

ALL MY EXES LIVE IN TEXAS-----AMONG OTHER PLACES

By Mark Speck

As they watched Super Bowl XXXVII, long-suffering Tampa Bay Buccaneer fans rejoiced. After all the losing seasons, all the jokes, and all the disappointments, their team had finally won it all.

But as they watched the same game, long-suffering Arizona Cardinal fans could only shake their heads. Once again, while they and their team had endured another losing season, more jokes and more disappointments, they had to watch former Cardinals help someone else win an NFL championship.

They had to watch defensive end Simeon Rice, who led the NFC with 15 and a half sacks in 2002, collect five tackles and two sacks and help disrupt the vaunted Raider offense.

They watched Michael Pittman, who had had a solid season for the Bucs, rush for a game high 124 yards.

And they had to sit and watch Jeff Christy, who had played in three Pro Bowls after the Cards had cut him in training camp in '92, open the holes for Pittman and anchor the Bucs offensive line like he had all season long.

This was by no means a new experience for Card fans. They've had to sit thru many a championship game watching ex-Cards win championships for other NFL teams. They've had to watch former Cardinals leave to help some other NFL team win games and achieve success. They've had to watch as the Cardinals gave up on a player and let him go, only to see him move on and become a star somewhere else.

To put it bluntly, the Cardinals, when it comes to player personnel decisions, have never been the sharpest knife in the drawer or the brightest bulb in the box. Year after year, the team has cut players, traded players or simply let them leave thru free agency because this infamously stingy franchise has refused to pay top dollar for talent. And year after year, Cardinal fans have watched these players win games for someone other than the Cardinals.

Most fans get to celebrate what is. Cardinal fans are left to wonder what could have been.

The Tennessee Titans made it to the AFC Championship game in '02 with a lot of help from ex-Cardinals kicker Joe Nedney. Nedney hit on 25 of 31 field goals and scored 111 points as the Titans won 11 of 16 games and the AFC South title. In 2001 he scored 94 points and in 2000 he tallied 126 while connecting on 34 of 38 field goals. All of this after being cut by the Cards in February of 1999.

Come to think of it, the Cardinals could probably kick themselves after the way they've handled some of their kickers. In 1991 they released Al Del Greco. He hooked on with the Oilers and had 8 100-point seasons. He helped get the Titans into Super Bowl XXXIV, and led the NFL in '98 with 36 field goals. He was so good that when he retired he was 8th on the all-time NFL scoring list.

The man right behind him on the list was Pat Leahy, who had a long solid career with the Jets. He tallied 6 100-point seasons and wound up with a career total of 1,470 points scored. All of this after the Cards cut him in training camp in 1974.

This trend goes all the way back to the 1950's. The Cards traded a kicker named Pat Summerall to New York after the '57 season. He promptly went on to help the Giants get into three NFL title games in 4 years. He was a dependable kicker and great in the clutch, and led the NFL with 20 field goals in 1959.

But back to more recent events, and more recent Cardinal personnel gaffes. Garrison Hearst had an injury plagued start to his Cardinal career. He missed most of both the '93 and '94 seasons with knee troubles. But in '95 he was healthy and rushed for 1,070 yards. Still, the Cards were not convinced that Hearst could be a dependable runner. So, they put him on waivers. He signed a one-year deal with the Bengals and ran for 847 yards in '96. Sounds pretty dependable. He left as a free agent and signed with the Niners. In '97 he was back at the top of his game, running for 1,019 yards and helping the 49ers get into the NFC Championship game. In 1998 he was even better, rushing for 1,570 yards and leading the NFC with a 5.1 yards per carry average. Then he sustained a devastating knee injury and missed all of the next two seasons. But the 49ers showed why they have been a successful franchise and the Cardinals have not. Instead of giving up on Garrison, the Niners were patient. It paid off. In 2001, he ran for 1,206 yards and also caught a career high 41 passes. In 2002 he led the 49ers in rushing again with 972

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yards and snared 48 passes out of the backfield. Arizona fans could only shake their heads, and dream of a backfield with Hearst and Michael Pittman together.

Another member of that same backfield could be Larry Centers. A member of the Cards since 1990, Centers was one of the league's best pass catching threats coming out of the backfield. In 1995 he grabbed 101 passes and a year later 99 more. After the '98 season and nine solid years, Arizona simply cut him. The Redskins grabbed him like Centers caught passes out of the backfield. He snared 69 passes in '99 and 81 more in 2000. With the Bills in 2001 Larry led the team with 80 receptions.

The St. Louis Rams won one Super Bowl and played in another with help from ex-Cards Ricky Proehl and Aeneas Williams.

Proehl played for the Cards from 1990 to 94, then was traded to Seattle for a 4th round draft choice that was later traded to the Jets. So the Cards got very little in return for a fine receiver who had averaged 57 catches a season. In 1997 he caught 58 passes for the Bears, and a year later grabbed 60 for the Rams. In the '99 NFC title game, he caught the winning touchdown pass from Kurt Warner with 4 :44 left to put the Rams in the Super Bowl. In Super Bowl XXXVI, he put the Rams ahead with 1 :30 left with a 26-yard scoring reception. Despite the Rams problems in '02, Proehl had another productive season, snaring 43 passes.

Cardinal fans still wonder why Aeneas Williams is not wearing the Big Red. Not only is Aeneas an extremely gifted cornerback, he's the type of veteran presence in the locker room that every successful team needs. He's the guy that youngsters like Kwamie Lassiter went to for advice and guidance. He tied for the NFC lead in interceptions in his rookie year with 6, and in 1994 he tied for the lead in the NFL with 9 picks. He also returned 5 interceptions for touchdowns during his tenure with the Cards, and made 6 straight Pro Bowls. Still, after the 2000 season, like many before him, Aeneas was no longer a Cardinal, traded to the Rams for a couple draft picks. Williams made an immediate impact with the Rams, and helped them get back into the Super Bowl in 2001. In the divisional playoffs against the Packers, Aeneas returned two interceptions for touchdowns in the Rams 45-17 rout. Meanwhile, the Cards were stumbling thru a few more losing seasons, desperately looking for a veteran presence, a respected player to show leadership on the field and in the locker room. Someone, say, like Aeneas Williams ?

The Falcons made it to Super Bowl XXXIII with a lot of help from quarterback Chris Chandler, who had left the Cards after the '93 season. Chris threw for 3,154 yards and 25 touchdowns in 1998, and he also played in two Pro Bowls with Atlanta.

Strong Safety Tim McDonald left the Cards and played in three Pro Bowls for the Niners. He was the starting strong safety in Super Bowl XXIX as the Niners crushed the Chargers. He returned 2 interceptions for touchdowns in '95 and solidified the Niner defensive secondary.

Jay Novacek was an up-and-coming young tight end in the NFL in the late 1980s. He seemed to be just coming into his own when the Cards decided to let him go. Novacek signed with Dallas and became one of the best tight ends in the NFL. He caught 59 passes in both '90 and '91 and 64 in '92. He played in three straight Pro Bowls and was an integral part of the Cowboys mini-dynasty in the early '90s.

After the '86 season, the Cards let O.J. Anderson go. They said he was « too old ». Ottis was so old, he went to the Giants and gained 1,023 yards in '89 and 784 more in 1990. He was so decrepit he managed to drag his weary bones across the goalline 14 times in '89 and 11 times in '90. To add insult to insult, Card fans watched O.J. garner the MVP award in the Giants win over the Bills in Super Bowl XXV.

The Cards released Dan Audick in '78. He went on to play for the Chargers in the 1980 AFC Championship and was then the starting left tackle for the Niners in Super Bowl XVI.

In 1973, the Cards made Purdue defensive tackle Dave Butz their Number One draft pick. He played in 12 games his rookie season and then a knee injury cut short his sophomore year. The Cards didn't think Butz was living up to their expectations—but seriously how high could Cardinal expectations be?—so they let him play out his option and in 1975 he signed with the Redskins. Butz became a fixture at defensive tackle and then nose guard for the Skins, and made the Pro Bowl in '84. He anchored the Skins defensive line and played in three Super Bowls and for two NFL champions.

The Vikings owe at least some of their success in the 1970s to three former Cardinals. Cornerback Nate Wright was traded to Minnesota for linebacker Mike McGill, who would never be mistaken for Dick Butkus, and defensive back Dale Hackbart, who was so far over the hill even George Allen couldn't see him. By 1973 both were out of football. Wright meanwhile, helped the Vikings win three NFC Championships and played in three Super Bowls. He intercepted 31 passes for the Vikes, including 7 in 1976.

John Gilliam had caught 139 passes in three seasons with the Cards. He was rewarded by being shipped to Minnesota for perennial back up quarterback Gary Cuozzo. Cuozzo was, you guessed it, a back up to Jim Hart and in his only season with the

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Cards threw 11 interceptions and 5 touchdown passes. Gilliam, meanwhile, became an All-Pro, who in his first season with the Vikings led the NFL in yards per catch with a 22.0 yard average. He played in two Super Bowls and four Pro Bowls with the Vikings.

Ahmad Rashad was still named Bobby Moore when the Cards gave up on him. He was traded to Buffalo for quarterback Dennis Shaw, who threw all of eight passes in 2 years of riding the pine in St. Louis. Rashad wound up in Minnesota, and played in four Pro Bowls and helped get the Vikings into Super Bowl XI. He had two seasons with over 1,000 yards in receptions and 6 times had over 50 catches.

Cardinal fans, meanwhile, could only dream of a team with Mel Gray, Gilliam and Rashad all lining up as receivers.

Another team that enjoyed success in the early to mid 1970s thanks to the efforts of a former Cardinal were the Redskins. Cornerback Pat Fischer was a member of the Cardinals defensive backfield from 1961 to 1967. He was a solid pro and intercepted 8 passes in '63 and 10 in '64. He made the Pro Bowl twice. But after the '67 season, the Cards let him play out his option and he signed with Washington. Fischer went on to play 10 years in D.C. and was one of the toughest cornerbacks in football. He was a Pro Bowl selection in '69 and was a starter in Super Bowl VII.

Center Bob DeMarco played nine years for the Cards, and was, like Fischer, a solid performer, earning a spot on three Pro Bowl teams. For all his efforts, he was waived by the Cards after the '69 season. He wound up in Miami and was the starting center for the Dolphins in Super Bowl VI.

Two AFL teams found success thanks to gifts from the Cardinals. Linebacker Garland Boyette was let go by the Cards after the '63 season. He wound up with the Oilers and played in the '68 AFL All Star Game and helped Houston make it to the AFL title game in 1967 and into the playoffs in '69.

Offensive tackle Tom Day was the 20th round draft choice for the Cards in 1960, and lasted a year with the Birds. They cut him and the Buffalo Bills grabbed him. The Bills converted him to defensive tackle and he became one of the AFL's top defensive linemen. He played in the '65 AFL All-Star Game and played a part in the Bills winning AFL Championships in '64 and '65, and getting into a third straight title game in '66.

The Cardinals haven't had much luck with coaches either. Leeman Bennett, Red Miller, and Joe Gibbs were all one-time Cardinal assistants who never had a chance at the head coaching position. They went on to success elsewhere.

After the 1977 season, head coach Don Coryell, who had turned this sorry franchise around and led it to two straight division titles in 1974 and '75, found that he had been locked out of his own office by Owner Bill Bidwell. Coryell subsequently resigned or was fired, depending on who you ask. In any event, the Cards had lost a fine coach with a brilliant offensive mind, and they have never recovered. Coryell, meanwhile, went to San Diego, where he led the Chargers to three straight division titles and built the team into one of the most feared offensive machines in pro football history.

In 1948, after the Cards lost the NFL championship to the Eagles 7-0 in the famous Snow Bowl, head coach Jimmy Conzelman resigned. The Cards were a strong young team that won the NFL title in '47 and made it back to the championship game in '48. But true to form, and in what would become a franchise tradition, the Cardinal front office was about to make the worst out of a good situation.

The co-owners of the team, Walter and Violet Wolfner on one side and Ray Bennigsen on the other, couldn't decide on a replacement for the departed Conzelman. Bennigsen preferred assistant coach Buddy Parker. The Wolfners, meanwhile, favored Phil Handler. Why they did is anyone's guess. In his last stint as Cardinal head coach, in 1943 to 45, Handler went 1 and 29. That's right, 1 and 29. So, in true Cardinal fashion, since they couldn't decide which one to pick, they named Handler and Parker co-coaches. This, as the old saying goes, may have seemed like a good idea at the time. But the team floundered under its two bosses and lost 4 of its first 6 games. Handler was finally kicked upstairs, and Parker was put in charge. The team finished the season 4-1-1. Did the owners then retain Parker as head coach? No way. C'mon these are the Cardinals we're talking about here. At the end of the season, the owners let Parker walk and he beat a path to Detroit, where he turned the Lions into a powerhouse in the 1950s. The Cards, meanwhile, suffered thru the 50s as one of the NFL's also-rans, winning 33 and losing 84 under a parade of coaches.

What could have been. Cardinal fans have been wondering this for years. What could have been if the Cards had retained Parker as coach. What could have been if they'd have kept Coryell in '77. What could have been if they'd hired Joe Gibbs to coach the team. What could have been if they'd kept players like Fischer, Butz, Anderson, Proehl, Williams, Hearst and Rice. We'll never know. Because there are some franchises that have a tradition of winning using someone else's discards. . Some franchises have a tradition of winning by grooming talent and building thru the draft. Some franchises have a tradition of winning by making all the right moves at the right time, and knowing which players to keep and which players to get rid of. But then there

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are the Cardinals, a sorry franchise with one NFL Championship in the last 75 years, who have a sad tradition of losing because they dump players they should keep and, more often than not, keep players they should let go. Bad trades, bad decisions, bad coaching.

And the fans sit and shake their heads, and watch former Cardinals win Super Bowls and championships for other teams. And wonder what could have been.