

# New football leagues aim to go deep

Launching a year apart, the Alliance of American Football and the XFL place high priority on the quality of the game on the field.

By Liz Mullen

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Photo: ALLIANCE OF AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Despite different business models, launch dates and franchise cities, the Alliance of American Football and the XFL share a common influence: the NFL.

From the experience of the executives, coaches and players they have recruited to the style of football they will play, the two spring leagues recognize that the NFL still may be the ultimate goal for many of their players. Yet they have found ways to differentiate themselves as well.

The XFL may hire players who are fewer than three years removed from high school, the NFL's longtime age limit, opening up the possibility that Vince McMahon's relaunched property could sign star players not available to other football leagues.

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"We are not subject to that three-year rule," XFL Commissioner Oliver Luck said. "There may be a situation where there's a young man in college who has played a year who wants to earn money playing football and needs to earn money playing football."

The XFL will relaunch in 2020, but this year it will begin staffing up, including hiring eight head coach/general managers who will earn about a half-million dollars a year and quarterbacks who could earn upward of a quarter-million dollars, Luck said.

Luck dodged a question about whether the league would hire some of the famous quarterbacks who are available now, such as Colin Kaepernick, Johnny Manziel or Tim Tebow. "All of our players will become famous players by the time the XFL's inaugural season is over," Luck quipped.

As for underclassmen fewer than three years removed from high school, Luck indicated that the league may allow such players into the league in limited situations and they could later go on to play for the NFL.

The American Alliance of Football, meanwhile, the spring football league founded by Charlie Ebersol and Bill Polian, already has hired multiple coaches and general managers and 600 football players in advance of its launch on Feb. 9. Polian has said the league will abide by the three-year rule like the NFL.

Each team has 75 players for the AAF's training camp, which started on Jan. 4. Similar to the NFL, the AAF will have a cut-down to 52 players by Jan. 31, said Polian, who served in both NFL team executive and personnel roles for more than 40 years. Of the 600 players hired, 92 percent have previous NFL or Canadian Football League experience and the "vast majority" of that 92 percent have NFL experience.

The league has hired several players known to NFL fans, including former quarterbacks Christian Hackenberg, Zach Mettenberger and Josh Johnson, who was signed by the Washington Redskins in early December after being picked No. 1 overall in the AAF's quarterback draft.

The AAF's training camp has been held in San Antonio, and Polian said he's surprised by how fast the teams and players clicked. "If you went out to one of our practices, unless you were looking for Andrew Luck or Patrick Mahomes, you wouldn't know it wasn't the NFL," Polian said. "It's NFL practices, with NFL coaches, with NFL-style football."

## STRUCTURE

The XFL and AAF are both single-entity ownership spring leagues, but the structures are different in several respects.

The XFL announced its launch first, in January 2018, followed by the AAF in March. But the AAF was quicker out of the gate not only with its launch date but in signing up NFL personnel executive talent. Executives at both leagues said head coaches would earn \$500,000 a year.

The AAF snapped up many former NFL coaches and general managers with deep ties to NFL agents, who are the conduit to players, starting last spring. Former Browns general manger Phil Savage and former St. Louis Rams general manager Billy Devaney are among the AAF's GMs, and former 49ers head coach Mike Singletary and former Rams head coach Mike Martz are among the coaches.

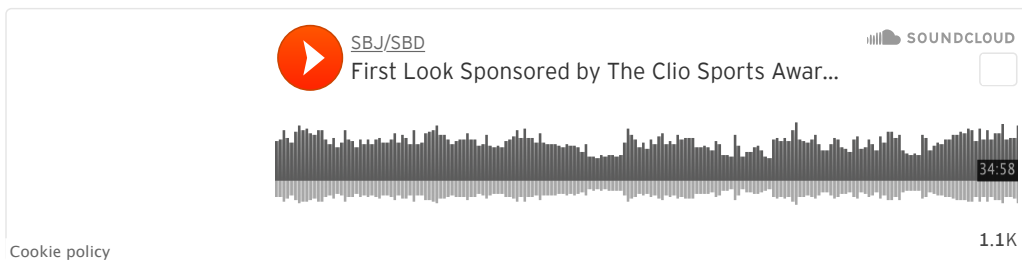
The AAF made headlines by hiring three women as assistant coaches — Jen Welter, Lo Locust and Jennifer King. They were hired by Hines Ward, a former four-time Pro Bowl wide receiver who serves as the AAF's head

of football development.

The AAF is offering players three-year deals worth \$250,000 with the opportunity to earn more — upward of \$100,000 a year — based on individual performance bonuses.

Getting NFL-style quarterbacks was not a problem, Polian said. The one position that was a bit hard to fill was offensive linemen, as many of those available are a tad smaller than the guards and tackles in the NFL, he said.

***First Look podcast, with football leagues discussion at the 11:00 mark:***



The AAF has an out in its contract for any player who gets a “bona fide” offer to join an NFL team. The AAF is a way for them to develop and improve their skills, and NFL scouts have already been attending the AAF’s training camp in San Antonio.

“We have some guys that are going to make it in the NFL in time,” Polian predicted. “We have some guys who are going to go.”

Told that the XFL may be paying some players more, Polian said, “I am not concerned about them. Just think about the structure we have — don’t forget we are up and running, right?”

Veteran NFL agent Harold Lewis placed more than 30 clients in the AAF and the vast majority of them have NFL experience, like quarterback B.J. Daniels, a seventh-round pick in the 2013 NFL draft who played for six NFL teams before being hired by the AAF’s Salt Lake Stallions.

Lewis noted the AAF’s timing is perfect for players to sign with NFL teams. The AAF’s games end before NFL organized team activities begin, which gives players who shine in the new league another shot at the top

league.

“This is going to be a very, very exciting league for what the future brings — not just for the football players on the field, but for the people that are coaching this, the people who are the general managers and pro personnel people. There are some up-and-coming superstars there,” Lewis said.

## STAFFING UP

The XFL made two major announcements late last year regarding staffing — a partnership with Optimum Scouting, a privately owned talent evaluation service focused on football players, and the hiring of Doug Whaley, former Buffalo Bills general manager, as senior vice president of football operations.

The XFL will hire eight head coaches who will act essentially as head coach/general managers. “All the coaches will report to me and I will report to Oliver who will report to Vince,” Whaley said, adding it was a vertical, efficient, streamlined system.



**Former Buffalo Bills general manager Doug Whaley is the XFL's senior vice president of football operations.**

Photo: GETTY IMAGES

Whaley, who spoke with Sports Business Journal in early January, was in the midst of interviewing coaches for the XFL's head coaching/GM positions. “As you know, it's the coaching carousel right now and everybody is trying to find seats,” he said. “So we are in extensive talks with a lot

of people right now.”

Whaley said it was possible the XFL would hire one of the recently displaced head NFL coaches, but it was likely to be a mix of NFL and college coaches. The head coach will have a budget of \$1 million to hire

10 assistant coaches, Luck said.

Optimum Scouting, meanwhile, is doing its work on available players for the XFL. The company was founded by Eric Galko 11 years ago, and has worked for colleges, college players and agents, among other clients.

Asked if there are enough good football players out there after the NFL and other leagues take them, Galko said it's a common question.

"There's always that concern," Galko said. "You watch football on Sunday and some teams look really bad out there and you wonder if there is enough talent for the XFL. ... We are very confident that there's enough talent."

## **QUARTERBACKS**

The XFL's first order of business will be to hire quarterbacks for the eight teams. "Our quarterbacks will be earning upwards of \$250,000 a year," said Luck, the father of Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck.

The XFL also may hire players at a few offensive skill positions, but the quarterback core is the first position the league is looking to lock down, said Luck, who played quarterback at West Virginia University before being taken in the second round of the 1982 NFL draft. He played five years for the Houston Oilers.

"Why quarterbacks first?" Luck asked rhetorically. "I guess that's why you hire a general first. ... The quarterback is you know arguably — maybe not arguably, it's pretty much settled fact — is the key person on a football team. A field general, to continue that analogy."

Luck wouldn't say what the minimum salary would be in the XFL, but unlike the AAF, all players won't be paid the same, regardless of position. Additionally, in the XFL, players will have the opportunity for additional bonuses, based on team wins.

## **Select players from AAF rosters**

Search:

Team ▼	Player	Position	College	Pro
Arizona Hotshots	Tim Cook	RB	Oregon State	Jacksonville*
Arizona Hotshots	Joseph Fauria	TE	UCLA	Detroit, Arizona*, New England*
Arizona Hotshots	Trevor Knight	QB	Texas A&M	Arizona*, Atlanta*
Arizona Hotshots	Will Sutton	DT	Arizona State	Chicago, Minnesota*, San Francisco*
Arizona Hotshots	Scooby Wright	LB	Arizona	Cleveland, Arizona
Atlanta Legends	Stephen Hill	WR	Georgia Tech	N.Y. Jets, Carolina, Toronto
Atlanta Legends	Jeff Luc	LB	Cincinnati	Miami*, New Orleans*, Cincinnati*, NY Jets*, Calgary*, Toronto
Atlanta Legends	Donnie Miles Jr.	DB	North Carolina	Atlanta*
Atlanta Legends	Aaron Murray	QB	Georgia	Kansas City, Arizona*, Philadelphia*, L.A. Rams*
Atlanta Legends	Denard Robinson	RB	Michigan	Jacksonville
Birmingham Iron	Chris Davis	CB	Auburn	San Diego Chargers, San Francisco
Birmingham Iron	Rickey Hatley	DT	Missouri	Buffalo
Birmingham Iron	Trent Richardson	RB	Alabama	Cleveland, Indianapolis, Oakland*, Baltimore*, Saskatchewan
Birmingham Iron	Blake Sims	QB	Alabama	Toronto, Saskatchewan, Wollongong, Atlanta*, Tampa Bay*
Birmingham Iron	Devin Taylor	DE	South Carolina	Detroit, N.Y. Giants
Memphis Express	Christian Hackenberg	QB	Penn State	N.Y. Jets, Oakland*, Philadelphia*, Cincinnati*
Memphis Express	Kenny Hilliard	RB	LSU	Houston*, Washington
Memphis Express	Zach Mettenberger	QB	LSU	Tennessee, San Diego chargers*, Pittsburgh
Memphis Express	Dallas Thomas	G	Tennessee	Miami
Memphis Express	Davis Tull	LB	Chattanooga	New Orleans, Atlanta*, Saskatchewan, L.A. Rams*
Orlando Apollos	Austin Appleby	QB	Florida	Dallas*
Orlando Apollos	Garrett Gilbert	QB	SMU	St. Louis*, New England*, Detroit*, Oakland, Carolina
Orlando Apollos	Jalin Marshall	WR	Ohio State	N.Y. Jets
Orlando Apollos	Jamal Morrow	RB	Washington State	NA
Orlando Apollos	Reggie Northrup II	ILB	Florida State	L.A. Rams*
Salt Lake Stallions	Matt Asiata	RB	Utah	Minnesota, Detroit*
Salt Lake Stallions	Kaelin Clay	WR	Utah	Tampa Bay*, Detroit*, Baltimore, Buffalo, Carolina, N.Y. Giants
Salt Lake Stallions	...	...	...	Houston, San Francisco, Seattle, N.Y.

Salt Lake Stallions	B.J. Daniels	QB	South Florida	Giants*, Chicago*, Atlanta*
Salt Lake Stallions	Jeremiah Poutasi	OL	Utah	Tennessee, Jacksonville, L.A. Rams*, Denver*
Salt Lake Stallions	Trevor Reilly	LB	Utah	N.Y. Jets, New England, Miami
San Antonio Commanders	Demarcus Ayers	WR	Houston	Pittsburgh, New England*, Chicago
San Antonio Commanders	Speedy Noil	WR	Texas A&M	Seattle*
San Antonio Commanders	Zack Sanchez	DB	Oklahoma	Carolina
San Antonio Commanders	Nick Temple	LB	Cincinnati	NA
San Antonio Commanders	Marquise Williams	QB	North Carolina	Green Bay*, Saskatchewan
San Diego Fleet	Michael Bercovici	QB	Arizona State	San Diego/L.A. Chargers*, Arizona*
San Diego Fleet	John Lotulelei	LB	UNLV	Seattle, Jacksonville, Oakland, Dallas*
San Diego Fleet	Tau Lotulelei	LB	UNLV	NA