

Rangers sign Burkett, Greer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — The Texas Rangers signed pitcher John Burkett and outfielder Rusty Greer on Wednesday to contract extensions that could keep them with the club through 2001.

Burkett, who would have been eligible for free agency after this season, received an \$8.45 million, two-year deal with two option years that could make the contract worth \$16.5 million.

Greer, already signed through 1998, got a \$7.2 million, two-year extension with an option for 2001 that could make the deal worth \$11.5 million.

Texas is sixth on the payroll level for luxury taxes — one team below where it would have to pay — but that could change as the season progresses. The Rangers have seven players under contract for 1998, including Juan Gonzalez, Will Clark and John Wetteland.

However, the team will have to open its wallet

even wider after this season if it wants to retain Ivan Rodriguez, Dean Palmer and starting pitchers Darren Oliver, Roger Pavlik and Bobby Witt.

"We know we'll have a lot of work to do this offseason, but this is a major step to show our fans the Rangers are committed to winning and keeping this team together," general manager Doug Melvin said.

"Both of these guys are the type of players we want in our organization — not only for their physical abilities but also for the way they carry themselves as individuals."

Burkett, who will make \$3.55 million this year, is guaranteed \$4 million in both 1998 and 1999. If the club picks up his option in 2000, he'll get \$4.2 million. If not, there is a \$450,000 buyout. Another \$4.3 million will be coming his way if he's still around in 2001. If that option is declined,

Burkett gets \$200,000.

Although the team's policy is not to work on contracts during the season, Melvin said an exception was made because negotiations had almost been finished during spring training. Had the deals not been completed Wednesday, they would have been shelved until the offseason, Melvin said.

That is bad news for Rangers fans still hoping for the team to re-sign its other free agents-to-be, especially Rodriguez. Texas rejected a \$38.75 million, five-year proposal by the five-time All-Star catcher's agent.

"I've exchanged a lot of letters with the representatives of all our free-agent players. These just seemed to work out. I can't say tell you why the others didn't, I can only tell you why these two did," Melvin said.

Marlins' Sheffield agrees to record \$61 million deal

MIAMI (AP) — Gary Sheffield agreed today to the largest contract package in baseball history, a \$61 million, six-year extension with the Florida Marlins.

The contract runs from 1998 through 2003. In terms of total money, it surpasses the \$55 million, five-year contract Albert Belle signed with the Chicago White Sox. San Francisco's Barry Bonds is third at \$43.75 million over six years.

Sheffield hit .314 last season with 42 homers and 120 RBIs.

Florida made the move following an offseason in which the Marlins committed more than \$89 million to free agents, giving the money primarily to pitcher Alex Fernandez (\$35 million over five years), outfielder Moises Alou (\$25 million over five years) and infielder-outfielder Bobby Bonilla (\$23.3 million over four years).

Sheffield, 28, is getting \$6.1 million in 1997, the final season of a \$24.45 million, four-year contract. His new deal calls for \$10 million a season from 1998-2002 and \$11 million in 2003. Florida has an \$11 million option for 2004.

In addition, the Marlins will give Sheffield a \$2.5 million salary advance on Jan. 6, 1998 — \$500,000 for each of the first five

seasons of the new contract.

Sheffield and the Marlins are believed to have agreed to most of the points of the deal in late February. But because extensions agreed to after opening day are not counted in calculations for a team's 1997 luxury tax, they held off announcing it until today.

Still, management's Player Relations Committee may investigate to see whether the deal should count to the Marlins' current payroll, a management official said on the condition he not be identified.

In addition to salary, Sheffield could earn a \$150,000 bonus if he wins the NL MVP award, \$100,000 if he finishes second, \$75,000 for third, \$50,000 for fourth and \$25,000 for fifth.

He would get a \$50,000 bonus each time he's elected to start in the All-Star game and \$20,000 each time he's picked as a reserve. He also would get \$100,000 if he's the World Series MVP, \$50,000 if he's the league championship MVP and \$25,000 if he's the division series MVP.

Finally, he would get \$50,000 each for winning Gold Glove and Silver Slugger Awards, and he receives a no-trade clause for the entire length of the deal.

Astrodome rejects early Oilers offer

HOUSTON (AP) — Astrodome USA owner Drayton McLane said Wednesday the Houston Oilers' offer for an early release from their stadium lease is unsatisfactory.

Houston KRIV-TV had reported Tuesday that Oilers owner Bud Adams was willing to drop his lawsuit against the Astrodome, in which he was seeking \$2.5 million in damages.

In return, Adams said the team would pay Astrodome USA nothing for leaving a year early for Tennessee. Adams gave Astrodome officials a Wednesday deadline to accept the offer, the station reported.

"We just called and told them it was unacceptable," McLane said. "(Adams) canceled the game in the Astrodome, and we didn't get anything for it."

Astrodome officials had said the Oilers must drop their lawsuit against them before they would consider freeing the team to leave a year early for Tennessee. The Oilers filed the lawsuit after a 1995 preseason game was canceled because of bad turf.

Astrodome USA has been asking for at least \$1 million if the Oilers do not play in the Dome next season.

Oilers spokesman David Pearson said Wednesday that the team

had no immediate comment.

Both McLane and Harris County Judge Robert Eckels indicated a deal was not impossible.

"I think it's reasonably close, but that's all in the eyes of the person looking at it," McLane said.

Eckels said the county was encouraging them to work out their differences.

"I don't think they're that far apart," Eckels said. "There's reason to believe they can get together."

But McLane, who owns the Houston Astros, said Houston fans would come see the Oilers play another year.

"If the team wins, they'll come," he said. "They will know they'll be playing their last year, and there would be a sentimental value."

The Oilers cannot leave Houston early without approval from Astrodome USA, Harris County and the city of Houston. Only the county has agreed, accepting a buyout offer from the Oilers of \$5.25 million.

However, the Oilers have said if they do not have an agreement from everybody by the end of Wednesday, all offers will be withdrawn, including the buyout offer accepted by the county.

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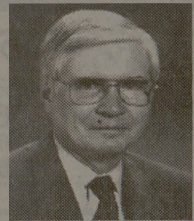
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