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BRUCE SEALS RAMS' FAIRYTALE VICTORY

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ATLANTA -- Kurt Warner needed a co-author to finish his storybook season in fairytale fashion. He turned to Isaac Bruce.

The pair hooked up on a 73-yard touchdown play that showed the tenacious Titans the downside of miracles and delivered the Rams their first NFL championship since 1951.

The Rams struggled to come away with this win. After taking a 16-0 lead midway through the third quarter, they allowed the Titans to roar back and tie the game with 2:12 left in regulation.

While Tennessee staged its resurgence, the St. Louis offense slept. Two three-and-outs by Warner and friends were sandwiched between two Titans touchdowns and an Al Del Greco field goal. Bruce knew it was time for action.

"Our defense had been on the field for a long time and it started wearing on them," said Bruce. "They got a little tired and we knew we had to make a play. We didn't want to go to overtime with these guys."

Following a 17-yard kickoff return by Tony Horne, the Rams took over at their 27. Offensive coordinator Mike Martz made the call: "Twins right, ace right, 999 halfback balloon." Bruce's job was to take advantage of man-to-man coverage and go deep down the right side of the field.

"We had five seconds left before the two-minute warning," said Martz. "We wanted to take a shot to Isaac over there, and we hadn't gotten it done during the game for whatever reason. I thought we'd take a shot. If we got it, great. If not, the two-minute warning would kick off and [Bruce] could rest."

As Warner uncorked a pass to his favorite deep threat, he took a hit from Titans defensive end Jevon Kearse. Bruce slowed down and slipped behind cornerback Denard Walker to catch the slightly underthrown pass at the Tennessee 38. From there, Bruce cruised into the end zone and Super Bowl history.

And just like that, the Rams had again landed a big one at a critical time. The strategy had paid off in the NFC Championship Game, when Warner hit Ricky Proehl on third-and-4 for a game-winning, 30-yard touchdown pass with under five minutes left.

"I know his mentality," Bruce said of Martz. "He's a guy that likes to score points from the field at any time. He likes to throw it up, and I'm glad to have him as my offensive coordinator."

The Super Bowl-winning grab was hardly Bruce's first clutch play of the night. Each of his six receptions went for first downs. Bruce contributed catches good for 11 and 15 yards on a second-quarter drive that culminated in a 29-yard Jeff Wilkins field goal. He added a 15-yard reception on the next drive, which also ended with a field goal.

Early in the third quarter, Warner and Bruce connected on a 31-yard pass that brought the Rams to the Titans 26. Four plays later, a 9-yard touchdown catch by Torry Holt gave them a 16-0 lead.

The 162-yard performance capped a remarkable season for Bruce, who earned Pro Bowl honors for the second time while recording 77 catches for 1,165 yards and 12 touchdowns. He also played in every game after hamstring injuries kept him out of 11 contests in 1998 and four in 1997.

After the game, Bruce reflected on the trying path he's taken as a professional. When the second-round pick out of Memphis joined the Rams in 1994, they were still based in Los Angeles. One year later the organization moved to St. Louis, where it endured four more years of losing -- until now.

"It's been six long years, coming from L.A. here to St. Louis," he said. "[This win's] for all the ex-Rams: Jerome Bettis, Troy Drayton, even Darryl Henley. It goes out to all the ex-Rams."

And Bruce's championship season goes out in style.