

**THIRD TIME:** Arizona's Kurt Warner celebrates after earning a trip to Tampa for his third, and the Cardinals' first, Super Bowl. JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

## It's all in the Cards

### Underdog Arizona has what it takes to beat the Steelers

By **DREW CARLUCCI**  
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On the NFL's biggest stage, the Arizona Cardinals will take on the underdog role and face the Pittsburgh Steelers in a second consecutive year of NFC David versus AFC Goliath. Last year of course, the New York Giants did the unthinkable and defeated the 18-0 New England Patriots.

For much of their existence, the Cardinals have been one of the NFL's worst teams. The team hasn't won anything of significance since 1947 when they won the NFL Championship as the Chicago Cardinals.

Since that time, the franchise moved twice—to St. Louis in 1960 and to Phoenix in 1988—hired 23 head coaches, and had a record of 349 wins, 509 losses, and 15 ties. But their luck would change.

In 2006, the Cardinals moved from Sun Devil Stadium, the official home of Arizona State University's football team, into their new \$500 million stadium in Glendale, Arizona.

Since the stadium move, things have gone well for the team. They acquired Pro Bowl wideout Larry Fitzgerald, linebacker Karlos Dansby, and free-agents Kurt Warner and former Colts running back Edgerrin James.

#### The return of Kurt

Warner, of course, is famous for leading the "Greatest Show on Turf" St. Louis Rams to a Super Bowl

victory in 1999 against the Tennessee Titans. In that game, Warner threw for a record 414 passing yards with two touchdowns and was named MVP.

Warner's comeback wasn't an easy one. After being named MVP and winning that Super Bowl with the Rams, he was released by the team in 2004 and was considered by many teams to be at the end of his career.

But later that year the New York Giants signed him to a one-year deal. After reviving his career with the Giants and providing excellent mentoring to first-round pick Eli Manning, Warner signed a one year, \$4 million contract with the Cards in 2005 and was named starting QB.

He struggled behind a weak offensive line and eventually lost his job to highly touted Matt Leinart, a first round pick of the Cards in 2006 from USC.

However, even though he was drafted with much fanfare, Leinart failed to focus on football and was later hampered by injuries. After a rough start in 2007, Warner edged him out of the starting lineup. The savvy veteran QB never looked back.

With Kurt at the helm in 2008, the Cardinals started the season 7-3, were fourth in total offense, and second in the league in passing yardage. Warner also threw for 4,583 yards and 30 touchdowns with 14 interceptions.

After losing four of their last six games in the regular season, Warner helped the team rebound and led

them into the postseason for the first time since 1998.

They would go on to win their first home playoff game in 60 years, defeating the Atlanta Falcons 30-24 and would, a week later, blow out the second-seeded Carolina Panthers on the road 33-13.

Returning to Arizona, Warner helped cap off his team's incredible postseason run by leading them over the surging Philadelphia Eagles 32-25. Looking very much like an All-Pro, Warner threw for 279 yards, four touchdowns, and zero interceptions.

The Cardinals have also shown a lot of grit. We all know they can score points, but after blowing a 24-6 lead, they retook the lead against the Eagles in the final minutes and proved themselves defensively with the game on the line.

With a resurgent former Super Bowl MVP at the helm, a solid running game, and an offensive line that has done a spectacular job in the postseason, the Cardinals have a very real shot at winning it all.

Along with their offensive line, the Cards' defensive line has also stepped up and shut down opposing teams on the ground, limiting the running games of Atlanta, Carolina, and Philadelphia to less than 200 yards combined.

Against a strong running team like Pittsburgh, controlling the trenches will be key in preventing them from establishing the run to set up the pass.

Another factor to consider is that Arizona's head coach Ken Whisenhunt was the offensive coordinator for the Steelers when they won Super Bowl XL in 2005. If anyone knows the Steelers offense inside and out, and how to slow it down, it's him.

## Kaka's loyalty to AC Milan stronger than money

MILAN (Reuters)—Kaka's decision to stay at AC Milan and reject Manchester City is a huge boost for a faltering Italian Serie A and goes against the notion that money always rules in soccer.

"It is an important sign for all Italian football," Italian league president Antonio Matarrese said in a statement.

"Financial resources have not come but an asset has stayed. It is a matter of great prestige which enriches the value of Milan and our league."

Brazil forward Kaka, a quiet and religious man with mesmerizing skill, has turned down the world's richest club and reported earnings that have never been seen before in soccer.

Record offer  
Manchester City is struggling in 11th place in the English Premier League and have enjoyed scant success in England, never mind Europe, since the 1970s. Kaka knew it would take a long time for them to challenge for titles.

Milan, who won their seventh European Cup in 2007 thanks to Kaka's brilliance, were bound to consider a world record offer which reports said was about 110 million euros (€175 million).

Kaka has not begrudged Milan for evaluating the offer and giving him the chance to make the final decision. Instead, he has repaid all the faith the club showed in him when taking the promising but unproven youngster from Sao Paulo in 2003.

Some commentators have suggested the whole saga was a big publicity stunt by Milan and owner Silvio Berlusconi, but there is no doubting the emotion Kaka felt at last Saturday's 1-0 home win over Fiorentina in Serie A.

The San Siro was packed with banners asking him to stay and songs hailing the 2007 world and European player of the year reverberated throughout.

Fan demonstrations outside Milan's club offices and Kaka's

home also showed him that he would struggle to have the same bond with supporters anywhere else in the world.

Kaka had also witnessed what happened to once-great striker Andriy Shevchenko when he left Milan for Chelsea in similar circumstances in 2006. The Ukrainian had a terrible time in England and came back to Milan half the player he was.

"My family has been amazing and not once did they push me to go one way or the other. In the end what counted was my history, where I am tied to and where, in reality, my heart is," Kaka said.

Family is so important to the Brazilian that Milan even recruited his brother Digao, an average soccer player at best, to give him some company in Italy after he first arrived.

Kaka also knows he is part of a bigger family, that of AC Milan, and it will take a lot more than money to take him away.

## Canucks struggling after Sundin joins team

Time needed for Sundin and for Roberto Luongo's form to return

By **KARL YU**  
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VANCOUVER—Playing the free-agent game in pro sports is kind of like going all-in in poker or betting it all in the spin of a roulette wheel—it's a high-risk high-reward proposition.

The NFL's Green Bay Packers signed Reggie White as a free agent in 1993 and he became a key component on the Super Bowl XXXI winning team. The "Minister of Defense" ranks #2 in career sacks.

By contrast, the Texas Rangers added pitcher Chan Ho Park for the 2002 season via free agency—he lasted only three seasons and his ERA never dipped below 5.46.

Prior to Christmas, the Vancouver Canucks signed prized free agent centre Mats Sundin to a reported \$5 million deal for half of the season, and while the former Toronto Maple Leaf captain had yet to crack the 10-game mark, his presence hasn't provided a spark for the Canucks.

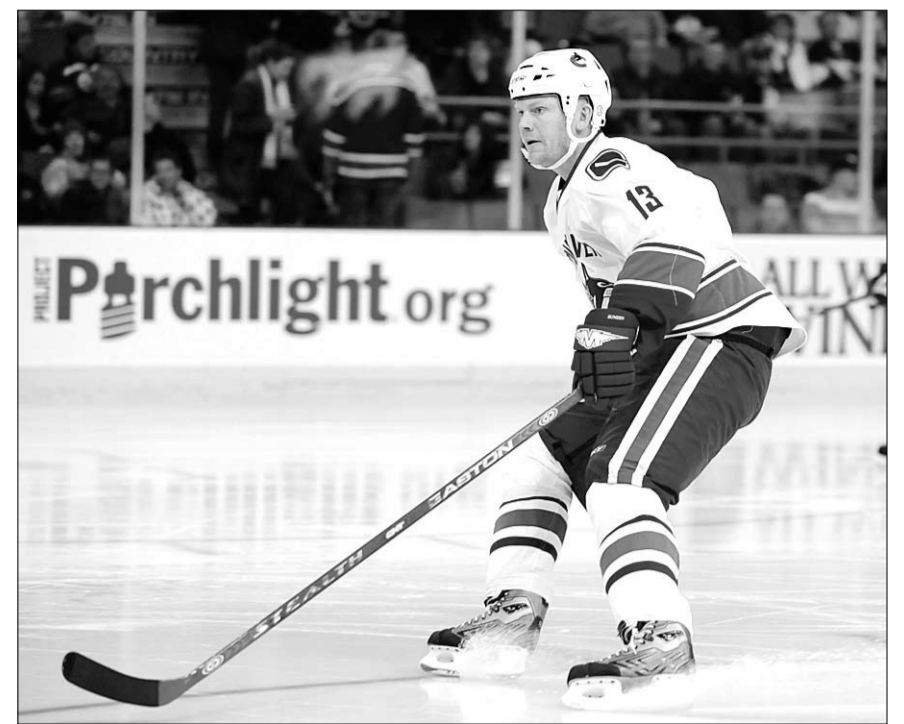
Ever since Sundin made his Vancouver debut on January 7, Vancouver has played in seven games, and has been an abysmal 1-4-2 but is no. 13 the reason the Canucks are having bad luck?

A 1-4-2 record would seem to point to yes but if you really look closely, the Canucks new player hasn't had enough time to get adjusted yet and he's not the only one.

Defense wins games and nowhere is that more evident than in hockey—if you don't have good goaltending, chances are you won't win many games.

The Canucks have arguably the best goalie in the league in Roberto Luongo, who was 11-5-2 prior to a game against the Penguins in Pittsburgh on November 22.

Luongo suffered a groin injury



**SLOW START:** Mats Sundin has three points in seven games since joining the Canucks. IAN JACKSON/GETTY IMAGES

in that fateful game and only returned to the lineup three games ago. He is 0-1-1 since returning and is rusty. The Canucks went 10-12-3 in his absence.

And much like his goalie, rust is also something Sundin has been trying to shake off.

Prior to his Vancouver debut, the last action Sundin saw was at the end of the 2007-08 season with Toronto—eight months without game action—however the newest Canuck has shown a pulse lately.

While Sundin failed to register a point in his first two games, he has points in three of his last five—two goals and an assist—and in last Sunday's game against the Columbus Blue Jackets, no. 13 put a beautiful back-hander past Steve Mason in the second period of what would end up as a 6-5 shootout loss.

But even though he still needs to get up to speed with his teammates, who are in midseason form, Sundin believes Vancouver has the horses to compete.

"I think we have all the players

here to be a playoff team and be a good team that can go far in the playoffs," Sundin said after the Columbus game.

"I think we all have to help out and keep the puck out of the net, that's the most important thing."

Although some fans are calling for head coach Alain Vigneault to be fired in the midst of the team's slump, the coach seems confident that once his two star players are back in the groove, the team's play will pick up.

"But those are real professionals, you're talking about Roberto, you're talking about Mats, and any other guy on our team," Vigneault said on the team's Web site.

"They're working extremely hard to get on track and that's why we, as coaches or management, are going to be behind those players."

"We're confident that when they do get their game to where it needs to be we're going to get on a roll."

With the key injuries it might be best to reserve judgment on the team until after the all-star break.

## A day for African-American athletes to stand tall

DETROIT (Reuters)—From the Australian Open to NBA locker rooms and playgrounds across the U.S., African-American athletes stood a little taller on Tuesday as Barack Obama was sworn in as the country's 44th president.

It was with special pride that American athletes shared in the historic moment because it was on their fields and inside their arenas where some of the most important battles against prejudice and segregation have been waged.

But even as America embraced its first black president, there are signs that old prejudices remain at the highest level of American sports.

On the momentous day that Obama stepped forward to take the oath of office, the NFL was still enforcing the "Rooney Rule" requiring all teams to interview at least one minority candidate for any vacant head coaching position.

Even the NCAA was not above the fray, fending off charges of racism sparked by the lack of black head coaches in college football.

At NASCAR races, the Confederate flag still flutters from motor homes parked in the infield even as America's most popular motor racing series tries to shed its "good ol' boy" image by reaching out to minorities with a driver diversity program.

#### Breaking barriers

While a few colour barriers remain to be broken, black athletes have transformed America's sporting landscape and along it with the social values and attitudes that helped clear Obama's path to the White House.

Jackie Robinson, who famously broke baseball's colour barrier in 1947, Willie O'Ree, the first black NHL player, Wayne Embry, the first African-American to be named general manager and then president of an NBA team, all nudged Martin Luther King's dream closer to the reality with their fearless determination.

Other notable achievers included Indianapolis Colts Tony Dungy, the first African-American to coach a Super Bowl champion, tennis player Arthur Ashe, the first black American man to win a grand slam title, and golfer Tiger Woods.

Jesse Owens undermined Adolf Hitler's theories of Aryan racial superiority at the 1936 Berlin Olympics by winning four gold medals



**THE GREATEST:** Muhammad Ali would be proud as Obama takes office. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

while Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their clenched fists from the podium at the 1968 Mexico Summer Games in a silent protest that was heard around the world.

#### Ali legacy

But perhaps there has been no more eloquent voice in the struggle against racial intolerance than world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, who tossed his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River after being refused service at a "whites-only" restaurant.

"For Muhammad, it's probably something he thought he'd never see in his lifetime," said Ali's wife Lonnie speaking for her husband at Kentucky's Bluegrass Inaugural Ball in Washington on Monday night.

"For Barack Obama to be sworn in as president, it's almost a dream, a fulfillment of Muhammad's legacy, everything he believed, everything he worked for."

"Muhammad believes in the good of man. He believes every human being on earth has good in their heart."

"Sometimes you have to look a little deeper to find it. But it's there."

"It's going to be a legacy fulfilled not only for Muhammad but for so many Americans, and for so many people who have since departed this world such as Martin Luther King, who we should honor as well."

"It has been the work of all these

people. Even names we do not know."

That anonymous group would include the 1958 Buffalo Bulls who rejected an invitation to the Tangerine Bowl because segregation policies would not allow two black players to participate.

#### Defiant stand

Their defiant stand against racism went virtually unnoticed for nearly 50 years until the Bulls finally made it to their first Bowl game playing in the International Bowl against the Connecticut Huskies in Toronto on January 3.

During the buildup to the game, tributes poured in from across the United States. Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson made the trip to Toronto to honor the members of the 1958 team at a kickoff luncheon hailing their stand as heroic, resulting in the "greatest game never played."

"There is a line from that university at Buffalo stand to Barack being elected president in 2008," said Jackson.

"Champions are different than heroes."

"There's a champion of every ball game. Whoever won the ball game is a champion. Champions are a dime a dozen."

"When you win the game the coach of a champion rides on the players' shoulders. Heroes ride on the people's shoulders."