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Palmer, Bengals agree to terms

By Joe Kay
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CINCINNATI — Heisman Trophy winner Carson Palmer agreed to a contract Thursday with the Cincinnati Bengals, who have the draft's top pick and a history of ruining young quarterbacks.

The Bengals narrowed their candidates for the No. 1 pick to Palmer, quarterback Byron Leftwich and cornerback Terence Newman, then targeted the passer from Southern California this week.

Palmer's agent, David Dunn, agreed on contract parameters late Wednesday, and filled in the rest of the details a day later.

Getting a pre-draft deal with Palmer was a priority for first-year Head Coach Marvin Lewis, who is trying to change the Bengals' reputation for bungling away chances to improve through the draft.

The Bengals have been the

NFL's worst team over the past 12 years, in part because they've mishandled their quarterbacks. They moved up to take David Klingler in the first round in 1992, and chose Akili Smith with the third overall pick in 1999.

Neither one had much of a chance on a team that hasn't had a winning record since 1990. Both missed training camp in contract disputes, then got thrown into the lineup as unprepared rookies.

Klingler, who came from a run-and-shoot offense at Houston, and Smith, a mobile passer from Oregon, were confined by the Bengals' passing philosophy. They tried to turn both of them into Ken Anderson clones — stand in the pocket until the last second, then dump it off if necessary.



PALMER

Klingler lasted only four years with a weak offensive line and an unimpressive receiving corps — Jeff Query was his top target at the outset.

The Bengals did even worse with Smith, who got less than one full season as a starter before he was discarded. The Bengals teamed him with rookie receivers Peter Warrick and Ron Dugans in 2000, when Head Coach Bruce Coslet quit three games into the season.

Coslet was in charge of developing Smith, who got little guidance and wound up relegated to third string for the past two seasons. He's still on the roster.

Palmer has one thing in his favor: Lewis understands the importance of bringing a young quarterback along slowly. Plus, Lewis needs to win right away, so he'll let veteran Jon Kitna run the offense this season, with Smith currently in line as the backup.

The Bengals were willing to

trade down with the first pick but found no suitable passers. They brought in Palmer Leftwich and Newman in interviews with the staff on the front office this month before finally deciding to go with the more acclaimed quarterback.

Palmer is 6-foot-4 and a pocket passer, more like Klingler or Smith. After going 16-16 in his first three seasons, he got the USC Trojans into the top 10 and led them to the Orange Bowl last season.

Palmer was the first Southern Cal's five Heisman winners to play quarterback, and the first Heisman winner chosen No. 1 in the draft.

Palmer was drafted by Tampa Bay last year in the Testaverde in 1987.

Like Klingler and Smith, Palmer comes to Cincinnati with confidence that he will be different.

"I've not met a whole lot of people like me," he said in a scouting combine in February. "I think I can go in and turn things around."

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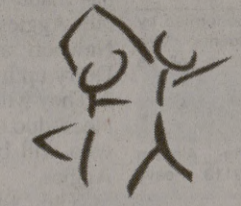
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Anthony declares draft eligibility

SYRACUSE, N.Y. (AP) — Syracuse freshman Carmelo Anthony, who led the Orangemen to their first national championship, will make himself eligible for the NBA draft.

Anthony said Thursday he will forego his final three years at Syracuse to play in the NBA.

Anthony delayed making the decision until after the season, preferring to focus on winning the national title.

He led the Orangemen in scoring, averaging 22 points, and broke Lawrence Moten's freshman scoring record and Derrick Coleman's freshman rebounding mark.

Anthony had a career-best 33 points and pulled down 14 rebounds in Syracuse's victory over Texas in the national semifinals in New Orleans earlier this month. He scored 20 points as

Syracuse beat Kansas in the title game and was named Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four — just the third freshman to earn that honor.

"I'm here in front of you today to announce that I will not be coming back next year," Anthony said at a news conference. "I will be moving on, moving on to the pros."

Anthony said he reached his decision after talking with his mother and Head Coach Jim Boeheim.

"It was a tough decision for me to make," said Anthony, who began crying as he spoke.

Boeheim agreed with Anthony's decision and said his star player is ready for the next level.

"This is a very happy day for Syracuse basketball, and a sad one, too," Boeheim said.

"The guy sitting here has done more for Syracuse basketball than any player we've ever recruited or that's ever played here. To lead his team to a national championship as a freshman is truly a historic moment in college basketball. I'm very thankful that he was here with us."

The NBA draft is scheduled for June 25. The NBA's deadline for underclassmen to make themselves eligible for the draft is May 12. Anthony is expected to be a lottery pick. The draft lottery will be held May 22.

Anthony is the first Syracuse undergraduate to declare early for the NBA since Billy Owens opted not to return for his senior season in 1991. Owens was the No. 3 pick that year. All-American guard Pearl Washington jumped to the NBA after his junior season in 1986 and was the No. 13 pick.

Andretti walks away from violent crash

By Steve Herman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS — Mario Andretti was hardly fazed after flipping a race car at more than 200 mph.

And the spectacular crash Wednesday at Indianapolis Motor Speedway while testing a car owned by son Michael won't change the elder Andretti's plan to help the team prepare for the Indy 500.

"Oh, yeah," he said without hesitation when asked if he would get back in the driver's seat next month should injured driver Tony Kanaan be unable to practice or qualify for the May 25 race.

In fact, the 63-year-old former Indy 500, Daytona 500 and Formula One champion seemed worried about only one thing — the reaction of his wife.

"I won't tell her," he said, laughing.

Andretti, the oldest driver ever to test an Indy car, hit debris and went airborne. The impact sent his car flipping end over end.

"I'm OK, a little bump on my

heel and my chin," he said. "I didn't hit anything hard."

But he found himself in an unfamiliar position — wheels up and over.

"I haven't been upside down too many times, and I didn't want to do it here," he said.

The crash occurred when he hit debris between the first and second turns. After striking the debris, the car went into the air, flipped at least twice and landed on all four tires, said Carol Wilkins, spokeswoman for Andretti Green Racing.

Andretti was checked out at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway's hospital, IRL spokesman John Griffin said.

"What I hit wasn't big, but it was solid, and it was able to launch me, and then all I saw was sky," Andretti said.

The debris apparently was left on the track after a crash involving former Indy 500 champion Kenny Brack, who hit the wall coming out of the first turn. Brack was not injured.

"I was going for it, obviously, and I came off of Turn 1 at full throttle, and all of a sudden there was debris everywhere,"

Andretti said. "It's just a freaky situation. It will not happen again, I'm sure."

Although Andretti retired from Indy car racing in 1994, he might try to qualify one of the team's cars for Kanaan, who has a broken arm.

The team has no problem with that.

"What I hit wasn't big, but it was solid, and it was able to launch me, and then all I saw was sky."

— Mario Andretti
 Professional car racer

and-most in history, and he's happy to be back at the speedway.

"I have great memories, no question," he said following session earlier in the day. "I tell you I've enjoyed this job a lot. The way it looks from the cockpit is the way I remember it."

Andretti also remembers frustration, when something always seemed to go wrong and ruin his chances to add the Indy 500 title to the one he won in 1969.

Andretti crashed six times between 1971 and 1992. In 1981, he thought he won the race after Bobby Unser was penalized for passing a line of cars during yellow caution period. But months later, a USAC appeal overturned the penalty and gave the victory to Unser.

In 1985, Andretti led 107 laps but finished second to Dan Sullivan, who won despite spinning. Two years later, Andretti started from the pole and dominated for 170 laps before his car went dead with a bad ignition system at the end of the race. In his race at Indy in 1994, a problem with the fuel system knocked him out after just 23 laps.

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