

Cards tired of hearing schedule belittled

By Steve Schoenfeld
The Arizona Republic

They won't apologize for their soft schedule or playing in a weak division, the beleaguered NFC "Least."

So don't try to irritate the Cardinals, who remain the NFL's "feel-good" story for this week after ending the league's longest playoff drought at 15 seasons.

They know they haven't beaten a team with a winning record this season, but they would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell everybody.

"We're in, and 18 other teams would do anything to be in our position," center Aaron Graham



Jamir Miller/
Says most NFL
teams are
envious of the
Cardinals for
being in the
playoffs.

said.

Cardinals opponents were 101-155 this season, a .395 winning percentage.

The only team they played all season that finished with a win-

ning record was the Dallas Cowboys, who went 10-6, eight of the victories coming over NFC East teams.

The Cowboys will try to beat the Cardinals for the third time this season when the two teams play an NFC wild card game Saturday at Texas Stadium.

"We made the playoffs with what we were given," center Mike Devlin said. "We can't help what the NFL schedule is, what cards were dealt to us."

Of the Cardinals' nine victories, seven were by three or fewer

— Please see **SCHEDULE**, Page C6

NFL PLAYOFFS

Saturday's games

Buffalo at Miami, 10:30 a.m., Ch. 15
Arizona at Dallas, 2:05 p.m., Ch. 15

Sunday's games

New England at Jacksonville, 10:35 a.m., Ch. 5
Green Bay at San Francisco, 2:15 p.m., Ch. 10

Related stories

SWANN SHOWS: For the first time since undergoing controversial knee surgery on Dec. 7, defensive tackle Eric Swann visits the Cardinals training facility. **C6.**

WIDE RIGHT: Most kickers have the reputation for being offbeat. Perhaps that explains why Chris Jacke was a Pittsburgh Steelers fan while growing up in Dallas. **C6.**

Schedule criticism infuriates Cardinals

— **SCHEDULE**, from Page C1

points, an NFL record.

They enter the playoffs on a season-best three-game winning streak, but all were won on field goals by Chris Jacke on the game's final play.

"We didn't back into the playoffs," Devlin said. "We finished 9-7, and the way things panned out, we deserved to be in. Still, it doesn't matter, how you get in, just that you're in. And you know what? We might be the team that gets the Cardinals' organization on a roll for years to come."

The Cowboys, who are 6½-point favorites, also didn't play the world's toughest schedule. The Cardinals were the only team they beat that had a winning record.

"The bottom line is we won enough games this year to qualify," defensive back J.J. McCleskey said. "It doesn't matter who you beat, how you beat them, whether you rolled over them or barely beat them.

"Look at history in playoff situations. North Carolina State wasn't supposed to have a chance against Houston in the NCAA (basketball) Tournament and beat them. Remember Villanova-Georgetown in the NCAA Tournament or Memphis-Tennessee in football last year? You would have bet your life on (the Volunteers) in that one. . . . And, remember, we have a lot of talent on this team."

Outside linebacker Jamir Miller said every time he looks at the teams in the playoffs, "Arizona is on the top of the list."

"One reason is because Arizona starts with 'A,'" Miller said. "But we beat those teams others couldn't."

Cardinals Coach Vince Tobin said he won't spend one second worrying about what critics of the team think.

"I can't worry about things I have no control over," he said. "We played 16 games, we won nine. The NFL tells you who you play.

"All I know is we have a better

record than anybody who didn't make the playoffs."

Defensive line coach Joe Greene, who won four Super Bowl rings with the Pittsburgh Steelers, said it's absurd for anyone to think the Cardinals don't belong in the playoffs.

"I go way back in this thing," he said of the playoffs. "If you win and are in, you deserve it. It's a disservice to anyone who is in the playoffs for someone to say they don't deserve it. This is a tough game. It's not easy to win. It's not easy to make the playoffs."

A year ago, the Cardinals finished 4-12 when they had nine of their games decided in the final minute of regulation or overtime. Four of their first five losses were by a total of 11 points.

They were awarded a fifth-place schedule, but last-place teams no longer play a schedule filled with other patsies. That's because interconference games are now scheduled on a rotating basis rather than in order of finish.

"You don't get anything extra if the teams you beat have winning records," running back Adrian Murray said. "You don't get double wins."

Bob Ferguson, Cardinals vice president, said he couldn't care less if people knock the Cardinals for failing to have enough high-quality wins.

"If that has anything to do with it, maybe we should readjust our schedule next season," Ferguson said.

The Cardinals play eight playoff teams next season — Atlanta, the New York Jets, San Francisco, Green Bay, New England, Buffalo, Miami and Dallas twice.

Graham said he is glad the Cardinals are among 12 teams still in the running for the NFL title.

"The Denver Broncos last year were a wild-card team and went all the way," Graham said. "It's definitely the way we're thinking. We've worked too hard to get this opportunity."