

Final gripes due in labor case

All the legal beagles scurry to Minneapolis Friday for one last shot at puncturing the league's free-agency settlement.

Pack a lunch. Get a ringside seat. For fulmination, indignation and high-toned carping, this one should be a beaut.

Consider the stakes. When and if this agreement gets the final OK, a collective bargaining agreement follows, and life in the NFL through 1999 will be governed by these standards.

Which makes the objections important, even if they're likely to get stomped flat by the NFL, the NFL Players Association and the lawyers who crafted the compromise with Judge David S. Doty not only presiding but pressing.

The arguments against the deal touch on nearly every aspect.

As an antitrust settlement, it perpetuates antitrust violations. As the wellspring of unrestricted free agency, it permits restrictions on free agency. To end suits about player licensing, it creates a monopoly dangerous to the market and harmful to players. It's unlawful, unfair, inadequate, unreasonable.

"Inherently unfair" and "grossly disproportionate" in how it allots damages, says Minneapolis lawyer Earle Kyle, who represents six unhappy players.

"Betrayal," says Suzelle Smith, a Los Angeles lawyer with 12 angry men as clients.



AROUND THE NFL

By Larry Welsman

"If Jimmy Hoffa and Bobby Kennedy were alive, and Hoffa had done this, Kennedy would have chased him to the ends of the earth," says New Orleans lawyer Larry Wiedemann, on behalf of one current and one former player.

Funny how the NFLPA had such a difficult time getting people to put their names on lawsuits to challenge

the NFL and now can't escape those who dislike the outcome.

Only it's not that funny. Why the NFL gets a college draft out of the labor settlement mystifies Wiedemann, whose suit on behalf of New England cornerback Maurice Hurst predates suits filed by such league stars as Reggie White. That named plaintiffs get so much more of the settlement money than the other members in the class action bothers Smith. Even the Philadelphia Eagles, defendants in the suits, object to many areas, not the least of which is how NFL Properties return so much licensing to the NFLPA.

Unfortunately for Doty, nobody is really wrong. Does the settlement best serve most players? So it seems. Does it impose restrictions and impinge upon the rights of some? Yes. Aren't there a lot of side deals in here? Looks that way. Are they illegal? Probably not, in the overall context of this settlement.

Spirited debate can't damage this deal, only improve it.

EXTRA POINTS: Buffalo will be paying nose tackle Jeff Wright \$6 million for four years after agreeing to match San Francisco's offer sheet. Last October, when Wright wanted to sign an extension, his asking price was \$650,000-\$700,000. By the end of November, the number was \$850,000. Now he'll get \$2.7 million in the first year of the new contract. ... The Los Angeles Raiders re-signed free agent fullback Steve Smith to a three-year, \$3.6 million contract. ... Minnesota and Tampa Bay have an interest in Green Bay running back Vince Workman, and Philadelphia is eyeing San Francisco linebacker Tim Harris. ... Mitch Frerotte, a backup at guard and center for Buffalo, visited the Los Angeles Rams and Seattle. ... Notre Dame running back Jerome Bettis visited Denver Tuesday. ... San Francisco 49ers quarterback Joe Montana would like to decide on a new team by this weekend or "definitely between now and the draft (April 25-26)," agent Peter Johnson says. Kansas City remains the front-runner, despite late interest from the Detroit Lions. ... Tampa Bay signed San Diego Chargers restricted free agent safety Darren Carrington to a three-year offer sheet Tuesday. San Diego has a week to match. ... Philadelphia and Phoenix got their official compensation of No. 1 draft choices for the loss of, respectively, Reggie White and Tim McDonald as free agents. The Eagles move into the 13th slot in the round while also picking 22nd. The Cardinals, selecting fourth with their regular choice, will also be No. 20.