

Packers' Russ Ball plays hardball with a heart

What's it like to sit across the bargaining table from Russ Ball, the Packers' vice president of football administration/player finance? NFL agents pull back the curtain and explain the art of dealing with Green Bay's chief negotiator and salary-cap savant.

By Michael Cohen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Ever since the arrival of general manager Ted Thompson, who assumed his post in 2005, fans of the Green Bay Packers have developed a twisted sense of enjoyment surrounding the advent of free agency each spring. Banded by snark, they revel in the annual chance to lob scripted volleys at Thompson's passivity on the open market, a core tenet of his draft-and-develop philosophy.

The irony of such apoplexy is that Thompson plays an absentee role in the actual negotiation of contracts, both with his own players and those from other teams. Aside from establishing financial parameters, during which he is a crucial figure, Thompson keeps his distance from ongoing discussions. He has, according to league sources and Thompson himself, almost no direct contact with agents.

Instead, the executor of Thompson's frugality is Russ Ball, the vice president of football administration/player finance for the Packers — better known as the team's chief negotiator and salary-cap savant.

"I think there's an extraordinary amount of trust, and the trust factor certainly rears its head in this particular case," Thompson said in an interview last week. "I think (my approach) is a little bit more hands-off. I think the combination of Russ sweet-talking them and me not saying anything is a good combination."

Ball, 57, is the most influential person in the organization whom the public knows the least information about. He has been barred from speaking to the media since his arrival in 2008 from New Orleans, where he managed the salary cap and handled contract negotiations as vice president of football administration. The Packers declined to make Ball available for this story, citing the longstanding policy.

But interviews with nearly a dozen agents — all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity — pulled back the curtain on how Ball does business, from his genial personality to his accommodating approach to negotiations. Representatives said they

admire his unwavering fairness, and more than one described Ball as being among their favorite people in the league.

Their remarks mirrored everything Ball's older brother, Randy, heard during his own football journey from college coaching to the United Football League and, eventually, to his current role as a pro scouting assistant for the Kansas City Chiefs.

"It was so interesting to talk to all the agents," Randy Ball said, "and every one of them would bring up how good a guy my brother is and how much they love dealing with him. Then they would bring up how tight he is sometimes. I told them the problem is he thinks that's his money instead of the Packers' money. He treats it like it's his.

"I've had agent after agent tell me how good a job he did negotiating with them and how mad they got at him. But they couldn't stay mad at him because he was such a good guy."

So consider the following a user's guide to negotiating with the Packers, and by extension Russ Ball. This is everything you need to know explained by the agents who've lived it many times.

Know the opponent

Just as teams around the league are identified by offensive and defensive philosophies, agents with enough experience can recognize organizational tendencies from one negotiation to the next. Each front office has its own contractual footprint, so to speak, and it behooves the deal seekers to understand their quirks.

"You only get that feel from being around the league long enough to know the negotiator at each team," said one agent who has worked with Ball for decades.

When it comes to the Packers, who have had the same pairing of general manager and contract negotiator since 2008, agents identified several tendencies that have become synonymous with the organization. They are the non-negotiables of every negotiation, and those who are most successful will have anticipated them from the start.

It begins with weathering the low-ball storm.

"Russ will typically reach out first and have a conversation and just say, 'Hey, we're interested in seeing if we can do something with so and so,'" said one agent who has secured multiple long-term deals with the Packers. "Then he'll send an email and it will always be a low offer. Always."

What follows is a very real, if often overlooked, educational process for players negotiating with the Packers for the first time. With rare exceptions, players have no direct involvement in the actual negotiations until a contract is ready to be signed. They are forced to rely on patience and the communicative skills of their representatives.

As such, more than one agent said the organization's preference to slow play contract talks — sticking to a low offer until the very last minute — can be difficult for some players to endure, especially as other teams around the league complete their deals at a faster pace.

“A lot of players talk a tough game but they can be very weak at the negotiation table,” an agent said. “That's the art of being an agent I guess is working with both the club and your client and making sure your client allows you to do your job.

“(Russ) has his convictions, which is great and fine, but you just know from experience that you have to weather the early low offer.”

The particulars of modern-day negotiations often center on guaranteed money, and in this regard the Packers are among the most rigid teams in the league: Since Ball's arrival, the Packers have flat-out refused to guarantee base salaries for future years of veteran contracts, according to an agent who has done numerous deals with the team.

Consider the four-year, \$41 million extension given to defensive end Mike Daniels late in the 2015 season. The only guaranteed money was a \$12 million signing bonus deposited into Daniels' account the day he signed the contract.

Next consider the five-year, \$60 million deal the Packers inked with outside linebacker Nick Perry earlier this spring. Perry's only guaranteed money was an \$18.5 million signing bonus.

By contrast, when right guard T.J. Lang signed a three-year, \$28.5 million contract with the Detroit Lions, he had his salary fully guaranteed for the next two seasons in addition to an \$8 million signing bonus. In total, the contract was shorter than deals extended to Daniels or Perry but still contained more guaranteed money (\$19 million).

While there have been several exceptions in which the Packers guaranteed roster bonuses in future years, the last veteran who had his base salary guaranteed beyond year one was defensive back Charles Woodson. His seven-year, \$39 million deal signed in 2006 included a base salary of \$1.25 million for the second year, \$1 million of which was guaranteed.

At that point, Ball was still working for the Saints.

“With any veteran contracts they are the team in the NFL that you will get some signing bonus from them, and that's of course guaranteed, but the Packers will not guarantee future years of salary,” an agent said. “That's the one kind of trait that they've created that is absolutely unique to them.”

Instead, the Packers litter their veteran contracts with incentives that protect the team. These incentives take the form of workout bonuses, which require players to appear at

Lambeau Field on pre-determined dates during the offseason, and roster bonuses, which require players to be on the Packers' roster at certain points throughout the year.

The Packers also have set a precedent when it comes to the minimum salary benefit applicable to veteran players, according to a longtime agent. By design, the rule allows teams to sign players with at least four accrued seasons to minimum contracts with reduced salary-cap charges. Regardless of how many seasons the veteran has played, the team only absorbs the cap hit of a second-year player.

All contracts under the minimum salary benefit must be one-year deals and can include up to \$80,000 in bonus money, which the Packers never distribute.

“The Packers just don't do that,” an agent said. “They don't want to put in the \$80,000. It doesn't matter to them that everyone else does it without a fight. They just have a way of doing things and they kind of stick to that plan.”

Friendly face

Many of the contracts signed during free agency have origins at the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis, where the decision makers for every team stuff a handful of downtown hotels. It is both the unofficial start to free agency and the largest collection of league power each year.

Scattered among the prospect interviews and workout footage that saturate television coverage are meetings between contract negotiators and agents. Legal meetings consist of agents talking with personnel men for the team employing their client. Discussions can focus on players whose contracts are about to expire, or the two sides can meet for a yearly status report of how the organization views a particular player.

(There also are illegal meetings that consist of agents sitting down with other teams because their client is set to become a free agent, but that's another story.)

Several agents said they meet with Ball nearly every year in Indianapolis, and some have standing annual appointments. They convene over coffee in the lobbies of the JW Marriott or The Westin — some teams will invite agents to a hotel suite instead — and shoot the breeze before addressing any pertinent business.

“It's a yearly thing where you sit down, you have a cup of coffee and you kind of come to the realization that you're dealing with a person here and not just some (expletive) whose money you're trying steal,” an agent said.

Agents pointed to Ball's demeanor during combine meetings as evidence of why they respect and admire his approach to the job. In a business where friendships often are discouraged, Ball spends as much time learning about the person across the table as he does discussing brass tacks.

Ball, whose daughter attends Duke, is known to commiserate with fellow agents about the rising costs of college tuition. He has shared his Christian faith on occasion and is quite knowledgeable about world events. He often references past conversations to demonstrate listening skills.

“What’s great about him — and maybe he’s a great note taker — he always remembers,” an agent said. “He’s like, ‘Oh, your son is doing this and doing that.’ I think he has that ability to relate and to learn about people on a personal level.”

Said another agent: “I’ve always liked Russ. . . . You could have a genuine personal relationship with him. It wasn’t just strictly business, which I enjoy.”

Said a third: “Very professional, and I would say somewhat caring relative to some of the other people out there in the league. . . . He’s just a really good person.”

State your case

The modern negotiating table is mostly metaphorical, with smoke-filled boardrooms and scotch on the rocks left antiquated by smart phones and laptops. Gone, for the most part, are face-to-face showdowns reminiscent of courthouse dramas, and in their place are texts and emails that give negotiating a distinctly non-verbal component.

“I go back to colleges and law schools and I always lecture on this stuff,” an agent said. “People think you show up and it’s all in person and you sit in a room and some guy is smoking a cigar, everybody is up in their face yelling and screaming. Maybe that’s happening, it just hasn’t happened with me yet.”

Instead, the outline of a contract might be hashed out over the phone and the particulars sent back and forth via spreadsheet with adjustable figures. The agent, who always signs the deal first, will do so with an emailed copy. The player, who signs it second, will receive a FedEx version in the mail if he isn’t in Green Bay at the time an agreement is reached.

“Did you ever see the movie ‘Jerry Maguire’?” an agent said. “Toward the end when they finally decide they want to make a proposal for Cuba Gooding Jr.’s character, they send a fax that has the outline of the contract. Once you finally say, ‘Hey, make me a proposal,’ one of the two groups will send something that looks very similar to that.”

To reach that point and arrive at a veritable “Show me the money!” moment, agents traverse what they describe as a fair and honest negotiation process with Ball, one that is predicated on an equal exchange of information.

Though it begins with the awkwardness of a high school dance — “Everybody is hesitant to go first,” an agent said — the eventual first step is a detailed discussion of the client that agents liken to a status report. Ball, who serves as a conduit to the coaching staff and personnel department during negotiations, relays the latest X’s and O’s evaluation of

each particular player. He uses this breakdown as justification for whatever contract(s) the Packers offer.

Feedback ranges from unpleasantly honest to warmly reassuring, and every verdict is softened by Ball's trademark tact.

"It's hard for us as agents because a lot of times the way the team is operating is very much behind the curtain," an agent said. "So we're not privy to what their thoughts are, what their philosophy is, where your client fits into what they're doing scheme-wise, roster-wise, etc. So when you have someone that's willing to open the kimono a little bit and tell you these things about your player and why he makes sense for them and why the numbers are where they're at, that lends itself in my opinion to a good working relationship."

Said another agent: "Dealing with him, you don't feel slimy like you can in some negotiations. You get a pretty honest opinion of what the organization thinks of your guy, which kind of tends to make the agent make a reasonable sales pitch based upon why a player should get what he's getting. They're not a big organization with regard to hey, you hit them high and they'll hit you low and you meet in the middle. You pretty much have to really justify why you're asking for what you're asking when talking to Russ about a contract."

Where Ball differs from many of his contemporaries is the open-mindedness with which he approaches each negotiation, according to multiple agents. After Ball shares the organization's reasoning for certain structures or financial terms, he invites agents to make sales pitches of their own.

What follows is an earnest discussion of the market, from comparable players around the league to an examination of price points set during free agency. To say that Ball rewards preparedness would be incorrect — there is no direct correlation between amount of research and favorable contract offers — but he certainly has been swayed at times, according to multiple agents. More than one described it as a fair exchange of information.

"He doesn't feel like he has to win every argument," an agent said. "A lot of times you get the sense that the team feels it has to win at everything. Russ wants to do a fair deal, what he sees as a fair deal for both sides. I think he will admit if he's undervalued the market after an initial offer."

"A lot of times in negotiations there is a take-it-or-leave-it nature, and you just don't get that sense with Russ," another agent said. "He's going to hear your counterpoints and take them into consideration. It doesn't mean he's always going to agree or act on them, but I do get a strong sense that Russ listens. I think that's big."

He continued: "Then Russ likes to make sure it's in concert with Ted. You hear Ted's name a lot in these negotiations. I'm not sure if I always buy that Ted has got that strong

of an opinion when it comes to contract structures and actual dollars, but you certainly do hear Ted's name a lot in these negotiations.”

The collaborative approach to negotiations has been known to trigger creative contract structures. Perry's deal, for example, came with a low cap number of \$6 million for the 2017 season, and larger cap chargers will be absorbed later as the cap is expected to rise.

When the Packers rewarded quarterback Aaron Rodgers with a five-year, \$110 million extension in 2013, they included a massive \$35 million signing bonus that would be prorated over the length of the deal. In doing so they minimized cap hits and afforded themselves additional flexibility to surround Rodgers with expensive talent. Unlike many teams, the Packers have been largely unencumbered by an enormous quarterback contract.

“It takes two to tango,” an agent said, “so you have to have someone on the other side of the phone that is willing to get creative and willing to hear ideas that are outside the box because many teams aren't.”

Tough love

When Ball worked for the Chiefs in the 1990s, his parents, Craig and Bobbi, convinced their sons to join them in splitting a vacation home on Lake of the Ozarks in their native Missouri. The three boys — Russ, Randy and Rick — still bring their families together for annual trips.

But Russ Ball is known to bring his work, too, and both older brothers recall watching Russ duck outside to negotiate contracts between OTAs and training camp. He winced over every detail or concession, even on vacation.

“It was just killing him,” Randy Ball said. “It would take all summer and drag it out, kind of ruin your summer if you're a negotiator like that.”

The story reinforces what agents have come to realize about Ball — that despite his jovial disposition, he approaches each negotiation as if his wallet were footing the bill. He is hard on issues but soft on people, according to one agent, and will draw lines in the sand if he needs to protect the team.

“I like Russ a lot,” the agent said. “He's one of my favorite people in the business. ... But don't mistake friendly and outgoing for being a pushover. He's a damn good negotiator.”

Disagreements are inevitable, but the mutual respect never wanes.

“He knows the art of the deal, so to speak,” Thompson said. “He has the ability to kind of look down the road and see the different moves that might be made to get the deal done.

“There’s not a lot of people that are telling truths during negotiating times, and I think in our case we have one of the few that might be telling the truth.”