

# It's crunch time



A stuffed bird. Cardinals running back Adrian Murrell gets smothered by Cowboys defensive lineman Hurvin McCormack during Dallas' resounding 38-10 victory in the season opener.

## Playoff win is Cards' next hurdle

By Steve Schoenfeld  
The Arizona Republic

IRVING, Texas — They've broken through so many barriers, this little Cardinals team that couldn't. They couldn't win on the road, on artificial turf, indoors, against AFC teams or in close or pressure games. "There's a lot of bad history," outside linebacker Jamir Miller said. "If we looked back at that history, we'd be home right now."

A 16-13 victory over San Diego last Sunday ended the NFL's longest playoff drought at 15 seasons. "We didn't want to be the kings of mediocrity," offensive guard Chris Dishman said.

The next door for the Cardinals to knock down is trying to beat Dallas in Texas Stadium for the first time since 1989.

The Cardinals (9-7) play Dallas (10-6) today in an NFC wild-card game, their first playoff appearance in a non-strike season in 23 years. "All that stuff is made to fail," Miller said. "We've got the bulldozer out. It hasn't stopped rolling."

If the Cardinals win today, they will get their first playoff victory since 1947 when they were located in Chicago and won their only NFL title.

"That's the year my dad was born," center Aaron Graham said. "My dad wasn't even born yet."

Dishman said. "I think Lomas was playing on the 1947 team."

That was another gratuitous shot at

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### CARDINALS VS. COWBOYS

# Cards hope 'bulldozer' rolls

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offensive tackle Lomas Brown, the team's 13-year pro.

"Who cares if we haven't won (a playoff game) since 1947," Graham said. "This is the 1998 team."

The '98 team heard in the off-season how it couldn't win on the road, particularly on artificial turf in domed stadiums.

Then, in Week 4, they beat the St. Louis Rams, 20-17, on Sept. 27 at the Trans World Dome. They finished with a 4-4 record on the road, their best mark since 1984.

"Through all the things we heard, all the negativity, we didn't allow that to affect us," Graham said. "When we had a rough start (0-2), everybody said we were the same old Cardinals."

"There comes a point in your career when you have to say, 'Enough is enough.' It's like what (offensive coordinator) Marc Trestman said. 'It's not about them. It's about us.'"

A year ago, the Cardinals played nine games that came down to the final minute or overtime and won only three.

This season, they played eight games that were decided by three points or less and won seven, an NFL record.

The past three weeks, they've won on Chris Jacke field goals on the final play, including a 52-yarder that beat the Chargers last Sunday and sent them into the playoffs.

Yet all they've heard this past week was that they didn't deserve to be in the playoffs because of their failure to beat a team with a winning record.

They only played one — the Cowboys twice — and could have been blown out in each game.

In the season opener at Texas Stadium, the Cowboys, behind running back Emmitt Smith's 124 yards rushing, routed the Cardinals, 38-10. It was the Cardinals' most lopsided loss in 30 games.

Smith rushed for 242 yards and three scores in Dallas' two victories over the Cardinals.

"The first thing you have to do is be disciplined against him," defensive tackle Bernard Wilson said of Smith. "People (defenders) put the game on their shoulders and get out of position, and he'll exploit that. If you let him rack up yards, it opens up their passing game, and either way they go, they can make it a miserable game for you."

The Cardinals, who have lost 16 of their past 17 games against the Cowboys, did little offensively in their last trip to Texas Stadium. They had eight series of four plays or less, including five consecutive "three and outs" in the first half.

They gained only 205 yards, their lowest total in 28 games, and didn't convert a third-down conversion in 10 attempts.

"We didn't give ourselves a chance," second-year quarterback Jake Plummer said.

In the rematch, the Cardinals fell behind, 28-0, before Plummer led a furious rally. He threw for 314 second-half yards and 465 overall, the second-most allowed by the Cowboys in team



Cardinals quarterback Jake Plummer has thrown 31 touchdown passes and is 12-13 in his first 25 games.



Troy Aikman was a late bloomer. The six-time Pro-Bowler threw 36 interceptions in his first two seasons.

#### TALE OF THE TAPE

##### Aikman vs. Plummer

A comparison of Cardinals quarterback Jake Plummer and Dallas' Troy Aikman after the first 25 games of their careers.

| Stat          | Aikman | Plummer |
|---------------|--------|---------|
| Completions   | 384    | 476     |
| Attempts      | 691    | 834     |
| Percentage    | 55.6   | 57.0    |
| Yards         | 4,328  | 5,842   |
| Touchdowns    | 20     | 31      |
| Interceptions | 36     | 35      |
| Rating        | 82.1   | 78.3    |
| Wins-Losses   | 7-18   | 12-13   |

history.

The game ended with Plummer throwing to Cardinals wide receiver Rob Moore in the right corner of the end zone. Replays showed Moore was mauled and that pass interference should have been called on cornerback Kevin Smith.

No flag was thrown and the Cowboys were

victorious, 35-28.

"The second half gives us confidence going into this game," Graham said. "They had a big lead. We had to find a way to get back in the game, and we would have scored even more points."

"At that point in time, the problem we had with our offense was we weren't starting fast. Then, we went to the 'no-huddle' and, in the following weeks, put up the most yards in the league."

But that was in the regular season. Now the Cardinals are in the playoffs, which is foreign ground for all but 11 of their players, who have been in a total of 46 postseason games.

The Cowboys, meanwhile, have 225 games of playoff experience. But Dallas first-year Coach Chan Gailey thinks that will help the Cowboys for only the "first minute" of the game.

"The veterans on this team and other people I've talked to say that as big a step as it is from the pre-season to the regular season, the step from the regular season to the playoffs is even bigger," Plummer said. "It is that much more intense."

"I don't think we're going to be intimidated. It will help us that we've been in so many close games."