

Questions remain in Cards' secondary

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The Arizona Cardinals knew going into the offseason their defensive backs situation could dissolve into chaos — all four starters were unrestricted free agents, and the team needed to retool anyway going into the pass-happy NFC West Division.

Now, with the draft less than a month away, the only sure thing is that free-agent signee Duane Starks is the cover cornerback the team wanted badly.

Other than that, there are a whole lot of questions, the answers which likely won't come until training camp nears.

"It's definitely different from a collegiate deal, where you have your freshmen to your fifth-year seniors and you know what you have," said defensive backs coach Kevin Ramsey, who spent 15 seasons



Who will join new Cards cornerback Duane Starks in the defensive backfield?

coaching in college before joining the Cardinals a little more than a year ago. "But coach (Dave) McGinnis schooled me on the patience of this whole thing. It comes with the package, the waiting."

Safety Kwamie Lassiter will play for the Cards this year, although he remains unsigned and irritated the team put the franchise tag on him. Some kind of training camp holdout seems likely unless he lowers his demands on a long-term contract.

But who will be next to Lassiter at safety? Second-year

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man Adrian Wilson might be, but Wilson might be the choice to move to cornerback to replace the departed Corey Chavous, especially if the Cards manage to re-sign Lassiter's 2001 partner, Pat Tillman.

If Wilson stays at safety, David Barrett goes into the minicamps as Chavous' replacement. But also lurking is 2001 second-round pick Michael Stone, who was disappointing as a rookie, but a player coaches believe has the physical tools to be a starter in the NFL.

That doesn't even factor in another possible free-agent signing (the Cardinals looked into San Francisco's Lance Schulters but Schulters is asking for too much money) or draft pick.

"(The changes) are the nature of the landscape of this business," McGinnis said.

Starks is the starting point, the guy the Cardinals had to get going against San Francisco and St. Louis twice a season.

"I have to go out now and be a dominant defensive player," he said, calling the challenge of covering the 49ers and Rams "all fun and games for me."

But Starks is only 5-foot-10, the same height Barrett is generously listed at. With receivers like the 49ers' Terrell Owens (6-3), the Seahawks' Koren Robinson (6-1) and six-footers Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt of the Rams, it may serve the Cards better to have the 6-3 Wilson play cornerback.

McGinnis said he will put Wilson wherever the team needs him. Wilson said he thinks Ramsey would rather have him play cornerback, but that he personally doesn't have a preference.

"As long as I start somewhere," Wilson said.

Barrett's play has been uneven in his first two seasons, but he has improved and the Cardinals like his speed, an important asset (and one of the reasons Wilson would probably beat out Tillman if the two battle for a safety position). Stone also has that speed, but he was so far behind last season as a rookie he barely logged any time at defensive back in games.

"I definitely want to use the offseason to get my technique down, get the rough points out of my game," Stone said, eager at the possibility of a competition to play opposite Starks. "You need to see some kind of light, and I see that opportunity. It's just up to the rest of us to earn that remaining spot."

EXTRA POINT: The man Starks replaced, former Cardinal Tom Knight, is starting to get more interest around the league. He has visited Cincinnati and Oakland, and New England and Denver might also invite him for a visit.