

49ers brass blame the team's decline on cap woes and injuries, but others disagree

By Eric Gilmore
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

The clock was winding down late in the fourth quarter of the 49ers' 42-27 loss last Sunday to the Seattle Seahawks, and fans were streaming out of Monster Park.

One man heading toward the exit asked his friend the question that must be on the minds of most 49ers fans about their 1-7 team.

Why did the 49ers get so bad so quickly?

Team owner John York and general manager Terry Donahue have blamed the 49ers' nose dive largely on salary cap woes and injuries.

Donahue, who received a four-year contract extension in September, said he has a plan to escape "this salary cap hell" by 2006. It's a plan that includes taking some nasty-tasting medicine now in terms of cutting high-priced veterans and building with affordable youth.

That's the 49ers' story, and they're sticking to it.

Of course there are other views. A handful of NFL executives and scouts and former 49ers weighed in on the struggles of a team that was in the playoffs just two years ago.

Where to begin?

Well, the 49ers went through so-called salary cap hell in 1999 and 2000 after a run that included the team's fifth Super Bowl championship in 1994 and 15 playoff appearances in 16 seasons.

Former 49ers president Carmen Policy and general manager Dwight Clark took most of the blame for that cap crisis and fall to 4-12 in '99 and 6-10 in 2000. The 49ers called on Bill Walsh, the architect of their dynasty, to help them get back on financial track and do the dirty work as general manager, cutting players such as wide receiver Jerry Rice.

In 2001, the 49ers went 12-4 and returned to the playoffs. Problem solved? Not exactly.

"I think the most frustrating thing for people out there that I talk to is I don't think people understand or ever had it explained to them why they're suddenly in this terrible situation again," said former 49ers center Randy Cross, now an NFL analyst for CBS.

"This was such an atrocity that Carmen and Dwight perpetrated upon the 49er kingdom, and it would never happen again. The interesting thing is, it's nobody's fault there. To me it's nothing more than really, really sad."

ESPN's Chris Mortensen may have shed some light on the 49ers' plight last Sunday when he said they had a "shoestring budget disguised as salary cap woes," a charge Donahue vehemently denied.

Donahue, however, often talks about the \$28 million in cap space that goes to "dead money" this year for players no longer with the team. That's \$28 million out of the \$80.6 million limit.

So-called dead money appears when a team cuts or trades a player before his contract expires. The rest of that player's prorated signing bonus immediately counts against the salary cap.

"What people seem to forget is we're not talking about cash, we're talking about an accounting system," said one former NFL executive, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Even though you have dead money, you don't pay them their salaries, which could amount to God knows how much.

"You might have some dead money, but you don't have any cash out of pocket. You've already paid the signing bonuses."

When the 49ers cut quarterback Jeff Garcia after the 2003 season, for example, they took a salary cap hit of \$10.3 million. But his \$10 million salary for 2004 disappeared, too, saving York big bucks.

York spent \$26.9 million in signing bonuses after last season on players such as cornerback Ahmed Plummer, running back Kevan Barlow and tight end Eric Johnson.

But the only 49er receiving a seven-figure base salary this year, according to the NFL Players Association's Web site, is injured linebacker Julian Peterson, the team's designated exclusive franchise player.

How does that compare with the rest of the NFC West teams? The Seattle Seahawks have 17 players receiving seven-figure base salaries this year. The Arizona Cardinals have 15. The St. Louis Rams have six.

"The last two years we've had the lowest player (compensation) in the league," Donahue said. "Because we had the highest for so long. The old saying, what goes up, must come down.

"We'll come out of that as soon as we get our cap in order. We're almost out of it now. Although it's been a very painful process, we're almost out of it."

According to Donahue, the 49ers spent \$69 million over the salary cap from 1994-2002, thanks to various bonuses. The last two years they've spent "roughly \$30 million" under the cap figure in actual cash.

"Next year we have to be under the cap again, (but) it won't be like this," Donahue said.

One former 49er, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the team's problems start with York and his wife, Denise DeBartolo York. He criticized them for their frugal ways and their inability to make the team's dream of a new stadium -- the key to earning much-needed extra revenue for signing free agents in the NFL -- a reality.

"They're treating the Bay Area fans like they're stupid, unsophisticated," the former player said. "In actuality, it's the most sophisticated market.

"People aren't going to stand for it anymore. They're cheap, they've had bad drafts and they've made excuses. ... We've had this same plan for seven years. What's changed? Nothing. It's all just I don't know what it is. It's disinformation. I guess they think the Bay Area people are stupid."

Donahue countered that York isn't cheap, pointing to the nearly \$27 million he spent to re-sign free agents this year. Donahue, though, also said that York is at a financial disadvantage because the 49ers play in one of the NFL's oldest stadiums and lack the revenue streams that teams with new stadiums enjoy.

"We don't have a stadium that allows us to be in a consistently profitable situation as an organization," Donahue said. "We have to get a stadium deal done in order to do the things financially we need to get done.

"In the meantime, we've got to do a great job of drafting. We have to do an outstanding job of coaching. We've got to get some (affordable) free agents that can come in and be productive, like a Travis Kirschke."

Former New Orleans Saints general manager Randy Mueller said teams with "very frugal" owners can succeed. He cited the Rooney family in Pittsburgh and Tennessee Titans owner Bud Adams as two examples.

"You can't say that formula doesn't work," Mueller said. "Others have proved that it has. You just have to make sure you're acquiring talent along the way."

That's the rub, one veteran NFC scout said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

He said the 49ers' problems go beyond salary cap constraints. He pointed to mediocre drafts and bad personnel decisions. He also pointed a finger at Donahue, a former UCLA coach.

"He's a coach and has no (personnel) background," the scout said. "They have nobody who grinds the country and can find the gems.

"I think Donahue is getting a free pass. It's salary cap this, salary cap that. He's a coach. He's not a personnel guy. ... In this business, I just look at who the personnel people are. People like me out on the road, we know who knows talent."

Donahue spent 20 seasons as UCLA's head coach and three years with CBS as a college football analyst before becoming the 49ers' director of player personnel in 1999 under Walsh. Donahue replaced Walsh as general manager in May 2001.

"Certainly I have more years in coaching than in personnel, but I've been in the NFL in personnel for six years," Donahue said. "The reality of it is, when you're in coaching, you're also working in personnel, directly or indirectly. The two are different, but you have to classify them as first cousins."

Donahue has made the 49ers' draft-day calls since 2002. The results are mixed at best.

Only four of 10 picks from the 2002 draft remain on the 49ers' roster: cornerback Mike Rumph (first round), linebacker Saleem Rasheed (third), guard Eric Heitmann (seventh) and tackle/guard Kyle Kosier (seventh). Rumph was starting before suffering a season-ending injury. Kosier and Heitmann are starters.

Two members of the 49ers' 2003 draft class are starting: defensive tackle Anthony Adams and wide receiver Brandon Lloyd. But top pick Kwame Harris lost his starting job at left tackle because of injuries and poor play.

Guard Justin Smiley and cornerback Shawntae Spencer, a pair of 2004 second-rounders, are starting -- Spencer is an emergency fill-in. Rookie Andy Lee, a sixth-round pick, is the 49ers' punter.

But wide receiver Rashaun Woods, the team's No. 1 pick, has barely played.

Donahue, though, does have his supporters in the league. Tennessee Titans general manager Floyd Reese said Donahue has the 49ers headed "in the right direction" in terms of rebuilding the team.

"Are they where they want to be?" Reese asked. "No, not yet. I think Terry is the style of guy, he knows how to do it. He knows it's going to take time. He's in it for the long haul. It will end up working."

Little has worked out well for the 49ers this season. They've been devastated by injuries to players such as Peterson, Rumph, center Jeremy Newberry, Plummer and quarterback Tim Rattay. Add that to the mass exodus of high-priced veterans, including Garcia, wide receiver Terrell Owens and left tackle Derrick Deese, and it's easy to understand the 1-7 record.

"It's not Camelot anymore," one AFC general manager said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "You have a rookie quarterback for all intents and purposes. Now, over time, he can get better.

"That's where it all starts. But there's your problem with Camelot. Who are you going to compare him to? The last three (quarterbacks) were multiple Pro Bowlers and two reside in Canton."

Actually, Joe Montana is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame and Steve Young is expected to join him in Canton next year. Garcia made three NFC Pro Bowl teams.

According to Cross, the level of talent on the team is "probably decent" if every player is 100 percent healthy. The former NFL executive called the 49ers a .500 team if completely healthy.

"They just don't have any flash now," the NFC scout said. "This thing has gone down so fast. I don't know what York's thinking."

About the only constant for the 49ers recently has been change, another reason for their free fall.

York fired coach Steve Mariucci after the 2002 season even though he led the 49ers to back-to-back playoff berths. The 49ers hired Dennis Erickson, a coach with no connection to the Walsh coaching tree.

This year, the 49ers parted ways with their two biggest offensive weapons, Garcia and Owens and a long list of veterans. In the 49ers' defense, the volatile Owens had become a locker room cancer. Keeping him was not a realistic option.

"This system is all about acquiring players and making those investments pay in the long haul," Mueller said. "When you change course in midstream on a contract, there are ramifications."

Some teams, apparently, deal with salary cap rules better than others. The 49ers appeared to be getting their financial house in order after purging high-priced players in 1999 and 2000. Now they're complaining about salary cap hell again.

"All it really takes nowadays is one or two bad deals," Cross said. "It doesn't take too many airballs to put you in a hell of a hole."

The 49ers' quick return to the playoffs helped create more salary cap problems, the former NFL executive said.

"Now all of a sudden some of those young guys want to have contract extensions for big, big bucks," he said.

In 2001, Donahue signed Garcia to a six-year, \$36 million deal.

According to Donahue, the 49ers never completely escaped their salary cap problems before their two-year resurgence.

"We began taking our medicine a little bit ... but what happened to us is that Jeff Garcia emerged as a Pro Bowl quarterback," Donahue said.

"We went 12-4 and 10-6. We decided to go for it again. We decided we're close. We gave Garcia a big contract. We extended guys like (Fred) Beasley, Newberry, Garrison Hearst. We went out and got Ron Stone. We went for it again. We didn't make it, but once we went for it again, the ship was about to sink."

Donahue's so-called new plan to fix the 49ers' salary cap problems is "almost identical" to the old plan the team unveiled in 1999, the former NFL executive said.

The 49ers started cutting high-priced veterans and adding affordable young players in '99.

"Mariucci and his staff put a smile on their faces and coached up a lot of young (players)," he said. "The next year they were a little better. The next year they got in the playoffs."

In other words, it's *deja vu* all over again.

"You make decisions along the way that put you in these predicaments," Mueller said. "The difference in this case is that (when this happened) before they had a Super Bowl or two and you could say, 'This is what it cost us.' It was easier to sell."