



Warner turns back the clock for Big Red

By Bernie Miklasz
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Kurt Warner is 37 years old, going on 1999.

The Greatest Show on Turf no longer exists. But the quarterback who made it go has returned with a Greatest Hits Tour.

"I feel like I'm 21 again," Warner said.

Warner, the NFL's MVP in 1999 and 2001, has emerged as a live candidate for the MVP in 2008. It would be a remarkable accomplishment for Warner to win a third MVP after having to rebuild his career following his demotion as the Rams' starter in 2002.

Warner has led the surprising Arizona Cardinals to a 4-3 record and first place in the NFC West. The Cardinals will be in town Sunday, to take on the Rams on Warner's old turf. And Warner re-enters the Edward Jones Dome with a gaudy set of numbers: he ranks No. 1 in the NFL in completion percentage (70.2), No. 2 in passing yards (2,089), No. 3 in QB rating (102.1) and No. 4 in touchdown passes (14).

All of this, after enduring a painful battering and a benching in St. Louis. This, after serving as a temporary starter for the New York Giants until the inevitable promotion of No. 1 draft choice Eli Manning. This, after signing on in Arizona and watching as another No. 1 pick, Matt Leinart, was installed as the starter.

Warner has taken a lot of hits, but he's still standing and throwing fastballs. Instead of dishing to Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt, he's connecting with generation-now wideouts Larry Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin. The scenes look familiar, even though the uniforms are different, with Warner trying to steer the Cardinals to the Super Bowl instead of the Rams.

I've been covering the NFL since the early 1980s. And other than Jim Plunkett, and perhaps Doug Williams, I can't think of a more remarkable comeback than the one Warner is pulling off now.

How did this happen? Several reasons, at least to this longtime Warner observer:

— Warner's body healed after absorbing heavy punishment in the wide-open Mike Martz offense in St. Louis. Between 2002 and 2006, Warner started only 31 games out of a possible 80 and clearly benefited from the unwanted break.

— Wearing a glove on his passing hand has helped Warner get a stronger grip on the football. Warner — plagued by hand issues — isn't as vulnerable to fumbling. And he's regained some zip on his throws.

— Warner is surrounded by a fantastic cast of playmakers led by Fitzgerald, Boldin and emerging wideout Steve Breaston. It's not uncommon for Warner to complete passes to eight different receivers in a game.

— Warner's accuracy has never been as precise as it is now. His completion rate of 70.2 percent is above his career rate of 65 percent.

— Warner still is among the most fearless of quarterbacks. And Warner's football intelligence gives him an

important edge. "Kurt, mentally, is so far ahead of anyone," Leinart told the Arizona Republic. "I just think he's so much smarter than your average quarterback. He's so far ahead of the game."

In an interview this week, Warner confirmed that he'll consider retiring after the season. He said he wants to be healthy as he leaves football so he can have a normal life. Warner's contract expires after the season, and Leinart is still waiting in the wings. It's difficult to predict Warner's path beyond 2008.

"But right now I'm enjoying competing and playing the game as much as I ever have," Warner said.

Though he probably needs to play at a high level for two or three more seasons to close the deal, Warner's resurgence has boosted his candidacy for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Warner has the third-best QB rating (93.9) in NFL history. His average passing yards per game (258.4) is No. 2 in NFL history. His yards per passing attempt (8.4) is No. 3 all-time in the NFL. Warner has the two league MVPs, the most passing yards in a Super Bowl (414) and was the MVP of Super Bowl XXIV.

When Warner returns to the Edward Jones Dome, it will revive sweet memories. From 1999-2001, Warner and the Rams averaged 32 points a game and advanced to two Super Bowls. Adding to the nostalgia is Dick Vermeil, coach of the 1999 Super Bowl champions, who will be honored by the Rams at Sunday's game. It's hard to believe that next year will be the 10th anniversary of the Super Bowl season.

"The more time that you go by without having something that special, the more fond you are of that time, and the more you want to experience it again," Warner said. "I've been trying to recapture some of that glory since I left there, and it's just such a hard thing to do. I don't know if we'll ever see an offense that does what we did for three years in a row. I think about it often. Some games we have this year, I'll feel a little of that. It makes me remember how I felt back in St. Louis."

The "Glory Days" comeback tour continues on Sunday at Rams Park. Just don't expect Jim Haslett and the Rams to give Warner a standing ovation.