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## **Challenging the System: NFL Collusion and the Elway Case**

In 1979, Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis began making efforts to move his club to a more lucrative market in Los Angeles, California. In 1983 the National Football League (NFL) attempted to restrict this move and Davis took the league to court and won a \$37 million antitrust suit. At the same time, Stanford All-American quarterback John Elway was drafted by the Baltimore Colts and was eventually traded to the Denver Broncos. Elway's refusal to sign with the Colts led to the NFL officials making concerted efforts to keep the Stanford All-American from the Raiders. This paper analyzes the forces that led to the collusion among NFL owners to keep John Elway from the Los Angeles Raiders. Three themes will serve to guide the narrative: Elway's refusal to sign with the Colts; the rise of the United States Football League (USFL) and subsequent bidding war for players; and the NFL owners' efforts to keep Elway from the Los Angeles Raiders.

At the forefront were the NFL owners' desires to exclude Davis from the Elway lottery. The 1983 draft occurred two weeks after Davis won his lawsuit against the league. The Raiders' owner constructed a multiplayer deal with the Chicago Bears that would have made a trade offer to Colts too hard to resist. But league officials intervened and blocked the trade. Simultaneously, the rise of the USFL resulted in a bidding war for both college and veteran players. Signing stars like Herschel Walker and Brian Sipe led the NFL owners to an all out effort to keep Elway in the NFL's employ and away from Davis. Research on the Elway case has been virtually nonexistent. There are a few popular sources that provide a page or two to the Elway case. A combination of secondary sources, newspaper accounts, and sporting periodicals will be used to reconstruct events and examine the NFL's collusive behavior.

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