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Peter King > MONDAY MORNING QB

Chris Canty must be sick to his stomach. He was on a roller coaster all weekend.

There is enough rule breaking in the free-agency chase to write three books, but I can tell you that the time on the screen of my MacBook Air was 12:00:06 (six seconds after midnight) when the phone rang in the Back Bay condo of agent Brad Blank Friday morning. I was in the upscale downtown Boston neighborhood with Blank, and on the other end of the phone was Washington vice president of player personnel **Vinny Cerrato**. The subject was Blank's client, defensive end Chris Canty, who'd been a free agent for all of six seconds.

"Hey, Brad," Cerrato said, eschewing pleasantries, "I need to get what you're thinking of numbers-wise so I can go in and talk to [owner] **Dan [Snyder]** and see if it fits us."

"It's eight, Vinny, and I don't really care how it's structured if we get to eight," Blank said, meaning \$8 million per year for a four-, five-, six- or seven-year contract. "You know the deal. I'd like to get him somewhere on a plane tomorrow. You interested?"

"Let me get back to you," Cerrato said, and just like that he was gone.

In his living room, Blank, the preppy 48-year-old former Brown roommate of **John F. Kennedy Jr.**, alternated between ESPN and NFL Network on the TV as free agency dawned. On a legal pad he had sketched out the teams he felt were the best shot for Canty. In order, they were:

1. Washington, 2. Tennessee, 3. San Francisco, 4. Seattle, 5. Denver, 6. Dallas, 7. Miami, 8. Green Bay, 9. New York Giants.

The ideal trip, Blank thought, would be Friday in Washington, Saturday in Tennessee and Monday in Seattle. Washington wouldn't be interested if the 'Skins signed defensive tackle **Albert Haynesworth**, the prize of the crop. And Blank waited. And Canty, sitting home in Charlotte, waited. And his dad, **Joe**, who was going to take the recruiting trips with his son, waited.

And nothing.

At the scouting combine the previous week, when it's supposed to be against NFL rules for teams to have discussions with agents for soon-to-be free agents, Blank had spoken to a number of teams about Canty, a 6-7 defensive end in a 3-4 defense who some teams thought could play defensive tackle in the 4-3. The teams, ostensibly, were feeling out the agents, and vice versa, about what level of compensation the player might get and



Defensive lineman Chris Canty started 50 games in four seasons with the Cowboys.

Greg Nelson/SI

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what other teams might be interested.

One of the parties interested in Canty was Washington. Blank thought San Francisco, Tennessee and Seattle would also want in. There were others. Teams are smart enough not to blatantly offer contracts at the combine, but some of them come close. In this case, Blank made it clear to anyone asking that he expected the money to come in between \$6 million and \$8 million a year, hopefully closer to eight.

"Football is a game of supply and demand," Blank said. "Chris is a 3-4 end and a lot of teams are going to the 3-4, and there aren't enough good ends out there. So he should be in demand."

1:08 a.m.: Cerrato rang to ask if Canty would come in for a visit later that day. "Does he like basketball?" Cerrato said. "The Wizards are in town playing Chicago. I think **Obama's** going to the game."

He likes basketball, Blank said, but more to the point, Blank asked if all the rumors were true about the Redskins and Haynesworth.

"We're out," said Cerrato. "He's too expensive."

"Do our numbers make sense?" Blank asked.

Pause. One second, maybe two seconds. "I'll get Eric [negotiator **Eric Schaffer**] with you in the morning," Cerrato said.

Hmmmm. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. But Cerrato said the Redskins would send a private plane to pick up Chris and Joe Canty at the Charlotte airport at 1 p.m., and he'd get back to him with details.

Blank called Canty. "How you doing, Chris?" Blank said.

"On pins and needles, Brad," Canty said.

"We're doing fine," Blank said. "I'm getting conflicting reports on Haynesworth and whether they'll sign him. But they're going to send a plane for you tomorrow. That's enough of a gesture to me that you should make the trip."

"Is there any way they could sign both Chris and Haynesworth?" Joe asked.

"No, I wouldn't think so," Blank said.

"Is \$8 million going to be the best we can do?" Chris inquired.

"I don't know," Blank said. "I'd press for more, but you never know."

In the next 15 minutes, Blank was in touch with Seattle, Tennessee and San Francisco, and all seemed interested, but not frothing at the mouth. They clearly didn't want to encourage Blank to think they'd be in the market to pay \$8 million a year for a good run defender with little pass-rush impact in the 3-4.

"What's the price of admission?" San Francisco director of football operations **Paraag Marathe** asked at 1:33 a.m..

"Eight million," Blank said.

"Be in touch," Marathe said.

At 1:42, Cerrato called back with the tail number of the Redskins plane. "N10RZ," he said.

"N10RZ," Blank repeated. "I've scheduled three other trips, but it's in your hands."

"Eric will call you tomorrow," Cerrato said. He still hadn't said one word about what he thought of Canty as a player, or whether the Redskins would work hard to close the deal.

Blank informed the Cantys about the flight to Washington at 1 p.m. "Hopefully Tennessee after that, then Seattle Monday, then who knows?" Blank said.

To which Chris Canty said: "I'm feeling better about this. Hey Brad, you think you can leverage one offer against the other?"

Blank said he didn't know, and he suggested Canty get some sleep. Blank went to bed around 4 a.m., feeling good about Canty's chance to get an offer Friday afternoon.

Now, Blank has had some bad days in the business. Friday and Saturday were right up there with them. He had 10 voice-mails, five from Cerrato, when he woke up around 9:30.

"BradcallmeVinny."

"BradcallmeVinny."

And then he heard it from a voice-mailer: Haynesworth had signed with the Redskins. As Cerrato explained to Blank that morning, Schaffer told Cerrato of Haynesworth's demands at the start of the night, just after midnight, and after some back and forth (Cerrato said agent **Chad Speck** was talking about a contract in the

neighborhood for six years and \$100 million, and the guarantees and averages were unacceptable to Washington), Cerrato said the Redskins were out of it. And so he had no qualms telling Blank at 1:08 a.m. that they were out of it.

("I felt awful about it," Cerrato said Sunday afternoon. "We were out of it with Haynesworth, then around 2:30, Chad Speck calls back, and his demands are different, and so we started talking again. I like Brad, and I felt bad about it, but things changed.")

Now Blank had to prop up the market for Canty. He called Tennessee GM **Mike Reinfeldt** and was astonished to hear the words: "We're not interested." So the first two teams on Blank's list had vanished. The Giants scheduled a Saturday visit with Canty, and they would be interested in him as a hybrid tackle-end, but Blank also knew they were seeing Seattle defensive tackle **Rocky Bernard**.

Then Seattle lost some motivation by signing Green Bay defensive tackle **Colin Cole**. The the Giants signed Bernard.

Uh-oh.

Blank thought: My God. We may have to go back to Dallas for a year or two, at \$6 million per. But the Giants said they still were interested, and Green Bay called back to schedule a Monday visit. By Sunday afternoon, with his client in New York, Blank was seeing momentum toward a contract; he didn't want Canty to get on a plane to Green Bay because his experience in the business told him that if the kid got on the plane, the Giants offer could vanish in a New York minute.

The Giants got to six years, \$41 million. That's it, they said; if you don't want it, good luck on your trip to Green Bay.

Blank called Canty, who was in the Giants offices in New Jersey. "You've got to draw the line somewhere," Canty said, "and I want to draw it at \$7 million a year. That's what we get, or I go to Green Bay."

And that's what they got. They got the extra million. All in a weekend's worth of chicken for Blank and his new, rich client, who would have liked to have been richer, but was euphoric Sunday night for his windfall.

"You play with fire sometimes," Blank said Sunday night, "and sometimes you get burned. I needed the Redskins. They pay people, and they pay people quick. It didn't work out with them, and I know I'll be second-guessed, but I did what I thought I had to do to get the biggest contract I could. You can't ignore the team you think is going to pay you the most money. But isn't it amazing? The last team on my list the other night is the team he ends up with. That's what happens in this business."

Canty signed the deal (six years, \$42 million, including an \$8.5-million signing bonus), finished his visit Sunday afternoon and went to JFK Airport. A snowstorm delayed his departure until today -- he hopes. So there was Canty, on his first night as an incredibly wealthy man, sitting in the JFK Holiday Inn.

"I can't get the smile off my face," he said. "I'm ecstatic. It was a wild ride, but I ended up in the best place for me."