

Big win worth the 51-year wait

■ **CARDINALS 20, COWBOYS 7**

By Steve Schoenfeld
The Arizona Republic

IRVING, Texas — Fifty-one years of heartache, nearly a century of being ridiculed, died on the 2-yard line Saturday.

Quarterback Jake Plummer took a knee and brought the big, bad Dallas Cowboys to their knees, exorcising the Cardinals' curse forever.

A team that hadn't won an NFL playoff game since 1947 had knocked the NFC East champions, five-time Super Bowl winners, out of the first-round of the playoffs with a 20-7 victory before 62,969 stunned fans at Texas Stadium.

"What do you do with a laughter?" said Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill, whose family has owned the franchise for 65 years. "I don't know how to act."

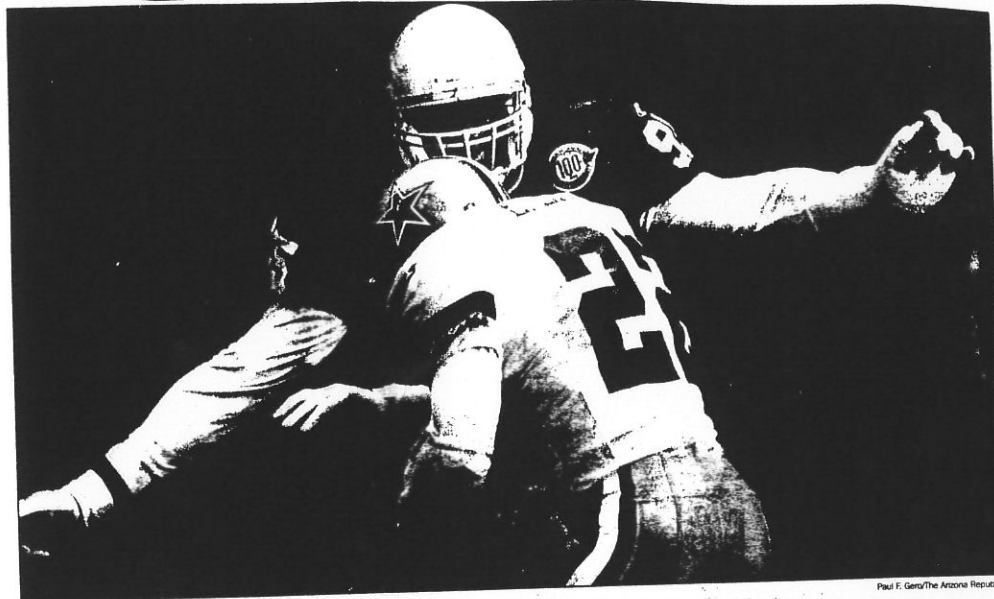
Now, their improbable season moves on to Minnesota, the NFC's top-seeded team, next Sunday at the Metrodome.

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Paul F. Gero/The Arizona Republic

Vince Tobin gets congratulations for a job well done from running backs coach Johnny Roland. Marc Trestman awaits his turn.



Paul F. Gero/The Arizona Republic

The open arms of Jamir Miller await Emmitt Smith. Miller had 12 tackles, including two sacks, as the Cardinals held Smith to 74 yards rushing on 16 carries.

Cards face Vikings next week

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"This is virgin territory," defensive tackle Bernard Wilson said.

"People thought we'd get to the playoffs and lose in the first round," rookie defensive end Andre Wadsworth said. "They didn't know we were on a mission."

The Vikings, who have an NFL-high nine Pro Bowl players, finished with the NFL's best regular-season record at 15-1 and have the most explosive offense in the league, led by All-Pro quarterback Randall Cunningham and rookie wide receiver Randy Moss.

"Everybody expects us to go up there next week and get blown out by 40," rookie cornerback Corey Chavous said.

Everybody except the Cowboys, who were dominated from the outset in losing to the Cardinals at Texas Stadium for the first time since 1989. It was Dallas' first home defeat in the playoffs since 1983, breaking a seven-game winning streak.

The Cowboys had swept the Cardinals in the regular season and won 16 of the past 17 games between the two.

"Nobody gave us a chance," said

strong safety Tommy Bennett, whose 42-yard interception return in the final minute allowed Plummer to kneel down and run out the clock.

As the final seconds ticked down, Cowboys All-Pro cornerback Deion Sanders, who played despite a painful toe injury, kept screaming at his teammates on the sideline.

"How are you going to feel in the morning?" Sanders kept shouting.

He hadn't settled down by the time he reached the locker room.

"You can't look in the mirror and be happy with the way we played today," Sanders said. "This team isn't getting any younger. It's time for some guys to step out. Our big-play guys have got to make big plays."

The Cardinals, who had only 11 players with playoff experience to Dallas' 26, were the ones who made the big plays.

Plummer's 59-yard pass to wide receiver Frank Sanders, who made a one-handed grab late in the first quarter, was their longest offensive play of the year at the time. It set up a 12-yard score by running back Adrian Murrell, who caught a shovel pass to give the Cardinals a 7-0 lead.

"How many guys do you know who could be running the opposite

SCORE BY QUARTERS

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	F
Cardinals	7	3	7	3	20
Cowboys	0	0	0	7	7

way and throw off the left foot while getting dragged down from behind and complete the pass?" center Mike Devlin said of Plummer's completion to Sanders.

Actually, Plummer never was supposed to run the play. He saw the Cowboys blitzing and was supposed to check out of the play.

He also was not supposed to run the shovel pass to Murrell because of a blitz.

"The coaches want to get mad, but they really can't because of the result," Plummer said.

Cornerback Aeneas Williams intercepted Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman twice and Chavous did it once. Aikman had thrown only five interceptions all year.

Williams, who had only one interception in the regular season, announced to a crowd at the Phoenix airport Friday that he was "declaring war on Texas."

"The only people who think that's out of character don't read the Bible," Williams said. "You have to take that attitude, and this week at practice was more focused than any time this year."

"It was not as serious as Desert Storm or Desert Fox, but I wanted the fans to know to get all the women and children inside because the men would be in the streets waging war."

Backup middle linebacker Mark Maddox stuffed Cowboys running back Emmitt Smith for a 1-yard loss

on fourth and 1 at the Cardinals' 7

midway through the second quarter.

Outside linebacker Jamir Miller and Wadsworth each had two sacks. Miller dropping Aikman for a 10-yard loss on a fourth-down play early in the fourth quarter.

"Our defense was unbelievable," center Aaron Graham said. "Every time we put them in a tough spot, they'd come up with a huge stop."

Murrell's 74-yard run off left tackle early in the third quarter eclipsed Sanders' catch as the longest play of the year. It set up a 3-yard touchdown pass from Plummer to Centers that gave the Cardinals a 17-point advantage, their biggest lead over the Cowboys since 1990.

Deion Sanders' 41-yard punt return set up the Cowboys' only score, a 6-yard catch by wide receiver Billy Davis with 3:33 left. But that was the closest they could get.

All that was left was for Plummer to kneel down, his eyes glued on the scoreboard and the shocking outcome.

This time, the Cardinals didn't need a field goal on the final play of the game to win.

"Just the joy to finally win a game that didn't have any suspense was awesome," Williams said.