

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

## After years of pricey free agent busts, Jets reverse trend with D.J. Reed

By Rich Cimini  
ESPNNewYork.com



Cornerback D.J. Reed has helped the Jets defense keep in check some of the best receivers in the game, like the Vikings' Justin Jefferson.

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. -- The [New York Jets](#) went into free agency in March with money to burn and several holes to fill. That can be a dangerous combination for losing teams in the NFL, so they scribbled "focus points" on a whiteboard in their war room -- three reminders to help them find the right players amid the bidding madness:

1. Love of game
2. Durability
3. What do they bring to help us win? Upgrade?

The Jets wound up doling out \$93 million in fully guaranteed contracts, the fifth-highest amount last offseason, according to *Over the Cap*, a website that tracks NFL teams' spending and salary cap space. Most of it went to five players, none more important than cornerback [D.J. Reed](#), one of the keys to their defensive turnaround. The Jets, ranked 32nd in yards allowed last season, have skyrocketed to third (301.2 YPG), in large part because of Reed and rookie [Sauce Gardner](#) at corner.

They acquired Gardner the old-fashioned way, via the draft (fourth overall pick). To find Reed, the Jets had to venture into a historically unwelcoming area, a place where they have blown tens of millions of dollars on overrated players who never panned out.

Free agency.

This is the franchise that paid \$28 million in guarantees to running back Le'Veon Bell, who gave them only 17 games and four touchdowns before getting cut in the middle of his second season (2020). It's also the franchise that handed \$34 million in 2018 to cornerback Trumaine Johnson, who lasted only two years (17 games) and once got benched for violating team rules.

If the draft is a crapshoot, free agency is an expensive crapshoot -- and the Jets' investments usually go the way of cryptocurrency. But they altered the trend this year, placing an emphasis on intangibles like football character -- i.e. "love of the game." That led them to Reed, who is so into the job that he walks the hallways of the facility studying game video on his tablet. Hey, it's a long walk from the meeting room to the locker room, and that's two minutes in his day he doesn't want to waste.

Coach Robert Saleh said the goal in free agency is to sign "guys who aren't going to take the money and run, because you know what he stands for. That's such a big part of the entire free agency process because when players get to that payday sometimes -- not to say they shut it down, but they just kind of take a deep breath. D.J. is not one of those guys, which is why you're comfortable giving guys like that free agent deals."

The Jets signed Reed to a three-year, \$33 million contract, including \$18 million guaranteed. His \$11 million AAV ranks 18th among cornerbacks, prompting *Over the Cap* to name him the league's top free agent signing for 2022.

"He's an outstanding player, he's an outstanding person," former [San Francisco 49ers](#) teammate Richard Sherman told ESPN. "He plays like a giant. He's all over the place. His effort -- his tenacity -- is unmatched."

Overshadowed by Gardner, an emerging star, the diminutive Reed (5-foot-9) has played at a high level at right cornerback. Targeted 60 times, he has allowed only 34 receptions as the nearest defender, yielding only 9.6 yards per catch, according to NFL Next Gen Stats. He has covered some of the

game's top receivers, most recently [Stefon Diggs \(Buffalo Bills\)](#) and [Justin Jefferson \(Minnesota Vikings\)](#), and his only blemish against them was a 10-yard touchdown pass to Jefferson.

Afterward, Reed said of Jefferson, "I was in his s--- all game. He got that one route on me." That sparked a social-media reaction from Jefferson, who didn't agree. Bottom line: The Jets -- mostly Reed and Gardner -- held Jefferson and Diggs to a combined 10 catches for 82 yards and a touchdown.

"I definitely want to be the best at my position," Reed said. "In order to do that, you have to go against the best guys in the league. I feel like, especially this year, the receivers we've been playing have been phenomenal."

The Jets' front office had insider knowledge of Reed because he was coached by Saleh in San Francisco in 2018 and 2019, his first two seasons before moving on to the [Seattle Seahawks](#). Naturally, general manager Joe Douglas solicited Saleh's input during the evaluation process, though the Jets cull intel from a variety of league sources.

This was a prime example of synergy between the coaching staff and front office, which hasn't always happened in previous regimes. The classic example: Former coach Adam Gase lobbied against the signing of Bell, but was overruled by former GM Mike Maccagnan, who was fired two months later.

Saleh knew Reed as a fearless competitor who was forced to play out of position in San Francisco.

"I screwed that one up because we tried to make D.J. a nickel free safety," said Saleh, formerly the 49ers' defensive coordinator. "Credit to Seattle. They put him at corner, and he's flourished at that position, but the mindset's still there -- the tenacity, the intensity, the strain, all of it is still there. He's really found his home at the corner in that right spot, and I'm thankful he's here."

Reed certainly has lived up to item No. 2 on the checklist -- durability -- as he has missed only one defensive snap in 13 games. Battling chest congestion, he took himself out of the Minnesota game for a play so he could catch his breath.

The other major players in the Jets' 2022 free agent class also have avoided the injury bug. Tight end [C.J. Uzomah](#) has missed one game; guard [Laken Tomlinson](#), safety [Jordan Whitehead](#) and tight end [Tyler Conklin](#) haven't missed any games. They all signed contracts in the \$7 million-13 million range per year -- pricey, but not outrageous.

In terms of bang for the buck, the Jets are getting solid production out of Tomlinson (ranked 20th out of 61 qualified guards in ESPN's pass block win rate metric), Conklin (second on the team with 45 receptions) and Whitehead (72 tackles, two interceptions). Uzomah has disappointed in the passing game (15 receptions), as he's being used mainly as a blocker. There's nothing wrong with that, except a \$15 million guarantee is a lot for a blocking tight end.

Free agency is risky. The Jets know the pitfalls better than most, but they have found a long-term solution to a perennial problem with Reed at corner.

"He's brought mentality, he's brought talent," defensive coordinator Jeff Ulbrich said. "He's brought us a corner that we have a ton of trust in to cover anybody."