

FITZGERALD'S PLAY EARNS RAVES

With strong Super Bowl performance, Cardinals wideout can claim label of league's best receiver

By Doug Haller
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TAMPA — In less than a month, Cardinals receiver Larry Fitzgerald has turned into perhaps the NFL's most dynamic performer. Analysts and former players all week have raved about his skills.

"You're looking at a guy playing at such a high level at the most critical time of the year, and that's what it's all about," said Tim Brown, a former receiver who ranks in the top five in career catches, receiving yards and touchdown receptions.

Story lines this week have focused on Fitzgerald's hands, his

father, his hair, his childhood, his college career and his off-season workouts. All this has led Fitzgerald to the biggest game of his life, and an opportunity to make his mark as the game's finest receiver.

"I think that's a little more arguable," NFL analyst and former Pro Bowl receiver Cris Collinsworth said of the "greatest" tag. "Andre Johnson, Steve Smith ... There are guys that can play that position. Different kinds of guys."

Still, Collinsworth is impressed. Fitzgerald already has posted 23 receptions for 419 yards and five touchdowns during Arizona's postseason journey. The receiving yards set an NFL record.

"Other than your quarterback, receivers have to be able to read defenses on the fly better than anybody else," Collinsworth said. "They have to know what the quarterback sees and be able to read those defenses. There's no question that there are two things that he (Fitzgerald) has that may be the best, or among the best, in the history of the game: A, his leaping ability; and B, his hands."

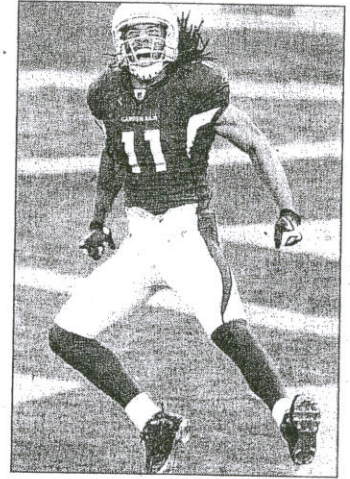
This reminded Collinsworth of a story:

"I can remember watching at Mississippi Valley State some kid in a college game," he said. "I'm like, 'Damn, that guy makes catching the ball look easy. Who is that?' And then the next (thing) I know, I'm playing against him (Jerry Rice) in the Super Bowl. And Fitzgerald has that same sort of ... not only do I not see him drop

one, I don't see him bobble one. Everything is an extended-hands catch. It's remarkable."

Brown played 17 NFL seasons. He participated in nine Pro Bowls. Not once, however, did he come across another receiver with Fitzgerald's skills. That includes New England's Randy Moss, who often is considered the game's best receiver.

"People want to compare him to Randy Moss, but there's absolutely no comparison to Randy Moss," Brown said. "Randy Moss, if you get in his face, he shies away. He doesn't want that contact. This guy (Fitzgerald), you get in his face and he will slap you in the back of the head. That kind of mentality, with that kind of size and with the (defensive backs) being 5 foot 9 these days, that's a great combination for him."



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Former NFL receiver Tim Brown says he has not seen a receiver with the skills of the Cardinals' Larry Fitzgerald (above).