

Memo to Cardinals: Don't pass on chance to start Warner

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I can't tell you which quarterback the Arizona Cardinals will roll out as their opening day starter, but I can tell you which quarterback they should.

Kurt Warner.



Warner and Leinart give the Cardinals two strong options. (US Presswire)

And here's why: The Cardinals have -- I can't believe I'm writing this -- a chance to compete for a division title this season, and Kurt Warner gives them their best chance.

He's accurate. He's productive. He's poised. Best of all, he's proven.

I'm not talking only about his experiences with St. Louis, when he led the Rams to two Super Bowls in three years. I'm talking about last year with the Cardinals, when he stepped in after Matt Leinart bowed out with a season-ending injury and drove the team to an 8-8 finish.

Big deal, huh? Well, yeah, in Arizona, it is. The Cardinals hadn't been through a non-losing season since 1998. In fact, before 2007, 11 of their previous 12 years were losing

seasons.

So along comes Warner to throw 27 touchdowns, resuscitate the franchise and give Arizona hope that, yes, maybe you can reach the playoffs more than once every 25 years.

Now let's make one thing clear before moving on: This is not an indictment of Leinart. I liked the guy at Southern California, and I still believe he can have a productive career with Arizona. But there have been a couple of ... how should we put this? ... detours along the way that make you wonder if he's ready to take over.

I know Warner is.

Of course, much depends on what happens this summer, too. The Cardinals long ago pledged allegiance to Leinart, saying he's their starter this year, and frankly, that's what they should have done. It allows them to sit back and watch how he behaves with his teammates, the organization and the team's fans looking to him.

In short, it allows them to see how he accepts the role as a starter.

That's great. But then let's watch what happens in training camp -- particularly exhibition games. Because if Warner's performances are in the same zip code, I tell Leinart to take a seat.

Remember, Warner is the returning starter. So Leinart must win the job, and to do that he better score a decisive victory. Anything close goes to the incumbent.

That doesn't mean I see Warner as Arizona's quarterback now and for the rest of his career. I simply said I would tilt toward him in the opener because I believe he gives Arizona its best chance for success.

But I also believe it could be the best solution for the long term, and let me explain. Let's say you choose Leinart as your starter, as the Cardinals are saying now, and he flops. That means you send him to the bench, call on Warner to mop up a disappointing season and risk damaging Leinart's psyche.

That's not good.

But if you start Warner you are sticking with the quarterback who won three of your final five the season before, was in charge of the league's fourth-ranked passing attack and threw for a league-best 484 yards in one game.

In other words, you're sticking with success.

But if he flops, you have an easy decision. You call on Leinart and let him go. There are no risks because there's no going back. You stick with Leinart, and Warner becomes an expensive clipboard holder, simple as that.

If you're forced to sit Leinart, however, you know at some point you're going to have to turn to him again. And then you can't be sure what you're getting.

I don't know what coach Ken Whisenhunt is thinking, but I do know he has been impressed by Leinart's behavior this spring, saying he thinks he's "more focused" than he has been in the past and is determined to assume the responsibility as Arizona's starter.

Good. He should. The Cardinals paid him a lot of money to feel that way. But unless he's lights-out this summer I'd give him a seat behind Warner for the season opener and tell him to pay attention.

Warner is the consummate pro, and, yeah, I admit I thought he was washed up when he left the New York Giants. But he's not. In fact, he's still one of the league's top passers.

You saw it last season. So did I. And it couldn't have escaped the attention of Whisenhunt.

The team responded to Warner, and Warner responded to the opportunity. So give it to him again, even if it is for the short term. We all know Leinart has talent; what we don't know is if he can win with it.

Warner can. So make him your starter, Arizona.