

THE WEEK AHEAD

COMMENTARY »

Sporting events this week, May 26-June 1

Sunday, May 26

Finau in the hunt

PGA Tour's Charles Schwab Challenge

Fort Worth, Texas

Watch: CBS, Golf, ESPN+, Peacock

Utah golfer Tony Finau opened the event with four-under-par first round.

Triple-A baseball

Salt Lake Bees vs. Albuquerque

1:05 p.m. at Smith's Ballpark

Watch: KMYU

Former Kansas City Royals third baseman Hunter Dozier leads the Bees with 35 RBIs as he continues his bid to get back to the majors.

Monday, May 27

College golf on the holiday

NCAA Men's Golf Championships

Carlsbad, Calif.

Watch: Golf Channel

The Utes were one of 30 teams to start the tournament last week.

Wednesday, May 29

RSL riding high

Real Salt Lake at Seattle

8:30 p.m.

Watch: Apple TV

Andres Gomez and Diego Luna scored in RSL's 2-0 home win over the Sounders earlier this month.

Saturday, June 1

Back on the home pitch

Real Salt Lake vs. Austin

7:30 p.m. at America First Field

Watch: Apple TV

Austin just bought out designated player Emiliano Rigoni, opening up room for a big signing.

THE GAME PLAN

	Wednesday at Seattle 8:30 p.m. TV: Apple	Saturday at Seattle 8:30 p.m. TV: Apple	June 15 at Real Salt Lake 5:00 p.m. TV: Apple	June 19 at Kansas City 7:30 p.m. TV: Apple	June 22 at Galaxy 7:30 p.m. TV: Apple
	June 8 Washington 5:30 p.m.	June 16 at Real Salt Lake 8 p.m.	June 20 at Washington 8 p.m.	June 29 Portland 8 p.m.	July 7 at Portland 4 p.m.
	Sunday Albuquerque 8 p.m. 10:15 p.m.	Tuesday at Real Salt Lake 10:00 p.m.	Wednesday at Real Salt Lake 7:00 p.m.	Thursday at Real Salt Lake 12:00 p.m.	Friday at Real Salt Lake 7:30 p.m.

Hit by a 110 mph foul ball, Blue Jays fan is now on a trading card

By JESSE JIMENEZ

The News-Herald Times

Liz McGuire in Toronto last Friday night, sitting on the third base line and talking with a friend, when a foul ball suddenly hurtled toward her at 110 mph, striking her in the head and leaving a large lump above her right eye.

McGuire, 40, didn't get to keep the ball that hit her, but now, 110 personalized Toronto's baseball cards bearing a picture of her swollen forehead have been mailed to her.

Bo Bichette, the Blue Jays shortstop, was up to bat during the late innings of Toronto's game Friday against the Tampa Bay Rays when he fouled off a pitch. The ball was fired over the protective netting in the lower bowl of Rogers Centre and behind the third base line, where McGuire was sitting with her friend.

McGuire said she briefly turned her head away from the field to talk to her friend and didn't see the ball barreling toward her.

"I heard someone scream, and then it just hit me," she said.

The Blue Jays said in an email Tuesday that McGuire was immediately attended to by medical workers at the ballpark, and that she decided to return to her seat to watch the rest of the game.

"I know you have to be careful with foul lines, and I know better," she said, adding that she attends games regularly. "But it was 110 miles per hour off the bat, and it came at me."

After McGuire posted pictures of her swollen face and the ensuing black eye on social media, she said Tommy, the trading card company, contacted her and asked her permission to use one of the images on a custom card.

Topps produced exactly 110 copies, a nod to the speed of the ball that hit McGuire. The card has a picture of McGuire in Blue Jays gear with the large lump on her forehead.

"Fan wears 110MPH foul ball like a champ," the cards say.

A spokesperson for the Blue Jays said that the team had reached out to McGuire and invited her to an upcoming game. The team also offered her a ball signed by Bichette.

McGuire said medical workers iced her head, but she wanted to watch the end of the game. (The Rays beat the Blue Jays 4-3.)

"I was pretty breezy about the whole thing," she said. But as her face started to swell, McGuire said she went to the emergency room after the game, and she was scanned for facial fractures.

"It was so big," she said of the swelling.

Since Friday, McGuire said she has suffered headaches and nausea. She went back to the emergency room Monday, but her CT scans were clear.

"I probably just have a concussion, and a good story," she said, adding that she bought two lottery tickets over the weekend.

The odds of being struck by a ball or bat at a baseball game are low. By 2018, all MLB teams had extended the netting behind home plate and down the foul lines to keep fans safe. Baseball fans are warned about the dangers of flying objects at MLB games.

Has the NFL wide receiver market hit breaking point?

By RANDY MUELLER

The Athletic

I'm not for letting good players walk out the door.

I know from experience that talent is too hard to replace, even with the best-hatched plan, without taking steps backward. So I understand that, at least sometimes, proven teams need to overpay slightly for the sake of continuity.

But recent contracts for NFL wide receivers have forced me to at least question my philosophy. And that tells me that general managers and team-builders around the NFL are no doubt contemplating that question as well.

It's not because these receivers lack talent. They are all really good players. But the contract numbers are making the team-building equation more complicated than ever.

The dilemma is twofold. First, if you're going to pay a wide receiver more than \$30 million per year, are you sure he's a difference-maker and not just a guy who fits your system? And second, is it feasible to pay big salaries to more than one wide receiver on your roster?

Ten years ago, the NFL's top-paid wide receivers made about \$16 million annually, equaling about 12 percent of the \$133 million cap. Today, A.J. Brown leads the way at \$32 million annually on a cap of \$25.5 million. That's still just 12.5 percent of the cap. But let's look closer.

In 2014, the two receivers making \$16 million annually were Calvin Johnson and Larry Fitzgerald, the clear standard-bearers at the position. There weren't enough top-of-the-heap receivers that every new contract would reset the market. Deshaun Watson, Demaryius Thomas, Julio Jones and A.J. Green signed new contracts in 2015, but none exceeded \$15 million per year. Fitzgerald's and Johnson's deals weren't eclipsed until Antonio Brown hit \$17 million per year in 2017 (a year after Johnson retired), just 10.2% of the \$167 million cap.

The receiver market has already been reset twice in the past month, and we are on the verge of another jump with Justin Jefferson, Cedee Lamb, Ja'Marr Chase and Brandon Aiyuk all up for new deals. All four could plausibly reset the market, so we might be looking at \$35 million per year — which would be 13.7 percent of the cap — or more. That leaves the Minnesota Vikings, Dallas Cowboys, Cincinnati Bengals and San Francisco 49ers with big decisions with implications across their rosters.

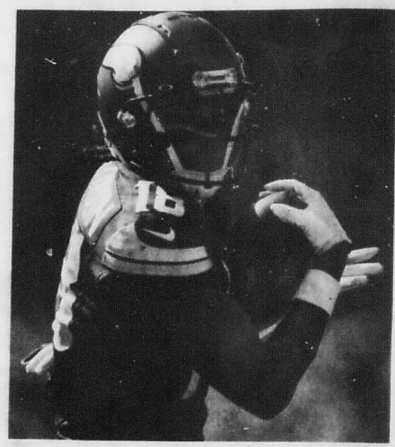
Teams must take a hard look at where this money will come from. How much is too much for a non-quarterback? Does it make sense for a position group other than QB to exceed 20 percent of a team's cap? How would that affect decisions elsewhere on the roster?

Jefferson is arguably the best receiver in the league, and Minnesota's cost will certainly extend him. But the cost will tighten money to spend elsewhere, like on last year's first-round pick, 22-year-old Jordan Addison, when his rookie deal ends. Or, if the Vikings' assessment of J.J. McCarthy proves accurate, a quality quarterback on a five-year rookie contract might be just what the doctor ordered. If I were running the Vikings, I would pay Jefferson and keep churning WR2 at the end of Addison's deal.

Jerry Jones and the Cowboys probably need to be much more creative in dealing with Lamb. Jones already has a \$50 million plus quarterback quantity on his hands, with Dak Prescott having all the leverage in an endless game of chicken. As long as Prescott is the QB, the Cowboys' evaluation skills, if the Vikings' assessment of J.J. McCarthy proves accurate, a quality quarterback on a five-year rookie contract might be just what the doctor ordered. If I were running the Vikings, I would pay Jefferson and keep churning WR2 at the end of Addison's deal.

If I were the Bengals, I would probably sign Chase — who still has two years left on his deal — as soon as possible to avoid resetting the market after Lamb's and Jefferson's deals come in. Cincinnati already appears to be planning to let Tee Higgins walk after this season, which might necessitate another high NFL draft investment at the position next year.

The 49ers have a more complicated situation than the Bengals, having already paid Deebo Samuel (\$23.8 million per year, \$28.6 million against the cap in 2024) and with Aiyuk (\$14.1 million against the cap in 2024) in the last year of his contract. Both players' names have been popular in trade rumors this offseason. The Niners hedged their bet by drafting Florida receiver Ricky Pearsall in Round 1 last month, giving themselves options at the position.



Minnesota Vikings wide receiver Justin Jefferson catches a touchdown pass during a game against the Carolina Panthers on Oct. 1, 2023, in Charlotte, N.C.

My crystal ball tells me this group will undergo a renovation after the 2024 season. Aiyuk and Samuel are set to count \$42.7 million against the cap this season. Add Pearsall and tight end George Kittle and that's more than \$56 million against the cap (22 percent) for four pass catches. Samuel is the NFL's eighth-highest-paid wideout and might rank third in the 49ers' position room when it comes to route running and ball skills. Something will have to give.

Players deserve whatever they can get. I am not here to dispute this — but even NFL teams with the most creative capologists will eventually be forced to pay for their extensions of credit, just like you and I. So what will they do about the rising costs of receivers?

When players get too expensive, nothing speaks louder than cheaper options.

Teams selected 35 wide receivers in the 2024 draft. That's not too unusual, but the total of seven picked in Round 1 grabbed my attention. Sure, it might just have been a year with several special talents available. But it also might speak to a few other factors:

1. With experienced receivers becoming more expensive, teams need more cheap talent.

2. In this era of seven-on-seven competitions and even more passing offenses in college, receivers have more advanced skills at a younger age. More advanced skills can identify and secure receivers properly, with smoother projections to the NFL.

If you can identify the traits — be they stats, height, weight and speed — that lead to a reasonably high hit rate on prospects, you can find value that you can't find with your eyes alone. You can find it by any means.

3. Create separation at the break point and/or change gears while underway in a route.

4. See and distinguish coverage with your mind and reactions (or instincts) and post-snap.

5. Consistently extend to catch with your hands near defenders, allowing small guys to play bigger and big guys to be great.

The last few draft classes have been rich in receiver talent. Even in a watered-down free-agent pool this year, there were several good values. In short, you don't have to pay top talent to get value at wide receiver.

Some teams, such as the Green Bay Packers, Kansas City Chiefs and Buffalo Bills, have already picked a lane. (Of course, having a talented quarterback makes it easier for them to consider this road.)

The Packers and Chiefs traded Davante Adams and Tyreek Hill before the 2022 season instead of paying them. Adams got \$28 million from the Las Vegas Raiders, and Hill got \$30 million annually from the Miami Dolphins. The Bills traded Stefon Diggs to the Houston Texans this offseason, two years after signing him to an extension worth \$24 million annually.

Exactly the Adams trade has not exactly worked out for the Raiders. Packers GM Brian Gutekunst has rewarded Green Bay's receivers via the developmental route.

Christian Watson, drafted in the second round in 2022, is a straight-line fast long-strider who can cut up a cushion, take the top off defenses and catch when he's covered. His game is similar to that of Jameson Williams, whom the Detroit Lions

drafted 22 picks earlier. In Round 4 that year, the Packers took Romeo Doubs, who will make \$11.1 million this year after catching 59 passes in 2023. Doubs' ability to find soft spots and distinguish coverages resembles that of the Lions' Amon-Ra St. Brown, at least stylistically.

Last year, the Packers took Jayden Reed (64 catches as a rookie) in Round 2 and Dontayvion Wicks (89 catches, 14.9 yards per catch) in Round 5. Given his acceleration off the ball and out of breaks, Wicks might have more upside than any of the above.

Sure, it requires conviction in your evaluations, but Green Bay should be lauded for overhauling this group almost entirely with draft picks (none in Round 1), as those four receivers will cost a total of \$63.3 million against the cap in 2024. Other teams should try to copy this economic model.

I'm not saying the Lions are wrong, but it's a useful comparison. They reset the market by paying St. Brown \$30 million per year even though he ranked 71st in the NFL in average air yards per catch (7.75) and 39th in average yards per reception (12.7) last season. I understand the importance of keeping peace in the locker room and rewarding hard workers and leaders. He fits their system. But that signing might have ruffled a few feathers outside of the Lions' front office and fans, who think it's money well spent. The Lions did let 29-year-old wideout Josh Reynolds walk, so they have shown they are willing to make tough choices, too.

The Chiefs, no doubt aided by Patrick Mahomes' presence, have thrived since hauling on the market and giving young, like the Packers, the Bills, with Josh Allen, have taken a similar route this offseason, choosing quantity over quality with reasonably priced wideouts like Justin Watson, Marquez Valdes-Scantling and Chase Coleman, after trading Diggs and letting Gabe Davis walk.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Seattle Seahawks paid DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett a total of \$41.3 million annually they restructured Lockett's deal this offseason, then drafted a receiver (Gus Smith-Ngigi) in Round 1 in 2023. The Philadelphia Eagles paid Brown and DeVonta Smith this offseason a combined \$57 million annually (22.4 percent of the cap), even after signing quarterback Jalen Hurts to a record deal last offseason.

The Eagles made those investments after struggling to draft and develop receivers, missing on top-60 picks in Jordan Matthews, Nelson Agholor, JJ Arcega-White and AJ Green. I can't help but wonder: Was paying Brown and Smith a reaction to their previous struggles at the position?

There's not necessarily a correct way to handle the rising costs at wide receiver. If there is, I'm not sure we know it just yet. Many theories are still being tested.

But here is something to consider: Teams will always have to pay great money for good players at positions where there is true scarcity, like quarterback. But I don't see wide receiver, especially in the modern NFL, as a position of true scarcity. As a result, the sticker shock of recent contracts has given me pause.

I'm still not for letting any good player walk, but with each market-setting deal, the costs are getting harder to justify.