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## LB Barton leaves Raiders for Jets

By Bill Soliday, STAFF WRITER

The Raiders lost a defensive starter for the second day in a row Saturday when linebacker Eric Barton signed a free-agent contract with the New York Jets.

Barton, the Raiders' weakside linebacker, was the team's leading tackler last season with 131. He also led the team in tackles in 2002 and recorded nearly two dozen tackles at or behind the line of scrimmage.

After making \$875,000 last season, Barton signed a contract that reportedly will pay him \$9.8 million over the next three years. Included was a \$4 million signing bonus and \$1.5 million roster bonuses in March of 2005 and 2006.

On Friday, defensive tackle Roderick Coleman became an Atlanta Falcon after agreeing to a six-year, free-agent deal that included a \$10 million signing bonus. Coleman had led the Raiders in sacks each of the past two seasons.



vs SAN ANTONIO SPURS  
Monday, March 15

Barton and Coleman were fifth-round draft choices by the Raiders in 1999. Both were under contract through the 2005 season but were able to void their deals on March 3 and become free agents.

The loss of Barton leaves the Raiders with only one of the three linebackers who opened the 2003 season as starters -- 2002 first-round pick Napoleon Harris.

Earlier, starting strongside linebacker Bill Romanowski was released after failing a team physical.

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Inasmuch as the team plans to play more four-linebacker defense in 2004, the Raiders find themselves understaffed at the position.

The only linebackers remaining on their roster, aside from Harris, are Travian Smith and Tim Johnson. Smith started the season as a situation substitution on pass-rushing downs but then became a starter on the strongside when Romanowski was lost for the season after Game 3 because of post-concussion syndrome.

Smith started seven games but followed Romanowski onto the injured list when he suffered a season-ending torn knee ligament. At that point, the team brought back Johnson -- who had been released in preseason -- and he started four games at middle linebacker when Harris was shifted to the strongside.

How the Raiders figured to line up this year under new defensive coordinator Rob Ryan has been open to speculation -- speculation that is even more open to interpretation.

In recent years, the team has chosen to go into the season with a limited crew of linebackers -- usually five. But if they are to play more 3-4 defense it is clear they would be in the market for linebackers this off-season.

One possibility currently on the roster is Sam Williams, who missed nearly all his rookie season in 2003 because of a knee injury. He was drafted as a defensive end, having bulked up from his college weight of 245 to 262.

There are a number of free-agent linebackers available including Philadelphia's Carlos Emmons and the New York Giants' Dhani Jones. Emmons was a major player for the Eagles until breaking his leg in the 15th game of the season and missing the playoffs.

Others on the market: Detroit's smallish Barrett Green (225 pounds), Denver's Ian Gold (who replaced Romanowski when the latter joined the Raiders in 2002), and the Giants' Brandon Short (an inside linebacker).

Pittsburgh Steelers star Jason Gildon is rumored to be on the way out and could be a possibility.

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