



Cardinals fans and players are looking to QB Kurt Warner to lead the team that hasn't been to the playoffs since 1998. "I haven't been in this place for awhile," Warner said, "to feel like I'm kind of the commander-in-chief of this team, as opposed to having to look over my shoulder and wondering how soon they are going to replace me."

Back on top of NFL? Cards' Warner pushing for third MVP

By Jarrett Bell, USA TODAY
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By Mark J. Rebilas, US Presswire

Cardinals QB Kurt Warner said the team's designation of Matt Leinart as its starter during the offseason never deterred him from winning the No. 1 job. "(Coach Ken Whisenhunt) basically said to me ... 'Just because Matt's been named the starter now doesn't mean he'll be the starter in Game 1,'" Warner said. "So that was refreshing. What I did last year wasn't taken for granted."

TEMPE, Ariz. — In some ways, it's like 1999 all over again for [Kurt Warner](#).

The Arizona Cardinals quarterback once more ranks at the top of the NFL passing charts, putting up 300-yard games at a record-threatening pace to help propel a once-downtrodden franchise into the thick of the playoff picture.

This seems so familiar. In 1999, Warner burst on the scene with the St. Louis Rams and won the first of two league MVP awards (the second came in 2001), en route to a Super Bowl crown.

Now at 37, he is enjoying a revival. While there are long odds that this season will end with a championship, the Cardinals (7-4) are on the brink of winning the franchise's first division title since 1975. With a victory at the Philadelphia Eagles on Thursday night (8:15 ET, NFL Network), Arizona would clinch the NFC West crown.

Warner can etch himself deeper into the NFL record book. With a 300-yard outing against the Eagles, he would tie a league record he shares with Steve Young and Rich Gannon for hitting that mark in six consecutive games.

"It's been awhile since I've been in a situation where I have the type of pieces around me, to be able to play the game the way I like to play it," says Warner, referring to talented receivers and a wide-open offense reminiscent of the scheme dubbed "The Greatest Show on Turf" that he flourished in with the Rams. "It makes it a lot more fun."

"Then you contrast that with where I've been the past four or five years, and that adds to the excitement of the game for me. I haven't been in this place for a while, to feel like I'm kind of the commander-in-chief of this team, as opposed to having to look over my shoulder and wondering how soon they are going to replace me."

Warner was once cast as an accidental superstar. His opportunity to start for the Rams came after Trent Green suffered a season-ending knee injury in a preseason game, and his unlikely route from Northern Iowa included stops in the Arena Football League and as a grocery store stocker. That underdog component was an appealing hook to Warner's story, proof that not every Super Bowl MVP has a first-round pedigree.

Now he's a comeback story. Warner is in the conversation as a candidate for what would be a third MVP award — tying the record held by Brett Favre. This after fizzling with the Rams, making a pit stop with the New York Giants and perhaps being previously viewed by some as an afterthought with the Cardinals.

Warner was "frustrated and disappointed" when Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt declared at the start of the offseason that Matt Leinart, the first-round pick in 2006 who was the starter last season until getting hurt, was No. 1 on the depth chart.

Beats out Leinart

Warner, in his 11th NFL season, knows too well how the quarterback-of-the-future tends to push guys like him to the sideline. He was replaced in St. Louis by Marc Bulger. Then after landing with the Giants in 2004, he was benched after nine starts that season as rookie Eli Manning, the No. 1 pick overall, took the reins.

But this case was different.

"The first time we talked about it after he said that," Warner says of Whisenhunt's offseason choice of Leinart, "he said it's still going to be a competition. He basically said to me ... 'Just because Matt's been named the starter now doesn't mean he'll be the starter in Game 1.' So that was refreshing. What I did last year wasn't taken for granted."

Warner won the camp competition and has played his way back to prominence. Throwing to targets that include arguably the NFL's best receiving duo in Anquan Boldin and Larry Fitzgerald, Warner finished Sunday as the league's leader for completions (302) and passing yards (3,506), while throwing a league-high 433 passes.

The Cardinals have passed on more than 62% of their snaps this season, in part because it has been an efficient means to an end. Warner ranks second in the NFL with a 102.4 passer rating and 21 TD passes and is third with a 69.7% completion rate.

'CONTROLLED CHAOS' AT HOME

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Kurt Warner knows how hairy it can be running a no-huddle offense in the midst of a high-pressure NFL game. It hardly compares to having seven kids at home. Warner and his wife, Brenda, quarterback a full squad, ages four to 19. "We call it controlled chaos," says Warner. "We always know what's going on, but at the same time we never know what's going on. It makes the weeks very busy, especially during the season, going in different directions. But at the same time it takes your mind off the game of football and some of the pressures of the game that are nice to get away from."

After Friday's practice, Warner bolted with Brenda to the elementary school where their seven-year-old daughter, Jada, was singing in a Thanksgiving program. He planned to sneak in the back of the cafeteria, to avoid being a distraction.

"It's nice to not always be an NFL player, but to be Dad," Warner said. "And she always wants Dad to be there, so I'm on my way." The Warners have instituted a plan to help juggle the rigors of a busy football season and the need for one-on-one time for the kids. Except for the two youngest kids, the Warners allow each of the others to choose a road game to attend. It means some quality time with Brenda and well, dinner with dad the night before the game.

"Our kids don't get a lot of one-on-one time at home, so that's a way to get separated from the controlled chaos," Warner says.

"It's become a tradition the kids look forward to." -- Jarrett Bell

"Play in and play out, situationally he's making better decisions, choosing when's the time to take a chance," says Todd Haley, Arizona's offensive coordinator. "That's hard, because he's aggressive. And you don't ever want to take that stinger away from him."

Last season — when he was used off the bench in the first few games to run no-huddle packages in an unconventional platoon, then started the final 11 games after Leinart suffered a broken collarbone — Warner was responsible for 23 turnovers. He threw 17 interceptions and lost six fumbles, which fueled criticism that he was skittish in the pocket and was hampered by hands weakened by injuries.

Protecting the football is still an issue. Warner has thrown eight picks this season, but in addition to an interception during a 37-29 loss to the Giants on Sunday, Warner lost his sixth fumble of the season against New York.

"Obviously, he has trouble with that because guys get good rushes and hit his hand," said Giants left end Justin Tuck, who chopped the ball out of Warner's hand. "But I don't know if that's his problem or if guys are getting real lucky with him."

Cardinals coaches hardly consider all of the turnovers as flukes. The day after last season ended, Haley told Warner, "It can't stay the same." He was talking about turnovers.

Coaches, using drills on the practice field to complement their message, mandated three keys for Warner:

- Keep both hands on the ball in the pocket.

- Move in the pocket, stepping up or sliding to avoid the rush.
- Get rid of the ball quickly.

"It's a process," says Whisenhunt, in his second year as coach after serving as the Pittsburgh Steelers offensive coordinator. "And I think that having to compete for the job really made him work on that. Even now, 11 weeks into the season, they work on the drills."

In addition to Warner's consistent accuracy, his coaches have been impressed by his willingness to implement tweaks in his game at this stage of his career.

"His anticipation might be the most impressive thing about the way he's playing," says Boldin, who missed two games after suffering head injuries but still leads the league with 11 receiving TDs. "There are so many times when he throws the ball before I've even made my cut, and when I turn it's there on the spot."

'Having fun again'

It is such skill that Gannon, now a CBS NFL analyst, appreciates most about Warner's game. He says the techniques — including the touch and accuracy on passes and footwork in the pocket — have keyed Warner's comeback.

"It's the body of work," Gannon says. "As a quarterback, it's the little things that you appreciate. There are plenty of guys who can throw it through a wall. But it's not about how hard you can throw it. It's where you throw it. The difference between putting the ball on the back shoulder vs. placing it for the receiver to catch it upfield while running in stride can be 30 yards."

Still, as impressively as Warner has handled the nuts-and-bolts of the job, Gannon senses how emotionally satisfying this season might be for Warner.

"He's part of something special with the Cardinals," Gannon says. "He's having fun again, having an impact on a franchise trying to turn it around after so many years of frustration."

Warner won't disagree. As much as he experienced in establishing himself as a rags-to-riches NFL success story, he's gained a fresh outlook this season.

"I don't think I ever took anything for granted," Warner says. "But when you go through three years, especially like the beginning of my career in St. Louis when that becomes the expectation every year, and then go through some lean years, you gain a whole new perspective on how difficult it is to win."

Days such as Sunday — when Warner was sacked once but was constantly badgered and hit by New York's rush — provide further reminders.

"I'll probably be sore for a couple of days," Warner said.

There was a silver lining to a loss that was underscored by glaring breakdowns on special teams and several self-inflicted blunders. The Cardinals moved the ball consistently, amassing 371 yards. Warner had his lowest passer rating of the season (79.9) but still left quite the impression with 351 yards on 52 passes.

"I'm tired," Tuck said afterward. "Passing teams give you the opportunity for sacks, but your legs get dead in the fourth quarter. You've got to really lace up your shoes against those types of teams. I'd rather play a smash-mouth team."