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## 1981–1992: An Icon Among the NFL Elite

**THEY WERE THE TOAST** of Washington, kings riding high through what resembled a football dreamland. To the delight of every Redskins fan in D.C., across the nation and abroad, they were models of excellence.

From 1981 to 1992, the Redskins appeared in four Super Bowls and won three times, captured five NFC East titles, and made the playoffs in eight seasons. Their 140–65–0 record, which included a 16–5 postseason mark, equals a .680 winning percentage that was among the NFL's best during the 12-season span.

Such achievements spelled one word—D-Y-N-A-S-T-Y—and came on the watch of a coach named Joe Gibbs, who steered the Redskins through the entire period. At his departure after the 1992 season, he was regarded as one of the greatest to ever coach the game and earned induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1996.

During his stay, the nation's capital was in a state of delirium as Redskins fever swelled to new heights. A love affair existed between the town and its burgundy-and-gold sports team, which continued to sell out RFK Stadium game after game and even built an international following. Redskins supporters, described by Canadian-born team owner Jack Kent Cooke as the “best bloody fans,” were more rabid than ever.

They didn't just hope for championships. They expected them.

“The fans fed off of us,” said linebacker Monte Coleman, one of the Redskins' stars of the era. “The more we started to win and go to Super Bowls, we were the talk of the town. Everybody was behind us. Redskins fever went from being good to being great. It rose about two to three notches.”

The hub of the pandemonium was 55,000-seat RFK Stadium, one of the smallest but arguably the most intimate venue in the league. Ace kick returner Mike Nelms remembered how raucous the fans were at RFK, which he called “a shot in the arm, a 12th man on the field”: “That stadium actually took on a life of its own,” he said. “You could look over and see everything going up and down. People would scream, ‘WE WANT DALLAS!’ If you were playing Dallas, it gave you chill bumps, and if you weren't playing Dallas, it gave you chill bumps in anticipation. When you see those fans, they come to life.”

“I don't use the word cozy very often, but RFK was pretty tight,” said long-time TV network pro football analyst John Madden, who broadcast many games at RFK during the era. “You could literally feel the fans because when they would start to yell or get excited, the whole stadium would bounce,

our broadcast booth would bounce, you could feel yourself going up and down, then the cameras were going up and down.”

He added, “I loved that band and the fight song, ‘Hail to the Redskins.’ That whole thing gives you chills. The kind of stadium, the team, Joe Gibbs, all the players, the fans, Riggo running off tackle with the Hogs. The whole thing was a pretty doggone good package.”

Gibbs, the glue for the package, enjoyed solid support in the front office. Cooke was lenient with his checkbook when it came to player signings and gave Gibbs and general managers Bobby Beathard (1978–89) and Charley Casserly (1989–99) a lot of room to operate. Plus, Gibbs's assistant coaching staff was stable in the otherwise volatile world of football coaching.

On the player front, myriad Redskins evolved into household names. They included 1970s-era holdovers in Coleman, quarterback Joe Theismann, running back John Riggins, kicker Mark Moseley, tight end Don Warren, wide receiver Art Monk, and defensive tackle Dave Butz, as well as Gibbs-era finds in wide receivers Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders, defensive linemen Dexter Manley and Charles Mann, cornerback Darrell Green, quarterbacks Doug Williams and Mark Rypien, and offensive linemen Joe Jacoby, Russ Grimm, and Jeff Bostic.

It was a cohesive group, sort of like a family, that featured true characters in Theismann, Riggins, Manley, and Clark, to name a few, who helped shaped the team's image. Nicknames like “the Hogs” and the “Fun Bunch,” running plays called “50 Gut” and “70 Chip,” and terms like “Counter-Trey” became ingrained in the lexicon of Redskins fans.

Why did the team have so much personality? “Because the individuals had personality, and we were allowed to show it,” Theismann said. “You talk about the genius of Joe Gibbs—he allowed every one of us to be whoever we were. He didn't try to stifle our personality, but yet he was able to mix them all together.”

The Redskins consisted of more than stars, for obscure names who became solid role players in Gibbs's system factored in with the squad's overachieving persona. Such players as wingback Nick Giaquinto, special teamers Greg Williams and Pete Cronan, and linebacker Larry Kubin, all on the Redskins' Super Bowl team in 1982, fit that bill. Plus, the Redskins signed low-round draft picks, free agents, and refugees from other leagues perhaps more than any other team in that era.



Joe Gibbs's coaching staff remained amazingly intact through his first coaching stint in Washington, a key reason for the Redskins' consistent success. This photo of his 1982 staff shows (back L-R) LaVern "Torgy" Torgeson (defensive line), Wayne Sevier (special teams), Dan Henning (assistant head coach), Charley Taylor (wide receivers), Don Breaux (running backs), and Warren "Rennie" Simmons (tight ends); and (front L-R) Dan Riley (strength coach), Larry Peccatiello (linebackers), Richie Petitbon (defensive coordinator), Gibbs, Joe Bugel (offensive coordinator), and Bill Hickman (defensive scout).

"We used every resource we had," Gibbs said. "That's what you need to do. There's no set way of building a team. You try to get talent every single way you can get it, through the draft, through signing free agents out of college, through free agency. Any way you can acquire talent, you need to be on top of your game and be ready to do that. We did that, Bobby Beathard did that, Charley Casserly did that. They really helped me in trying to get good talent. You've got to be willing to move mountains to get whatever you've got to get."

Offensive line coach Joe Bugel said, "We always went out and made sure we got smart, tough people. We had a premium on tough guys. We didn't want prima donnas. We wanted snot blowers who liked to practice, liked to hit. We had guys like that, the Theismanns, the Riggins. We had great personalities. The Grimms, the Jacobys—those guys liked to work. They just came around here and hung out here. This was their place, their platform."

According to Grimm, "A lot of it was the chemistry on that football team. The one thing that sticks in my mind is that coach Gibbs said his toughest job is not the Xs and Os but making sure he picks the right 53. Those are the guys who have to go 17 weeks and even longer into the playoffs."

During the 12-year glory period, San Francisco was the only team to top the Redskins in winning percentage at .738. The 49ers captured four Super Bowls during the era. Denver made the Super Bowl three times but lost all three, including Super Bowl XXII to the Redskins.

Gibbs's departure coincided with the start of an unfettered form of free agency and salary cap provisions that would make it very difficult for teams to enjoy the stability the Redskins experienced during that era, when many of the same faces adorned the roster year after year.

"Free agency hit, and the team went in different routes," said Rypien, a Redskin from 1987 to 1993. "We were probably

the last of the dinosaurs. We did everything as a team. It was a unique group."

## 1981: 8–8, 4TH PLACE—NFC EAST

### Head Coach: Joe Gibbs

On the face of it, an 8–8 record spells mediocrity. But the Redskins' 8–8 record in 1981 was oh so special.

After dropping their first five games and appearing headed for a disastrous season, the Redskins won eight of the last 11—the three losses coming to playoff-bound teams—and remained in the playoff race through the last week. The rebound laid much of the groundwork for their upcoming Super Bowl-winning season and beyond.

"When we came out of that 0–5 start, nobody wanted to go back to it," said Joe Gibbs, who made his Redskin coaching debut that year. "We were highly motivated, and we learned a lot. That drove us for the first two or three years."

An offensive specialist, Gibbs implemented a well-oiled system that racked up yards and points that year, reminiscent of the Redskins' offensive machine from the 1960s. He also made the squad more entertaining to watch after years of frequent offensive stagnation under coaches George Allen and Jack Pardee.

"All the way around, it was a lot more fun to play," said Art Monk, one of the Redskins' top receivers that year. "The offense was much more flexible and wide open than under Pardee, and more exciting."

In Pardee's final season, 1980, the Redskins sported one of the NFL's least productive offenses, and team owner Jack Kent Cooke sought a coach who could inject pizzazz into the system. Armed with a recommendation from general manager Bobby Beathard, he hired the 40-year-old Gibbs on January