

# The Curious Case of Jay Cutler's Contract

By Joe Flaherty

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It is a tall task to quantify Jay Cutler's success as a Chicago Bear. That task has become even taller now that he'll be sidelined for at least the next four weeks with a torn groin.

Another untimely injury has left Cutler unable to prove his worth in the final year of his expiring contract. He has shown flashes of brilliance in Marc Trestman's new offense, but he has never displayed consistent production in Chicago.

But that's not going to stop Cutler from getting near-maximum money to stay in Chicago. There's little reason to believe the Bears will give up on their goal of molding him into a franchise centerpiece even after years of inconclusive evidence.

Cutler's career was on the upswing in 2008 before he left the Denver Broncos. After throwing for nearly 4,500 yards and 25 touchdowns and earning a Pro Bowl invite, he was labeled a cornerstone quarterback the likes of which Chicago has never seen.

Fans were irked by how much the Bears had to give to land Cutler; Kyle Orton, two future first-round picks and a future third-rounder. Cutler's demeanor and blasé attitude didn't earn him many supporters, either. But all would be forgiven if he could eventually lead the Bears to a championship.

But while Cutler has shown flashes of his elite potential, he has been inconsistent.

Initially, he was given a pardon because had no talent to throw to. That was remedied by reuniting him with former teammate Brandon Marshall, and more recently through acquisitions of Alshon Jeffery via the draft and Martellus Bennett through free agency.

The offensive line couldn't keep him upright long enough to through to the receivers he did have, either. In his first two seasons as a Bear he was sacked 87 times, the most in the NFL during that span.

A completely overhauled line featuring four new starters was constructed for the 2013-14 season, and it seemed to be paying dividends.

Cutler was off to one of the best starts of his career, posting nearly identical numbers through the first six games this year (1,630 yards, 12 touchdowns, 6 interceptions) as he had in his Pro Bowl campaign (1,694 yards, 12 touchdowns, 5 interceptions).

But the sacks caught up with him again, this time literally as he suffered his torn groin while going down in the arms of Redskins defensive end Chris Baker. Injuries have caused him to miss eight games during his tenure, and he'll miss at least three more following the team's bye week this Sunday.

Fans may be tired of giving pardons, but the Bears have no viable option to fall back on.

Though they may struggle in Cutler's absence, the team won't collapse and wind up with a top three pick in this year's draft. Hoping to draft Louisville quarterback Teddy Bridgewater, the top quarterback prospect, is nothing but a pipe dream.

Backups Josh McCown and Jordan Palmer are exactly that: backups. And don't expect to find any worthwhile names in free agency this offseason.

The championship window of opportunity is closing fast. Lance Briggs recently turned 33 and will join Cutler on the injured list for the next six weeks. Aging stars Julius

Peppers and Charles Tillman are on the decline and leading a unit that is a shell of its former self, ranking third from last in the NFL in points allowed.

The front office has finally assembled enough firepower on offense, but Cutler may have only six more games to show how well he can work with the team.

Even if the Bears don't see enough out of him to offer him max money, another desperate team will. The Minnesota Vikings, Jacksonville Jaguars, Oakland Raiders and Cleveland Browns would all gladly empty their pockets for an upgrade.

The Bears need to match any offer presented to Cutler to give their team the best chance of winning immediately and to finally give him a fair shake at proving his value. Yes, he's already had five years to do that, but the deck has never been stacked in his favor. The only way to truly assess Cutler's career in this city is to extend it.