



Redskins Legacy: Cardinals Doom Hot Redskins

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By the midway point of the 1996 season, the Redskins were riding high at 7-1 with a hold on first place in the NFC East. They had captured seven straight games after losing the season opener, marking the team's longest win streak since its 1991 Super Bowl-winning season. Redskins fans could taste a division title and possible home field advantage in the playoffs.



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Redskins-Cardinals Through The Years

But cornerback Darrell Green tried to put matters in perspective, saying “we’re not that good.” The future Hall of Famer apparently knew what he was talking about, as the Redskins lost six of their last eight games to finish 9-7 and miss the playoffs.

The Arizona Cardinals did their part, too, to deflate Washington’s once-lofty season.

Then one of five teams in the NFC East, the Cardinals beat the Redskins twice in the second half of the year, both times on last-second field goals. Their second clash in the next-to-last game knocked Washington out of playoff contention.

The Redskins began the second half with a 25-point loss to Buffalo before hosting the Cardinals at RFK Stadium. Washington’s defense, which yielded 476 yards and 31 first downs to the Bills, was even more pitiful against Arizona, which gained 615 yards – the most ever allowed by the Redskins in their long history.

Most of the Cardinals’ yardage came off the arm of 35-year-old quarterback Boomer Esiason, who was subbing for injured starter Kent Graham. Benched earlier in the year, the former University of Maryland star threw for 522 yards, third-most in NFL history at the time and the most against the Redskins since Giants quarterback Y.A. Tittle totaled 505 in a game during the 1961 season.

Against the Redskins that day, Esiason completed 35-of-59 passes, with three touchdowns and four interceptions. He rallied the Cardinals from a 27-13 deficit to a 34-34 tie at the end of regulation, and looked superhuman in the fourth quarter and overtime, when he connected on 23-of-35 passes for 351 yards with two touchdowns.

The overtime period, which included five field-goal attempts and two critical Redskins penalties, was bizarre. Arizona won the coin toss and drove to the Redskins' 15, but kicker Kevin Butler missed a 32-yard field goal.

The Cardinals regained possession but fumbled, setting up a 38-yard try by Redskins kicker Scott Blanton. His kick was good with 3:18 left, but tight end Scott Galbraith was called for holding, a penalty that Redskins head coach Norv Turner called "inexcusable."



Blanton missed from 48 yards out, and Arizona drove to the Redskins' 19. Butler's field goal hit the goal post with 37 seconds left. However, Redskins safety Darryl Morrison was ruled offsides, and Butler was true from 32 yards out, ending a heart-wrenching game for the Redskins and their fans.

"We got to the point where we were beating them, and we figured that we had the game won before it was over," Redskins linebacker Ken Harvey, a former Cardinal, said years later.

"There's no such thing."

The Redskins rebounded with a 26-21 win over the Eagles to regain sole possession of first place in the NFC East. Then came a four-game losing streak capped by a 27-26 loss to the Cardinals at Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, Ariz.

As with the first game between the two teams, the Redskins blew a second-half lead. They were up, 23-14, in the third quarter, but the Cardinals scored 10 straight points, including a 21-yard touchdown pass from Graham to receiver Frank Sanders. Washington regained the lead on Blanton's 35-yard field goal with 7:14 left, but the Butler did it again with a 28-yarder in the waning seconds to account for Arizona's win.

Afterward, the Redskins blamed themselves for the implosion.

"I've been coaching long enough to know anything can happen," said Turner, then in his third season in D.C. "As soon as you take something for granted, you've got trouble. We just have to find a way to play better."

In their final game at RFK, where they played for 36 seasons before moving to FedExField, the Redskins closed out with a 37-10 rout of Dallas, which won the NFC East at 10-6. The Eagles went 10-6 to earn a wild card spot.

If only the Redskins had won one more game to also finish 10-6.

Then again, they ran into those resurgent Arizona Cardinals.

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