

Kickers on the Move

by Mike Herman, exclusive to Footballguys.com

Less than a third of the way through the year, the NFL kicking landscape has already undergone quite a few changes. Following is a recap of what has transpired so far.

Not Going Anywhere

Four players that could have become free agents did not, as their teams retained their services. The Oakland Raiders gave [Sebastian Janikowski](#) a new lucrative four-year deal which made him the highest paid kicker in the league. That escalated the going rate for established kickers and likely influenced the Seattle Seahawks and the Pittsburgh Steelers, both of whom then placed the franchise tag on their veteran kickers. [Olindo Mare](#) signed his tender last month and [Jeff Reed](#) signed his earlier this week. The San Francisco 49ers re-signed [Shane Andrus](#), who kicked in the final game last year, filling in for the ailing Ricky Schmitt who was filling in for the ailing Joe Nedney. Andrus will presumably serve as a camp leg behind Joe Nedney and Andy Lee.

The Next Chapter

As we previously highlighted, [Jason Elam](#) retired after signing a one day pre-retirement contract with Denver.

No Competition

Of the kickers that changed teams via free agency, only [Jay Feely](#) is assured the job at this juncture. In New York the Jets had signed Nick Folk at a bargain price and then did not come to terms on re-signing Feely. In Arizona, the Cardinals did not come to terms on re-signing Neil Rackers. The Cards replaced one veteran kicker with another veteran kicker, and Feely will be the kicker on opening day in September.

Competitors

[Neil Rackers](#) meanwhile landed in Houston. [Kris Brown](#) struggled last year and head coach Gary Kubiak subsequently indicated kicking competition would be brought in early this year. After Rackers and the Cardinals could not come to terms on a new contract, Rackers opted to compete for the Texans job rather than pursuing other options that were out there. Houston will have a highly unusual kicking competition, in that both competitors have a decade of NFL experience.

[Nick Folk](#) underwent hip surgery the previous off-season and then struggled to make kicks in 2009, leading the Dallas Cowboys to release him before the season ended. The New York Jets signed Folk prior to the free agency period. The Jets and Folk are hoping he'll return to his pre-surgery accuracy levels. The team may not be sold on that being a certainty, as they were scheduled to meet with Neil Rackers until Houston snatched him up. Folk could still face competition for the job, possibly from Clint Stitser, or from someone yet to be signed.



Last year the Baltimore Ravens opted to go with [Steve Hauschka](#), the heir apparent to Matt Stover. However he missed a few kicks and was cut after nine games. Hauschka was signed by Atlanta late last year when starter [Matt Bryant](#) was questionable to play due to an injury. This year Hauschka will challenge Bryant for the Falcons kicking job.

[Justin Medlock](#) got the quick axe from the Kansas City Chiefs during his rookie season in 2007. Last year he went to Canada and demonstrated that he's a good kicker while playing for the Toronto Argonauts in the CFL. Medlock will compete against second year player [Graham Gano](#), whom the Redskins signed for the final four games of 2009 after bailing on Shaun Suisham.

In 2008, [Dave Rayner](#) filled in briefly when Shayne Graham was ailing. In 2009, he lost out in the preseason to Shaun Suisham for the Washington Redskins kicking job. Now a free agent, Graham ended his Bengals career on a down note, missing two kicks in the wildcard playoff loss last year. Rayner was signed by Cincinnati during the off-season and will presumably compete against someone for the Bengals job... we just don't know who yet.

The Long Shots

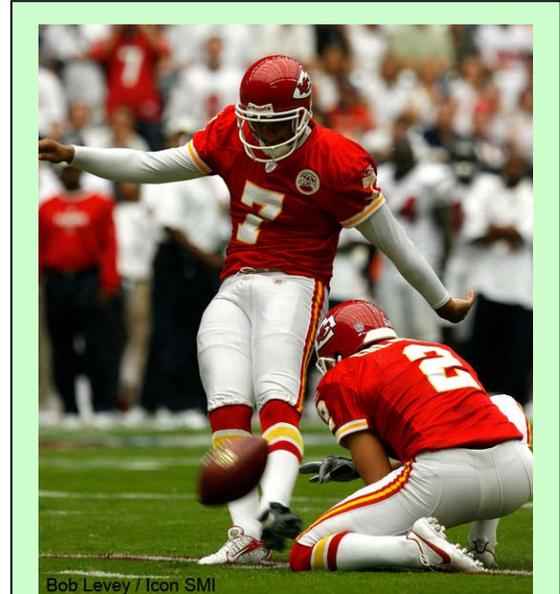
Three players are dark horse candidates, depending primarily on how the kicker ahead of them on the depth chart performs. [Connor Hughes](#), who played for the Philadelphia Soul in the AFL in 2008, was signed by Dallas. The Cowboys "Plan A" is to expand kickoff specialist [David Buehler](#)'s role to include placekicking, under the tutelage of recently hired kicking consultant [Chris Boniol](#). If that doesn't work out, then Hughes could be "Plan B". In New York, if Nick Folk doesn't regain his 2008 form, that could open the door for [Clint Stitser](#) (Fresno State, 2004-07) with the Jets. Also in New York, kicker Lawrence Tynes does not have a firm lock on the starting job. If he struggles, that could open the door on the other side of the new stadium for [Sam Swank](#) (Wake Forest, 2005-08).

Kickoff Specialists and Camp Legs

Kickoff specialist [Rhys Lloyd](#) was the first kicker to be signed during free agency this year, landing with the Minnesota Vikings. His former team, the Carolina Panthers, recently filled that same role with [Todd Carter](#). Two players signed to serve as camp legs are [Ricky Schmitt](#) by Tennessee and [Swayze Waters](#) (Alabama-Birmingham, 2005-08) by Oakland.

Free Agents

Still available on the free agent market are [John Carney](#) (presently kicking consultant for New Orleans), [Matt Stover](#) (will be selective about if/where he returns), [Shayne Graham](#), [Mike Nugent](#), and [Shaun Suisham](#).



Bob Levey / Icon SMI

Justin Medlock, 2007



John Sommers II / Icon SMI

Dave Rayner, 2007