

Cards give Green pink slip

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Graves gets 3-year extension

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The Cardinals fired their coach Monday.

Yet the theme emanating from the Cards' complex was not of change but continuity.

Dennis Green was out, but vice president of football operations Rod Graves was given a new three-year contract. Meanwhile, the coaching search started with Graves and team vice president Michael Bidwill making one thing crystal clear — the new man better win with the current pieces.

"We will be looking for a coach that will be organized, that will see the opportunities with this football team," Graves said. "We are looking for someone with the best plan given what we have in place currently. I don't see wholesale changes needed."

Green went 16-32 in his three seasons with the Cards. He had one year left on his contract and will still collect about \$2.5 million.

But he didn't win enough, especially this season, when

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CARDS: Bidwill not looking for much turnover

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Bidwill expected a playoff push and instead got a 5-11 record.

As they did three years ago prior to hiring Green, Bidwill and Graves will conduct the coach search and already were lining up interview candidates.

The team will bring in Houston assistant head coach Mike Sherman, who coached Green Bay from 2000-04, Thursday. The Cards also are planning to talk to Titans offensive coordinator Norm Chow, Steelers offensive line coach Russ Grimm, Steelers offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt, Bears defensive coordinator Ron Rivera and Colts assistant head coach/quarterbacks coach Jim Caldwell.

The team is still seeking permission to talk to other NFL assistants, Graves said.

The Cards have a window to interview Rivera and Caldwell next week or wait until their teams are eliminated from the playoffs.

No matter who gets the job, a new coach won't be able to blow up the roster like Green was allowed to do.

"We feel we have a good structure, and there is no reason in my opinion to deviate from that," Graves said.

That includes working with Graves, whose job was thought to be in as much peril as Green's

at midseason. Since Graves took over his current position before the 2003 season, the Cardinals have a 20-44 record.

But Bidwill trumpeted Graves' ability in leading productive drafts and signing key young players to contract extensions as the reasons to give him a new deal.

Bidwill sidestepped a question about whether Graves' job description might change at all; sources have said the Cards have looked into adding someone to help with personnel.

"Ultimately Rod will have final decision on football matters," Bidwill said. "The vision is for the coach to make the football decisions and to have Rod make the draft and free agent decisions."

The team retained seven assistant coaches — offensive line coach Steve Loney, receivers coach Mike Wilson, offensive coordinator Mike Kruczek, defensive line coach Larry Brooks, defensive coordinator Clancy Pendergast, linebackers coach Frank Bush and safeties coach Rick Courtright. The others were fired along with Green.

The new coach is going to be asked to evaluate the holdovers, and the implication from Graves Monday was — in the spirit of continuity — some should be kept as the team goes forward.

"I just didn't think a wholesale turnover of this staff was necessary," Graves said.

Whether that stability helps the team with a new head coach will remain to be seen. While many players privately acknowledged Green made mistakes, they also have issues with another change.

"I feel like we are starting over; that's what I feel right now," Pro Bowl safety Adrian Wilson said. "I just think Denny should be able to see it through. This is not a quick-fix league."

Said fullback Obafemi Ayanbadejo, "It is never a comfortable feeling starting from scratch with a new coach."

But Ayanbadejo added that it was "good" the Cardinals have apparently decided to keep things as stable as possible with the roster and the staff.

In the end, however, the Cards' success will only be as good as the man they pick to be their coach.

"Looking back at the hiring of Coach Green, certainly most people believed (at the time) we had made the right decision," Bidwill said. "To go through a process like that, I think we learned a lot."

"I think we will be successful, and more importantly, look at the team we have; this is a much different situation than it was three years ago. This is something that can be turned around very quickly."

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DENNIS GREEN HIGHLIGHTS

- Rebuilt a roster lacking in star power or talent. Green was part of drafts that saw the Cardinals get a quarterback of the future (Matt Leinart), a Pro Bowl receiver (Larry Fitzgerald) and defensive starters like cornerback Antrel Rolle, linebacker Karlos Dansby and defensive tackle Darnell Dockett, among others.
- Notched his 100th career win at Miami in 2004, a game that snapped a 17-game road losing streak for the Cardinals.
- Cardinals finished as the No. 1-ranked passing team in 2005 with a pair of receivers (Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin) who both finished with more than 100 receptions and 1,400 yards receiving.
- Won NFL's first-ever regular season game on foreign soil when Cards beat San Francisco, 31-14, in Mexico City in 2005.
- Helped recruit key free agents like running back Edgerrin James and defensive end Bertrand Berry.

DENNIS GREEN LOWLIGHTS

- In a year that held such promise after a season-opening win, the Cardinals lost eight straight games in 2006 to all but end playoff hopes by midseason.
- Failed to figure out an effective offensive line through 2 1/2 of his three seasons, helping the Cardinals finish in 2005 with the NFL's fourth-worst rushing season since the AFL-NFL merger.
- Benched Josh McCown on the eve of a game in Carolina in 2004 for Shaun King despite the Cards having won two straight and four of six; the Cards lost to the Panthers, 35-10.
- Went through assistant coaches like tissue paper, firing seven total before the midway point of his third season.
- Under his watch, the Cardinals were the only team to lose to the 2-14 49ers in 2004 and were the first victim of the 2-14 Raiders in 2006.
- Presided over the "Monday Night Meltdown" against Chicago in 2006, the Cards' first "Monday Night Football" appearance in seven years, a 24-23 loss in which the Cards led, 20-0.
- Changed starting quarterbacks six times during his tenure by choice and not because of injury.