

Jury out on lost home game

By **DARREN URBAN**
TRIBUNE

MEXICO CITY • The problem was brought up when word first leaked that the Cardinals might play in Mexico this season.

How can they give up a home game?

The reasons were obvious, of course. With shrinking crowds in Tempe and the chance to expose the franchise on a world stage, the decision-makers with the Cards saw the move as a no-brainer.

But right now, with the Cardinals struggling at 0-3, playing the San Francisco 49ers in Sun Devil Stadium Sunday rather than at Estadio Azteca might be preferred.

"I just like the idea of playing at home, being in a home environment, sleeping in my own bed before the game," defensive end Bertrand Berry said. "There's certain advantages to playing at your own home as opposed to being on the road. That's the part that I'm really disappointed in.

"On the other hand, this is a first. That is very exciting."

The Cardinals have lost 22 of their past 23 games away from Sun Devil Stadium. And the 49ers, as a more popular franchise in Mexico, stand to have the majority of the fans at the game Sunday night.

Then again, the Cardinals will get to be on ESPN, and in this age of loving the spotlight, that's a draw that influences players' opinions.

"It would have been nice to play here, but on national TV, everyone will be watching," linebacker James Darling said. "That alone is excitement. Wherever we had to go for national TV."

Coach Dennis Green, who doesn't like anyone complaining on his team, said he didn't mind losing the home game.

"I don't think that way," Green said. "My life has always been you deal with whatever you are dealing with. We made the decision to play in Mexico, that's where we are heading."

WAKEFIELD'S TURN

Defensive end-turned-offensive tackle Fred Wakefield will be the Cards'

starting right tackle Sunday, replacing the injured Oliver Ross. Green has repeatedly praised Wakefield's progress. Wakefield just wants a chance to play.

"I don't want to sit around," Wakefield said. "(Ross) is a key player on the line and I don't want to be a weak link out there, so I am going to bust my butt, show these guys I can play. I know I have the confidence of the guys around me."

Ian Allen, who has experience, still could get the start, but he most likely will be Wakefield's backup. Ross is expected to miss at least a month after surgery to repair a broken bone in his hand.

RATTAY FIGHTS BACK

The 49ers took quarterback Alex Smith with the No. 1 pick in the draft, which was supposed to signal the end of Tim Rattay's tenure as starter.

Instead, Rattay — the East Valley product who once starred at Scottsdale Community College — won back the job.

"They always drafted guys every year," Rattay told the

San Francisco Chronicle. "I enjoy it. Competition makes you better."

San Francisco coach Mike Nolan said Rattay has had his struggles, especially in the fourth quarter, but is generally pleased with his play.

"He has won the job, his experience put him above Alex, and he runs the offense well," Nolan said. "He's been effective."

"I don't think (Smith) is ready for the starting role. I think he's prepared for that environment as a backup, but in time I do expect him to be the starter. Obviously, we didn't draft him as the first pick to sit on the bench that long."

EXTRA POINT

Running back James Jackson (hamstring) and linebacker Eric Johnson (hamstring) were the only Cardinals not to practice Friday, meaning cornerback David Macklin (hamstring) will play Sunday. Starters cornerback Antrel Rolle (knee), tackle Oliver Ross (hand), and quarterback Kurt Warner (groin) are all out.

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