

# The Washington Post

## Outlook: Was this the worst Redskins season of the modern era?

*Michael Richman*

Author, "The Redskins Encyclopedia"

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Writer **Michael Richman** says this was the worst Redskins team of the NFL's modern era. He took your questions about his Outlook piece, and about what the franchise needs to do to recover.

2009 was the Washington Redskins' worst season in decades (Post, Jan. 3)

Richman is the author of "The Redskins Encyclopedia," a history of the team.

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**Michael Richman:** Hi, Redskins historian Mike Richman is here to discuss the state of our storied franchise. Look forward to your questions.

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**Afton, Va.:** I think the worst season was Joe Gibbs 5-11 finish in 2006.

That was the third year of a (supposedly) five-year program under a Hall of Fame coach. Joe Gibbs II was a major disappointment. His effort level was lacking and I believe he came for the money. Joe left the team seemingly

exhausted yet he seems to have plenty of energy in auto racing. I lost a lot of respect for Joe Gibbs.

Zorn was not even qualified for the head coach position so his failure was expected.

Don't you think the current year takes on too much popularity for the worst season because it is now?

**Michael Richman:** In my mind, this is the worst season in nearly a half century not only because of the 4-12 record, but because of the tremendous fan and media backlash that's been directed at the Redskins' front office. I've never seen anything like this level of anger from Redskins fans. That's what makes it worse than 2006, which was bad enough. I don't necessarily agree that Gibbs returned just for the money, but he definitely wasn't focused enough in his second coaching stint.

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**Petersburg, Va.:** Mr. Richman, It is obvious in the NFL that the best franchises have a strict chain of command that stops at the head coach. Will Mr. Snyder ever be willing to be the businessman/owner instead of the general manager/owner? How can the new head coach ensure he has total control of the on-field operation?

**Michael Richman:** It remains to be seen if Snyder will relinquish any control of player personnel decisions. But until he does, the Redskins will continue to struggle. Any new head coach that comes in will want a strong say in personnel decisions. Otherwise, it doesn't matter if the new coach is Vince Lombardi or Bill Parcells!

**Philadelphia, Pa.:** In your estimation, do you see the Shanahan/Allen decision structure being ideal for this team? My understanding is what Snyder wanted, more than a competent GM, was Shanahan, but to get him, he was forced to hire a GM of Shanahan's choosing. Given the historical lack of success with former big name coach/personnel "experts", I worry that Allen will ultimately cater to whatever Shanahan asks for, without challenging him to make the best decision for the team. Thoughts?

**Michael Richman:** The Redskins will realize

success if there is a collaborative effort between Allen and the new coach to make decisions. It must be a team effort. Allen has been successful in past stints as a front-office executive, and any new coach must tap his knowledge of the game.

**Gaithersburg, Md.:** Don't you think that Bruce Allen got off on the wrong foot by subjecting Jim Zorn to a final indignity by firing him almost literally as he steps off the plane from San Diego? After giving him a team riddled with weaknesses, and humiliating him during the season, what possible benefit did Snyder's management team gain by firing him this way. It's too bad Dan Snyder can't be fired, too!  
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**Michael Richman:** It was inevitable that

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Zorn was going to be fired. I don't fault the Redskins for the timing. They want to move fast on this and avoid a situation similar to the one in January 2008 when they waited more than a month to name a new coach.

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**Washington, D.C.:** What do you think was the single most important lesson that Snyder could learn from mediocre to poor Redskins teams of the Cooke era that were translated to great teams?

**Michael Richman:** The top less Snyder could learn in general from JKC was that while he demanded success and attended practices, he left the ultimate personnel decisions to Joe Gibbs and Bobby Beathard. Cooke also understood that patience and long-term planning are critical for success in the NFL. If Snyder hasn't learned that after a decade of owning the team, I'm afraid the Redskins will continue to struggle.

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**Silver Spring, Md.:** Is there any talk about Dan Snyder selling the team to an owner that will re-build the team instead of trying to buy victories.?

**Michael Richman:** I haven't heard of Snyder considering selling the team.

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**Fairfax, Va.:** Tom Boswell has an interesting theory that Snyder kept Cerrato on as long as he did for fear of Cerrato spilling the beans on the goings-on of this team. Do you agree? I'd love it if someone, maybe you, would script a tell-all book on the Snyder era thus far. I have a feeling that all the tomfoolery that has been reported is only the tip of the iceberg.

**Michael Richman:** That's an interesting theory. But whether Cerrato was forced out early in the season or in December, it was time for him to go.

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**Farmington, Conn.:** Michael, while I share much of your position on this season, as a fan, my expectations were pretty low for this year, which makes this season

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somehow more palatable than others. For example, the 2000 season for me was perhaps the worst. Coming off a division championship.

**Michael Richman:** I'm glad you mentioned the 2000 season. Talk about something backfiring. That was the year Snyder brought in high-priced free agents Deion Sanders, Bruce Smith and Jeff George, thinking they would improve a team that had won the NFC East and went to the 2nd round of the playoffs the year before. But the 8-8 finish was a huge disappointment. That season as a whole was very chaotic, and the situation was compounded by the firing of Norv Turner with the Skins at 7-6 and still in playoff contention.

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**Reston, Va.:** In his first year Hanyesworth received around \$4 million sitting on the sideline for 4 games. Multiple times he took himself out of the game with small or no injuries.

What do the Redskins need to do to get more out of our \$100 million dollar man?

**Michael Richman:** Very simple: no more mercenaries! No more chasing after the biggest name on the free agent market. Build through the draft!

**Washington, D.C.:** Michael,

I love your passion, but I don't agree that this is the worst season the Redskins have had in the Modern NFL. Everyone is always trying to label things as the best or worst ever.

In 1993, they started 2-13. They were much worse than this team.

This team is really sad and has been for years. The big spending style is constrained by the salary cap so they are very thin. So almost every other year they range from competitive to fairly mediocre because of injuries. It is likely the Redskins would improve in a non-salary cap system.

Sadly you do point out many management issues that the Redskins need to correct.

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Thanks.

**Michael Richman:** Here's my argument about why 1993 wasn't worse than this season. Joe Gibbs resigned in March 1993, and Ritchie Petitbon, who wasn't NFL head coaching material, was named his successor. As I wrote in my book, Bill Parcells or Dan Reeves would have been the Redskins' new coach had Gibbs stepped down right after the 92 season. Also, many of the players from the Redskins' glory years got old all at once in 1993. It was inevitable that the Redskins would have a down year after so long of an elite period.

**Washington, D.C. :** So we enter a "rebuilding period" with new high-priced coach and what if two years in we are 5-11 as we were with Gibbs 2.0? Does that coach get fired like those that preceded him? The point is the owner has no patience and I can't imagine that he has suddenly developed that sort of mature trait. Your thoughts?

**Michael Richman:** It's impossible to say at this point if Snyder has matured as an owner. Firing Cerrato was a solid first step. We'll know in the coming months if he's developed the patience he needs to absorb failure without making a knee-jerk reaction to fire the coach. Any new coach coming in should be given at least 2 years if not 3 to take the Redskins to the playoffs. Zorn

wasn't head coaching material, and his time was up after 2 seasons.

**Worst season comment:** The Redskins definitely had worst seasons years ago BUT nobody was expecting much for those seasons. However, this year much was expected since it was Zorn's second year with the troops and the additions of Haynesworth and Hall (though he came near the end of the previous season).

**Michael Richman:** It wasn't out of the question to think the Redskins were Wild Card playoff material this year. This was also Zorn's 2nd season, and he was coming off an 8-8 year. Finishing 4-12 was unacceptable.

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**Rockville, Md.:** Hi Mike, loved your book!

What quarterbacks are available for the Redskins to select or should they stay with Campbell?

**Michael Richman:** I've been a Jason Campbell fan for a long-time, but I've reached the conclusion that he isn't the type of QB who'll take you deep into the playoffs. Forget about the lack of an O-line f or a second, he seems to lack the instincts to ever be one of the elite QBs in the league. If the Redskins retain him, it would be as a No. 2 quarterback. I see them going after one of the big-name QBs in the draft such as Colt McCoy.

**Leesburg, Va.:** OK, so maybe Jim Zorn isn't the hottest coach going. But how much of this team's failures is really on his shoulders and how much belongs with "the front office"?

**Michael Richman:** It's been a combination. Zorn made his share of head coaching mistakes such as poor clock management and bad play calling. That fake field goal in the Giants game was one of the most ridiculous plays I've ever seen in pro football. With that said, the frong office is also to blame for the Redskins' woes. Your GM or whoever makes the personnel decisions must provide the coach with the

right players. Zorn obviously didn't have an O-line to work with this year.

**Washington, D.C.:** What are your thoughts when you consider the fact that there were 6 games this season in which the Redskins didn't get beat by another team but beat themselves. That would've made them 10-6! How do you change a team that consistently prevents itself from winning?

**Michael Richman:** Everybody wants to win, but the Redskins must learn how to win. It's sort of an intangible quality. The good teams have it, the bad ones like the Redskins don't. There have been many times in recent years that they've beaten themselves due to mental mistakes, conservative play calling and poor clock management. They must correct those

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**Does that coach get fired like those that preceded him?:** I think it was easier for him to fire Zorn due to Zorn's lack of experience. It's going to be harder to fire a proven coach like Shanahan if his first year is only 5 wins. If that happens I think Snyder will be able to say it's because of the rebuilding effort and not due to the coaching. If after 3 years it's the same, sure, he'll fire Shanahan.

**Michael Richman:** First of all, it's not a given that Shanahan will be the Redskins' new coach. He could be a smokescreen. But whoever comes in will get more than one season even if the team wins only 5 games.

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**Reston, Va.:** This has to be the worst season, if for no other reason than you had the announcers repeatedly mocking the organization and their play on the field.

Has that ever happened before? Where announcers referred to the team as an embarrassment and ridiculed the manner in which plays are called?

**Michael Richman:** I'm sure it's happened. 2003 was a very embarrassing year, too.

**Philadelphia, Pa.:** What is your opinion on coaches and how to motivate teams? There are so many different styles and techniques. More specifically, would you have advised Coach Zorn to do some things differently?

**Michael Richman:** The players seemed to like Zorn and wanted to play hard for him. I think they rallied around his optimism. In the end, though, that wasn't enough. More than anything, players are motivated by the belief that they have something to play for. Redskins players new very early this season that it was a lost season and clearly lost their focus and desire. Jason Campbell eluded to that in an interview with Comcast SportsNet.

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**Ormond Beach, Fla.:** In 1971 the Redskins were the best special teams in the NFL --

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led by Bill Malinchak and Herb Mul-Key. Why is there so little emphasis on this phase of the game and will Bruce Allen address this? Also, when will the Redskins block a punt again?

**Michael Richman:** Bruce Allen obviously knows that his father put great emphasis on special teams. How much that applies to the current-day Redskins is unknown at this point. That'll mostly be up to the head coach. With that said, the Redskins must improve in special teams with better punt return, kickoff return and punt blocking units. I don't know when they'll block a punt again, but it'll be nice when it happens.

**Ashburn, Va.:** The main issue with Zorn was his feeble play calling (of which did not change much after the hiring of the Bingo guy) - about 90 percent of the passing plays were caught behind the line of scrimmage -- the worst passing scheme in the NFL. Did Zorn not have confidence in Campbell in throwing deep balls over the middle or does the offensive coaching staff lack aggressiveness?

**Michael Richman:** There were many times that Zorn seemed to lack confidence in Campbell. But Campbell brought a lot of that on himself with his inconsistency and indecision in the pocket. But Zorn must

improve his play calling if he'll ever succeed as a head coach in the NFL. He was way too conservative and predictable at times.

**Draft picks:** What are the odds the Redskins waste their draft pick on a QB who doesn't work out (Tim Tebow?) and gets pummeled because they failed to shore-up their O-line?

**Michael Richman:** There's no way the Redskins will neglect their O-line again in the draft. They have five picks this year and should use at least 3 on offensive linemen. Your QB may only be above average, but if you have a great offensive line you can go far. This game is won in the trenches.

**Annandale, Va.:** Don't you think that the

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Redskins should retain Jason Campbell at quarterback? It appears to me that he's performed as well as possible under the circumstances, and he certainly has the mental and physical abilities to succeed. Furthermore, he's demonstrated a tremendous amount of character. And don't you think there are many other positions on the team that require upgrading more urgently?

**Michael Richman:** The most important position on the field is quarterback, and after three full years as a starter, it's not clear if Campbell is the QB who can take the Redskins deep in the playoffs. Yes, he has demonstrated much character. And he's a very tough guy as exemplified by his ability to take a tremendous pounding and bounce back, but the Redskins would do themselves a disservice by not considering another quarterback, whether through the draft or a trade.

**Jacksonville, Fla.:** When will we start putting a lot of the blame on the players instead of always blaming the coach? The men on that team is what determines if you win or lose. I think we should re-evaluate the player also, you can't have that many coaches and have the same results. It's funny we had coaches go to other teams and are successful. Just a thought....

**Michael Richman:** There's blame to go all around. Yes, the players are getting paid a lot of money, but the front office must provide the team with the talent needed to win.

**It's not about the QB:** "I've been a Jason Campbell fan for a long-time, but I've reached the conclusion that he isn't the type of QB who'll take you deep into the playoffs"

Two words: Mark Rypien

**Michael Richman:** Mark Rypien wasn't an all-around great athlete. But he was very accurate with the long ball -- something Campbell isn't -- and he had a great O-line in front of him in 1991, the year the Redskins won Super Bowl XXVI. He was sacked only 7 times that year. Of course, he

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also had a Hall of Fame receiver in Art Monk and two other great receivers in Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders.

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**Gainesville, Ga.:** Mr. Richman,

What about the 1-12-1 team in 1961? Surely, that team was dreadful?

**Michael Richman:** I wrote about the 1961 team in my article in the Post. While that team was anemic on offense, nobody expected it to do anything. And back in those days, 24-7 media coverage and sports talk radio didn't exist. If they did, the ineptitude of the 1-12-1 team in 1961 would have been magnified in the worst way.

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**Where's the overthe hill gang?:** Michael, Last night over Chinese food I had an interesting thought and question. It was spurred by seeing Charlie Joiner as receiver coach for San Diego. Seems like not many of the Skins stars of the 70s have made it in the coaching ranks? Guys like Taylor, Houston, Fisher, Hanberger, even Sonny come to mind. Why haven't we seen any of the great past Redskins make it as coaches?

**Michael Richman:** That's a hard question to answer. Sonny never wanted to coach, although his radio buddy Sam Huff said he

would have made a great one. Perhaps many of those guys didn't choose coaching because back in the 70s they had jobs in the offseason and wanted to continue working in those positions when they retired. Len Hauss is a good example. The star Redskins center went to law school during his playing days and pursued a law career during retirement.

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**Michael Richman:** I'm signing off. Thank you so much for all of your questions about the Redskins. Look forward to chatting with you again.

Mike Richman  
Author of The Redskins Encyclopedia

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**Washington, D.C.:** Mr. Richman,

Do you think the Redskins have

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plummeted to become the worst franchise in the D.C. metro area?

ALso, who do you think would be the best coach for them to hire at this time?

**Michael Richman:** The Wizards may be in worse shape than the Redskins right now. Talk about a team not able to gain any traction. Gilbert Arenas is a cancer on that squad and must go. The Wizards may be able to void his contract because of the gun controversy.

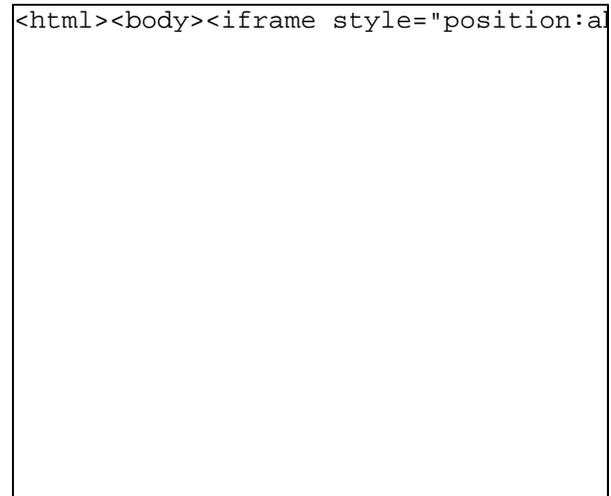
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