

Why Raiders won't spend big this summer

By TASHAN REED *The Tribune*

As the end of offseason team activities approaches with mandatory minicamp next week, the Las Vegas Raiders still have significant salary-cap space at their disposal. According to Over the Cap, they have about \$34.99 million in cap space, the sixth most in the NFL. Most of that space came from the money the Raiders saved by releasing quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo with a post-June 1 designation in March.

Despite having that additional room, the Raiders don't plan on using it to make a major veteran acquisition, league sources told The Athletic. They plan to preserve that money for in-season roster flexibility, looming extensions for players already on the roster and rollover cap space for 2025.

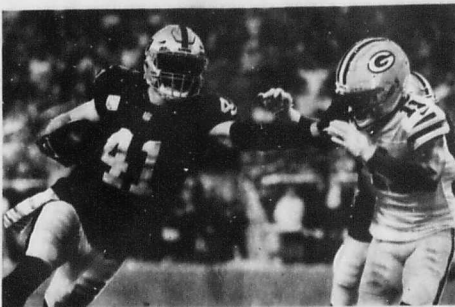
That aligns with how the Raiders handled the earlier stages of free agency. They signed defensive tackle Christian Wilkins to a massive four-year, \$10 million contract and gave quarterback Gardner Minshew a two-year, \$25 million deal in March — but the rest of their signings were complementary pieces. They still had ample cap space but focused on addressing their remaining needs in April's NFL Draft.

Coming out of the draft, the Raiders roster remains far from perfect. Still, they don't view the players remaining in free agency — even at positions of need — as worthy of making a significant investment. Also, they have 91 players on their roster. They have an exemption for defensive end David Aguiar, who signed with the team through the International Player Pathway program, but they're still at the offseason roster limit of 90 players. So to add to the roster, they'd have to release someone already on it.

Taking a step back from the team's immediate needs, general manager Tom Telesco is patiently working to instill a future-oriented approach to the roster-building process. Instead of signing an aging veteran to serve as a one-year stopgap, for example, he'd rather prioritize the growth of younger players who could potentially be longer-term solutions. He's working toward achieving sustained success.

While that ideology is shared among many GMs across the league, it runs counter to how head coaches typically want to operate. Head coaches are usually given a short leash and are more concerned with making moves that put them in position to win immediately. Coach Antonio Pierce has acknowledged that he falls more into that line of thinking, and it has been an adjustment to lean into Telesco's approach.

"You want to win now," Pierce said recently.



DAVID BECKER / Assoc. Press Photo

Las Vegas Raiders linebacker Robert Spillane tries to get past Green Bay Packers wide receiver Jayden Reed after his interception during a game on Oct. 9, 2023, in Las Vegas.

"But you also understand it's a process."

Telesco and Pierce have been working together for only four months, so it's natural that they're still working to nail down the collective direction they want to take.

That process will take time to play out. In the meantime, here's an examination of the primary reasons for the Raiders' financial discipline ahead of the 2024 season.

Hoping for development at the cornerback position

The Raiders have two starters locked in at cornerback with Jack Jones on the outside and Nate Hobbs at nickelback. The other outside corner job, though, is up for grabs. Seven-year veteran Brandon Facyson and second-year man Jalorion Bennett have been rotating with the starting lineup during OTAs.

Facyson was injured for most of last season, and Bennett struggled to stay healthy and didn't perform well when he was on the field, so it would seem to make sense to pursue a proven veteran option in free agency. The most notable players available are Stephon Gilmore, Xavier Howard, Patrick Peterson, Alhelo Williams, Steven Nelson and Adoree' Jackson.

Perhaps there's an upgrade among that group, but the Raiders have been lukewarm on the cornerbacks available in free agency. Their sentiment is that most of the players still on the market may provide a marginal improvement over what they already have.

but that they are older and will likely continue to decline this season.

The preference is for the coaching staff to develop someone already on the roster into a capable starter this season. Bennett, who'll be only 24 this fall, has been praised by coaches and could improve in year two.

"I think the most important thing for him now is that he's not under fire," cornerbacks coach Ricky Manning Jr. said Tuesday. "He has a way higher understanding of the defense. It's slowed down a little bit for him now, so now he can really work on that development. So is he ready? Heck yeah."

Rookie Decamerion Richardson also may push into the mix for a starting role. The fourth-round pick is more of a project, but he has enticing physical tools at 6-foot-2, 195 pounds, with exceptional speed and athleticism.

"He's long, he's fast and he's willing to work," defensive coordinator Patrick Graham said last month. "It's something to work with, but he has a long road ahead of him as a rookie."

If neither Bennett nor Richardson is up to par, then Facyson could be the fallback option. He has been solid in the past as a part-time starter with the Raiders in 2021 and the Indianapolis Colts in 2022.

"I love the way the guy shows up every day," Manning said. "He is a pro. The way he works, the way he shows up to work, the way he studies, his detail, his effort and intensity to get better. It's been showing up every day. He's been very consistent."

The Raiders could pivot once they get into

training camp, but the plan is to roll with what they have at cornerback. As much as that's a bet on the players already in-house, it's also an expression of confidence in the coaching staff.

"Guys are tuned in," Manning said. "They're competing. They're ready. We have a rep chart in our room, not a depth chart. We've got to earn it. I'm just really diving into developing the guys."

Players due for extensions and potential restructures

The Raiders have seven projected starters going into the final year of their contracts: defensive tackle John Jenkins, defensive end Malcolm Koonce, linebackers Robert Spillane and Divine Deablo, Hobbs and safeties Marcus Epps and Trevon Moehrig. They'll likely be looking to sign extensions with at least some of them either this year or next.

On top of that, there are a few players under contract beyond this season who are set to have massive cap hits in 2025. Receiver Davante Adams leads the way at \$44.1 million. Wilkins is second at \$23.8 million and edge rusher Maxx Crosby is at about \$28.2 million. Restructuring at least one of those deals likely.

Acquisitions understandably receive the most attention when it comes to roster management, but finding a way to retain productive players already on the team is just as important. That's something Telesco has to make sure the Raiders are prepared for from a cap perspective.

Possibilities of 2025 offseason

The NFL hasn't set the salary cap for 2025 yet, but the Raiders are currently projected to have only \$24.2 million in cap space, according to Over the Cap. That's not much room to operate with, and it's another reason why preserving cap space to roll over to next year makes sense. If the Raiders are going to make a major splash in 2025 in free agency — let's say pursuing Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott — or via trade, they'll need extra money.

Even if that's not in the cards, it just makes sense for the Raiders to be responsible in their roster-building process given where they are. In all likelihood, this isn't a team that'll be a Super Bowl contender in 2024. To get there one day, they have to avoid making rash moves that'll handicap them in the future. It doesn't guarantee success, but their path forward will be a measured one.

"We know where we are today," Telesco said in April, "but we are looking for today and in the future."

Parker

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mentality. I think being able to do that these past two years is a really great foundation to build upon, and something that we want to do and continue to do each and every year."

Parker's pitching legacy still lives on in the minds of Gasso and former coaches. OU's head coach uses lessons from Parker in even some of the most heated moments. During the Sooners Game 2 vs. in the WCWS finals, OU's head coach opted to start Karle Keeney over WCWS Most Outstanding Player award winner Kelly Maxwell, who had already started two consecutive games before that.

"We knew we couldn't throw Kelly," Gasso said after the game. "We just couldn't. I did that one time with a girl named Paige Parker. I'd never do it again. It wasn't worth it."

While Parker's playing days are over, those lessons she faced in the circle under Gasso are paying dividends for her own coaching now. She is entering her fourth season as Utah's pitching coach and sixth overall, but her pitching staff is entering familiar territory as the Utes enter the Big 12.

Parker pitched against Big 12 competition for four years on the Sooners.

"It's really exciting transitioning into the Big 12," Parker said. "In terms of our pitching staff, we're going to be a lot more youthful next year in our staff, which I'm really excited about. I think we have some really good freshmen pitchers coming in. We have a transfer from Salt Lake Community College that's going to be a part of our pitching staff this next year. Then we have some returners who didn't necessarily get a ton of time in the circle this past year."

The next step in Parker's mind is increasing fan engagement and receiving



NATE BILLINGS / Assoc. Press Photo

Utah coach Amy Hogue talks to her players during the second inning of an NCAA Women's College World Series game against Washington on June 2, 2023, in Oklahoma City.

more NIL deals for Utah's softball players through the Utes' Crimson Collective. In 2023, even more signs of growth occurred when 3,023 fans attended the first-ever Salt Lake City Super Regional at Dumke Family Softball Stadium.

Parker has also pushed for more player-based meet and greets, an event that she says familiarized OU's fans with their team when she was a player. Nowadays, softball is reaching national audiences, and that trend continued when the WCWS Finals recorded an average of 2 million viewers for each game.

"In 2024 we definitely saw a lot more fan engagement," Parker said. "People just showed up to our games on a consistent basis. Throughout my time here, I've definitely seen that support and number go up every year. ... Having been a player and now a coach, I love to see that."

For the rest of the summer, the Independence, Missouri, native will move her focus to the recruiting trail.

Those small efforts — finding hidden gems and players formerly like her — helps Utah's roster improve year in and year out. Oftentimes, she'll run into Gasso or former pitching coach Jen Rocha when on the trail.

Those subtle moments matter to her how she once helped build a program from the ground up as a player and is now aiming to do it as the Utes' pitching coach.

For the next couple of days, though, she'll make sure to text her former coaches.

"I know how busy things are for them after," Parker said of congratulating her former team. "I kind of let them have a little bit of time, and then I'll shoot everyone a text. I'll often see them out on the recruiting trail this summer as well and be able to congratulate them in person."

"The work ethic that they have and the relationships that they've built with their players is something that I really aspire to do."

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