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LEADERS & SUCCESS

Football Coach Joe Gibbs

His Focus On Teamwork Pushed His Players To Be The Very Best

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When Joe Gibbs spoke, his players listened. That's because the pro football coach showed brilliant people skills. He knew which motivational buttons to press, and when to press them.

Gibbs praised players publicly and reprimanded them privately. He spoke the truth and backed up everything he said. That sincerity came across in his voice; he looked people in the eye when he spoke. He was clear on his goals and what he wanted the team to accomplish.

He didn't scream, curse or cajole. He was stern but respectful, aware that he was speaking to professionals.

His players thus believed in him and responded to his call. As a result, Gibbs became one of the top coaches in National Football League history. He led the Washington Redskins to three Super Bowl victories, an accomplishment equal to San Francisco's Bill Walsh and just behind Pittsburgh's Chuck Noll, the all-time leader with four.

Gibbs coached the Redskins for 12 seasons from 1981 to 1992, compiling a 140-65 overall record for a .683 winning percentage, the fourth-highest all-time mark for coaches with at least 100 wins. He also posted a 16-5 playoff record for a .762 winning percentage, the best one ever for a coach with at least 10 playoff wins. He was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1996.

"He was a great leader, a great verbal leader, very charismatic, very smart," said Darr-

yl Grant, a defensive tackle who played 10 seasons under Gibbs. "He's a guy who, with his words, could rile you up to move just about any mountain, and you respected that about him. You knew he was right. We went out and did the things that he said."

Gibbs kept everything simple. He believed that complicating matters would lead to confusion and, ultimately, losses. He regularly reminded his players that he didn't have a lot of rules and implored them to use common sense when making decisions. He made sure that players who didn't weren't with the Redskins too long.

The players found Gibbs approachable and flexible. He, in turn, enjoyed their company. He wasn't taciturn and regularly created conversation with them, even if it had nothing to do with football. That was the curiosity in Gibbs.

"I find people's lives interesting," he wrote in his book "Fourth and One" with Jerry Jenkins. "It's exciting to find out how people got where they are in life. I like to know how and why they make decisions. And people have had tremendous influences on my life. I watch them, study them, and when they are admirable, I try to learn from them."

In addition, Gibbs never gave his players an excuse to fail. If the Redskins lost, he said "We lost," and didn't single out a player or segment of the team that came up short. By pointing fingers, he surmised, players would believe they're not that good. Because he never allowed them to believe they were bad, they tended to overachieve.

Gibbs, 60, had the instincts

of an overachiever in his youth. He loved playing sports and wanted to be the best at everything, whether it was baseball, basketball or football.

But he wasn't a great athlete; many of his peers didn't pick him to play in games. Undeterred, he worked extra hard to improve. He spent hours and hours after school and on weekends, for example, practicing shooting a basketball or passing a football.

"It was my lack of natural ability that made me so competitive," Gibbs wrote. "Nothing came easy for me. I had to work hard to excel, and I was willing."

His determination brought results. He earned a scholarship to play football at San Diego State University in 1959.

In college, Gibbs never showed the potential to play pro ball. But he was still hungry to learn the game's intricacies. He stayed late to watch game films. He spent extra time reviewing strategies. His knack for diagramming 'X's and 'O's impressed his coach, Don Coryell, who hired him as an assistant in 1964. Gibbs then held a series of assistant coaching jobs before becoming the Redskins coach in 1981.

The Redskins started 0-5 under Gibbs. But he didn't panic by cutting players or firing assistant coaches. He also didn't perceive the streak as a doomsday scenario. He instead took it as a humbling, character-building motivator that would make him a better coach. He looked to the future by focusing on the present.

"Sometimes negative motivation is the best," Gibbs wrote.

Gibbs also put more emphasis on the team's primary offensive strength: future Hall of

Fame running back John Riggins. Gibbs made the sure-handed Riggins the lone back in the offense so the Redskins could maintain ball control and reduce turnovers.

His strategy worked. The team committed 21 turnovers in the first five games, compared with only 16 in the final eight games, when the Redskins went 8-3 and missed the playoffs by one game. Their momentum carried into the 1982 season, when Washington finished 12-1 and won Super Bowl VXXII, the first of three for Gibbs.

The 1982 season included a tremendous off-the-field challenge for Gibbs. All NFL players went on strike after the second game. Although Gibbs was on management's side, he took the initiative to maintain team unity.

He advised the veteran players to remind their teammates to stick together. He also told the players that, if they were to cross the picket line, to do it simultaneously. That way, he thought, there'd be no jealousy or animosity among the players.

By staying composed, Gibbs again sensed right. While other teams were in chaos once the two-month strike ended, the 2-0 Redskins maintained their stride. They won 10 of their last 11 games, including the Super Bowl.

Every year, Gibbs worked hard to make the Redskins successful. He was a perfectionist who logged 100-hour workweeks to craft game plans. He slept on his cot in the office at least three days a week.

"Sometimes, we'd be arriving in the morning, and he'd just be getting up," Redskins linebacker Neal Olkewicz said.