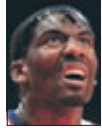


Knicks drop 3rd straight despite 41 from Amar'e

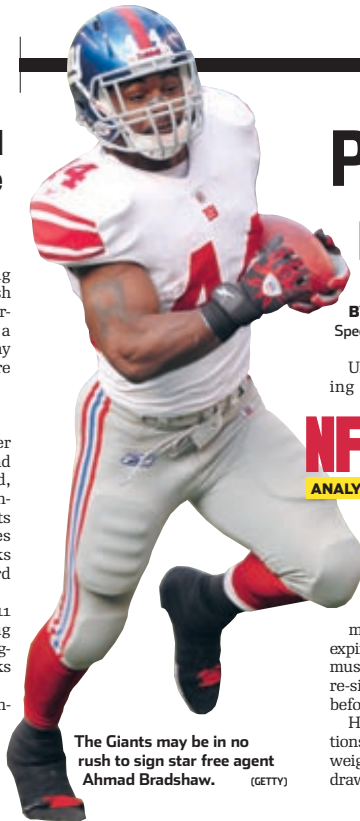
The suddenly slumping Knicks fell prey to Steve Nash and the Phoenix Suns yesterday, losing 129-121 during a Martin Luther King Jr. Day matinee at Madison Square Garden.



Stoudemire Amar'e Stoudemire, Nash's former teammate and good friend, had a season-high 41 points in 34 minutes for the Knicks (22-18), who lost their third straight game.

Nash had 15 points and 11 assists while orchestrating the Suns offense and avenging a 121-96 loss to the Knicks in Phoenix on Jan. 7.

In his return from a seven-game absence to nurse a sprained left knee, Knicks forward Danilo Gallinari scored 17 points. (NEWSDAY)



The Giants may be in no rush to sign star free agent Ahmad Bradshaw. (GETTY)

Pending free-agency period marred by labor uncertainty

BY KYLE STACK
Special to amNewYork

NFL ANALYSIS

Uncertainty surrounding a new NFL labor agreement may prevent NFL teams from signing the free agents they desire.

As the NFL and its players' union try to work out an extension of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) before it expires on March 4, teams must evaluate whether to re-sign their free agents before that date.

Here are three questions that front offices are weighing as the offseason draws near:

Will salaries go down under a new CBA?

It could happen if players agree to reduce their near 60 percent share of league revenues. (Players receive about 50 percent after team owners skim expense credits off the top.)

"I don't think there's going to be a deal where [player] salaries go down," said Andrew Brandt, a business writer for the National Football Post who was formerly an NFL contract negotiator.

Still, don't assume the Giants will re-sign Ahmad Bradshaw before the March 4 deadline.

"There's so much uncertainty surrounding not just the terms of the deal but when it will be struck that there is a hesitancy to make any deals now," said Gabe Feldman, director of the Sports Law Program of Tulane University.

Will new rookie contract guidelines affect veterans?

The NFL claims rookie contracts have been unnecessarily high for too long. The NFL Players Association has offered to limit rookie contracts to three years, with the savings funneled toward veteran-player incentives; the NFL rejected that.

"I do not think a reduction in rookie contracts will make certain that veteran salaries will increase," said J.J. Hallsell, a former salary-cap analyst for the Washington Redskins who writes for Football Outsiders.

First-year players lack leverage, Brandt said: "The rookies are going to be sacrificed; they don't have a voice."

How will a new CBA affect teams' offseason strategies?

Feldman emphasized that it's difficult for teams to make decisions when they don't know the rules of the game, but Brandt said one element to watch for is a potential flood of free agents compared to last offseason.

Because the 2010 season was set without a salary cap, players needed at least six seasons of experience — rather than the usual four — to become unrestricted free agents last offseason. Players with four or five years' experience were considered restricted.

Under a new CBA, free agents with at least four seasons would likely become unrestricted — creating a clamor for teams to get players signed.

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