

High noon: NBA free agents become expensive

(AP) Shaquille O'Neal can listen to the Lakers, Reggie Miller can telephone the Knicks, Dennis Rodman can assess his post-title value and even Michael Jordan can go shopping.

As of noon EDT Tuesday, the largest and gaudiest free agent market in NBA history will open for business as soon as the collective bargaining agreement between the league and players is ratified. Nearly unanimous approval is expected.

About 150 players whose contracts have expired will be available. Money and location will be the prime considerations. The teams with the most room under the salary cap will have the most options, but any team can exceed the \$24.3 million limit to retain one of its players.

"The market will be dictated by the superstars and the time frame is im-

mediate. Teams that have salary cap room won't take chances with waiting to spend the money," said David Falk, the agent for Jordan, Alonzo Mourning, Juwan Howard, Kenny Anderson and several other free agents.

Jordan, who wants a minimum of \$18 million to stay with the Chicago Bulls, has threatened to play elsewhere if Bulls owner Jerry Reinsdorf tries to lowball him. But almost no one around the league expects such a scenario.

Jordan's deal could be done by July 18, when Falk is taking his family to Europe for vacation. Falk also expects the rest of his flock to have new deals by then, too.

"Other players may want to get on airplanes and fly around the country on recruiting trips, but not our clients. This isn't college, this is the professionals."

The Miami Heat, New York Knicks, Minnesota Timberwolves, Indiana Pacers and Vancouver Grizzlies have the most salary cap room, and the Los Angeles Lakers will join that group if the anticipated trade of Vlade Divac for Kobe Bryant goes through Tuesday after the league's eight-day moratorium on signings, trades and negotiations expires.

The Lakers would then make a hard push for O'Neal, hoping the movie lots and recording studios of Hollywood can lure him from the Disneyesque motif of central Florida.

"Orlando is still my first choice. I don't even have a Plan B," O'Neal reiterated Monday, refusing to comment about the possibility of playing for Los Angeles.

"It's going to be a difficult time, one of the most difficult decisions of my life.

It's like deciding whether to get married, where to go to college, whether to leave college early."

O'Neal was not predicting an early resolution, and Dream Team teammate Miller said the bidding war for O'Neal could drag on two weeks.

Miller, who nearly led the Indiana Pacers to the NBA Finals in 1994 and 1995, expected to hear from the Knicks and Heat.

"It's going to be interesting, probably the biggest free agent market the league will ever see," he said. "It'll be something to see teams maneuver and shift."

If Falk's prediction comes true, the biggest stars will sign first, setting the market ceiling. After that, signings of lower-level players should come in bunches.

"The average player may have to wait until later in the summer, after the

primary five or six guys, Mourning (Dikembe) Mutombo, Howard, O'Neal (Gary) Payton, Anderson — get the deals," Falk said. "Jordan is at his level. He's a whole different matter."

O'Neal and Mourning may be the most sought centers, especially if another rumored trade goes through: Dennis Rodman to Houston and Reggie Miller to Phoenix in a three-way deal that sends Charles Barkley to Houston and Reggie Miller to Phoenix.

The second tier of free agents includes Ervin Johnson of Seattle, McMillaine of Washington, Benoit Benjamin of Milwaukee and Atlanta Sean Roberts.

Payton, the defensive player of the year for Seattle, is the marquee guard on the market. A notch below are Anderson and Tim Hardaway

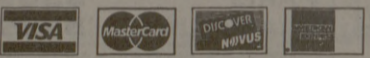
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Former Dallas police officer to stand trial for plot to kill Irvin

DALLAS (AP) — The judge in the case of a former Dallas police officer accused of plotting to kill Cowboys star Michael Irvin ruled Monday that probable cause exists to go to trial.

Judge Jack Hampton also declined to lower the defendant's \$250,000 bond.

The rulings came after testimony from one prosecution witness and several defense witnesses at an examining trial and bond reduction hearing for Johnnie Hernandez.

Sources say Hernandez wanted Irvin killed because the football player had threatened his girlfriend, Rachelle Marie Smith, a topless dancer due to testify against Irvin at his ongoing drug possession trial. Hernandez is also a potential witness.

Irvin was subpoenaed to testify at the hearing, but defense attorney John H. Read agreed to drop the subpoena after meeting with Irvin's attorneys.

"He started this, didn't he?" Read said of Irvin. "I think this is all over threats of serious bodily injury ... How about death?"

"My understanding of the threats were she (Smith) wouldn't see the end of the light of day if she testified before the grand jury ... or if she testi-



IRVIN

fied at trial ... and she'd never see my client, at least those are the allegations," Read said.

Hernandez, 28, resigned from the police force following his June 24 arrest on charges of solicitation of capital murder and bribery. The bribery charge stemmed from an unrelated case.

Dallas police Sgt. John Coughlin testified Monday about audio and video tapes made during the investigation that recorded Hernandez discussing the alleged scheme and paying an undercover drug agent \$2,960 to make the hit.

Under cross-examination, Coughlin admitted that the day after Hernandez was videotaped to back out of the scheme.

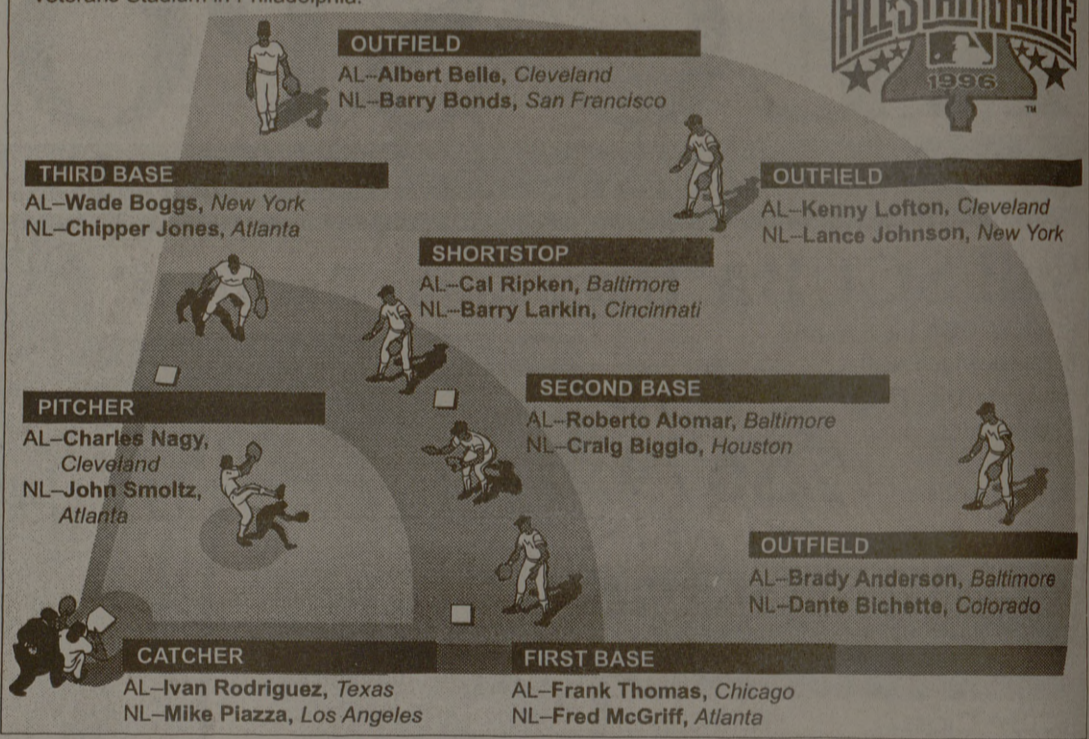
"Mr. Hernandez paged the (Drug Enforcement Administration) agent and told him he had thought about it and asked if he could call it off," Coughlin said, adding that he was being "washed" about the alleged hit. "The DEA agent said, 'I already made the payment. I paid people.' At the end of the tape, Coughlin said, Hernandez reaffirmed his desire to proceed with the hit. 'Go ahead and do it,' Coughlin quoted Hernandez as saying.

Coughlin also said that the agent agreed to supply Hernandez with the approximately \$27,500 needed to complete the job. In return, Coughlin said Hernandez would provide the undercover

'96 All-Star Game

ALL-STAR LINEUP

Elected starters, by position, for the 67th All-Star game, scheduled at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia:



Injuries keep players out of game

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Ken Griffey Jr. and Tony Gwynn already were gone, and then Matt Williams got banged up. Now there's a chance Roberto Alomar and Frank Thomas may not be able to play, either.

No doubt, attrition is taking its toll on Tuesday night's All-Star game.

"I was really looking forward to seeing Tony hit," said NL teammate Greg Maddux, who may not be able to pitch because of a cracked nail on his big right toe. "He's one of the guys I like to watch."

More than injuries, however, there's another factor that many feel will truly hurt future All-Star games — interleague play.

By this time next summer, AL starting pitcher Charles Nagy of Cleveland may have faced Cincinnati's Barry Larkin earlier in the season. There may be no mystery about how NL starter John Smoltz of Atlanta will match up with Baltimore's Cal Ripken because they might have seen each other only a few weeks earlier.

"From the National League

fan's standpoint, they want to see the American League stars play," said Gwynn, sidelined with a heel problem. "And probably, we should feel the same way."

"But this game is a special occasion and a special time that a lot of guys don't have the opportunity to enjoy," he said. "My feeling is interleague play may take away from this event."

The allure of the All-Star game, after all, is seeing players on the same field who aren't usually together.

But starting next June, pending approval by the players' union, Mike Piazza may be hitting against Troy Percival while Barry Bonds may try to steal against Ivan Rodriguez.

"I'm not an advocate of interleague play, OK?" NL manager Bobby Cox said. "Eventually, I think it will take a little luster off the World Series and All-Star game."

For now, the biggest problem is injured players.

Griffey, the leading vote-getter in fan balloting for starting spots, is unable to play for the second straight year. He has a

broken right hand, though it did not prevent him from standing at shortstop while the AL took batting practice.

"I'm here for the fans, and the Philly cheesesteaks," he said. "They voted me to be here, and I'm here. That's my obligation, and I didn't want to let them down."

Williams also will be absent for the second straight summer, this time because of a bruised elbow.

Alomar, voted to start at second base for the AL, missed Monday's workouts because of an injured finger. The Baltimore star is scheduled to bat third, but AL manager Mike Hargrove said he's prepared for Minnesota's Chuck Knoblauch to start in place of Alomar.

Thomas has been hampered by a sore left foot for about a week. If the Chicago White Sox first baseman cannot start — the injury cost him a chance to defend his title in the home run derby — Mo Vaughn of Boston will play.

"I'm in a tremendous amount of pain," Thomas said. "You get voted in, you want to come. Who knows if I'm going to play or not?"

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