

The Washington Post

2009 was the Washington Redskins' worst season in decades

By Michael Richman

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The Redskins' game Sunday against the San Diego Chargers not only marks the end of the 2009 season for the burgundy and gold, but the culmination of a long, arduous year for misery-stricken Redskins fans, including me. There's no need to sugarcoat it: This has been the team's worst season in nearly half a century.

Oh, sure, the Redskins have endured seasons with lower winning percentages, but whether this squad finishes 4-12 or 5-11 is pretty much irrelevant. I've followed the team closely for four decades now and have researched its full history, and I've never seen such fan disenchantment. When you combine the ineptitude on the field with the turbulence and acrimony off it, it is clear that Washington's premier sports franchise has become dysfunctional. Our beloved Redskins have fallen far and fast.

Looking back at the season's results tells part of the story. The Redskins opened 2-4, losing to two featherweights -- including a Lions team that snapped a 19-game losing streak against us -- and barely beating two other doormats. They blew four fourth-quarter leads and found ways to

lose games they were in position to win, most notably the bizarre 33-30 loss to the Saints on Dec. 6. And they were outclassed by and went 0-6 against their division rivals -- the Giants, the Eagles and the Cowboys -- making this the first time since 1994 they were winless in the NFC East.

Their only convincing victory was against the Raiders, a team that may be in greater disarray than the Redskins. They failed to show up mentally at times and tried one of the most ridiculous plays I've ever seen in pro football: a botched fake field goal attempt that turned amateur hour against the Giants on Dec. 21. If you want respect, that's not the way to earn it.

Of course, a non-playoff season is nothing new around here; Washington fans are used to watching other teams compete for the championship. The last time the Redskins went to the Super Bowl was nearly two decades ago, during the glorious Joe Gibbs era of the 1980s and early 1990s, when they w

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on three championships and were the class of the league. Since Gibbs's departure after the 1992 season, the Redskins have gone 118-157-1 (.429), posting two wins in three playoff appearances and registering some demoralizing seasons: 4-12 in 1993, 3-13 in 1994, 5-11 in 2003 and 2006.

Even so, Redskins enthusiasts have a right to feel tormented about this season; you must go back half a century to find such a low point in the team's history. The Redskins won only five games from 1959 to 1961 and lost 23 straight between the 1960 and 1961 seasons. Their 1-12-1 record in 1961 stands as the franchise's all-time worst for winning percentage (.107). Now that was rock bottom.

Here are some memorable stats from 1961: The Redskins were the only team in the league to score fewer than 200 points, with 174, suffering three shutouts and posting single digits five times. Kicker John Aveni was the team's leading scorer, with 42 points, and made only five of 28 field goals (Where's Shaun Suisham -- cut this season after converting 18 of 21 field goals -- when you need him?) By dire comparison, the expansion Vikings won three games and scored 285 points, 111 more than the Redskins, and the Cowboys won four games in their second year of existence. Only a closing-day win over Dallas averted a winless season for Washington.

That pitiful showing came during the Redskins' ignominious quarter-century between 1946 and 1970: four winning seasons, zero playoff appearances and a 119-185-15 record (.397). The architect of the calamity was the iron-fisted George Preston Marshall, the Washington business wiz who founded the team in 1932, placed it in Boston and then moved it to the capital in 1937.

Marshall was a meddlesome owner who employed a revolving door of coaches and refused to integrate his lily-white squad when racial barriers fell in the NFL after World War II. His Redskins were long the league's southernmost team, and Marshall felt that signing black players would alienate his fan base.

With the Kennedy administration threatening that he integrate or lose his

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lease to play at D.C. Stadium (now RFK Stadium), which opened in 1961, and with Washington Post columnist Shirley Povich mocking his racist policy, Marshall acquiesced and signed several black players after the 1961 season, including future Hall of Famer Bobby Mitchell. But by then his intransigence had crippled the franchise. Longtime Redskins radio analyst and Hall of Fame linebacker Sam Huff told me that while playing for the Giants from 1956 to 1963, he'd mark games against the Redskins as sure wins. (Just for the record, the Giants beat Washington 53-0 in 1961, a margin 20 points greater than the humiliating 45-12 loss to the Giants two weeks ago.)

Though 1961 was worse statistically than 2009, this season has been more of an eyesore. While nobody believed that the 1961 squad would amount to much of anything, the 2009 team was seen to possess at least wild-card playoff potential. An aging offensive line that lacked depth was expected to be a problem, but a defense ranked No. 4 last season on an 8-8 squad and upgraded by the addition of mammoth defensive tackle Albert Haynesworth looked like it could carry the Redskins into the postseason.

Instead, we've witnessed an abysmal season exacerbated by an off-field soap opera that has further distracted the team. Fans staging a "Burgundy Revolution" have relentlessly criticized owner Dan Snyder

and his top executive, Vinny Cerrato, who eventually resigned; Redskins alumni with Super Bowl rings have voiced disgust with their team like never before; lame-duck coach Jim Zorn was undermined with the hiring of a bingo-caller who was promoted to a play-caller; an assistant coach reportedly interviewed for Zorn's job not long ago; Redskins management temporarily banned signs critical of the team at home games; and members of one of the NFL's most loyal fan bases have boycotted games at FedEx Field, which hasn't been emptier in years.

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What will it take for the Redskins to return to prominence? How do they rise to the level of excellence shown in recent years by such teams as the Steelers, the Patriots and the Colts? For that matter, how do they at least become a legitimate playoff contender each year, like the Eagles, the Giants and the Ravens?

First and foremost, Snyder must transform his philosophy of running the team. That means divorcing himself from personnel decisions and delegating that responsibility to people much more experienced in the game. Heck, why doesn't he model himself after his predecessor, Jack Kent Cooke? Cooke demanded success but didn't meddle with the decisions made by Gibbs and general manager Bobby Beathard during the Redskins' glory years. That strategy worked magnificently -- why not give it another shot?

Snyder took a solid first step with his recent removal of Cerrato, who had a hand in a series of pathetic personnel moves and often seemed out of touch with the Redskins' most pressing needs. Snyder's decision to hire Bruce Allen, the team's first general manager by title since Charley Casserly in 1999, was also a promising move. Allen,

son of Hall of Fame Redskins coach George Allen, is a former NFL executive of the year and has worked for Oakland and Tampa Bay, which won a total of five division championships during his tenure. Can Snyder, whose hands-on approach has mirrored that of Marshall, relinquish full control? Has he had an epiphany? We'll know soon.

I commend Snyder for transforming the Redskins into one of the richest sports franchises in the world, and there's no doubt that he yearns to also win big on the field. He'll reach the pinnacle if he embraces patience and long-term planning, both critical for success in the NFL.

The impetuous owner must stop trying to win the offseason Super Bowl by signing the biggest marquee free agent. This season's key find, Haynesworth, has missed three games, including two against division opponents, because of a sprained ankle and has appeared out of shape. He also publicly

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questioned the team's leadership and his role on the field, and was disciplined because he apparently showed up late for a meeting. Is that what you want from a \$100 million player? When you're guaranteed \$41 million, what's the incentive to put up when the going gets tough? Our superstars should mostly be homegrown players plucked from the draft, the key to building a winning team in the NFL.

It's inevitable that Snyder will fire Zorn -- who started off 6-2 in 2008 but has since shown signs that he's not ready to be an NFL head coach -- and hire a new coach/team president. Two-time Super Bowl winner Mike Shanahan appears to be the front-runner, but I wouldn't mind seeing Redskins legend and longtime NFL assistant Russ Grimm, a charter member of the "Hogs" offensive line, get a shot.

It doesn't matter who the new coach is, however, if the owner doesn't give him freedom and time to stabilize the team, together with Allen. If that's the case, the misery will endure. The aim of these front-office moves should be to change the culture of the franchise, restore its dignity and return it to elite status.

Is the future now, to play on the famous phrase uttered by George Allen when he began coaching the Redskins in 1971? Some perspective is needed here, however sobering. The Eagles, one of the most

successful teams in the past decade, haven't won an NFL title since 1960. The Cowboys -- those guys with the mystique and the revered star on their helmets -- haven't won a playoff game since 1996. And 15 teams have never won a Super Bowl, period.

So, considering how long it takes to build a real contender, judging from the way the Redskins collapsed this season, and knowing the monumental personnel changes they must make to regain their footing, it may take some time before Redskins Nation can again root for a team that is expected to win.

The future may not be now, but hopefully not too far from now, we'll once again cheer with confidence: Hail to the Redskins!

Michael Richman is the author of "The Redskins Encyclopedia," a 75-year history

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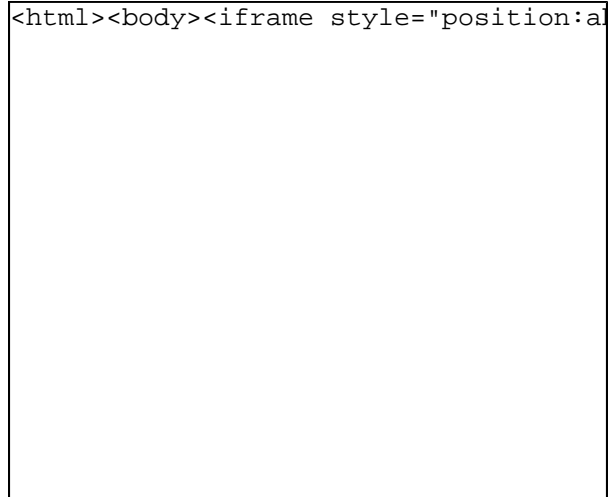
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of the franchise. He will be online to chat with readers on Monday at 11 a.m. Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

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