

A GREAT RUN

Sanders says he'll retire

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — Barry Sanders is quitting football despite the near certainty of becoming the NFL's career rushing leader this season.

"My desire to exit the game is greater than my desire to remain in it. I have searched my heart through and through and feel comfortable with this decision," Sanders said in a statement Wednesday.

The Detroit Lions running back arrived in London Wednesday on a flight from Detroit and said at Gatwick Airport, "I'm going into retirement and I don't see my plans changing."

Asked why he came to London, Sanders said, "I don't know the right way to retire. This is just my way of doing it."

The 31-year-old star said he would spend a couple days in London before going to Amsterdam and Paris.

A Lions spokesman said general manager Chuck Schmidt had been in contact with Sanders' agents. Sanders retired without speaking to Detroit coach Bobby Ross or anyone else on the team but said he leaves "on good terms with everyone in the organization."

At a news conference this afternoon, Ross refused to speculate on why Sanders retired.

"Obviously, we're very, very disappointed because we lose a great player," Ross said.

"It's a huge hole missing right now," wide receiver Johnnie Morton said at practice today. "I think we're in a shock state of mind."

Sanders will be put on the Lions' reserve list after notifying the club of his retirement. An NFL spokeswoman said he can be activated any time this season until Dec. 5. If he joins the team before then, he can play in the playoffs.

"I wish he would have given a hint," quarterback Charlie Batch said. "I'm sure the doors aren't closed. ... He's got a lot of good years left in him."

Sanders would be in position for a return because he stays in top shape whether he is working out with the team or not. Those who know Sanders regard him as a man of his word, and unlikely to waver once he makes a major decision.

"From what I know about Barry, when he makes up his mind, he makes up his mind," Ross said.

Attempts by his agents to talk him out of retiring have been as futile as a defender trying to arm-tackle him.

"I am not involved in a salary dispute of any kind," Sanders said. "If I had played this season, I would have earned a more than satisfactory salary."

Sanders was a training-camp holdout in 1989, 1991 and 1997, all related to contract negotiations. He has played two years on a six-year, \$36 million contract.

Sanders is only 1,458 yards shy of breaking Walter Payton's NFL career rushing record. One of Sanders' agents, David Ware, said the prospect of the record was not enough to change his client's mind.

"Individual accolades have never been the things that motivated Barry," Ware told WWJ radio in Detroit today. "Money has never been something that motivated Barry."

Sanders rushed for 1,491 yards last season, ending a streak of four consecutive 1,500 yard seasons.

"Shortly after the end of last season, I felt that I probably would not return for the 1999-2000 season," he said. "I also felt that I should take as much time as possible to sort through my feelings and make sure that my feelings were backed with conviction."

Speculation about Sanders' reasons for leaving include the Lions' 5-11 finish last season, Ross' temperamental personality and local media reaction when it became known he was contemplating retirement. Also, Sanders supposedly questions the Lions' commitment to winning.

"I know at times, it was frustrating for him," Morton said.

In his statement, Sanders had only praise for the team and its management.

"I truly will miss playing for the Lions," he said. "I consider the Lions' players, coaches, staff, management and fans my family. I leave on good terms with everyone in the organization. I have enjoyed playing for two great head coaches, Wayne Fontes and Bobby Ross, who are good coaches and leaders."

During Sanders' 10 seasons in Detroit, the Lions had a 78-82 regular-season record and made the playoffs five times, winning one playoff game. Detroit had two 5-11 seasons sandwiched around a 9-7 record in 1997 that earned a wild-card spot.

"Football is still a game; we're talking about this man's life," tight end Walter Rasby said.

"It'll be a distraction to some people but it'll tighten us up as a team. I'm glad I got my jersey signed (by Sanders) last year."

