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Must reading for area fans

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Dick Heller - There's good reading these days for area football fans who can tear themselves away from the tube. Come to think of it, perusing pigskin pages is a dandy way to ignore all those endless commercials.

Local authors Michael Richman and Keith Cavanaugh have done themselves proud with meaty, interesting volumes on the Almighty Redskins and Maryland coach Ralph Friedgen, respectively. Devotees of either team should be fascinated.

"The Redskins Encyclopedia" (\$35, Temple University Press, 418 pages, illus.) — Richman has provided the definitive history of Washington's pro football favorites just in time for what the club is calling, somewhat misleadingly, its 75th season. This really is the Redskins' 71st season in the nation's capital and their 76th overall because the team began combat in 1932 as the Boston Braves. But why pick nits?

Richman, a veteran freelance writer, guides us painstakingly through all of the team's wildly dissimilar eras: the early glory years from 1937 through 1945, when it won two NFL titles and five Eastern championships; the 25-year playoff drought from 1946 through 1970, when the lily-white Redskins often were doormats; and the return to respectability and then some under George Allen and then Joe Gibbs.

If you remember a particularly significant game (such as the 26-3 drubbing of Dallas in the NFC Championship game on New Year's Eve 1972), you will find an account here. Richman goes through each season game by game, including eminently forgettable ones like the 73-0 loss to the Chicago Bears in the 1940 NFL title game and a 62-3 rout by the Cleveland Browns during the regular season of 1954.

The book also contains interesting sidebars about people and things older fans might have forgotten and younger ones might not know. For instance, the Redskins had an All-World passer decades before Sonny Jurgensen or Joe Theismann. His name was Sammy Baugh, and in his first season (and the team's first in Washington) he passed the Redskins to the NFL title. For such magnificence, Slingin' Sam was not exactly overpaid. He got \$5,000 and earned every penny, also punting and playing safety.

Baugh is one of many Redskins icons featured in a "Washington Monuments" section near book's end. Others include innovative, irascible owner George Preston Marshall; coaches Ray Flaherty, Vince Lombardi, Allen and Gibbs; and players Baugh, Jurgensen, Turk Edwards, Sam Huff, Bobby Mitchell, Charley Taylor and John Riggins.

Funny thing, Heath Shuler didn't make the cut.

To his credit, Richman didn't gloss over negative aspects like Marshall's calculated bigotry, which doomed his team to a quarter-century of mediocrity and worse. Washington was the NFL's southernmost outpost until the Dallas Cowboys joined the league in 1960, and Redskins games on radio and then TV blanketed the states of the Confederacy. Concerned that black players might cost him fans in that region, Marshall did not sign a player of color until he was forced to do so by Interior Secretary Stewart Udall in 1962.

Marshall, a Washington businessman and impresario, was what today might be called a piece of work. He changed coaches the way some men change underwear, and his mouth frequently runneth over. After the Redskins beat the mighty Bears 7-3 in November 1940, GPM suggested the so-called Monsters of the Midway were overrated crybabies. Three weeks later in a NFL title game rematch, the Bears rearranged the digits.

And 364 days later, as the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor to force the United States into World War II, Marshall withheld the news from a crowd watching the Redskins play the Eagles at Griffith Stadium. His idiotic explanation: "I didn't want to divert the fans' attention from the game."

Richman also recounts the mediocre seasons following Gibbs' retirement in 1992 and generally disappointing results since his return. This gives the book the validity that a mere whitewash job (no pun intended) would lack.

And for trivia buffs, there are tidbits galore. Did you know Marshall changed his Boston team's nickname from Braves to Redskins when it moved from Braves Field to Fenway Park in 1933 "to suggest a kinship with the Red Sox," as Richman says? I didn't.

"My Way" (\$24.95, Terrapin State Publishing, 295 pages, illus.) — You have to wonder how many folks will buy the book thinking it's about Frank Sinatra. Oh, well, Friedgen *is* in the habit of singing the Maryland fight song along with the student body after victories — of which there have been many in his six-plus seasons as master of gridiron matters in Terptown.

Cavanaugh, a veteran observer of Maryland athletic matters as editor and publisher of the Terrapin Times newspaper, gives a remarkably complete portrait of Friedgen, wife Gloria and their four daughters. He also describes the many highs and lows of Maryland football since Jim Tatum first made the Terps a national power in the early 1950s. Subsequently, Jerry Claiborne, Bobby Ross and Friedgen produced productive programs in College Park. A batch of lesser coaches failed abysmally, especially the incredibly rock-rumped Bob Ward in the late 1960s.

Perhaps the most interesting portion of the book concerns Friedgen's version of the dialogue between him and athletic director Debbie Yow when she approached him about the job at his alma mater after the 2000 season.

"There are some things you need to know about me," Friedgen says he told Yow. "Don't ever lie to me. You lie to me, I'm gone."

Now the two are what Friedgen calls "an odd couple ... not a pretty picture." But he adds, "She is the best athletic director I have ever worked for. She doesn't play golf. She's in the office in the morning when I'm in. She's in at night when I'm in. She actually works."

So does Friedgen, even more so than most of his peers — which is why he and Maryland usually win. And Cavanaugh's revealing book is a winner, too.
