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MANAGEMENT

NFL Champion Coach Joe Gibbs Outclassed His Rivals

By MIKE RICHMAN, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY
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Gibbs took over the Redskins in 1981, won the NFL title the next year and tacked on two more crowns on the way to his Hall of Fame induction. AP [View Enlarged Image](#)

Coached the Redskins to three NFL championships.
Overcame: An 0-5 start in his first season as head coach.
Lesson: Let your accomplishments do the talking.

"Joe Gibbs was just very thorough in every facet of the game. He had a great mannerism with his players, assistant coaches. Just a wonderful human being, very bright, a good person, very ethical. Everything you'd want in a coach, Gibbs had," said coach Don Shula.

Winning Attitude

Despite his string of success, he never took anything for granted.

"You don't want to have greater expectations than what you should have," Gibbs, 71, told IBD. "It's a tough league, people can get hurt, and every year you've got to go out there and have things go your way to a certain degree. Everything can be in place, and it can be taken away

Joe Gibbs let his coaching on game day do the talking.

He refused to mouth off during the week for fear it would create distractions for his team and motivate opponents.

Case in point: When bombastic Philadelphia Eagles coach Buddy Ryan said a few days before a playoff game in January 1991 that Washington running back Earnest Byner would fumble three times, reporters pressed Gibbs for a response.

The Redskins' coach refused to take Ryan's bait.

Gibbs' silence spoke volumes about his disregard for triviality.

"Joe was every bit as competitive as Buddy if not more, but he just never let it show because he understood that the whole circus act during the week didn't matter," Ray Didinger, a sportswriter at the time for the Philadelphia Daily News, told IBD. "All that mattered was what you did once the ball was kicked off. That was the way he prepared his team and that was the way they played against the Eagles."

The Redskins beat the Eagles that day 20-6, one of Gibbs' most gratifying victories in his 16-year National Football League coaching career. Helping the coach have the last laugh were Byner's 77 yards receiving, 49 rushing — and no fumbles.

Including that wild-card game, Gibbs boasted a playoff winning percentage of .708. That and his regular-season mark of .621 are among the best for coaches with at least 100 victories.

Gibbs' Keys

in one quarter. So there are no guarantees."

Gibbs coached in Washington during two stretches.

His era of fame was from 1981 to 1992, when the Redskins had three Super Bowl triumphs, five division titles and eight playoff appearances. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, in 1996.

He came back in 2004, coached the Redskins to the playoffs twice and left after the 2007 season.

Gibbs has been competitive in many areas. As an intense center and linebacker, he played at San Diego State but saw he lacked the talent to advance as a player.

Determined to pursue his passion, he stayed connected to football by volunteering in 1964 to coach at that school while pursuing a master's degree.

He committed himself to learning the coaching business and gained a feel for running practices, devising game plans and getting the most out of his players. Head coach Don Coryell realized his potential and promoted him to offensive line coach in 1966, when San Diego State finished 11-0 and won the Division II national title.

"During the three years Joe coached with me at San Diego State, I saw he was going to be a really fine coach," Coryell said. "He had a way of talking to people, and he was so industrious and so fired up himself that all these good traits that you want in a player rubbed off on the fellows he had. He just did a terrific job, unbelievable for a young kid like that."

After three more coaching stops on the college level, Gibbs reunited in 1973 with Coryell as an assistant with the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals.

At the same time, Gibbs started playing racquetball and became obsessed with the game. He played during his lunch hour, occasionally missing meals, and sometimes into the early morning hours on the courts inside Busch Memorial Stadium, the Cardinals' home field. With a hunger to compete against the best, he drove to cities to play in prestigious tournaments.

His zest paid off. He captured a national 35-and-older racquetball tournament in 1976 and finished second in the country in 1977.

"Winning the national championship kind of tells you about the drive that he had," said Jim Hanifan, also a Cardinals assistant then. "He decided, by golly, he was going to become a really good racquetball player. Later when he became a head coach, he had the same discipline, the same all-consuming scenario. It was his work ethic."

Gibbs stayed with the head coach when he took his Air Coryell passing attack back to San Diego, this time with the NFL's Chargers.

Gibbs soaked in his genius. As the Chargers' offensive coordinator, he called plays for one of the most explosive offenses in NFL history. The 1980 team tallied 400 yards per game and 418 points and lost in the AFC championship game.

Running The Show

Finally, in 1981, Gibbs became the head man.

With the Redskins, he inherited a team that looked like it would be without its best offensive player, John Riggins. The running back had sat out the 1980 season due to a contract dispute after posting two straight 1,000-yard seasons.

Gibbs knew he needed him in the lineup, so he traveled to Riggins' ranch in Kansas to coax him back to Washington. The coach told himself that at first he would try to learn about Riggins' character.

"When I always talk about people, I say, 'Don't go off resumes,'" Gibbs told IBD. "When you pick people, you've got to try to understand people."

Riggins admired Gibbs' moxie and returned to the Redskins.

But he was underutilized early in the 1981 season, when Gibbs opted to employ Coryell's highlyflying scheme. The Redskins lost their first five games despite having the league's top passing offense.

Gibbs considered his options: pass and lose, run and win?

He downshifted fast, implementing a balanced attack with a one-back, two-tight-end alignment featuring Riggins and Joe Washington alternating as the backs.

Gibbs had learned about that alignment from Coryell. He also welcomed a suggestion from offensive coordinator Joe Bugel to put more stock in the running game.

Feet On The Ground

"Joe didn't let his ego get in the way of making a change," said George Starke, an offensive tackle on that team. "Bugel said, 'Look, we're all going to get fired. You've got a big fullback in Riggins; you need to run the ball.' The thing that made Joe Gibbs great is he said, 'OK.' A lot of guys would have gone down in flames saying, 'This is my system.'"

The strategy worked, as the Redskins won eight of their last 11 games to finish 8-8. Joe Washington rushed for a team-high 916 yards, and Riggins gained 714. The Redskins set a team record with 5,623 yards of offense.

The next two seasons, with Riggins carrying the load in the one-back system, the Redskins rode to the Super Bowl, winning in January 1983 and losing in '84. Gibbs was named NFL Coach of the Year both seasons. His teams also won the 1988 and '92 Super Bowls.

His willingness to listen to others also surfaced in his deft halftime adjustments. He'd huddle in the locker room with his assistants and pinpoint his opponent's weaknesses overlooked in the first half.

"Teams would come out with the same approach offensively or defensively, while the Redskins would come out and, boom, they'd win the ballgame," said former Redskins radio announcer Frank Herzog. "It got to where you'd think at halftime what they were going to do to second-guess and adjust."

Gibbs focused mostly on what he knew best: the offense. He experimented with innovations on that side of the ball because he was always "curious about his own genius," said Joe Theismann, who quarterbacked the Redskins to conference titles in 1982 and '83.

Gibbs introduced the bunch formation, which calls for three receivers to run complicated patterns simultaneously. In one season, 1989, Art Monk, Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders used that cluster to each gain more than 1,000 yards in the air for the Redskins.

"Coach Gibbs laid a foundation, and anytime you're going to have a championship in anything, you have to have a foundation," said Darryl Grant, a defensive tackle on two championship Gibbs teams. "He based his foundation on family. He always preached that we stick together. Everybody didn't always love each other, but once we got on the field, we meant business."

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