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**Cowboys sign Sparks to fill gap**  
*DB tries to get in playing shape for secondary duties*

(AP) — Not completely comfortable with their young, shaken-up secondary, the Dallas Cowboys on Monday signed Phillippi Sparks to a five-year contract and expect him to play in the season opener.

During the offseason, after it was apparent that Deion Sanders was not coming back, the Cowboys signed free agent Ryan McNeil and used three of their five draft picks on cornerbacks.

McNeil has earned his starting job, but two of the drafted rookie cornerbacks have been injured, and Kareem Larrimore, the rookie seemingly set to be a starter, struggled in preseason games.

Then the Cowboys ended up without two players they expected.

Sixth-year safety Charlie Williams will miss at least two games recovering from offseason knee surgery. Cornerback Kevin Smith, an eight-game starter last season, reported to camp, but decided to retire instead of playing a ninth season.

"We went into two-a-days, we had some good young corners, young

talent and felt like we would have Kevin Smith and Charlie Williams, some guys with experience," said Cowboys coach Dave Campo. "Now, we're in a completely different situation."

The Cowboys also considered Sparks before signing McNeil, who was in Cleveland last season after spending his first six NFL seasons with Detroit and St. Louis. Sparks spent the past seven seasons with the New York Giants, but then hinted he may retire and did not sign with a team before training camp.

Sparks admits that he is not yet in playing shape, describing himself as "partly cloudy but fair."

"I don't want to be a savior, but know I can help," Sparks said. "It's time for me to learn the system and get in playing shape ASAP. It's something that hopefully won't take too long."

Both Campo and Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said Sparks would be on the field when the team returns to practice Wednesday. They expect him to play in Sunday's opener against Philadelphia.

"We feel like there's no one else that he can come in here and give us the experience plus significant skill that will really help this team," Jones said. "I want every bit as much about what he brings to the table. Larrimore gets the numbers of snaps he's going to get anyway."

To make room on the roster, the Cowboys waived cornerback Chris Bordano, who was from New Orleans in an off-trade that sent cornerback Mathis to the Saints. Sparks' \$1.5 million signing bonus will make about \$500,000 this season with Dallas.

Campo said Larrimore has been enough to be the opening-day starter and insisted that the move was a reflection on the rookie. But he would not say who would be the opposite of McNeil on the corner.

"It's a business decision. I'm not too worried about any of that," Larrimore, a fourth-round pick of West Texas. "I'm still out there now and just have to continue to get better."

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**Penn State Lions fail to make AP poll**

*University breaks streak of 119 poll inclusions, first time out since*

(AP) — Penn State lost more than the Kickoff Classic over the weekend: The Nittany Lions are out of the Associated Press Top 25 college football poll for the first time since the end of the 1992 season.

Soundly beaten by USC 29-5 on Sunday, Penn State saw its streak of being ranked in 119 consecutive polls end Monday with the release of the AP's first regular-season ratings.

The Nittany Lions, who had the fourth-longest run of consecutive rankings behind Nebraska, Florida State and Florida, entered the game ranked 22nd.

The last time the Lions were unranked was in the final poll of the 1992 season, when they finished 7-5 after a loss to Stanford in the Blockbuster Bowl.

Nebraska and Florida State remained 1-2 in this week's poll as the top 11 were unchanged from the preseason poll.

The Cornhuskers, who open their season Saturday against San Jose State, collected 35 first-place votes and 1,728 points from the 71 sports writers and broadcasters on the panel. The Seminoles, 29-3 winners over BYU in the Pigskin Classic, had 30 first-place votes and 1,723 points.

Alabama, which opens its season Saturday at

UCLA, was third with three first-place votes and points, followed by No. 4 Wisconsin and No. 5 Miami.

The Badgers, who had one first-place vote, and Hurricanes open their seasons Thursday night, against Western Michigan, while Miami plays against McNeese State.

Michigan was No. 6, followed by No. 7 Texas (first-place votes), No. 8 Kansas State, No. 9 Florida, No. 10 Georgia. K-State opened with a 27-7 win over Iowa in the Eddie Robinson Classic.

Virginia Tech, which had its game against Georgia Tech postponed by violent thunderstorms and a fogging, was No. 11, followed by No. 12 USC (top spots), No. 13 Tennessee, No. 14 Washington, No. 15 Purdue, No. 16 Ohio State, No. 17 Clemson, No. 18 Mississippi, No. 19 Oklahoma and No. 20 TCU.

Illinois was No. 21, followed by No. 22 South Carolina, No. 23 Mississippi, No. 23 Colorado, No. 24 Michigan and No. 25 Texas A&M.

The Aggies, the only new team in the poll, beat Notre Dame on Saturday.

Nebraska's streak of consecutive poll appearances is up to 310, followed by Florida State's 184 and Florida's 178.

**RANKINGS**

*Continued from Page 1B*

with the wealth of talent that lines the front seven. The only question is, how will an unproven secondary live up to the challenge?

In the Big 12 South, Texas draws the national attention. Now can Texas maintain its elite status for an entire season? The Longhorns have been unable to accomplish it in such recent years when they draw national attention.

Texas coach Mack Brown has accumulated a group of receivers who would make any quarterback

salivate. Texas has two. Chris Simms and Major Applewhite began to compete for the snaps toward the end of last season. The race only intensified during the offseason as Simms moved in to unseat Applewhite. But Texas will have to stick with one starter to bring some consistency to a high-powered offense.

Once a quarterback is chosen, the Longhorns have some of the biggest and fastest targets in college football. The only problem is they are all inexperienced. Redshirt freshman Artie Ellis, sophomore Courtnee Garcia and junior Montrell Flowers look to be the target for Applewhite or Simms. These

three freshman will add much-needed depth.

Yet Texas suffered a big setback when tight end Bo Scarife was earlier in preseason.

Texas has a lot of firepower in the lineup to live up to the Just as Texas A&M failed to live up to its Top-10 bidding last season, Texas will likely fall as well, though it may not happen until much later in the season.

Both teams have what it takes to arrive undefeated in the Big 12 Championship game. But that's where one team's bid to be the nation's best will end.

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