

10 BIG GAMES REMEMBERED: 1971-1980

Nov. 16, 1975: St. Louis 20, Washington 17, in St. Louis. In a pivotal game for two 6-2 squads tied for first in the NFC East, the Redskins led 17-10 in the waning seconds. On fourth down, Cardinals quarterback Jim Hart connected with Mel Gray in the end zone, but Redskin Pat Fischer popped Gray, and the ball came loose. After a 10-minute discussion, the officials ruled it a touchdown, and St. Louis won the game on an overtime field goal. The controversial loss hurt, for the Redskins missed the playoffs that year. "The evidence is clear he didn't catch the ball," Fischer said.

In the best season of his 17-year career, Kilmer completed 120 of 225 throws for 1,648 yards, with 19 touchdowns and 11 interceptions, and earned his only Pro Bowl invitation. The indefatigable Brown rushed for a team-record and NFC-high 1,216 yards and was named league MVP. The offense tallied 336 points, third in the NFC, and the defense allowed a conference-low 218. Chris Hanburger was named NFC Defensive Player of the Year after intercepting a career-high four passes, and special teams blocked five field goals and four punts.

"NOTHING LEFT TO CHANCE"

The genius behind the Redskins' revival was George Herbert Allen. Before becoming an NFL head coach, the South Dakota native had moved from head coaching positions at Morningside College in Iowa and Whittier College near Los Angeles to assistant jobs with the Rams and Bears. In Chicago, he learned from his mentor, NFL pioneer and Hall of Famer George Halas, a winner of six NFL championships as the Bears' coach. In one of those championship seasons, 1963, Allen was defensive coordinator of a

**Allen in Agony:
Touchdown Call
'Not Even Close'**

ferocious unit that yielded only 144 points and is known as one of the top defenses in league history.

Allen was a defensive mastermind. He introduced the "nickel" alignment with five defensive backs and helped mold the blitz into a bona fide weapon. In the 1972 playoff win over Green Bay, his daring "quarter" defense, a five-man front, shut down running backs John Brockington and MacArthur Lane, who combined for nearly 2,000 yards in the regular season. He used some 150 defensive audibles in all. Allen was also a visionary with special teams, deeming them critical in an era when they were often considered an afterthought. He depended on special teams for at least two wins per season through blocked kicks, kick returns and turnovers, and he hired one of the NFL's first special-teams coaches, Dick Vermeil, in 1969.

"There was nothing, nothing left to chance," said Bill Brundige, a Redskins defensive tackle from 1970 to 1977. "George always ran the defensive meeting. Once, he said, 'Boys, let me tell you how to win. We've got to have three turnovers on defense and one score. We also need five big plays from special teams.' So (Ron) McDole and I went to the guys on offense and said, 'All you've got to do for us to win is not turn the ball over.' That got them so mad."

Allen's conservative philosophy reflected his personality. He never swore, his favorite drink was milk, and he ate easy-to-swallow foods such as ice cream so he had enough time to study game films and critique opponents. Football consumed his life, and the perfectionist worked around the clock hoping to know his opponents better than they knew themselves. A quote on his desk at Redskin Park read, "Is what I am doing, or about to do, getting us closer to our objective ... winning?" To him, a loss felt like "death" or a "funeral," said Bruce Allen, one of the coach's three sons and the Redskins' current general manager.

THERE'S NO QUESTION ALLEN WAS BURNED



"He was passionate," Bruce Allen said. "He felt he owed it to every coach, every player, every fan to use every waking moment of every day to help the team win. He felt it was joyous to win and painful to lose."

Allen was known for his eccentricities. He looked to recruit players everywhere he went, like when his family was once vacationing on the Caribbean island of Barbados. "We found some guys playing basketball on dirt there, so obviously they had athletic ability," Bruce Allen said. "We ended up timing them in the 40, and I think we brought one in for a tryout." The wary coach also thought games could be affected by trivial circumstances unrelated to football, such as the trash he spotted at Lambeau Field in Green Bay before the Redskins beat the Packers 17-6 in 1974.

"He pointed out that there's trash around here, and that's a sign we're going to win because they don't pay attention to details," said Brig Owens, a Redskins safety from 1966 to 1977.

Many of Allen's players bought into his obsession to win and enthusiasm

Pat Fischer (preceding page, left) puts a hit (preceding page, top) on St. Louis Cardinals receiver Mel Gray in the end zone, knocking the ball loose, but officials ruled it a touchdown. "There's no way that he had control of the ball," declared Fischer. "I hit him just as the ball got there." (Above) Allen was livid and let the officiating crew know it.

for the game. Often after victories, he instructed his troops to give three cheers for the Redskins in euphoric locker room settings. His players, soaking in the playground-like atmosphere, responded with chants of “Hip, Hip Hooray. Hip, Hip Hooray. Hip, Hip Hooray. Hip, Hip Hooray.”

ALLEN'S CONSERVATIVE APPROACH

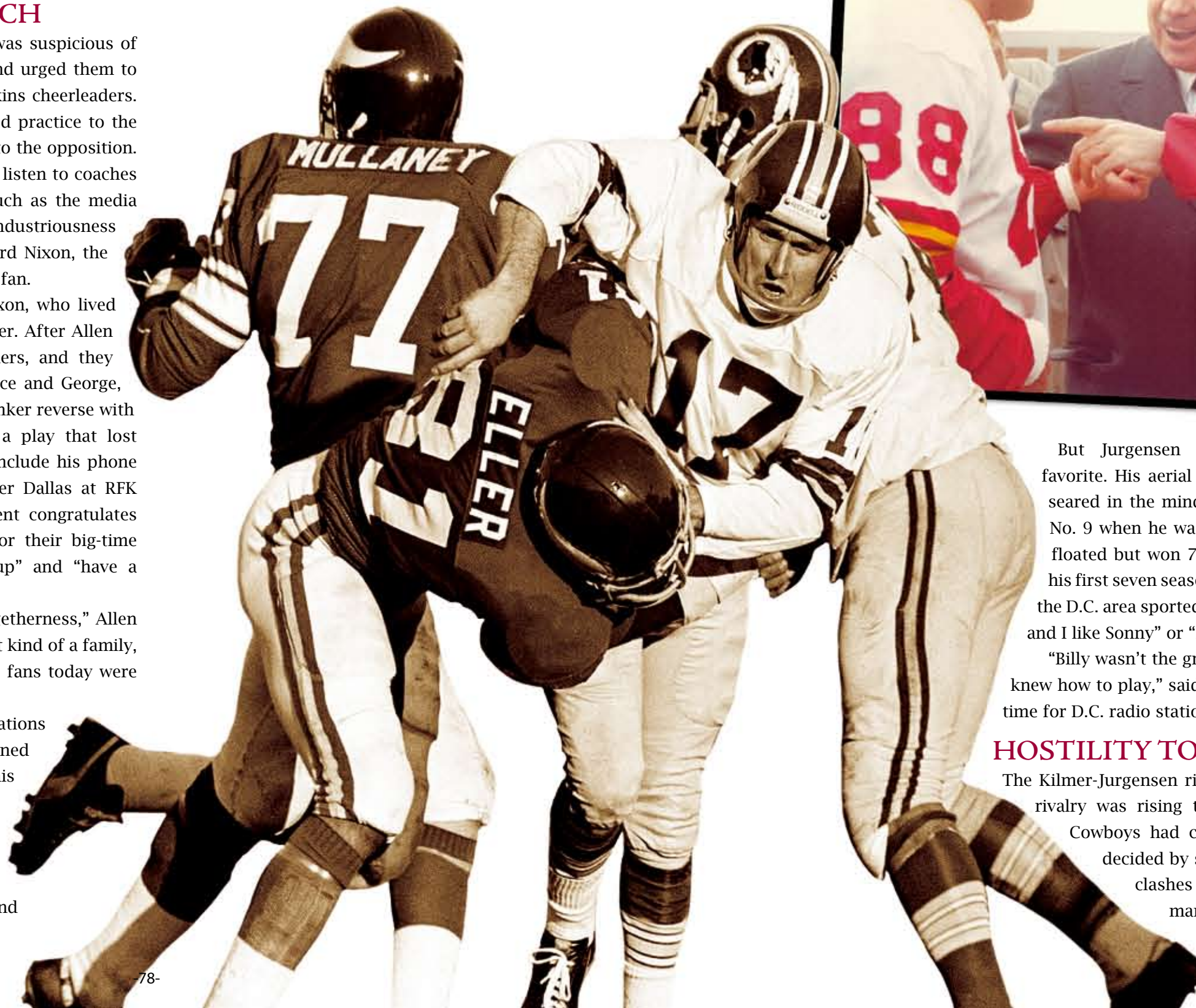
Allen was a players coach but no fan of the media. He was suspicious of reporters, thinking they aimed to embarrass his team, and urged them to only document positive developments and act like Redskins cheerleaders. He disliked controversial questions and sometimes closed practice to the press for fear that media reports would give intelligence to the opposition. “He was just ahead of his time,” Bruce Allen said. “If you listen to coaches today in all of sports, I don't think they disclose as much as the media would like.” The coach's distrust of the press and his industriousness were characteristics similar to those of his friend, Richard Nixon, the U.S. president from 1969 to 1974 and a staunch Redskins fan.

The two met when Allen coached the Rams, and Nixon, who lived in Southern California, was resurrecting his political career. After Allen came to D.C., Nixon invited him to White House dinners, and they spoke often about football. But two of Allen's sons, Bruce and George, refute the popular story that Nixon told Allen to run a flanker reverse with Roy Jefferson in the 1971 playoff loss to the 49ers, a play that lost 13 yards. Nixon's secretly recorded White House tapes include his phone conversation with Allen after a 24-20 Redskins win over Dallas at RFK Stadium on Oct. 22, 1972. During the call, the president congratulates Allen and praises Larry Brown and Sonny Jurgensen for their big-time performances. Nixon also tells his friend to “live it up” and “have a glass of milk.”

“I'll tell you, Mr. President, our team has so much togetherness,” Allen said at one point. “I know that sounds corny, but we've got kind of a family, and everybody is happy for the other guy's success. The fans today were fantastic. The ground down there was trembling.”

Allen seemed to have the president's ear, but communications with his quarterback weren't quite as easy. Jurgensen frowned on the coach's conservative approach on offense and his insistence on letting defense and special teams win games. In the Redskins' first quarterback drama of the modern era, Allen favored Kilmer over Jurgensen because he appreciated how Kilmer adhered to his vanilla game plans. Jurgensen, in comparison, sometimes freelanced and resisted Allen's instructions.

(Below) The Redskins beat Dallas to make the '76 playoffs but couldn't get past the Vikings, who hassled Kilmer all day, in the first round. (Opposite page) Allen was close with President Nixon, an avid Redskins fan who once visited the Redskins practice facility.



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Dec. 12, 1976: Washington 27, Dallas 14, in Dallas. The Redskins earned a wild-card playoff spot and their fifth postseason appearance of the Allen era. Three pricey free agents — running backs John Riggins and Calvin Hill and tight end Jean Fugett — scored touchdowns. Washington's defense posted five sacks, two fumble recoveries and two interceptions, including a pick that set up the clinching touchdown. Bill Malinchak, who at Allen's request suspended his career on Wall Street to return to the Redskins late in the season, blocked a punt.

But Jurgensen was the sentimental fan favorite. His aerial wizardry of the 1960s was seared in the minds of fans, who implored Allen to play the great No. 9 when he was healthy. Kilmer, who threw wobbly passes that floated but won 74 percent of the games that he played in during his first seven seasons in Washington, had his supporters, too. Cars in the D.C. area sported bumper stickers that said, “I root for Washington and I like Sonny” or “I root for Washington and I like Billy.”

“Billy wasn't the greatest quarterback who ever lived, but by God he knew how to play,” said Steve Gilmartin, the voice of the Redskins at the time for D.C. radio station WMAL.

HOSTILITY TOWARD DALLAS

The Kilmer-Jurgensen rivalry surfaced at a time when another Redskins rivalry was rising to a fever pitch. The Redskins and the Dallas Cowboys had collided in a series of wild, high-scoring games decided by single digits in the 1960s. But by the early 1970s, clashes between the NFC East foes had become one of the marquee rivalries in pro sports. The rivalry's chief architect was Allen, a master at creating hype.

Allen despised the Cowboys because of their snooty reputation, the shiny star on their helmets and their self-promotion as “America's Team.” He also thought they received favoritism from the NFL because their general manger, Tex Schramm, was buddies with then-league commissioner Pete Rozelle. To antagonize the Cowboys and their quarterback, Roger Staubach, Allen assigned one of his loyal veterans, defensive tackle Diron Talbert, to make outrageous comments like “Roger Staubach wears skirts.” Such hostility toward Dallas spread throughout the organization. As the Redskins were routing the Cowboys in the 1972 NFC Championship game, reserve quarterback Sam Wyche proclaimed, “Die you dogs, die you Dallas dogs.” The Cowboys detested the Redskins, too, and the teams exchanged charges of dirty play and spying on practices.

“It was very easy to build a rivalry with them,” Bruce Allen said. “Dad believed they were standing in the way of what we wanted to accomplish. They were also trying to be something other than a football team.”

In the 1973 and 1974 seasons, Jurgensen and Kilmer, nicknamed “Hobble and Wobble,” rotated at quarterback mainly because of injuries, although Kilmer again saw most of the playing time. The Redskins finished 10-4 both seasons and made the playoffs as a wild-card team but were eliminated immediately