

Wilker’s Weekly: The NFL Offseason’s best and worst contracts so far

by Graham Wilker
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
graham.wilker@uconn.edu

Best: SAF Jaylinn Hawkins, Baltimore Ravens
3 Years, \$10 million

The Ravens are the subject of some real controversy at the moment, with some fans under the impression that they failed Maxx Crosby’s physical on purpose after realizing Trey Hendrickson wouldn’t cost as much as originally expected. Nonetheless, they’ve had a nice off-season, and Hawkins’ contract might be the best of them all. The ex-Patriot had a career year last season, totaling 71 tackles and four interceptions during the regular season. A breakout at 28 years old, he might have left teams wary of handing him a richer deal, and the Ravens landed a bargain. PFF suggested he’d have a \$15-\$20 million market this offseason, but the Ravens find an upgrade of Ar’Darius Washington for only \$3 million more per season.
Grade: A+

Worst: ED Jaelan Phillips, Carolina Panthers
4 Years, \$120 million

When healthy, Phillips is fantastic. Health has been a rarity in his career, however. He’s played only 63 regular-season games in five years and has played 29 in his last three seasons. He had a modest 5.0 sacks in 2025, and while he’s better than that number shows, a \$30 million pass rusher should be expected to consistently rack up double-digits in the category. He’s never done that. Turning 27 before the season, age is no issue for the pass rusher, but consistency is. The Panthers had a major hole on the edge last season, and while

rookies Nic Scourton and Princely Umanmielen showed signs they could be productive players, adding an alpha was a must for the Panthers. They’ve paid the Miami product like he’s just that, but he hasn’t been that alpha since his 2023 Achilles tear. Grade: D-

Best: RB Kenneth Walker, Kansas City Chiefs
3 Years, \$45 million

The Chiefs needed to upgrade a backfield that featured Kareem Hunt and Isaih Pacheco, and they did exactly that by signing the Super Bowl MVP. Walker had 313 yards and four touchdowns in three playoff games, and, while splitting the backfield with Zach Charbonnet, broke the 1,000-yard threshold. Holders of the No. 9 pick in the NFL Draft, Notre Dame’s Jeremiah Love

was often mocked to the Chiefs, but now, they have the ability to ignore the most replaceable position that early in the draft. The departures of starting cornerbacks Trent McDuffie and Jaylen Watson to the Rams necessitate adding a cornerback, and the draft has several to offer. LSU’s Mansoor Delane and Tennessee’s Jermod McCoy could be the answer for the Chiefs now as they hold their first top 10 selection since 2017, when they selected the league’s most talented quarterback. Grade: A

Worst: WR Alec Pierce, Indianapolis Colts
4 Years, \$114 million

Pierce became the highest-paid free agent wide receiver in history after inking a four-year extension with the Colts. The Patriots reportedly offered him north of \$37 million per season and while his size and deep threat ability would have made him an intriguing target for Drake Maye, his loyalties lied in Indiana. Be it for \$29 million or \$27 million, Pierce is receiving far too big a contract for what he does. He eclipsed the 1,000-yard threshold for the first time in his career last season, and he’s yet to have a 50-catch season. Michael Pittman was traded, leaving Pierce the clear No. 1 wide-out, though Josh Downs is sure to see a healthy dose of targets. The offense will primarily run through Jonathan Taylor and Tyler Warren, but paying nearly \$30 million for a one-trick pony has bust written all over it. I truly feel that this has the potential to go down as one of the worst contracts in NFL history. Grade: F

Best: SAF Kevin Byard, New England Patriots
1 Year, \$9 million

The Patriots allowing Hawkins to leave for such a modest price tag hurts without a doubt, but they made up for it with the signing of Byard. An All-Pro in 2025, the former Bear lead the league in interceptions (7) for the second time, bringing his career total to 36. At 32, it remains to be seen how much elite play he has left, but he’s likely to continue to be one of the league’s best safeties in 2026. Not only was his ‘25 play excellent, but Byard was a part of Vrabel’s teams in Tennessee until the very end. He’s bounced around over the past few seasons, but I’d expect him to end his career playing in New England, be that at the end of the 2026 season or later. Adding an All-Pro safety to a defensive backfield that already features Christian Gonzalez, Carlton Davis, Marcus Jones and Craig Woodson only helps the rich get richer. Grade: A+

Worst: TE Charlie Kolar, L.A. Chargers
3 Years, \$24.5 million

The going rate for blocking tight ends is steep at this point in time, and Kolar is one of the league’s better blockers. Despite his ability in the run game, he has only 30 career catches but signed for north of \$8 million per season. Chig Okonkwo signed a three-year deal worth \$30 million with the Washington Commanders, and he’s caught 164 more passes in that time. I understand the Chargers’ affinity for running the football, but \$8 million yearly for a player who’s never been higher than the TE3 on his depth chart is a steep price. I can see a world where he fits into L.A.’s scheme, but there were better players available at the position for his price. Grade: D

Jaelan Phillips wearing his eagles jersey while on the field. Phillips signed a \$120 million deal with the Panthers. PHOTO COURTESY OF @JJPHILLIPS15 ON INSTAGRAM

WILKER’S WEEKLY: THE NFL OFFSEASON’S BIGGEST WINNERS AND LOSERS SO FAR

by Graham Wilker
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
graham.wilker@uconn.edu

Winner: Las Vegas Raiders

The Raiders came into this week with one of the most hyped young coaches in Klint Kubiak and Fernando Mendoza soon to be on their roster. While that’s a nice starting point, surrounding the IU quarterback with a strong supporting cast was the key to their free agency. So far, they’ve added the class’s top center in Tyler Linderbaum, traded for Taron Johnson, and brought in a pair of former Georgia linebackers in Quay Walker and Nakobe Dean. They also re-signed Eric Stokes, who was quietly one of the league’s better defensive backs in 2025, and managed to trade away Geno Smith for draft capital. Inking Malcolm Koonce also offers them another QB hunter in ‘26. They admittedly committed a lot of money to Jalen Nailor and Kwity Paye, but overpaying early raises a team’s floor. The Ravens shockingly backed out of the Maxx Crosby deal following a failed physical. For better or worse, that does improve the Raiders’ defensive line in the short-term. Don’t be surprised to see fans drink the Raiders Kool-Aid this summer.

Loser: New York Jets

The Jets have made an effort this offseason to patch up their quarterback situation, but their solutions have hardly been inspiring. Aside from still rostering Justin Fields, they traded a late round pick to reunite with Smith. Guards John Simpson and Alijah Vera-Tucker both walked, and they failed to add any meaningful receiving option. They’ve yet to agree to a long-term deal with Breece Hall, either. Defensive addi-

tions David Onyemata (33) and Demario Davis (37) are signings that a competing team might make, not a rebuilding team. Minkah Fitzpatrick could prove to be a star in the defensive backfield with his versatility, and I do like the Dane Belton signing. Kingsley Enagbare and Joseph Ossai are not inspiring edge options, however, and Nahshon Wright was the team’s lone cornerback addition. While he’s a ball hawk, he also allowed 8 touchdowns this season. The NFL Draft will be the time for the Jets to make significant upgrades towards the team’s future, but they set a very old and uninspiring baseline.

Winner: L.A. Rams

Free agency is a time to find immediate fixes for a team’s roster, and the Rams had one major need: cornerback. They sent a package of draft picks centered around the 29th pick

in the 2026 NFL Draft to the Chiefs for Trent McDuffie, who they subsequently paid \$31 million a year. They stuck with the Chiefs theme, signing Jaylen Watson as well. They additionally re-signed standout safety Kam Curl. Emmanuel Forbes will be on the roster next season, but it appears midseason addition Roger McCreary and veteran Akhello Witherspoon will have new homes next season. For a team looking to compete while Matt Stafford is still under center, the Rams have done an excellent job, all while retaining their 13th pick in the upcoming draft.

Loser: L.A. Chargers

The Chargers went into the offseason with some of the most cap space of any team, and they haven’t able to do much with it. Odafe Oweh left for a \$100 million payday, and the team instead opted to retain Khalil Mack on a one-year contract.

Zion Johnson inked a contract with the Browns, and Cole Strange was signed to replace him, a rather significant downgrade. Tyler Biadacz will be a solid center for the duration of his three-year contract, but relying on Strange to one side and Trevor Penning to his other to protect Justin Herbert wouldn’t be an upgrade. Alec Ingold is a nice addition at fullback, and Charlie Kolar went from Harbaugh to Harbaugh after four years with the Ravens. There are some decent moves, but it has thus far been disappointing from the former San Diego squad.

Winner: New York Giants

The Giants have been a way-too-early longshot playoff team for the 2026 season. The Patriots went from a 4-13 record to a Super Bowl appearance thanks to a last place record and exciting young QB, so to think the Giants could make the playoffs

this season isn’t unreasonable. The Giants hired a veteran head coach in John Harbaugh, so it shouldn’t come as a surprise that he brought in some of his own players. Former Ravens Pat Ricard, Isaiah Likely, Ar’Darius Washington, and Jordan Stout were all brought in. Even Jermaine Eluemunor, who entered the league as a fifth-round pick by Harbaugh’s Ravens, was re-signed. Aside from Stout, All-Pro kicker Jason Sanders was signed to replace the constantly injured Graham Gano. Defensive additions Tremaine Edmunds and Greg Newsome are two of my favorite additions across free agency in general. The team saved money with the releases of James Hudson and Bobby Okereke too.

Loser: Cincinnati Bengals

The Bengals’ defense was one of the league’s worst last season, only allowing fewer points than the Cowboys. They’ve made an effort to improve the unit thus far through the additions of Boye Mafe and Bryan Cook, but neither are particularly inspiring adds. Mafe finished 2025 with only two sacks, but earned himself a 3-year deal worth \$60 million. The departure of Trey Hendrickson and Ossai signing with the Jets necessitated an addition, but between Mafe and former first-rounders Shemar Stewart and Myles Murphy, the Bengals top three edge defenders totaled just 8.5 sacks last season. On the back end, paying Cook \$13 million per season isn’t an awe inspiring move, but it does shore up the second safety spot next to Jordan Battle. Without any significant offensive line additions, either, I’d expect the Bengals to once again struggle with the “boring” elements of football in 2026: blocking and defense.



Will McDonald IV from the New York Jets running during a game. McDonald is a defensive end for the team. PHOTO COURTESY OF @NYJETS ON INSTAGRAM