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September 2, 2010 12:55 pm | 6 Comments

A Franchise Tag in the NBA

Evaluating the possibility of the NBA incorporating the NFL's franchise tag.

If the Nuggets were to assign him a non-exclusive franchise tag, leaving open the possibility of him signing with another team and the Nuggets recouping draft picks in exchange, they would have to pay him 120 percent of his '10-11 salary if he stayed put. That's because the other option — the average of the top-five paid players at Anthony's position — would actually result in a salary lower than what he's making this season.

Anthony is slated to make \$17,149,243 for the upcoming campaign, according to NBA salaries listed on HoopsHype.com. In the NFL, "franchised" players are listed according to their specific position, so Anthony would likely be considered a small forward and not just a forward in our hypothetical franchise tag scenario. If that were the case, it's likely Rashard Lewis (\$20,514,000), Andrei Kirilenko (\$17,822,187), Anthony, Peja Stojakovic (\$15,336,000) and LeBron James (\$14,500,000) would be considered the five highest-paid small forwards. The average salary this upcoming season for that group is \$17,064,286 — or \$84,957 less than what Melo will make this year. A 120 percent raise would leave Melo's 2011-12 salary at \$20,579,091. That's a healthy raise but it's likely one Anthony could get at a per-year rate in a multi-year deal, assuming a franchise tag didn't exist to limit his ability to hit the open market.

The tag is already reviled to varying degrees by NFL players. Even though a franchise tag represents a guaranteed contract in a league which peculiarly doesn't guarantee contracts, given the sport's physicality, NFLers still prefer long-term deals.

"If I'm a tight end, instead of getting a \$5 million franchise tag, I can go out and get a four-year extension with \$12 million guaranteed," said JI Halsell, a former salary cap analyst for the Washington Redskins who now writes about the NFL salary cap for the [Football Outsiders website](#).

Halsell, via a phone discussion, also stated that more often than not a player is going to desire having the freedom to negotiate a long-term deal with the team of his choice.

"In the NFL, there is a definitive mechanism which specifically precludes a player from getting to free agency. Whereas in the NBA, there's an incentive to stay with your team but they can't prevent you from hitting the market," Halsell said.

By that, Halsell is referring to the NBA's Larry Bird exception. It's an incentive for players to re-sign with their current team, which can offer its own player one more year and annual raises 2.5 percent higher than what any other team can offer. Feldman noted the Bird exception is essentially a light version of the franchise tag.

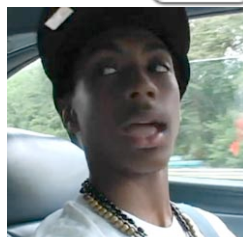
"If you are a small-market team, it's something you want," Feldman said. Surely most players who are given the chance to explore the open market will look toward teams in big markets. They can typically offer more money as well as additional off-court marketing opportunities and a preferred lifestyle.

Coon pointed out that restricted free agency keeps players in a certain market at the beginning of their career. The Bird exception, or any other contract rule which gives a player's current team the monetary advantage of keeping him, is in there for a vital reason.



"The League does want to give teams a return on investment," Coon said. It's important to the health of mid- and small-market teams who developed a player to be able to keep that guy. It helps build the fan base in a

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smaller market and gives a team a chance at continued success. The Bird exception is aimed at doing that and it's been successful at keeping Tim Duncan in San Antonio and Kevin Durant in Oklahoma City, among other examples. In that respect, the League's owners have done just fine in keeping their most important players.

"I think the League has done a great job," Kerr said. "The current system generally ensures that because most players aren't willing to turn down all that extra money and security. If you're a player and you decided to do that and you get hurt, that's a wasted opportunity. Most players aren't willing to take that risk. I know I couldn't do it. [Laughs] I'd be scared to death."

What might scare teams to death would be employing a star player who used his distaste for a franchise tag to form a negative environment in the locker room.

"One of the things you learn by working in an NFL front office — or a front office in any league — is you never want disgruntled players walking around your locker room," Halsell said. "It doesn't lead to a conducive environment for winning. By having a franchise tag in the NFL, you do have players who are disgruntled because they've been franchised."

Feldman doesn't see the franchise tag coming into play for the NBA partially because of the Bird exception's effectiveness. And he feels that a major change in the structure of the NBA would have to take place for a franchise tag to be included in the next CBA.

"I don't think what we've seen happen over the last few months has been enough," Feldman said.

Kerr took a different side, albeit one with some skepticism.

"It could be a compromise because the whole idea of cutting back on guaranteed deals, the length of guaranteed deals, is going to be in play," Kerr said. "I could see some form of that coming into play in the League."

What's likely is that if a franchise tag makes it to the bargaining table, there will be hard lines drawn in the sand from each side about the tag's worthiness. In that case, you can chalk it up as yet another topic both sides view in different ways.

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6 Responses to "A Franchise Tag in the NBA"

[Bryan Crawford](#) Posted: Sep.2 at 1:10 pm

As always, Kyle, very insightful stuff. Great read!

The Philosopher Posted: Sep.2 at 1:11 pm

Great piece.

Jer Boi Posted: Sep.2 at 1:26 pm

Great article really cleared things up.

JTaylor21 Posted: Sep.2 at 1:44 pm

Franchise Tag for the NBA is a really, really, really BAD idea. It would be restrictive to player movements and a deterrent to the free agency process. Of course the owners love this idea because it put even MORE power in their greedy hands and takes away one of the few advantages that players have over teams.

IAMORANGE4EVER Posted: Sep.2 at 1:52 pm

No to the franchise tag. If a franchise truly wants to keep their franchise players, then do whatever it takes to keep them - at least Cleveland tried with LeBron, but can you say Denver did all they could to keep Carmelo? No way...they are the same franchise that gave away Camby for the right to swap second round picks, and some trade exceptions they ended up letting expire...the same franchise that refused to part with Linas Kleiza for Ron Artest, only to watch that asset go overseas and then eventually end up on the Toronto Raptors. Bottom line, don't cut/shed salary to avoid luxury tax (Denver) and then cry when you're franchise player wants to join another franchise that is serious about WINNING.

IAMORANGE4EVER Posted: Sep.2 at 1:55 pm

*YOUR franchise player

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