

Irving, Texas

This must be a fairy tale, because it can't possibly be true.

It doesn't make sense.

This is Rip van Winkle waking up from a 51-year nap. Cinderella in cleats. Gilligan leading the castaways off the island.

The last time a Cardinals team won a play-off game it was 1947. They were the Chicago Cardinals then, Al Capone was in prison and Jackie Robinson had just broken the color barrier in baseball.

But as coach Vince Tobin has repeatedly reminded us cynics, "I don't need historians, I need pioneers."

What a trail they blazed Saturday.

The Cardinals that were 4-12 a year ago, 6-7 just four weeks ago and had been the Dallas Cowboys' whipping boy for so long they flinched even before the blow was coming, did what seemed impossible.

And they did it easily.

Arizona 20, Dallas 7.

Are you ready for some *more* football?

"We declared war on the state of Texas," said cornerback Aeneas Williams. "Once we declared war it didn't matter what they did. Now we're declaring war on the state of Minnesota."

That would be home of the 15-1 Vikings, who will play host to the Cardinals at 2:15 p.m. next Sunday.

"I know it sounds weird," said center Aaron Graham, "but we're two games from the Super Bowl. Is that unbelievable?"

Nothing seems crazy now. Nothing seems unimaginable. The next thing you know recalcitrant owner Bill Bidwill will get his own talk show.

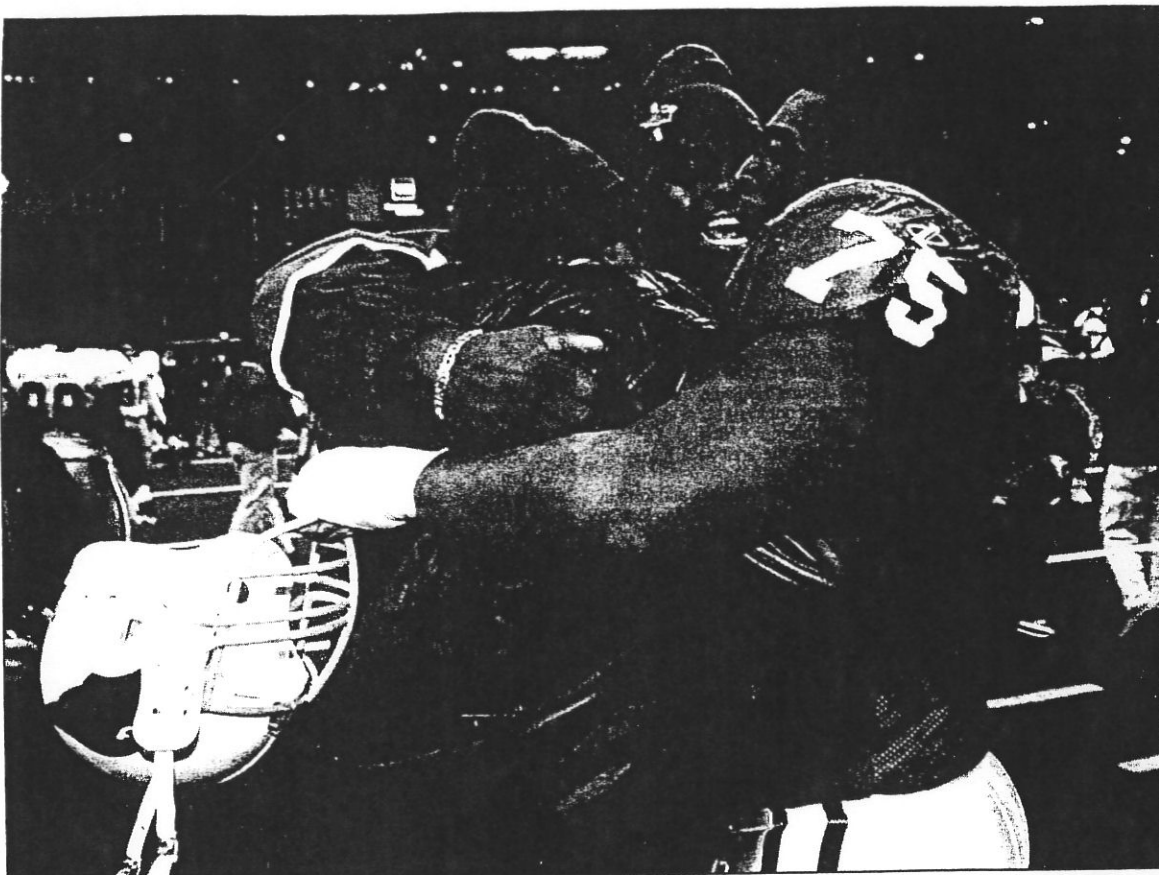
There was a storm front in the Midwest on Saturday, but who expected hell to freeze over in Texas?

The Cardinals, that's who.



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IRWIN R. DAUGHERTY/TRIBUNE

Big hug: Offensive tackle Lomas Brown, right, embraces two members of the Cardinals staff after Saturday's victory in Irving, Texas.

BORDOW: Cardinals 'declare war' on foes

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After Arizona beat San Diego last Sunday to close the regular season, Tobin told his players, "we're going to go down there and beat the hell out of the Cowboys."

Forget that they hadn't won here since 1989, or that Dallas had beaten them 16 of the last 17 meetings. When the reserved Tobin and God-fearing Williams are talking smack, fear has taken a holiday.

"I don't care about the past, only about the future," Tobin said. "It doesn't matter who was the president the last time the Cardinals won in the playoffs."

That, by the way, would be Harry Truman.

And no, the headline you read over this story isn't a monumental error.

Dewey did beat Truman.

The joke stops here.

No more snide references to '47. No more harrumphing that

the Cardinals didn't beat a team with a winning record in the regular season. That they didn't belong in the playoffs.

One writer said NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue should apologize for forcing this game on the public.

Saturday, the only joke was Dallas, which saw its reign as the Beast of the NFC East come to an end.

"It's time to pass the torch," said Cardinals vice president of player personnel Bob Ferguson.

And Arizona loved making Dallas feel the burn.

"I don't think they respected us very much at all," linebacker Jamir Miller said. "That was their mistake. They thought we were a joke. But we're not ever going to be a joke again."

How stunning was this afternoon?

First, there were Cardinals fans in the stands. The last time that happened in Texas Stadium was, well, never. Why be witness

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VINCE TOBIN
HEAD COACH

to torture?

In the middle of the fourth quarter the Cardinal fans in the upper deck unfurled a huge "Have a nice day" happy face poster.

By that time, the followers of America's Team had no come-

back. Neither did their fallen heroes, who obviously thought these were the same old Cardinals.

"I was not surprised by our performance," said cornerback Deion Sanders. "I think a lot of the guys were looking at the next game."

Funny, but that's what the Cardinals were doing when they enjoyed the sweetest moment of all: Taking a knee the final two snaps of the game and watching the clock melt away.

"When I watch the game film," said running back Larry Centers, "that's what I'll look forward to the most."

There will be eight teams remaining in the NFL playoffs next weekend. The Cardinals will be one of them.

Just when is the clock going to strike midnight?

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