

MNF hits the Valley



49ERS AT CARDINALS

- **WHEN:** 6 p.m., today
- **WHERE:** Sun Devil Stadium
- **TV:** Ch. 15
- **RADIO:** KDUS (1060 AM), KSLX (100.7 FM)
- **RECORDS:** Arizona 11, San Francisco 11
- **LINE:** San Francisco by 2

MORE INSIDE

- ▶ Dolphin Dimitrius Underwood is hospitalized with stab wounds, **C3**
- ▶ **NFL roundups:** Brett Favre leads Green Bay to a comeback win over Minnesota, **C4**
- ▶ **NFL box scores,** **C4**
- ▶ **NFL sidelines,** **C5**

BY LEE RASIZER
THE TRIBUNE

Are you ready for some football? Evidently, Valley fans are, making tonight's Arizona-San Francisco showdown on *Monday Night Football* a rare sellout at Sun Devil Stadium.

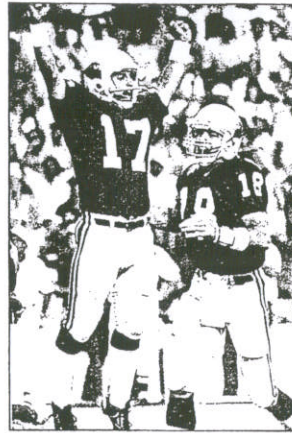
The important question is, are the Cardinals? Prime time recently has been a second home for the 49ers. San Francisco has made three Monday appearances in each of the last six years.

The Cardinals would hardly recognize ABC announcer Boomer Esiason if some of them hadn't played with the ex-quarterback. Arizona (1-1) is making just its third appearance in what has become the league's showcase game of the week.

Coach Vince Tobin's chore during preparation last week was to make sure his young team isn't affected by the hype.

"To me it's a lot like a playoff atmosphere and we were in the playoffs last year, so that gives us a little bit of a feel of what the national glare is. And that's really what it is," Tobin said.

Please see **CARDS**, Page **C3**



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

Point of emphasis: Then-Cardinals kicker Al Del Greco, left, and holder Cliff Stoudt celebrate the extra point that beat the San Francisco 49ers, 24-23, on Nov. 6, 1988 on *Monday Night Football*.

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TRIBUNE

CARDS: Are ready for some football

From Page **C1**

"Everybody's family and friends from home see them play. All the other players in the league see them play and that's very similar to playoff-type football. And I think the intensity level increases because everybody knows everybody's watching."

So why Arizona, why now, under the bright lights? Look no further than the postseason to which Tobin referred. Success, plus exciting finishes in 1998, plus a potential star in quarterback Jake Plummer was an equation the NFL couldn't ignore.

"They were 9-7, which is a good record, and not only did they get to the playoffs they got to the second round," said Joe Ferreira, the league's senior director of broadcasting planning and scheduling. "And since I've been here in '92 there hasn't been a team that made the playoffs that did not make *Monday Night Football* the next year."

The goal now of the Cardinals organization is to make Monday nights as familiar to the likes of Andre Wadsworth, David Boston and Plummer as it has been to San Francisco's Jerry Rice, Steve Young and Ken Norton Jr.

"Everything you work for is to be in games like this," Cards general manager Bob Ferguson said. "To get the opportunity to do them is the hard part for a lot of people. We've earned the right to play this schedule."

There are a handful of Cards players who know all about the hoopla of Monday nights. Linebacker Mark Maddox, long-snapper Trey Junkin and kicker Chris Jacke experienced the games on a regular basis with other teams.

Jacke said the biggest difference is having to wait nearly two extra days to play. Watching games in the living room on Sundays seems strange and getting through the monotony before game time can be interminable.

"The only difference is everybody is going to be watching us and we're in the spotlight for that night," Maddox said. "We're the game of the week, basically."

For others taking part for the first time, it's foreign territory and a chance to create a lasting image

Monday Madness

Teams that have appeared the most and fewest times on *Monday Night Football* since 1970 (records in parentheses).

MOST

- Dolphins 61 (35-26)
- Cowboys 56 (33-23)
- 49ers 51 (33-18)
- Raiders 50 (33-16-1)
- Steelers 45 (27-18)
- Redskins 45 (23-22)

FEWEST

- Buccaneers 5 (2-3)
- Cardinals 15 (5-9-1)
- Seahawks 16 (11-5)
- Colts 18 (10-8)
- Saints 18 (6-12)

on a national stage. Chicago's William Perry was just another defensive lineman in the mid-1980s. On the morning after rumbling over linebackers into the end zone on *Monday Night Football*, he was "The Fridge."

"*Monday Night Football* is special. I don't care what anybody says," defensive back J.J. McCleskey said. "It's another level." ...

Still, "I would hope that this won't turn into a bigger circus than it already is," adds Junkin, a 17-year veteran. "The NFL's kind of a circus to start with and then when you start putting added pressure into the mix, then you don't get the results you're used to getting and things happen that you're not prepared for."

Junkin believes there's a sure-fire way to get rid of the stars in your eyes early on.

"Generally, I think the first time you get hit, it's gone," he said. "We're back to reality."

And reality is that the San Francisco team the Cardinals will be playing isn't the same as the one remembered in awe from previous Monday night conquests. The 49ers are 1-1 and seemingly on the downswing after nearly two decades of success.

"You can make a statement that they're not the old 49ers," Plummer said. "But they're still a team that has quality football players and ... is still a (expletive) good ballclub."

But the Cardinals think they are, too. Tonight, they'll have the stage to prove it in front of the nation.