

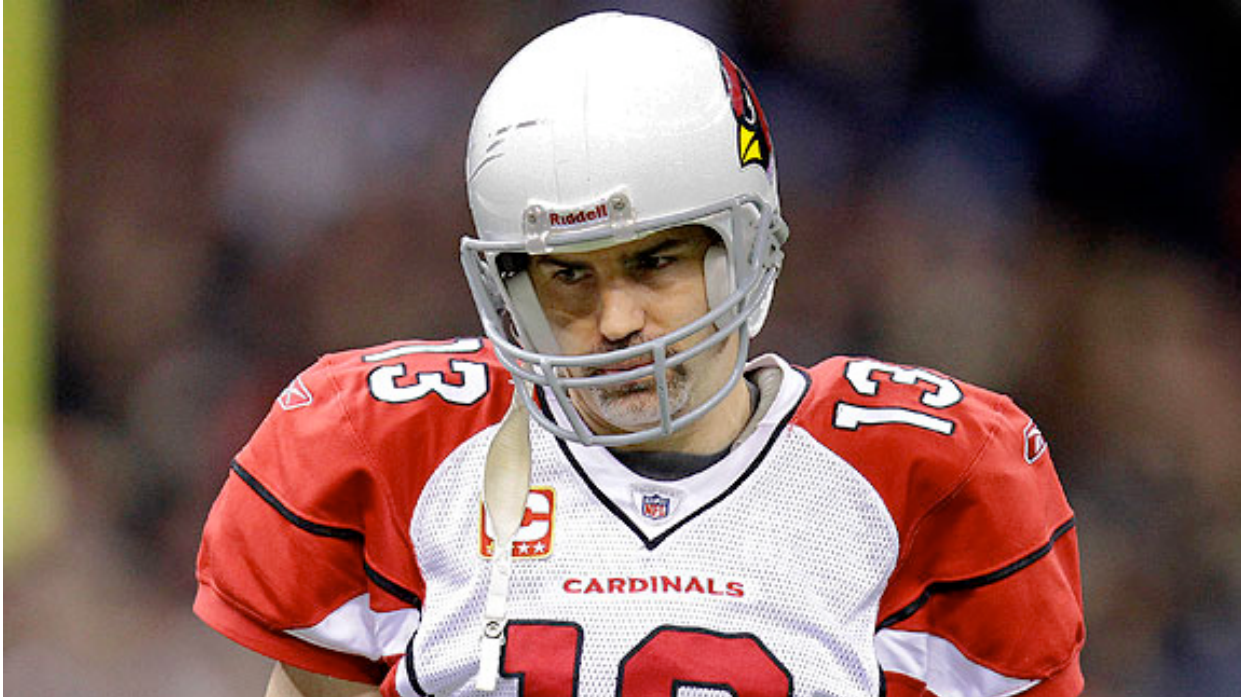


# Hailing Warner's unique story

The Cardinals QB retires after 12 NFL seasons as an inspiration to many

By Seth Wickersham

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*AP Photo/Patrick Semansky*

**Arizona Cardinals QB Kurt Warner ended an amazing 12-year NFL career Friday.**

You have no idea what the NFL is losing in [Kurt Warner](#), who Friday afternoon announced the end of his NFL playing career after 12 seasons.

I'm sad that he's retiring. You should be, too. We'll never see another player like him.

Of course, we knew by the end of the 1999 season that we'd never witness another *story* like him, going from stocking shelves to operating one of the most potent offenses in history, winning league and Super Bowl MVPs. But Warner as a player, as a person, deserves our thanks.

Thanks for the numbers: Four Pro Bowls, two NFL MVP awards, three Super Bowl appearances including one victory and two close losses, and the top three passing games in Super Bowl history. The second-greatest dome quarterback in history behind the [Indianapolis Colts' Peyton Manning](#), Warner at times reached Jordanesque hot streaks.

In the 2009 season with the [Arizona Cardinals](#), Warner completed 75 percent of his passes in a game four times, including one during which he hit at 92 percent, an NFL record. Few quarterbacks in history were as streaky as Warner, but when he was on, few could match him.

Thanks for the religion. Some athletes give their life to Jesus Christ as a PR move; some are ripe with hypocrisy; some just say offensive things. Warner always expressed his faith without trivializing it or us.

Thanks for the quick release, even at 38. His greatest gift, as a quarterback, was his innate ability to hold the ball until the last possible moment before delivering an accurate pass. It's a fine line between waiting until the final millisecond and stalling too long. Somehow, Warner did it at a level rivaled only by Dan Marino.

It's not coachable; it's natural and unable to be measured by scouts who obsess over big arms like [JaMarcus Russell](#)'s. Of course, scouts also can't quantify the guts it takes to stand in the pocket and take brutal hits for the chance of a big play. You just know it when you see it. I'm going to miss seeing it from Warner.

Thanks for the Hall of Fame argument. Warner has revitalized the timeless HOF debate: peak value versus longevity. He had such a strange career -- early success, a mysterious array of thumb injuries sidelining him in the middle and greatness in the end -- that nobody knows how to honor it.

Here's how: Write his name on the first ballot. If the average NFL career is only three years, longevity can't be a bulletproof prerequisite, especially if the player, at his best, was as good as anyone ever and has the numbers to prove it.

Thanks for hope. Hope was Warner's thing, his product. The [St. Louis Rams](#) and Cardinals were punchlines before Warner lifted them to Super Bowls. But he didn't stop there. He's given Arena Football League quarterbacks across the country the confidence that they can make it to the NFL. Through charity work, he's inspired thousands of developmentally disabled kids. As a result, he's received the NFL's Walter Payton Man of the Year Award.

Thanks for the access. Warner has been as open as any superstar player. He signs every autograph. He has time for every interview, even the tough ones. I remember talking to him in 2003 when I was doing a story about the quarterback who replaced him with the Rams, [Marc Bulger](#).

Warner was his usual accommodating self, singing the praises of a rival who would turn out to be a fraction as good. When Warner sat behind [Eli Manning](#) and [Matt Leinart](#), he

just waited his turn.

Finally, thanks for helping so many lives. A friend of mine met his wife through Warner. Heck, I might not have this job without him. I was a senior at the University of Missouri in 1999, when Warner led the Rams to the Super Bowl. That allowed four of us college sportswriters at the Columbia Missourian to cover the game.

During that week, I met the editor-in-chief at ESPN The Magazine and promised to hound him for a job. A few months later I started work, and have had the pleasure of guessing wrong on NFL games ever since.

Two years ago, I had a long talk with Warner about the perils of playing while injured, and as he chatted in his usual open and honest way, it hit me that I was one of the many people he has inadvertently helped during his career.

I wish I'd thanked him.

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