



Hot hand

Warner will cash in, but with whom and for how long?

By Eric Edholm
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With every laser throw he makes, Kurt Warner cashes in.

With every quarterback that goes down or gets benched around the league, Warner's future payday gets a little more sweet.

And with every game the Cardinals win, the future for the 37-year-old Warner looks a little brighter.

Wasn't it just yesterday that we were ready to bury this guy? Wasn't Warner more scrutinized and attacked than most political candidates were this fall? Wasn't it just a matter of time before Matt Leinart was going to elbow his way back in as the starter?

Grab another brew, dude. The old man has a lot left in the tank.

Warner is having one of his best seasons, not as great as his magical 1999 and '01 campaigns, but his timing couldn't be better. He's in the final year of his deal and is set to hit the market as one of the more valuable free agents next year.

Unless the Cardinals step up and re-sign him. Warner's agent, Mark Bartelstein, and Cardinals GM Rod Graves spoke about this as recently as last week. The phone lines remain open, although no significant progress has been made toward an extension.

"I wouldn't say it's his best season," Bartelstein said. "This is just the level Kurt Warner has played at. The reality is that he had a sensational season last year, too.

"It's kind of in their hands. They know how Kurt feels about the team, the organization, the staff — they know how much he loves it there."

Warner's future is one of the more interesting subplots of what is turning out to be an intriguing Cardinals season in which they appear to be the favorites to carry the NFC West. Their passing attack has been the heartbeat of the team, and Warner has been the engineer behind it, although the last thing he wants is his contract to be the story.

"He's so focused on that, he doesn't even want to turn attention to the contract," Bartelstein said. "This is the guy, you have to remember, who went to training camp without a contract after winning the Super Bowl. He showed up at training camp with an exclusive-rights deal. That's the way he is. That will never change with him."

Success doesn't guarantee Warner will return to Arizona. All you need to do is look at Brett Favre in Green Bay after last season, in which he was an MVP candidate and brought the Packers to within a few minutes of a Super Bowl. Favre, you know, exited in ugly fashion and now slings passes for the Jets.

The Warner-Cardinals situation has less potential to turn ugly, but it is worth tracking. After all, as with Favre in Green Bay, the Cardinals have invested heavily in a first-round pick who might or might not represent the future. Leinart was a higher pick (10th overall) than Aaron Rodgers (24th), and although Leinart has 16 starts under his belt in his three seasons, there is serious question if he is the one who should succeed Warner after he was beaten out clearly in August for the starting job.

In terms of average money per year, Leinart ranks 19th at almost \$5.5 million, and Warner is just behind him with his 2008 salary of \$5 million. Even with Warner possibly earning up to an additional \$1.5 million this season in incentives, he only would move up a couple of spots on the QB list.

Bartelstein won't come out and say it, but given the way Warner has played, he should be paid like a top-10 quarterback next season, and he probably will.

"It's a little bit of a complicated situation with Leinart there," Bartelstein said. "All I would say in regard to that is, Kurt's belief is to go out and do the right thing, and hopefully at the end of the day everything will be resolved the right way."

So what is one league insider's opinion of Warner? Strong but mixed.

"Ball security is an issue. He holds on to the ball too long, and it results in fumbles and interceptions, but it's not all his fault. There are miscommunications and wrong routes (being run) and tipped balls. ... Edgerrin James has not been at his best (in pass protection)."

The Cardinals might not admit it openly, but they need Warner. Leinart doesn't appear to be a good fit with head coach Ken Whisenhunt's no-nonsense, taking-care-of-business style, even if teams also are reluctant to give up on a young QB they have spent millions of dollars on — especially when having two solid quarterbacks has proven to be a must. Whatever they might get in a trade for Leinart would not make much sense, especially with no other real candidates to take the backup spot behind an injury-plagued Warner.



Kurt Warner

And the inherent fact is that Warner might need the Cardinals just as much. He's almost at that age — 38 before next season — where so many great QBs have fallen off because of injury or depletion of skills: Joe Montana, Steve Young, John Elway, Dan Marino, among them. Favre might be a slight exception, but he's not an MVP candidate anymore. Warner has revived his career in Arizona and has the Cardinals on the cusp of their first playoff berth since 1998.

But Warner's career has taken some strange turns, and he even mentioned retirement this season when a brutal hit on WR Anquan Boldin at the end of a lopsided loss to the Jets rattled Warner deeply, Bartelstein said.

"He treats his receivers like he treats his children. He takes a lot of pride in protecting those guys, making sure he doesn't put them in a position where they can get hurt. ... I spoke to him that night on the bus, and he was as shaken as I have ever heard him," Bartelstein said.

It's Bartelstein's job to put Warner in the best position he can beyond this season, and if the Cardinals let it get too far, perhaps some team that believes it's close to a Super Bowl could make a big play at him for one shot at glory. It's the next chapter in Warner's long, winding career, and it's sure to be just as interesting as the first part of the story.