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Kurt Warner writes his own ending

By Bernie Miklasz, St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sports Columnist

Ten years ago today, the Rams won the Super Bowl. The winning touchdown pass was a 73-yard dream from Kurt Warner to Isaac Bruce that floated above the reach of the Tennessee Titans and straight into history. It was mystical, unbelievable, a special moment that became the memory of a lifetime. One flick of Warner's right wrist, and all of those sad, sorry, losing Sundays disappeared.

Friday afternoon, Kurt Warner said goodbye as a player. At a news conference in Arizona, No. 13 announced his retirement after 12 NFL seasons and one of the most unusual and improbable careers in the history of American sports.

Watching it, I wanted to be sad.

I wanted to turn back the clock. I wanted to make the last few seasons of Rams football go away, just as Warner and his teammates made all of those bad memories go away in 1999.

I can't believe it's been 10 years since the 1999 season, and the rollout of "The Greatest Show on Turf," Warner to Bruce, Mike Jones and "The Tackle," and the triumph of Super Bowl XXXIV.

But as I watched Warner explain his decision to move into another phase of his life, the melancholy lifted. Let's realize how fortunate he is. Warner leaves with his health intact to savor a fulfilling life with Brenda and their seven children. Warner exits the stage as a winner, having led futile franchises in St. Louis and Arizona to three Super Bowl trips against all odds.

Warner departs on his terms. He isn't broken down. His skills haven't deteriorated. He didn't stay too long. He didn't embarrass himself in a money grab. Warner wasn't an aging Willie Mays losing a fly ball in the sun in 1973. He wasn't a diminished Muhammad Ali, getting battered by Larry Holmes. He wasn't Michael Jordan, fading into irrelevance in the odd colors of the Washington Wizards. He wasn't John Unitas, limping around as a San Diego Charger.

How many star athletes know when to leave on time? Not many. A list of those who managed to pull it off includes Barry Sanders, Jim Brown, Sandy Koufax, Larry Bird, Ted Williams, Ozzie Smith. Well, place Warner's name among them. He made it to the mountaintop but had the good sense to know when it was time to walk down, and find a new path to take him onto the next journey and a new challenge.

And that's why I'm happy for Warner. He won. In a few years, he went from tossing cans of greenbeans to co-workers on the overnight shift at the Hy-Vee store to throwing the TD pass that won a Super Bowl. How many athletes realize their wildest dreams? How many athletes can retire knowing they enhanced their sport? Or that they inspired millions of fans through their display of perseverance and personal character?

"I wanted people to remember that anything is possible," Warner said at his news conference. "With my story, and the fact that it took me so long to get here, I know there are a lot of people that gravitate to that part of it. That understand the struggles. That ... understand when it takes a little bit longer to try to achieve your goal. There are moments that you want to give up and you question whether you should continue to follow your dream.

"I think I'm a living example of when you make yourself useful, when you continue to work hard, when you continue to believe in yourself, and when God wants to use you in a special way, that anything is possible. I hope that when people think back on my career, that's what they remember more than anything else."

Warner did something else important during his career: He restored some of our lost faith in athletes. They're not all frauds or phonies or too good to be true. Warner is a genuinely noble man who treated everyone with class and respect, including those like me who largely wrote him off as a beaten-down, damaged-goods quarterback in 2003.

I figured it out later.

I didn't really underestimate the quarterback; I underestimated the man and the amazing resolve that he summoned to overcome the injuries and a staggering mid-career slump.

The professional quarterback had to make a comeback.

The person -Warner's soul - never went away, or got lost.

Off the field, Warner recognized that he could make a positive difference by serving his community, and he acted upon that generous instinct in many ways even during the most difficult times of his career.