



Bengals, Levi Jones agree on \$40 million extension

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When the Cincinnati Bengals used the 10th overall choice in the 2002 lottery to select left offensive tackle Levi Jones, the pick was roundly criticized by draft pundits.

But it was Jones who got the last laugh Tuesday afternoon, reaching agreement with the Bengals on a six-year contract extension that moves the four-year veteran into a salary class which reflects his emergence as one of the league's emerging standouts at his position.



The deal is worth slightly in excess of \$40 million and includes \$16.3 million in guarantees. In terms of so-called "new money," it makes Jones the fourth highest-paid offensive lineman in the NFL and the highest-paid blocker who has never been to a Pro Bowl game.

Negotiations between the Bengals and agent Kenny Zuckerman had been ongoing for a good portion of the off season, but were markedly accelerated in recent days. Jones was entering the final season of his original five-year contract in Cincinnati, and would have been eligible for unrestricted free agency next spring if the two sides had not struck the accord.

Jones, 26, became a starter in his rookie season after a standout career at Arizona State, and has started in 61 of his 63 regular-season appearances. He had a streak of 59 straight starts snapped in the season finale last year. Regarded as one of the NFL's premier pass protectors, his play has helped Carson Palmer grow into an elite quarterback, and Jones has also progressed as a run blocker.

Securing a deal with Jones was key for the Bengals, since three of their other starting linemen are in the final season of their respective contracts. That group includes Pro Bowl right tackle Willie Anderson, standout left guard Eric Steinbach and center Rich Braham. The Bengals earlier this spring signed right guard Bobbie Williams to a three-year extension.

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