

49ers

FROM PAGE 6

Aiyuk's contract extension talks, of which we should not expect any imminent resolution given the insane inflation in the wide receiver market.

You can blame Amon-Ra St. Brown (four years, \$120 million) and Justin Jefferson (four years, \$140 million) for contract negotiations between Aiyuk and the Niners looking all the more likely to drag deep into the summer and perhaps even the fall.

But that deal will get done. And in a league with a hard salary cap, and for a team that must budget roughly \$50 million — at least 20% of the cap — for its quarterback after the 2023 season, only so many players can be paid top-of-the-market.

You can only afford so many weapons.

Fred Warner, George Kittle, Nick Bosa, and Trent Williams are all paid at or near the top of their respective positions. Aiyuk will soon be, as well, making more than \$30 million per season. McCaffrey re-set the running back market again, and will likely remain at the top until at least 2026,



The 49ers' Christian McCaffrey celebrates his fourth touchdown of the game with San teammate Deebo Samuel (19) against the Cardinals on October 1.

his age-30 season. Purdy might sign the most annually lucrative contract in NFL history this time next year.

It all adds up to a whole lot of money. And while the NFL's salary cap keeps going up, it's not growing nearly

fast enough to keep up with these kinds of costs. Cuts are going to have to be made. The attrition started

this past offseason, when defensive tackle Arik Armstead was jettisoned. It should be no surprise that McCaffrey and the 49ers came to a new deal in June — Armstead officially came off the Niners' books on the first.

Samuel, who signed a three-year, \$73.5 million extension before the 2022 season, is, unquestionably, next. (And he's unlikely to be alone.)

In fact, it's a bit of a surprise Samuel is still on the team. The 49ers were openly shopping him this past offseason and had serious traction on a trade to send him to the AFC before the draft.

Ultimately, that deal fell apart and the Niners — still hellbent on winning the Super Bowl — opted to keep Samuel for the 2024 season. They're a better team with him.

"It was a thing, at first," Samuel said Tuesday of the trade talk. "But we've moved past it." But it doesn't take a Rhodes scholar to see what happens next. McCaffrey was paid, despite there not being a serious need. Aiyuk will be paid. Purdy is about to secure a — as the cool kids say — bag.

This is the last dance for the now-No. 1. And to the receiver's

credit, he's not pretending that's not the case.

"At the end of the day, the contract was signed, I know what I signed up for, and we're just focused on this year," Samuel said Tuesday.

If Samuel has a big year, he might force the 49ers to reconsider the seemingly inevitable — they can find the money elsewhere on the roster.

At the very least, he'd ensure another large contract is waiting for him on the other side of a release or trade next spring (though any release would carry a post-June 1 designation).

The era of free-wheeling spending is over for the 49ers. A period of austerity is about to come.

And in the meantime, San Francisco is locking up the players they want to carry into this new era. Favorites are being picked; priorities established.

Samuel is part of the 49ers present, but he's not part of the team's future. And he'd be the first to tell you "That's just business."

Cold, ruthless, but ultimately smart business.

And for the 49ers, there's going to be a whole lot more of it in the days, weeks, months, and years to come.

Ward

FROM PAGE 6

it seemed like."

On the other hand, "My lower back started to hurt," Ward said. "Driving a car, sitting in a car for a long period of time, my body would just ache. I'm only in my mid-20s. I felt I was 35 or 40, damn near."

Ward enters the third year of a contract he signed in 2022 worth up to \$42.6 million. With a void year, Ward, a Pro Bowl selection and a second-team All-Pro in 2023, can become a free agent next offseason. He's 28 and at the peak of his playing -- and earning -- power.

The 49ers signed Christian McCaffrey to a two-year extension Tuesday and are working on a deal to extend Brandon Aiyuk. It's unclear where Ward falls in the pecking order, but he's hopeful something can be worked out.

"I'd like to stick around," Ward said. "They love me here. I love it here. Love all the coaches, all my teammates. But I'll let my agent handle it. That's the business side of things. I'm going to go out there and ball and put pressure on 'em, and hopefully, they'll give me a bag."

"If they don't, there won't be any bad blood between me and them. It will just be a business decision. But I'm pretty sure they'd like

to have me, and I'd like to stay."

Ward isn't the only one. Potential free agents following the 2024 season also include cornerback Deommodore Lenoir, left guard Aaron Banks, and two players whose future deals are complicated by injury rehabs: linebacker Dre Greenlaw (Achilles) and safety Talanoa Hufanga (ACL).

With as talented a roster as there is in the NFL, the 49ers may have difficulty putting together the financial jigsaw puzzle.

"I would say there aren't any who are going to be free agents that we don't want around here," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "We've built a good roster. And you can't keep everybody around."

Ward intercepted five passes last season and led the NFL by breaking up 23 more and lamented the ones that got away.

"I could have had almost 10 interceptions last year so I just want to make more plays, try to become more of a leader, more of a talker," Ward said. "I'm kind of the old head of the group now."

Defensive coordinator Nick Sorensen acknowledged Ward's statistical production and physicality, which also didn't appear to drop off despite the core issue.

"He's a really good tackler which is essential in our defense," Sorensen said. "Everyone's got to be able to tackle, run and hit, be vio-

lent. He does that. It's good to see how he got recognition with his PBUs and interceptions. He keeps taking those steps as he matures and becomes that leader."

Ward's offseason has included a trip to South Africa (Zimbabwe, Johannesburg, Cape Town) that changed his perspective. "It taught me to be more grateful and thankful for everything I have," Ward said. "I'm an NFL player, rich as hell, got one of the best jobs in the world but I still kind of stress about small things."

"They don't have much, but their spirit is way up there. I come from poverty, but I come from nothing, and I know I went All-

Pro last year, but I don't want to get too comfortable. It's going to teach me how to grind harder, match what I did last year, and become even better."

A veteran of 17 playoff games, 11 with the Chiefs, Ward started on the 2019 team that beat the 49ers 31-20 and was on the other side of it last Feb. 11, when Kansas City prevailed 25-22 in Las Vegas. He believes the margin to be razor thin, shading toward Chiefs' quarterback Patrick Mahomes.

"They were the better team because they won, but I felt we had a little more talent," Ward said. "They just had the best player in the NFL. They got it done. That's point blank, period."

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

Highlands Mutual Water Company is NOT FOR SALE

Highlands Mutual Water Company
14580 Lakeshore Dr,
Clearlake, CA 95422

June 4, 2024

Editor
Lake County Record-Bee
101 North Main Street
Lakeport, CA 95453

Dear Editor,
We the undersigned would like to submit the following opinion editorial (OPED) for publication in the Record-Bee.

OPED

Highlands Mutual Water Company is NOT FOR SALE.

City of Clearlake officials launched an effort to take over the three water utilities that serve the area, seemingly to subsidize projects for developers. The takeover would require buying the Highlands Mutual Water Company from the community that owns it. To accomplish its goal, the City, in its newsletter and from rhetoric by the city manager, attempts to cast doubt about the integrity of current drinking water quality and infrastructure in our area. Such audacity could prove expensive to the residents served by the Highlands through double taxation by the City and the unwarranted taking of private property to subsidize new development.

Highlands is proud of our 99-year history of providing reliable, high-quality drinking water to Clearlake residents and businesses. We represent the ultimate form of local control because the residents we serve own Highlands. State law makes us a not-for-profit co-op that is allowed to only charge the cost of providing service and upkeep of infrastructure. Contrary to the City's statements, Highlands meets all regulatory standards for safe drinking water and works cooperatively with the other water utilities to assist with wildfires, providing each other with mutual aid and emergency connections. We also have new developers paying for connections to our water services, allowing existing customers to avoid rate increases to accommodate new connections.

We strongly encourage the City to discontinue its efforts and

leave management of our community's water supply to the experts.

However, if Clearlake wants to make its plan work, officials must first create a new tax assessment district to take over the water utilities. This is because California law, under Proposition 218, prohibits the use of other dedicated fees for such an effort. While the City pledges to use state grants and loans to pursue acquisition of the water utilities, it must provide a match and/or have a revenue source to pay back any state loans as well. The City has yet to reveal the new utility tax rate to be assessed on properties. This would be a form of double taxation on Highlands customers, who also own the Company.

Given how the City already struggles to provide adequate services, how can it be trusted with providing safe drinking water? Clearlake has a spotty record of managing government grants. One recent audit cited frequent staff turnover in the City's Finance Department and a lack of internal controls. The city manager was recently praised for lasting five years on the job given the frequent turnover of his predecessors.

California's State Water Resources Control Board maintains a list of water utilities at risk of failure or failing. The list demonstrates that small cities with municipal water utilities outnumber other forms of water utilities at risk of failure, such as special districts, investor-owned utilities and mutual water companies. Contrary to the City's innuendos, Highlands is not "at risk." The City, however, fits the profile of small cities that already struggle to adequately run and maintain municipal water utilities, just as it struggles with the limited services Clearlake already provides.

In its effort to provide fee waivers and subsidies to developers seeking new water services, the City may seek condemnation of Highlands property and water rights. As a mutual water company, Highlands and its customers who own it have property rights for water and property that are used by the utility service. The City does not have sufficient funds to pay the fair market value of Highlands to the residents who own it. But it doesn't matter because Highlands Mutual Water Company IS NOT FOR SALE.

Sincerely,

Highlands Mutual Water Company