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## Csonka Deal Gives Superstars New View of Free-Agent Status

"By the time my grandchildren are sports fans," said Ed Keating, the agent who negotiated a huge contract with the New York Giants for ex-Dolphin, ex-World Football League superstar Larry Csonka, "stars may be signing for \$7 million or more."

Keating didn't exactly do poorly for Csonka, the bulldozer running back who received a release from Memphis Southmen owner John Bassett a week before the National Football League player draft. "It was in excess of \$1 million," said Keating modestly, "but under \$2 million."

That figure is merely the base salary, cautioned Keating. "He'll make at least \$100,000 and maybe closer to \$200,000 a year in endorsements and off-field speaking engagements." Keating said he had just put down the phone after refusing a free speaking engagement for Csonka. He had a good laugh at that request.

"Prior to the last half-decade, the economy was on an upswing and the mood of sports fans and businessmen was on an up mood," he said. "No one thought too much about players' salaries and union benefits. But then an upward trend started.

"Even when the economy sank, there was no stalemate. Along came the World Hockey League, the World Football League, the American Basketball Association and World Team Tennis and that created new competition. It was a case of supply and demand. The demand for superstars was great and the supply was small and that drove salaries up.

"Right now the superstars will do exceptionally well as free agents, and the average player will do only O.K."

Jim Klück, who is not a superstar, "won't do as well as Csonka," Keating said. The Philadelphia Eagles and the Denver Broncos are showing sluggish signs of interest in the Sundance Kid, Csonka's NFL and WFL sidekick.

NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, reached in New York, cracked one of

## Joan Ryan

his rare jokes when asked about Csonka-Klick (he is laughing more these days since the NFL won the Joe Kapp case, its first legal victory in years). "They're saying the best thing that ever happened to Klick was having his picture taken with Csonka for that Sports Illustrated cover."

Rozelle's laughter was stifled quickly when the May 1 deadline was mentioned. On that day, 28 NFL veterans will become free agents, with no compensation rule to restrict them. But management, which long has predicted that the big dollars of rich owners, the sunshine of Los Angeles and Miami and the ad agencies of New York would absorb all who sought the highest bidder, may have to eat their words.

The ballet-like wide receiver Paul Warfield told his agent, Ernie Green, that he was interested only in returning to the Cleveland Browns, a last-place team in a city of least appeal. There were five or six teams bidding for Warfield's sure hands, but he chose Cleveland for emotional reasons and because he wants the challenge of a struggling team.

"I got my start here in Cleveland and I'd like to finish my career here," said Warfield, who feels he has three or four years left. "I feel reborn again, based on my unpleasant experiences with the WFL (Memphis). When I left Cleveland six years ago I never thought I'd be coming back and playing with quarterback Mike Phipps."

"But I think Phipps has started to mature as a quarterback. He was under tremendous pressure from the fans because of the trade that involved me," Warfield said diplomatically. Cleveland traded Warfield to last-place Miami for a No. 1 draft choice that was

Phipps. "But for two summers I've trained with him and he throws a nice tight spiral and has good velocity on his arm. Halfway through last season he began to mature as a quarterback."

"At this juncture of my career my juices are flowing and I wanted the challenge of joining a team that had a chance of improving. Plus, Cleveland has been my home even when I played in Miami and Memphis. I told Ernie from the start that I was not particularly interested in playing with other people."

So Warfield is happy, Csonka is rich and Klick is holding, but hopeful. What of Andy Messersmith, the free-agent pitcher who most thought would become this year's Catfish Hunter and opt for money and glamor? San Diego tried to lure him to its sunny coast with a \$1.15 million offer, but Messersmith turned it down in favor of the troubled Atlanta Braves with whom he signed for something close to \$1 million. "Money wasn't the only consideration," Messersmith said. "I didn't like San Diego's operation."

It can't be all bad, this focus on the financial nirvana of our sports superstars. Every society has fantasy counterparts as a buffer against life's woes.

England always has relished the glamor of its royal family as a cushion for the commoner's deprivation. And America lived off the Joan Crawford and Rudolph Valentino movie-star syndrome to the same end. But somewhere in time — perhaps back when Steve McQueen opted for blue jeans and motorcycles—the country turned to the likes of Joe Namath and Muhammad Ali for escape.

Yes, today's sports heroes are rich. But Ed Keating, perhaps to bring things into proper focus, points out that the richest athlete ever was home run king Babe Ruth. His \$85,000 yearly salary (more than the President's at the time) was tax-free. And we commoners don't have that worry now, do we?

