

NFL owners to seek agreement as deadline looms

By **DAVE GOLDBERG**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK
NFL owners will try today to find labor peace before the start of free agency, hoping to avoid the mass dumping of veterans for salary-cap reasons.
The owners will meet in New York, looking to reach an agreement with the players' union that could add \$10 million to \$15 million to a 2006 salary cap that currently is \$94.5 million. Without it,

some teams could be forced into wholesale cuts to get beneath the cap by midnight.
Free agency starts Friday.
The league extended the deadline for teams to terminate contracts and request waivers on players from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. today.
The NFL said in a statement



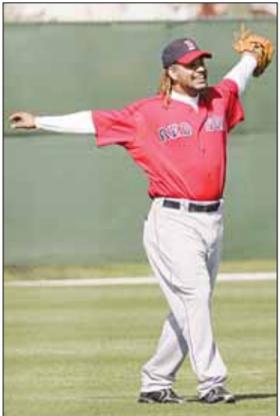
UPSHAW

Wednesday that the management council executive committee unanimously rejected the union's latest proposal as a basis for further negotiations.
"Without an agreement with the union on an extension, the league year will begin as scheduled at midnight today under the current terms of the CBA," the statement said.
Three days of talks between the league and the NFL Players Association to extend the agreement that runs out in 2008 ended

Tuesday with the sides far apart on the percentage of league revenues earmarked for players.
Gene Upshaw, the union's executive director, said the league is offering 56.2 percent of its total revenue for the players, almost four points lower than the union's.
"Our number has to start with a six," Upshaw said.
But beyond the numbers is an issue that has divided the owners for two years: revenue sharing among the teams.
Under the current system, some

teams make far more than others in ancillary income, ranging from local radio rights to stadium naming rights and advertising.
The lower revenue teams say that forces them to commit as much as 70 percent of that money to players, while teams with more outside money contribute far less, giving them more available cash for upfront bonuses to free agents.
The NFL said in a statement after talks broke off that revenue sharing won't be discussed at today's meeting.

Still, it is bound to come up during a meeting that is considered a strategy session to determine the owners' next move. Labor negotiations often have a way of being moved forward by deadlines, and revenue sharing is considered a critical part of the formula.
Under the current agreement, 2006 is the final year with a salary cap. An uncapped year in 2007 means new rules that will force teams and agents to change plans and could keep some teams out of the free-agent market entirely.



AP PHOTO

Boston Red Sox outfielder Manny Ramirez enjoys a laugh on his first day at spring training camp Wednesday in Fort Myers, Fla.

Ramirez reports, willing to take trade

By **HOWARD ULMAN**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORT MYERS, Fla.
Manny Ramirez showed up for work Wednesday like other 9-to-5ers, an employee paid to do his job even if he might prefer to move to another company, or team.

There were some glaring differences, though.

The Boston Red Sox left fielder arrived at spring training with his agents and others in a pair of luxury vehicles: one copper, one silver. He sported dark orange dreadlocks and was on the baseball field for only an hour. He showed up, with the team's approval, one day after the mandatory reporting date.

The slugger declined several opportunities to say he's happy to still be with the team after asking to be traded following the past season.

"I'm here. I'm here," Ramirez said when asked if he's happy to be with Boston.

He also said he wouldn't entertain questions about past trade rumors or play for the Dominican Republic in the World Baseball Classic this month.

"My main focus," he said, "is getting prepared for the season to help Boston win. ... I'm not ready, so I'm not going to go out there and make a fool of myself."

Ramirez isn't expected to play in tonight's exhibition opener against Minnesota, but manager Terry Francona didn't expect him to be out of the lineup for long.

Ramirez's agent, Greg Genske, made it clear his client might not exercise his 10-5 rights (10 years in the majors and five with the same team) to refuse a trade.

"I wouldn't say that," Genske said when asked if Ramirez has no intention of leaving the Red Sox. "I'd say he's kept an open mind."

Ramirez, who reportedly wanted more privacy than he has in Boston, said Wednesday he liked the attention.

"I get paid to play baseball, and no (matter) where I go and play, I've still got to go and perform even if I like it or not," he said.

That wasn't exactly embracing his current team.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," he said. "I guess a lot of people want me to be back, and that's why I'm here."

Ramirez is due to make \$19 million in 2006, the sixth year of his eight-year, \$160 million contract.

After the 2003 season, the Red Sox placed him on waivers in an effort to relieve themselves of his expensive contract but found no takers and tried to trade him for Alex Rodriguez.

Last season, Ramirez took off the final two games before the trade deadline July 31 while the team explored possible deals.

During the offseason, the Red Sox talked with Baltimore and the New York Mets, among others, about trades involving Ramirez.

"I think Manny knows that we have made a good faith effort to meet his ... request," Jed Hoyer, co-general manager at the time, said Jan. 12. "We haven't found a deal that works for us."

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