasons.

49ERS

San Francisco agreed to a four-year contract with running back Jerick McKinnon and a five-year deal with center-guard Weston Richburg. McKinnon replaces departing starter Carlos Hyde and Richburg could start anywhere in the interior line.

"We see Weston as one of the top young interior offensive linemen in the NFL," GM John Lynch said. "His athleticism, intelligence and

attitude are a perfect fit for our scheme. Jerick has proven to be an extremely versatile football player whose speed, elusiveness and tackle-breaking ability make him a very difficult matchup for defenses. We can't wait to get them on the field with their teammates and coaches later this spring."

GIANTS

New York agreed with offensive tackle Nate Solder, late of the Patriots, to become its starter on the left side. Solder, 29, will get a four-year contract worth about \$62 million.

The Giants can move 2015 first-round draft pick Ereck Flowers to the right side as they rebuild a line that has struggled for years.

TITANS

Tennessee kept right guard Josh Kline and defensive end David King with new contracts after making a splash in free agency by getting Butler for \$60 million over five years (\$30 million guaranteed) and also taking running back Dion Lewis away from New England.

BILLS

The Bills restocked their quarterback position by agreeing to a two-year contract with AJ McCarron.

The 27-year-old spent the past four seasons backing up Andy Dalton in Cincinnati after being selected by the Bengals in the fifth round of the 2014 draft.

McCarron's signing came five days after Buffalo traded three-year starter Tyrod Taylor to Cleveland. The trade left 2017 fifth-round pick Nathan Peterman as the only quarterback on Buffalo's roster.

Buffalo also added defensive end Trent Murphy from Washington and got a needed pass rusher, albeit a player coming off a major injury.

Murphy had 15 sacks in 47 games, including nine in 2016, then sat out last season after tearing two ligaments in his left knee in a preseason game.

The Bills finished tied for 30th in the NFL with just 27 sacks last season.

The Bills added defensive backfield depth by agreeing with safety Rafael Bush on a two-year contract, and got linebacker Julian Stanford on a two-year contract.

FALCONS

The Falcons addressed a need by signing offensive guard Brandon Fusco, who started 16 games for San Francisco last season, to a three-year deal. Fusco, who began his career with the Vikings, could immediately start at right guard.

DOLPHINS

Five-time Pro Bowl defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh officially was released, when the trades to acquire defensive end Robert Quinn and send Jarvis Landry to the Cleveland Browns were formalized.

Miami also released tight end Julius Thomas, which had been expected, but decided to keep right tackle Ja'Wuan James, which guarantees him \$9.34 million in 2018.

CHARGERS

Tight end Virgil Green got a three-year contract and safety Adrian Phillips re-signed with a one-year deal.

Green spent the past seven seasons with the Broncos, starting all 16 games last season and winning a Super Bowl ring in February 2016. His addition adds intrigue to whether the Chargers will bring back 37-year-old tight end Antonio Gates, who hopes to extend his record-setting career for at least another season.

JETS

New York signed linebacker Avery Williamson to a three-year contract worth \$22.5 million. Williamson spent his first four NFL seasons with Tennessee and led the Titans in tackles in two of those years.

The Jets also tendered wide receiver Quincy Enunwa at the second-round level, worth \$2.9 million. Enunwa was emerging as a threat before missing last season with a bulging disk in his neck that required surgery. He had a breakout season in 2016, catching 58 passes for 857 yards and four touchdowns.

Norwegian musher wins iconic Iditarod sled dog race in Alaska

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Joar Ulsom of Norway won the world's most famous sled dog race Wednesday after a grueling dash across Alaska's rough terrain, but he earned tens of thousands of dollars less than last year's top musher at the struggling Iditarod.

"It's pretty unreal I pulled it off," Ulsom told reporters at the finish line in Nome, Alaska.

After nearly 1,000 miles (1,609 kilometers), Ulsom and the eight dogs on his team came off the Bering Sea ice onto Nome's main street. He slapped hands with fans who lined the streets and went under the finish line at 3 a.m. local time.

"I don't know what to say about it. It's out of this world," he said before hugging each of his dogs. His supporters crowded the finish line, and one waved the flag of Norway.

The 31-year-old, who took the lead Monday when Nicolas

Petit got off course in a blizzard, became the third person born outside the U.S. to claim the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. He's also the second Norwegian after Robert Sorlie, a two-time winner who cheered Ulsom's progress along the trail.

Ulsom said he had no idea he had taken the lead when Petit got off course. He saw a sled track ahead of him, and figured he would find someone resting at the checkpoint.

It was a pleasant surprise when he found out he was the first musher to arrive, and figured he had "a good shot at taking it home then."

Ulsom moved in 2011 from Norway to Willow, Alaska, the dog mushing capital of the U.S. He first entered the Iditarod in 2013, when he was named rookie of the year, and has never finished below seventh place. His previous best finishes were fourth-place rankings in both 2017 and 2014.

Ulsom picks up about \$50,000, a drop from the 2017

winner's earnings of more than \$71,000.

The race, which began March 4, has been suffering financially and lost Wells Fargo bank as a major sponsor in the last year. Organizers have blamed animal rights activists for putting pressure on sponsors.

The Iditarod also was marked by fallout from its first-ever dog doping scandal. Race officials announced that the team of four-time champion Dallas Seavey tested positive for an opioid painkiller after his second-place finish last March but said they could not prove he gave tramadol to his dogs.

Officials didn't punish Seavey but changed race rules to make mushers responsible for any positive drug test. Seavey, who won four titles between 2012 and 2016, denied giving drugs to his dogs and sat out this year's race in protest.

The Iditarod also reprimanded but didn't fire the head of its drug testing program on Monday after a musher claimed

Dr. Morrie Craig threatened him minutes before the race's start.

Musher Wade Marrs said Craig threatened to expose him as another musher who had a positive drug test last year. Iditarod spokesman Chas St. George has said Seavey's team had the only positive test.

Marrs, who is president of the Iditarod Official Finishers Club, said he felt Craig was trying to punish him for criticizing how the race handled Seavey's case and to silence him before a mushers meeting this week.

The Iditarod said the context and intent of the conversation between Marrs and Craig differed but acknowledged that it was ill-timed. Officials also said Craig should only communicate test results to board members and that any further actions deemed detrimental to the race would result in further disciplinary action, including possible termination.

Sixty-seven mushers started the race north of Anchorage. Eight of those have scratched.



AP Photo/Diana Haecker

Joar Ulsom of Norway poses with his dogs after winning the Iditarod sled dog race in Nome, Alaska, on Wednesday. Ulsom became just the third person born outside of the U.S. to claim the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race title.

SCOREBOARD

Local slate

Table with local sports results including Prep Baseball, Prep Softball, Prep Tennis, College Baseball, College Softball, and College Track and Field.

Table showing NFL scores for various games including matchups like Pittsburgh vs. Cleveland, Washington vs. Philadelphia, and Baltimore vs. Kansas City.

Table showing MLB scores for games like Detroit vs. Cleveland, Texas vs. Los Angeles, and Yankees vs. Boston.

Table showing NHL scores for games like Tampa Bay vs. Boston, Toronto vs. Montreal, and Washington vs. New York Rangers.

Table showing WNBA scores for games like Detroit vs. Los Angeles and Nashville at Arizona.

Table showing NBA scores for games like Toronto vs. Boston, Cleveland vs. Philadelphia, and Golden State vs. Houston.

Basketball

Table with Eastern Conference NBA scores including Toronto vs. Boston and Cleveland vs. Philadelphia.

Table with Western Conference NBA scores including Golden State vs. Houston, Los Angeles vs. Memphis, and Sacramento vs. Phoenix.

Table with NBA scores for Washington vs. Charlotte, Phoenix vs. Memphis, and Cleveland vs. Philadelphia.

Table with NBA scores for Los Angeles vs. Memphis, Toronto vs. Boston, and Cleveland vs. Philadelphia.

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