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MANAGEMENT

## Joe Theismann Gunned The Redskins To Football's Top

By MIKE RICHMAN, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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Theismann, scrambling for Washington in 1985, almost claimed the Heisman in 1970 and won it all as a Redskin. [AP View Enlarged Image](#)

The Redskins won 15-14 and qualified for the playoffs on the way to the National Football League title.

### Cheers For That Grittiness

### Theismann's Keys

Directed the Redskins to the 1982 NFL title.

Overcame: Critics who called him too short.

Lesson: Stay focused on your goals and you could realize them.

"What you want of your co-workers is that they give you a day's work for a day's pay. And Theismann always gave you a day's work for a day's pay. Always. I've been on the field when his nose was broken, his teeth knocked out. He never tried to go to the sideline," said Washington lineman George Starke.

"Joe was a leader as far as I was concerned," Joe Washington told IBD. "What showed toughness for me is that he wore a one-bar face mask his whole career. In pass situations, he stood in there just as strong as if he had a 280-pound back blocking for him as opposed to a 175-pound back. Joe was confident, and by having a confident quarterback who feels he can pull out anything, it really rolls off onto the rest of the players."

All along, Theismann shrugged off criticism and zoomed in on his goals. He hated failure.

"I got a taste of winning early, a taste of competition early in my life," Theismann, 63, told IBD. "People always told me I was too small, too fragile, too light. But I never adhered to or listened to what other people thought of me. And I always competed against people who were older or better than I was. The bar was always set so high for me."

Theismann met the challenge.

In 12 seasons, all in Washington, he amassed 25,206 passing yards, 2,044 completions and 3,602 attempts, all Redskin records.

He was the league's Most Valuable Player in 1983 and has been a preliminary nominee for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

He started under center on teams that went to two Super Bowls, winning against the Miami Dolphins in January 1983 and losing to the Los Angeles Raiders the next year.

From his youth, Theismann was determined to make it as an NFL quarterback. Equipped with a take-charge attitude and a will to win, he quarterbacked teams to undefeated seasons. He also lived vicariously through quarterbacks now in the Hall of Fame, including the

Baltimore Colts' Johnny Unitas, the Green Bay Packers' Bart Starr and the New York Jets' Joe Namath.



Joe Theismann led Notre Dame to consecutive Cotton Bowl showdowns against Texas, knocking the Longhorns off their No. 1 perch on Jan. 1, 1971.... [View Enlarged Image](#)

mark in 1969 and 1970 and consecutive bowl appearances. He amassed school passing records and finished second in Heisman Trophy balloting in 1970, capping his senior season by knocking off No. 1 Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

Drafted by the NFL's Dolphins in 1971, Theismann learned he'd be warming the bench behind Pro Bowler Bob Griese. True to form, he wanted to start right away and bolted to the Canadian Football League, where in three seasons he threw for 6,093 yards and used his scrambling ability to rush for 1,054.

In 1974, Theismann transitioned to the NFL and became a Redskin. It would take several years for him to become the team's full-time starter, but he didn't relax.

He returned punts, gained 15 pounds through a rigorous weight-lifting program and worked in the offseason with star quarterbacks such as Baltimore's Bert Jones to improve his skills.

Theismann was still unpolished upon becoming the Redskins' starter in 1978. Determined to improve, he welcomed the chance to learn from assistant coach Joe Walton.

Walton worked with him on his release and accuracy. He also taught Theismann to be patient in the pocket and not to always use his legs to try to make something out of nothing.

The result: Theismann crafted a breakout year in 1979 with career highs in major passing categories.

"You didn't know what Theismann would do when he first came up," said Kirk Mee, a Redskin scout in those days. "He scared our team, and he scared the other team. Walton did a great job of getting him to play in a disciplined offense, and he made good decisions."

### Hooking Up With Gibbs

Theismann was a top-notch quarterback when the Redskins hired a new coach, Joe Gibbs, in 1981.

Soon the relationship became strained. The Redskins were so shaky while starting 0-5, Gibbs benched Theismann and considered trading him.

Theismann wasn't about to give up. He made a late-night visit to Gibbs' home, a move that some might have seen as out of character for a quarterback with an egotistical image. Hollywood Joe had played in movies, owned restaurants and was immersed in broadcasting. Now he wanted to assure Gibbs that football was his sole focus.

"When I was a kid, I didn't want to be president of the United States," he said. "I didn't want to be a fireman or cowboy. I stood behind center like John Unitas. I walked hunched over like Joe Namath. I even limped like Namath. I wanted to be a quarterback."

Theismann also practiced throwing the ball like Namath, who had a lightning-quick release.

Plus, he absorbed Namath's air of self-confidence and ability to inspire. Namath is legendary for predicting a Jets victory over the heavily favored Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl, then backing it up.

"I thought he had a presence about him," Theismann said of Namath. "He had an aura about him that when he stepped on the field, the other team had to be thinking, 'Oh, crap.' And his teammates had to be saying, 'Let's go.' That was sort of what I wanted to aspire to. I wanted to be able to elicit those types of feelings from the men I played with and the men I competed against."

Theismann worked tirelessly to improve his athletic skills while growing up in South River, N.J., spending hours playing basketball, stickball and football. He was a three-sport star in high school and especially stood out at quarterback.

Many big-time college football teams sought him, and baseball's Minnesota Twins drafted him.

Theismann chose to play football at Notre Dame. And that was a mistake, mocked one sportswriter looking at the kid's 5-10, 152-pound frame. "Little Joe should take the Minnesota Twins baseball offer because he'll get killed at Notre Dame," the columnist wrote.

So what, thought Theismann.

### Wake Up The Echoes

After becoming a starter, he led the Fighting Irish to a combined 18-3-1

"I explained to (Gibbs) how important football was to me and that I would give everything else up if he wanted me to just prove to him that football was the single most important thing in my life," Theismann recalled.

The diplomacy worked.

Theismann and Gibbs agreed they were pursuing the same goal: an NFL championship.

On the field, the Redskins won eight of their last 11 games in 1981 and romped through the 1982 season to reach the Super Bowl, where Theismann made a game-saving play with his presence of mind.

With Miami up 17-13 in the third quarter, a Theismann pass was tipped near the line of scrimmage. The Dolphins' Kim Bokamper appeared ready to catch the ball unimpeded from the goal line. But Washington's quarterback didn't panic.

Showing the instincts of a defensive back, he reached in to tip the ball away at the last second.

Had Bokamper caught the ball and scored, the Dolphins would have taken perhaps an insurmountable lead. Instead, the Redskins won 27-17, handing Washington its first Super Bowl triumph.

"It was a pretty heads-up play by Theismann," Bokamper said. "A lot of quarterbacks would stand there and just watch the ball come down. He had the wherewithal to go make a play. It ended up making the difference."

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