

REPORT  
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# ANY GIVEN SUNDAY

## Hip forces Lomax into new role with Cards

By Lloyd Herberg  
The Arizona Republic

Every Sunday for the past eight weeks, Cardinals quarterback Neil Lomax has had the same reminder that his career is on hold, if not finished. It's always a heavy dose of reality for a 30-year-old, nine-year NFL veteran who had played football every fall since grade school.

During the week, it's almost like old times. Lomax attends meetings, exchanges banter in the locker room and lifts weights. Before practice, he throws a few passes, takes some snaps and goes through warm-up exercises with his teammates, although his are limited.

When practice begins, Lomax watches. He will throw an occasional pass and often displays uncanny accuracy from 40 yards by knocking over a row of water-filled paper cups sitting on a table.

But, even then, Lomax remains in his element. Until Sunday.

"It all builds up to Sunday," he said. "I prepare myself and go through the game plan just like I used to do — obviously, I don't spend as much time on films as when I was playing — and then Sunday it's again the realization to walk in the locker room and there hanging are a golf shirt and slacks instead of my helmet and shoulder pads.

"It's still a shock."

One question is whether Lomax will suit up again. Another is whether he should. Maybe it would be best to let go. But Lomax says he's giving himself until next spring's minicamp.

"I want to be back on the field, doing it, because I feel my talent's still there," he said. "But the question is valid, 'Am I willing to give it up?' Well, at that time, I think I will be because I've had a lot of time to think about, 'Well, if this condition's the same next year, I don't want to keep parading around like I might play.'

"It's not fair to management and not fair to the other players. And it's not fair to me and my family."

The Cardinals placed him on injured reserve during training camp

because of his arthritic left hip. He still walks with a pronounced limp and is little closer to playing again in the NFL.

That goal is "realistic," he said, but one of many.

"I have certainly found out this: I've always maintained that football was not the most important thing in my life and this has definitely showed me that, hey, it better not be," Lomax said.

There has been progress. The leg is stronger. He can bicycle for 45 minutes where he couldn't do more than five in February. Certain leg presses that couldn't be done in July now are accomplished. He is better able to support his left side.

He now can jog with his 3-year-old son, Nicholas Ryan.

"Right now, I'm in a six-month rehab," he said. "That's the way I'm taking this. That's the attitude I have to take. I just can't tell myself, 'Hey, I'm not going to play,' when God might perform a miracle still. I'm not shutting that door."

Lomax doesn't enjoy talking about the end of his Pro Bowl career. But, in the next breath, he says he'll talk with owner Bill Bidwill, General Manager Larry Wilson and Coach Gene Stallings in the off-season "because, believe me," he said, "I'm not going to risk permanent damage."

Lomax is bound by his contract, which pays him a guaranteed \$1.3 million salary this year and guarantees him \$2.9 million the next two years. If he retired, there is conjecture whether the contract would remain valid. A settlement, if necessary, might allow a graceful exit.

"Believe me, I'd be willing to give all my money back if I could have a healthy hip, and I think people who know me know that's true," Lomax said. "I'd love to have my health."

Some days the hip feels better, other days it's back to recuperating.

The therapy sessions Lomax undergoes under the supervision of Mack Newton, who has had a hip transplant, are not just football-related. Lomax is getting his body in the best shape possible so it won't

reject his transplant. He wants to do more than just play golf.

"I want to do the things I used to do 2-3 years ago," he said. "That's the frustrating part, because that was my love and my drug, sports, and God has taken that away right now."

While the players eat lunch, Lomax takes a 10-minute drive to work with Newton. He calls the drive his quiet time, when there's "a lot of praying, a lot of thinking." Once he arrives, it's an all-work-no-play session.

"(In the beginning), it was hell, there's no question," Lomax said. "I'll say it, it was hell. I don't wish any of my enemies go through that."

"But what Mack did for me is he made me believe in myself, push myself to the point I can have more strength and get ready for the operation one of these days. . . . I hate to say it, but I can't wait to have mine done."

In the meantime, he is making the "transition from playing to assistant coach," he said. "I guess that's kind of my role."

It affords him a better appreciation of both sides of the profession. It also adds to the frustration. Lomax said he occasionally still gets butterflies before a game.

"On away games, the bus ride over to the stadium, I'll see Texas Stadium or RFK and it's, 'I've been here before, let's do it again.' Then I realize I'm not going to play," he said. "It's not a self-pity thing, it's a void. 'Why am I feeling nervous? I'm not going to play'."

At Sun Devil Stadium today, while Gary Hogeboom directs the Cardinals against the New York Giants, Lomax will be in the press box, six stories up, "where everybody's open."

Up there, he said he sometimes catches himself "checking out coverages and plays, and I can still see myself executing them. I don't really enjoy that."

Lomax said he is being tested.

"I really believe that if I didn't believe in God," he said, "I'd be a basket case right now."