

Cardinals' comeback win in '88 was classic

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It was a big fourth-quarter comeback for the Cardinals.

It was in Sun Devil Stadium. And Jake Plummer had nothing to do with it.

This was long before Jake, before the Cardinals' countless failures in the Valley soured many fans on their local NFL team. It was Year 1 after the franchise had moved from St. Louis — 1988 — and the then-Phoenix Cardinals had a 5-4 record with powerful San Francisco visiting on Nov. 6.

Midway through the third quarter the 49ers led, 23-0. When it was over, the Cardinals had a 24-23 win, a victory still regarded as one of the greatest in the team's short time in Arizona even with all the miracles Plummer has provided

recently.

"The thing I remember," said former Cardinal Roy Green, on the receiving end of Neil Lomax's winning touchdown catch, "is that a couple of times they were in scoring position and our defense held, and they didn't get the touchdowns. It was then when I felt we would win the ballgame."

Sun Devil Stadium, where the 49ers visit again tonight, hasn't been good to the 49ers (they also lost in 1992 to a woe-ful Cardinals team, 24-14, in their only other game in Tempe). Many of the lingering nightmares go back to 1988.

San Francisco was a juggernaut. Roger Craig had 162 yards rushing on 26 carries that day. Jerry Rice was establishing himself as a pretty good wide

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receiver. And legend-to-be Joe Montana was on the bench, so coach Bill Walsh could work in an up-and-coming quarterback named Steve Young.

"I've never been so sick over one game in my life," Walsh said this week. "When we left the field at halftime (leading 16-0), I said to myself, 'This is the best 49er team I've seen. We've never looked better than this.'"

A San Francisco touchdown with 7:20 left in the third quarter put the Cardinals in their biggest hole of the day. But Lomax hooked up with Green on a 35-yard touchdown pass on the following drive, and Al Del Greco kicked a field goal early in the fourth quarter to make it 23-10.

The confidence was growing among the Cardinals, in no small part because of Lomax — the only quarterback besides Plummer to inspire Arizona fans in the Cards' 11 seasons here.

"We had a good nucleus of players," Green said. "Our depth wasn't as good, but it was similar to what the (current) team has with Jake — we felt that when Neil was healthy we always had a chance. That feeling permeates the team, and it's something special."

Lomax converted a fourth-and-goal play with 2:19 left in the game, hitting Ernie Jones with a touchdown pass. San Francisco got the ball back, but on a fourth-down bootleg run — the Cardinals were out of timeouts — Young sprinted for the first-down marker at the sideline as Cardinals linebacker E.J. Junior knocked him out of bounds.

The measurement was close. "To this day, we made the first down," Young said this week. "Too bad we didn't have instant replay."

Replied Junior, now living in Miami, Fla., "Tell Steve he was

short. . . . He fooled everybody on that bootleg. I just happened to see him pull the ball back and run. All I could do was throw my body at him."

When the referees marked it short, the Cardinals were 66 yards away from the end zone. But Lomax went to work, and Jones made another key catch at the 9-yard line with less than 30 seconds left.

The Cardinals decided to go with Green running a fade route to the corner of the end zone, but as the teams approached the line of scrimmage, 49ers safety Ronnie Lott screamed for timeout, because San Francisco only had 10 men on the field.

"Now I've seen the coverage," Green said. "So they get the timeout, but as we go back to the sideline, the coaches want to change the play, because they don't think the one we have called gives us enough options. I turned to Neil and said, 'Don't you dare let them change it' because I had seen the coverage and I knew it would work. And it did."

With three seconds on the clock, Green made the touchdown catch, and when Del Greco added the extra point, the Cardinals owned a stunning victory.

"You could tell it got to (the 49ers)," Green said. "And if I'm not mistaken, they made a quarterback change."

Indeed, Walsh — reportedly upset at Young's mental error of not staying in bounds, although as Junior said, "He didn't have a choice." — gave the reins back to Montana, who guided the 49ers not only to a Super Bowl victory at the end of that season but also the next, cementing his place in NFL history.

The ending wasn't as storybook-like for the Cardinals, however. Despite winning the following week against the New York Giants and taking over first place in the NFC East with a 7-4 record, Lomax injured his hip.

Monday Night Memories

Cardinals players recall their favorite moment watching Monday Night Football through the years:

"Kellen Winslow walking off the field after the Miami-Chargers game. Both teams played to the end and were exhausted. In the end, they had to carry him off."

AENEAS WILLIAMS
CORNERBACK

"Bo Jackson running over (Brian) Bosworth in the Kingdome. Also, Dallas-Philadelphia two years ago. All they had to do was kick a field goal, but they bobbled the snap and Dallas won the game."

J.J. McCLESKY
DEFENSIVE BACK

"Tony Dorsett, 99 yards vs. the Minnesota Vikings. The Cowboys were my favorite team. I took my school pictures in his jersey."

KWAMIE LASSITER
SAFETY

"Giants-Eagles. That boy (New York's Carl Banks) hit Randall Cunningham in the knee. Pop! And he put his hand down, got up and threw a TD and won the game."

JON CLARK
OFFENSIVE TACKLE

"Green Bay-Denver, in the snow, 1984. Flurries are coming down and (Broncos defensive back) Steve Foley makes a return for a touchdown while the field's covered with snow. Denver went on to go 13-3."

COREY CHAVOUS
CORNERBACK

"My mom fighting with my dad about watching the game."

MIKE DEVLIN
CENTER

The magic the Cardinals felt with Lomax in charge disappeared, and they lost their final five games. Lomax never played again.

Beating the 49ers that day became the highlight of the franchise's time in Arizona, before Plummer brought home a playoff victory last season.

"I still tell all the guys here that we came back and kicked their butt," said 49ers safety Tim McDonald, a member of the Cardinals in 1988. "No one gave us a chance."