

## When minimum is too much

BY DAVID MOORE FOXSports.com

Alex Van Pelt doesn't suffer from delusions of grandeur. The Buffalo quarterback has a handle on his skills and his value to the team. Sometimes, that's not enough. For a handful of backup players on every club in the NFL, the union that was organized to protect their interests often prices them out of the market with the veteran minimum. That happened to Van Pelt last season before a training-camp injury opened the door to his return. "Exactly," Van Pelt said. "I was like hey, my union is supposed to be out there helping me, and instead, it's keeping me out of work." Gene Upshaw, the executive director of the NFL Players Association, acknowledges this flaw and is working with the league's management council to improve the system. A change is likely to occur. But it won't happen in time to save the veterans who will be cut over the next few weeks and months as clubs fill out the edges of their roster with young, unproven talent. The veteran minimum in 2001 for a player with five or more seasons of experience is \$477,000. That figure is \$209,000 for a player in his first year. Most teams are looking to cut salary cap corners anywhere they can. If the final five spots on the roster are given to rookies rather than veterans who have carved out a special niche, that saves a club \$1.34 million on the cap. Football is unquestionably a young man's game. The best teams are ones that consistently spot and develop young talent. But too often these days, those decisions aren't based on performance or potential. They're based on a sliding minimum wage scale that has some veterans sliding out of the league before their time. "Ultimately, you have to ask yourself the question, are you better off going with the young guys or do you want to wind down with those veteran guys who have done so much for you?" said Stephen Jones, the Cowboys executive vice president. "Are you better off with a veteran player for another year or using that roster spot to develop someone? "I straddle the fence on that one." The Bills straddled the fence on Van Pelt last season. The club was already paying big money to Rob Johnson and Doug Flutie. Buffalo wanted to keep Van Pelt as the third quarterback, but felt if it poured more money into the position it would be thin elsewhere. Van Pelt was an eighth round pick out of Pittsburgh in the 1993 draft. He had played in just 11 games entering last season, but was scheduled to make \$440,000. He understood why the Bills didn't keep him. Even he didn't think he was worth that much to the club. "Absolutely," Van Pelt said. "The Bills had their money wrapped up in Rob and Doug. The year before, I had taken one snap. They were justified in thinking I would not see a lot of action. "I was in total agreement. I understood what they were doing. It was just unfortunate there was no way I could work out a deal with them." There are six different minimum salaries in place, ranging from a player with no experience to one with five or more seasons under his belt. Van Pelt went to Phil Hansen, the Bills player representative, and argued he should be allowed to negotiate with the team and sign for less than the veteran minimum. Hansen raised this issue at the union meeting in Hawaii and it was shut down with very little discussion. "The only good part about it is that it helps young guys get a chance in the league," Van Pelt said of the sliding wage scale. "Which would be great if I was a young guy. "But to be honest, hey, I've put my time in. Why should I be the guy getting screwed?" Van Pelt isn't alone in this sentiment. "We get calls from agents all the time saying their clients don't care what the money is," Jones said. "They would play for less than the veteran minimum. They just want to play." Five. That was the average number of veterans with 10 or more years of

experience on NFL clubs last season. The average undoubtedly would have been higher if the veteran minimum was lower. Upshaw and Harold Henderson, the league's chief labor negotiator, are working to amend the system. One idea is to narrow the sliding scale. The minimum for every player who has been in the league three years or more is \$300,000. Upshaw would then like to see an incentive pool set aside that would allow these veterans to earn money based on performance. Another factor to consider is this: Many veterans are willing to lower the minimum salary because that extra year pays so much more on their pension and annuity plan. "The widening gap between the rookies and veterans on the minimum is a serious point of contention," Jones said. "I think it needs to be tightened down some. "Maybe you can do something with the benefits package, make it even more attractive and weigh it more heavily toward someone with tenure. I don't think the clubs would mind paying more in benefits." And how did Van Pelt's story end? He was out of a job until Flutie pulled a groin in training camp. When Johnson went down in last season's Monday night opener against Tennessee, Van Pelt came in and directed the team's winning drive. He enters this training camp as Buffalo's No. 2 quarterback. "I know this only applies to a handful of players on each team," Van Pelt said. "But if you've been with a team and know their system. "I know there are guys who can contribute and help out more than a first year guy."

Senior writer David Moore covers the NFL for FOXSports.com. He can be reached at [dmoore@foxsports.com](mailto:dmoore@foxsports.com).