



Cards turn attention to next step

NFC WILD-CARD GAMES

(Minnesota, Atlanta have first-round byes)

■ SATURDAY'S GAME

Arizona at Dallas, 2:05 p.m. (Ch. 15)

■ SUNDAY'S GAME

Green Bay at San Francisco, 2:15 p.m. (Ch. 10)

AFC WILD-CARD GAMES

(Denver, New York Jets have first-round byes)

■ SATURDAY'S GAME

Buffalo at Miami, 10:30 a.m. (Ch. 15)

■ SUNDAY'S GAME

New England at Jacksonville, 10:35 a.m. (Ch. 5)

BY LEE RASIZER
THE TRIBUNE

Now comes the hard part.

The Arizona Cardinals have advanced to the playoffs for the first time in more than two decades, but getting there is only the opening battle in the war.

"We're in," coach Vince Tobin said, "now we have to do something with it."

And the Dallas Cowboys, Saturday's opponent at 2:05 p.m., haven't made a habit of allowing the Cards to feel good about themselves in recent years, particularly in Big D. Arizona has dropped nine straight games at Texas Stadium dating back to 1989, including a 38-10 drubbing in the

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season opener, and have won just one of the last 17 meetings overall vs. Dallas.

"We're pretty confident that we can go in there and have some success," cornerback Corey Chavous said. "We know this is a good football team and that we're a team that matches up well with them. There's just certain things that we've got to be able to stop — particularly the run. If we can do those types of things, contain Troy

Aikman, we'll be in good shape.

"They're going to be pretty confident that they can run all over us. And we've got to stop that early and establish our identity early."

Arizona's identity before Sunday was of a team that couldn't get over the hump into the postseason. Now that the Cards have done so, courtesy of their thrilling 16-13 win over San Diego in the season finale Sunday, that personality has changed to a team that is inexperienced, with warts on both sides of the ball that hasn't beaten a winning team all season.

But they're also a club that is predictable in its unpredictability after seven comeback wins in 1998,

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PLAYOFF MATCHUPS: OFFENSIVE LINE

The Cowboys have had rough going on the ground of late, gaining a total of 117 yards in losses to Minnesota, New Orleans and Kansas City in one three-week stretch beginning Nov. 26. But Dallas dominated Philadelphia and Washington to the tune of 153 and 156 yards the last two weeks and the offensive line went five games without yielding a sack before giving up two against the Redskins on Sunday.

Tackles **Erik Williams** and **Larry Allen** are the keys on the unit and have had their way with Cards defensive ends **Simeon Rice** and **Andre Wadsworth** during their two wins

over Arizona this season. They helped pave the way to 188- and 146-yard rushing games and did not yield a sack.

The Cardinals line, meanwhile, has had its moments this season, but Sunday wasn't one of them. Arizona rushed for 25 yards — a season low — and yielded four sacks after having allowed that many over the previous three weeks. Dallas has been particularly rough on the line this season, holding the Cards to 77 yards on 38 carries.

Edge: Dallas

Wednesday: Skill positions

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CARDINALS: Running game is key

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including the last three games. And that, perhaps, makes them most dangerous.

"I'm not sure there's a lot of teams quaking in their boots of teams getting ready to play the Cardinals but they still have to play us on Sunday," Tobin said, putting this week's start time aside for a moment. "And we're a team that's getting better and better all the time. We don't always play as consistent as we'd like every week or in every phase of our game. But I think we're very capable in all phases. And I'm still waiting for the day that we put all three phases together for 60 minutes."

Saturday would be a good place to start, and three areas in particular will be keys. Two of them the Cards even can do something about.

The aforementioned run defense must tighten up. Unheralded Terrell Fletcher ran for a career-high 127 yards Sunday — the third time in four weeks a back has gone over 120 yards against the Cards. On offense, Arizona must be able to at least put up a representative total of ground yards. Adrian Murrell went for one yard or less on 15 of 18 carries vs. San Diego.

The X-factor, though, is Arizona's lack of experience in playoff situations. Only 12 players on Arizona's roster have been to the postseason, and how this youthful team reacts under playoff duress can't be gauged until game day. Meanwhile, Cowboys stars such as Emmitt Smith, Aikman and Michael Irvin each are wearing three Super Bowl rings.

"You can't take away experience. Experience is a key and it's something everyone longs to get. But the thing about it is that we're a determined team," said tackle Lomas Brown, one of the Cards' playoff veterans dating to his days in Detroit. "We haven't tasted this before and it's a good taste in our mouths. And anytime you face a team that has never tasted success, they're a dangerous team. I think we'll be a dangerous team."