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Washington redskins defeating adversity

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ROCKVILLE, Md.--It's over. That emotional roller coaster the Washington Redskins rode this season ended with their playoff loss to Seattle on Saturday. But what a special year it was. In fact, I can safely say it is the most extraordinary season I've ever witnessed in Redskins history, and I've seen about four decades of them.

I saw a gutsy performance by a team that endured one type of adversity after another, but still found a way to claw and scratch its way into the postseason. Repeated heartbreaking losses, multiple injuries to key players, embarrassing coaching blunders, and--something so unimaginable and unprecedented in NFL history--the murder of the team's best player and the face of the franchise for years to come, Sean Taylor, all befell the Redskins in 2007.

While the death of Taylor was tragic, the season was also one of triumph. Led by a reserve quarterback who hadn't started an NFL game in a decade, Todd Collins, the Redskins won their final four games to finish 9-7 and reach postseason play as an NFC wild-card team. Unfortunately, the loss to Seattle ended their magical run, but I'm still so proud of my beloved team.

To put this season in perspective, I must turn the clock back to Sunday, Dec. 2. On a gray day when the Redskins and their faithful at FedEx Field honored Taylor, who had been murdered about a week earlier in a botched burglary attempt at his home, a victory was sorely needed to lift the spirits of the team and Redskins nation.

But the Redskins fell that day to the Buffalo Bills, 17-16, a loss compounded by an embarrassing gaffe by the Redskins' Hall of Fame coach, Joe Gibbs. He later called it the lowest moment of his celebrated professional career. With seconds remaining and the Redskins up by two, Gibbs illegally called back-to-back timeouts in hopes of freezing the Bills' kicker, Rian Lindell, who was setting up for a 51-yard field goal attempt. The timeouts resulted in a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, and Lindell booted the game-winner from 36 yards out.

The maddening defeat, the Redskins' fourth straight loss, left them 5-7 with their playoff hopes flickering. Four days later against the Bears, the Redskins' talented starting quarterback, Jason Campbell, dislocated his kneecap in the second quarter and was writhing in pain on the field. With



Washington Redskins quarterback Todd Collins celebrates a touchdown pass with Keenan McCardell and Mike Sellers in the game against the Chicago Bears last month.

Campbell down, the Redskins themselves looked like they were down for the count in the eyes of many, including mine.

Enter Collins.

In following sports for so many years, I've learned that sometimes that obscure figure, that unknown talent, comes out of nowhere and makes clutch plays that lead a team to victory and prompt people to ask, "Where has he been?" For the Redskins, Collins was that man. Behind his stellar play that caused many jaws to drop, and riding the emotional wave triggered by Taylor's death, they won their last four games to land in the playoffs.

To me and I'm sure to many others, it was so inspiring the way the Redskins picked themselves up from the ashes, came together in unison, and found a way to persevere. Despite the blow from Taylor's death, plus everything else that had gone wrong during the season, the Redskins beat tremendous odds to do what they did. It was like the kid who was told that he'd never realize his dream but then went on to prove everybody wrong. That's the key message I gleaned from this Redskins team.

I can't say I'm happy with the way the Redskins' season ended, but I'm not disappointed, either. The momentum they generated at the end of the regular season only points toward optimism for 2008. In addition, they have a stream of young players who made major contributions this past season, plus most of their 2008 draft picks. Campbell will be back by training camp, and his presence along with that of core impact players such as receiver Santana Moss and running back Clinton Portis, bodes well for the future. And of course, the Redskins will long continue playing in honor of Taylor.

I've always felt so much pride being a fan of the burgundy-and-gold, but the circumstances of this season elevated my feelings for them to a new level. Those feelings will never wane. Hail to the Redskins!

Michael Richman is a freelance journalist in the Washington area and author of The Redskins Encyclopedia.

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