

THE OVER THE HILL GANG

George Allen's Redskins Tenure: 1971-77



George Allen came to the nation's capital in 1971 to take over a franchise that had gone through rough times for the better part of two decades. It made for a perfect match. Allen quickly put the Redskins into the playoffs and started seven years of winning football in D.C.

Just how bad Washington was prior to Allen needs to be emphasized. Since 1955, the Redskins had produced only one winning season—that came in the one year they lured Vince Lombardi away from the Green Bay Packers, before Lombardi died of cancer. The last time the 'Skins had back-to-back winning seasons? It hadn't happened in the postwar era, the last instance being 1944-45.

Allen was an established winner as a coach. Allen had been the defensive coordinator for George Halas and the Chicago Bears' 1963 NFL champs. Allen got his opportunity to be a head coach for the Los Angeles Rams and from 1966-70 he went 40-13-1. But a power clash and playoff losses left him without a job. The power clash in Los Angeles would be Washington's gain.

Allen was legendary for his disdain of rookies and half of the starting lineup for the '71 Redskins would be 30-years-old or older and during Allen's tenure from 1971 through 1977, the team became known as "The Over The Hill Gang."

TheSportsNotebook has compiled a series of seven articles that capture every season with Allen and *The Over The Hill Gang*. Each season has its own narrative that's published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those seven articles have been pulled together and edited for this compilation.

In *The Over The Hill Gang*, you'll read about the following

*Allen's exciting first year that immediately produced a playoff appearance, sealed with a big win in his old stomping grounds of Los Angeles.

*The big breakthrough of 1972 with a trip to the Super Bowl behind an MVP year from running back Larry Brown.

*Two more playoff trips in 1973 and 1974, with each season marked by debate over which veteran quarterback--Billy Kilmer or Sonny Jurgensen--should be starting. This includes the final great moments of Jurgensen's final Hall of Fame career.

*After missing out on the playoffs in 1975, Kilmer got his own last glorious run in 1976, with multiple big-game performances that put the Redskins back into the postseason.

*The final season of 1977, marked by a battle between Allen and young GM Bobby Beathard over the direction of the organization and a couple aggravating losses that kept them out of the playoffs.

They're all here. The veterans, including defensive names like the great Kenny Houston in the secondary, Pat Fischer at corner, Chris Hanburger at linebacker and a whole lot more. There was the great rivalry with the Dallas Cowboys, battles with the St. Louis Cardinals, Minnesota Vikings and other contenders in the 1970s NFC.

There weren't many great eras in the long history that was Washington Redskins football. The George Allen era was one of the good times.

1971

The 1971 Washington Redskins were led by 32-year-old Billy Kilmer at quarterback. They included two veterans on defense that would be vital parts of this franchise's future. Jack Pardee played linebacker and would later succeed Allen as coach. Richie Petitbon was in the defensive backfield and would one day be the right-hand man to Joe Gibbs in this franchise's glory run of 1981-92. Both Petitbon and Pardee had played for Allen in Chicago and had his trust.

Overall, this was not a lineup stacked with talent. Larry Brown rushed for 948 yards and made the Pro Bowl, but he was the only one to do so. The Redskins won with veteran guile and coaching.

The schedule was soft early on, with both games against a bad St. Louis Cardinals team in the first five weeks, along with road trips to the New York Giants and Houston Oilers, two more bad teams. But the Redskins had also been one of those bad teams for a long time now, and when they swept those four games, it certainly sent a message.

The message was made stronger by what happened right in the middle of those first five weeks. Week 3 was a road game with the Dallas Cowboys, the defending NFC champion. Playing at the Cotton Bowl, the 'Skins got a 57-yard touchdown from Charlie Harraway early on. Harraway ran for 111 yards and Brown chipped in 81 more. Washington shut down Dallas back Calvin Hall and their quarterback tandem of Roger Staubach and Craig Morton. The final was 20-16 and the biggest moment of Washington's 5-0 start.

A road trip to play the Kansas City Chiefs ended in a tough 27-20 loss. The Redskins led 17-13, before two fourth quarter touchdown passes from Len Dawson did them in. Actually, what did them in for the game as a whole was an inability to stop the run—KC's Ed Podolak rushed for 110 yards while Washington couldn't get a ground game going. Still, a defeat to a playoff-bound team on the road was hardly a disgrace.

Washington got a sloppy win over the woeful New Orleans Saints to bounce back. The 24-14 result was never in serious doubt, but the 'Skins committed six turnovers. It set the tone for a poor three weeks that put Allen's early success at risk.

Seven more turnovers came in a home game with the mediocre Philadelphia Eagles. Kilmer threw four interceptions, but the defense kept the team in the game. The quarterback tossed a 32-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter to escape with a 7-7 tie in the days prior to the existence of overtime.

One week later, the team was beaten in the trenches by the Chicago Bears. They gave up 205 yards on the ground while generating only 88. Even though the 'Skins led 15-3 in the third quarter, the inability to control the point of attack cost them in a 16-15 loss.

Meanwhile, Dallas was coming on strong. Head coach Tom Landry had dropped his quarterback tandem and settled on Staubach. The Cowboys came into a November 21 date at RFK Stadium with a 6-3 record, while the Redskins clung to first place at 6-2-1.

Kilmer played an efficient game, going 10/16 for 118 yards and no interceptions. So did Staubach, at 11/21 for 115 yards and no mistakes. The problem is that the Redskins again could not run the ball—only 27 yards for Brown—while the Cowboys generated at least enough to put a few points on the board and they won 13-0.

Dallas would not lose again, en route to the first Super Bowl title in franchise history. Washington was fighting for survival at a time when only one wild-card team qualified for the playoffs.

Allen's veterans righted the ship in consecutive wins over the Eagles and Giants, neither a blowout, but both done reasonably comfortably. It set the stage for the most dramatic of all scenarios—Allen returning to Los Angeles in what was close to winner-take-all for the playoffs...and on the Monday Night stage.

The Redskins, at 8-3-1, led the wild-card race, but the Rams were a game back and could simultaneously pull even and take the tiebreaker if they won this game. The Detroit Lions came into the week a game back, but their loss on Sunday further clarified the stakes for the Monday night battle. You couldn't have scripted this any better if you tried.

Kilmer had Washington on the move early, but Rams corner Kermit Alexander picked off a pass at his own 18-yard line and 82 yards later was in the end zone. It would be Kilmer's last mistake on what ended up being one of the best nights of his professional career.

The quarterback hit Roy Jefferson on a 70-yard touchdown strike to quickly tie the game up. The teams traded field goals and then Washington unleashed. Kilmer hit Clifton McNeil on a 32-yard scoring pass. The quarterback again hooked up with Jefferson, this time on a short touchdown pass. In between the two TD passes, Brown ran one in.

It was 31-10 and though the Rams rallied with consecutive touchdowns, Washington's Speedy Duncan put the finishing touches on the win with a 46-yard interception return. Kilmer finished 14/19 for 246 yards and three touchdowns, completely outplaying the more heralded Roman Gabriel, who was an erratic 17/44 for 219 yards and three interceptions. But no one would argue the night belonged to Allen, who had his revenge on Los Angeles.

The victory clinched a playoff berth for the Redskins. They still had a shot at the division title, but Dallas won the ensuing Saturday to wrap up the NFC East, so the 'Skins had nothing to play for when they took the field Sunday in a season-ending loss at Cleveland.

Washington was heading west to meet the San Francisco 49ers. They took the field in the final game of the divisional round weekend that then opened the playoffs. The first day of the postseason had been on Christmas Day and produced the game that still stands as the longest in NFL history, when the Miami Dolphins beat Kansas City. Dallas also won, so the Redskins took the field on December 26 knowing they could get a third game with their archrival with a win.

The game started well, with Kilmer finding Jerry Smith on an early touchdown pass and it was 10-3 'Skins at the half. But the quarterback wasn't nearly as efficient as he'd been two weeks earlier in Los Angeles. Kilmer struggled to an 11/27 day and only 106 yards. Brown was able to find a little running room though, with 84 yards and even when San Francisco's John Brodie heated up two third quarter touchdown passes, it was still a game 17-13.

Washington was punting from their own end zone in the fourth quarter when the ball was fumbled. San Francisco recovered it in the end zone. Though the Redskins rallied for another touchdown, that was the death knell. The season ended with a 24-20 defeat.

It was still an amazing first year for Allen in Washington. They'd made the playoffs and won a memorable Monday Night game to do it. Winning football was back for the Redskins, and this time it was going to stay for a while.

1972

Allen had still never won a playoff game, either here or in an otherwise successful run with the Los Angeles Rams. The city of D.C. was thirsting for more.

Washington opened the season with a high-profile Monday Night visit to Minnesota and old Metropolitan Stadium to face Bud Grant's Minnesota Vikings. Special teams made the difference—Bill Malinchak blocked a first quarter punt for the Redskins and recovered it for a touchdown and an early 7-0 lead.

The 'Skins fell behind 14-10 in the third quarter, but a pair of fourth quarter touchdown drives put them in control and they hung on 24-21. The stat sheet wasn't pretty—Kilmer struggled to a 7/17 for 57 yards outing, while counterpart Fran Tarkenton was 18/31 for 233 yards. Washington got a strong running from Larry Brown, with 105 yards, but a tag-team of Viking backs had 182.

Turnovers were not decisive. It was the blocked punt that really swung the game. It sounds strange to say this, given Washington won a high-profile MNF game and then won 10 of their first 11 games, but the 'Skins did not start the season well. Minnesota would end up struggling to a 7-7 finish, the rare instance through the 1970s that they didn't own the NFC Central (the current teams of the NFC North). Nor were the next two weeks all that impressive.

After beating a bad St. Louis Cardinals team 24-10, Washington inexplicably lost to the woeful New England Patriots, blowing a 14-0 lead. The Redskins trailed 24-21 and Malinchak almost

saved the day again, blocking a punt in the end zone. But it rolled out the back for a safety and Washington lost by a point. The Redskins were 2-1 and looking most unimpressive in the process.

A quarterback controversy was now in place. Sonny Jurgensen, now 38-years-old, was still beloved by the Redskin faithful and Allen gave him the job over Kilmer. "Jurgy" led the team past a terrible Philadelphia Eagles team 14-0, and then the offense finally got untracked in a 33-3 win at St. Louis. The Redskins looked to be coming together as the Dallas Cowboys—the defending Super Bowl champions—arrived at RFK Stadium in a battle for first place in the NFC East.

Dallas came out of the gates strong, with three good drives. But the Redskins defense made key stops in the red zone and the game was still a manageable 13-0 when Washington started to turn it around. Jurgensen threw a 19-yard touchdown pass to Brown. With the score 20-7, Brown took off on a 34-yard scoring jaunt. And trailing 20-17, Charlie Harraway ran in for a fourth quarter touchdown and a 24-20 win. Washington was alone atop the division.

Jurgensen was an effective 11/16 for 180 yards, but the story of the game was Brown. The 25-year-old running back ran for 95 yards and 100 more receiving, in an era where all-purpose backs were decidedly not the norm. Brown ended the year with over 1,200 yards rushing and won the MVP award. It's fair to say that the first big push of his MVP campaign came in this October 22 win over Dallas.

The town was in love with Jurgy and rightly so, for the way he was playing. It had the making of a storybook season for the old veteran. But Hollywood endings often clash with real life, and this was one of those cases. Early in the following week's game at the New York Giants, Jurgensen tore an Achilles tendon. He was done for the year. Kilmer had to take over what was again a very promising season.

Kilmer had plenty going for him. The defense was the third-best in the NFL, anchored by 1st-team All-Pro linebacker Chris Hanburger. In addition to Brown's MVP year, the Redskins had a quality veteran receiver in Charley Taylor, bound for the Pro Bowl himself. And center Len Hauss was the best on the offensive front. All of these component parts continued to mesh after the injury to Jurgensen, and Kilmer himself drastically elevated his play.

Brown took over the Giant game after the injury to Jurgy and rushed for 191 yards, a 23-16 Redskin win that really wasn't that close. Kilmer completed 7/16 passes the following week at the New York Jets, but those seven completions produced a whopping 222 yards, and included a 70-yard scoring strike in a 35-17 win. The Redskins completed a three-week Big Apple trifecta by again beating the Giants, this time with Kilmer throwing for 256 yards.

A Monday Night home date with the mediocre Atlanta Falcons saw the Redskins fall behind early, 10-0, but Kilmer threw third-quarter touchdown passes to Brown and tight end Jerry Smith. The defense forced four turnovers in a 24-13.

Dallas had been keeping pace, remaining one game out, but on Thanksgiving, the Cowboys lost at home to the San Francisco 49ers. The door was open for the Redskins to take firm control of the NFC East, but they had to beat the Central-leading Green Bay Packers. They did just that in a 21-16 home win. Neither team ran the ball well, but Kilmer was 14/21 for 158 yards and no interceptions.

Washington had the tiebreaker advantage on Dallas, due to a superior conference record, and they could clinch the division on December 3 in Philadelphia. If the Redskins didn't get it done here, the lead would be cut to one game, the tiebreaker dynamics would shift back to the Cowboys (by virtue of Washington losing a divisional game) and set up a battle the following Saturday in Big D for the division.

The Redskins made sure that didn't happen. They took a 10-7 lead in the first half at Philly, and then took over the second half. Kilmer's renaissance continued, with a sharp 12/15 for 155 yards performance. Washington won 23-7, and at 11-1 had clinched the division.

Homefield advantage was not a factor, as the NFL used a rotation system among division winners to determine playoff matchups and venues, so there was nothing left to play for. Washington dropped its final two games and got ready for the playoffs.

Christmas Eve Sunday came, and the Packers were back in D.C. for the divisional playoff round. After a scoreless first quarter, Green Bay drove into the red zone, but settled for a field goal. Kilmer then stepped up and hit wide receiver Roy Jefferson on a 32-yard touchdown strike.

It was all the Redskins defense needed. They collared the Packer running game, allowing just 78 yards on the ground. Green Bay quarterback Scott Hunter was out of his element against this defense. Brown ground out 101 yards and Washington churned out a 16-3 win.

Now it was time for a showdown with Dallas. Redskins Nation came to RFK Stadium on New Year's Eve hoping to have two reasons to party at night. The combination of Kilmer and the defense did it again.

Another scoreless first quarter gave way to a second quarter where a deep Washington drive ended in a field goal. Then Kilmer rifled a touchdown pass to Taylor. The Redskin defense was again collaring an opposing running game. Washington didn't run well themselves—Brown had 88 yards, but it took 30 carries to get them—but Kilmer was completely outplaying his counterpart Roger Staubach.

Staubach was held to 9/20 for 98 yards, while Kilmer coolly completed 14/18 for 194 yards. And he threw one more touchdown pass to Taylor, a 45-yard strike. Taylor had a huge day, with seven catches for 146 yards. Washington pulled away to a 26-3 win and it was time to start the party in D.C.

Two weeks later in the Los Angeles Coliseum, the party ended at the hands of the undefeated Miami Dolphins. Kilmer threw three interceptions and Washington couldn't stop Dolphin running back Larry Csonka, who rushed for 112 yards. The most aggravating interception came early in the fourth quarter—trailing 14-0, Kilmer saw Smith wide open in the end zone. The pass hit the crossbar, which was then situated on the goal line and fell incomplete. One play later, Kilmer was picked. The final was 14-7.

Washington may not have won a Super Bowl, but they had built on the previous year's success, won playoff games and at least won an NFC crown. Brown, Kilmer and Allen enjoyed their career high points in 1972.

1973

1973 was a good year—the Redskins again made the playoffs—but inconsistency at bad times, the loss of the running game and a merry-go-round at quarterback prevented them from reaching the previous year's heights.

Larry Brown struggled through much of '73. The problems of the running game—no Pro Bowlers on the offensive line—were overshadowed by Allen's juggling of veteran quarterbacks, Sonny Jurgensen and Billy Kilmer.

The latter started most of the games, but Jurgy was a fan favorite in the twilight of his career and still started some of the Redskins' biggest games. Even with the running game going in starts and stops and the quarterbacks seemingly in rotation, the Redskins were still able to produce the sixth-most points in the NFL. A Pro Bowl year from veteran receiver Charley Taylor marked him as a steady contributor amidst the chaos.

It seems odd that the offense ranked the same as the defense, because the D was a little more stacked. Linebacker Chris Hanburger was a first-team All-Pro and the secondary was filled with ballhawks. Ken Houston was an All-Pro at strong safety, Brig Owens roamed at free safety while Pat Fischer and Mike Bass manned the corners.

The Redskins opened the year with a soft schedule, but did not take full advantage. A season-opening route of the San Diego Chargers was followed by a loss to the St. Louis Cardinals, on their way to a 4-9 season. It was here that Jurgensen began getting a lot of playing time, as he threw 18 passes, while Kilmer threw 22.

Jurgensen got the start at Philadelphia and threw two touchdowns in a 28-7 win. It set the stage for a Monday Night battle in RFK Stadium with the Dallas Cowboys coming to town. The Redskins had beaten the Cowboys in the NFC Championship Game the year before, and Dallas was 3-0.

The game was a defensive war, and Dallas led 7-0 in the fourth quarter. Jurgensen stayed in the game the whole way, testament to how much more rope he had than Kilmer. Jurgy flipped a one-yard scoring pass to Taylor to tie the game.

Washington was getting destroyed on the ground, but they were making up for it with stellar pass defense. Fittingly, the game's decisive play was Owens picking off a pass and taking it 26 yards to the house. The Redskins won 14-7.

Easy victories over the New York Giants and a revenge home game with St. Louis moved the Redskins to 5-1. Then a disastrous road trip to New Orleans went down. Both quarterbacks played and neither played well. Running against a bad defense, Brown carried 12 times for six yards. The Redskins lost 19-3 in a game that would haunt them all the way into the postseason.

To make matters worse, the loss came right before a road trip to play the Pittsburgh Steelers on Monday Night. The "Steel Curtain" that would win four Super Bowls in six years in the 1970s wasn't in full bloom, but it was close—the Steelers had made the playoffs the year before and it was one year after this that the dynasty run would begin. The Monday Night game in the Steel City was not well-played, with four turnovers apiece, and the Redskins lost 21-16.

Washington was able to right the ship and win four games against beatable opponents. Kilmer played extremely well in San Francisco, throwing for 267 yards and beating the 49ers 33-7. The running game finally had a big breakout on Thanksgiving Day in Detroit. Brown and Charlie Harraway led an attack that piled up 202 yards at old Tiger Stadium in a 20-0 win.

But the most notable game in this four-game stretch again involved a quarterback change. The Redskins fell behind the Giants 24-13 in RFK. Kilmer was 6-for-15, though he had thrown for 138 yards. Allen called Jurgy's number and the old vet came through, as did Brown. Washington drove for two fourth quarter touchdowns, with Brown running for one and catching a 16-yard toss from Jurgensen to win the game 27-24.

There were two games left and though Washington was 9-3, they weren't home free for the postseason. They had a road trip to play the 8-4 Cowboys coming up, and Dallas would take the tiebreaker if they won—a consequence of the Redskins losing that game in New Orleans. Furthermore, the surprising Atlanta Falcons could jump up and steal the wild-card spot.

It was a late Sunday afternoon kickoff in Dallas and the game couldn't have gone worse. The Cowboys again pummeled the Redskin defense on the ground. Washington again could not answer with a running game of their own. And this time, Staubach was sharp, while Jurgensen was not. The final was 27-7, with the Redskins' only points coming on a blocked punt in the fourth quarter.

Fortunately, Atlanta had also lost, so Washington was in a good position to still make the playoffs. Although here again, losing to New Orleans had introduced an element of chance—the

tiebreaker would come down to net points, and while Washington looked in good shape there, it was close enough that Atlanta could still make it interesting.

Redskins fans with the benefit of current knowledge are painfully aware that the 1979 team was in great shape on the points differential battle coming into a season finale, only to get their hearts ripped out.

The easy way to deal with all that was to win the game in Philadelphia. It didn't start well—the Eagles jumped out to a 10-0 lead, but after a tumultuous year, Kilmer took over. He threw for 251 yards and rifled four touchdown passes. Brown stepped up at the big moment and ran for 150 yards. The Redskins won 38-20 and were going to the playoffs. Dallas took care of St. Louis to win the NFC East.

Divisional round weekend began Saturday afternoon in Minneapolis, with the Redskins meeting the Vikings outdoors at old Metropolitan Stadium. Brown ran like his 1972 self, producing 115 yards and rushing for a second quarter touchdown that made it 7-3. Kicker Curt Knight drilled a 52-yard field goal and a 42-yarder, and Washington led the NFC's top seed 13-10 in the fourth quarter.

Then Fran Tarkenton ripped the hearts out of the nation's capital. The scrambling quarterback, one of the best in the league, threw for 222 yards on the day, a high number in this era of running offenses and physical defenses. He found John Gilliam twice for touchdowns in the fourth quarter. Kilmer threw a 30-yard scoring pass of his own to Roy Jefferson, but the Vikings won 27-20.

It was a changing of the guard in the NFC, as Minnesota would go on to do what Washington did—first defeat Dallas in the NFC Championship Game, then lose to the Miami Dolphins in the Super Bowl.

The 1973 Washington Redskins were a good team, and anything but boring. The ending was disappointing, but Allen continued to deliver playoff berths.

1974

Sonny Jurgensen was one of the great quarterbacks in NFL history, and has a plaque in Canton. His last ride came with the 1974 Washington Redskins. And at age 40, Sonny was often called on in relief of starter Billy Kilmer. "Jurgy" started some of the season's significant games and he was critical in pushing the Redskins into the playoffs for the fourth straight year under head coach George Allen.

The lack of a running game was a problem regardless of who was under center. Larry Brown, the league MVP during the team's Super Bowl run of 1972, slipped to 430 rush yards. There were no Pro Bowlers on the offensive line, the norm during the Allen era. Jurgensen and Kilmer made up for it by spreading the ball around to three different receivers—Pro Bowler Charley

Taylor, Roy Jefferson and tight end Jerry Smith, who had a career second wind at age 31 after a few dry years under Allen.

Washington ranked fourth on offense, and they ranked the same on defense, thanks to a veteran core that stayed mostly the same during the Allen years. Chris Hanburger was an All-Pro linebacker and Ken Houston was the same at strong safety. Pat Fischer and Mike Bass were steady at the corners, and Diron Talbert had a Pro Bowl year anchoring the defensive front.

Opportunistic defense made its presence felt immediately when Bass intercepted a pass in the first quarter of Week 1 and took it to the house. The Redskins beat the Giants in the old Yale Bowl, where New York played while Yankee Stadium was under remodeling.

The opportunism turned against the 'Skins in a Week 2 home game against the St. Louis Cardinals. The Cards scored early on a 71-yard fumble return, and also got a 75-yard touchdown run from running back Terry Metcalf. St. Louis did nothing the rest of the game—Metcalf got just twenty more yards and Jim Hart threw for only 56 yards.

But St. Louis didn't turn the ball over, the Kilmer-led offense was anemic and Washington lost 17-10 to a team they would be battling all season for supremacy in the NFC East.

Kilmer got on his game in a Monday Night thrashing of an adequate Denver Bronco team, going 17/23 for 223 yards and two touchdown passes to Taylor. But Kilmer hit his low point in Week 4 and Jurgy made his first appearance.

A road trip at mediocre Cincinnati went horribly. The Bengals' Lemar Parrish scored on both a punt return and a pick-6. The Redskins fell behind 28-3 and Kilmer got the hook. Jurgensen threw a couple fourth quarter touchdown passes to make the score respectable and he got the start the following week.

And what a start it was—the Miami Dolphins were coming to RFK Stadium, the first time the teams had met since the Dolphins completed their perfect season of 1972 by beating the Redskins in the Super Bowl.

Washington trailed 10-3 in the fourth quarter and then the old veteran came through. He hit Jefferson on a 37-yard touchdown pass and eventually pushed the 'Skins ahead 13-10. Miami reclaimed the lead, but Jurgy, who threw for 303 yards, led one more drive and threw one more touchdown pass to win it 20-17. He came back the next week and rifled three scoring passes in a 24-3 rout of the Giants.

The Redskins were 4-2 and it was time for the return trip to St. Louis on October 27. The Cardinals were soaring, at 6-0. Jurgensen got the start, but the Cardinals got him early. Roger Wehrli picked off a Jurgy pass and took it 53 yards to the end zone. Then Hart threw a 52-yard touchdown pass to Earl Thomas, as St. Louis built a 16-0 lead.

Jurgensen stayed with it though, and ended up completing 20/29 passes for 201 yards. He threw a short touchdown pass to Brown and the 'Skins closed to 16-13. But Hart was having an outstanding day, 15/19 for 200 yards and threw a touchdown pass of his own. St. Louis held off Washington 23-20. The biggest stat of the day was zero—for the second straight meeting, the Cardinals did not turn the ball over against the Redskin defense and it's the reason they swept the season series.

The NFC East race appeared all but over and even a playoff berth—there was only one wild-card in a three-division conference format—looked in jeopardy. Allen went back to Kilmer and the Redskins won in Green Bay 17-6, though it took into the third quarter before Washington put the ball in the end zone and got the lead. When the 'Skins fell behind at Philadelphia 20-7 in the third quarter the following week, Jurgensen was back in the lineup. He rallied Washington to a 27-20 win.

Meanwhile, St. Louis hit a tough part of the schedule. They lost at Dallas, the division's traditional power, but who had gotten off to a terrible 1-4 start and was trying to get off the mat. Then the Cards lost at the Minnesota Vikings, who had gone to the Super Bowl in 1973 and would again this year.

Allen went back to Kilmer for the home game with Dallas, and the coach's decision was vindicated. Kilmer was an efficient 11/19 for 161 yards while counterpart Roger Staubach was 16/38 for 174. Washington won 28-21 and effectively beat back Dallas' push for a playoff spot. The 'Skins beat Philadelphia at home when Larry Jones returned a kickoff for a touchdown in the third quarter to break open what was then a close 13-7 game. It set up a trip to Dallas and one of the most regrettably memorable Thanksgivings in NFL history.

Washington led 16-3, would force five turnovers and had knocked Staubach at the game. But Cowboy backup Clint Longley made a name for himself. He went 11/20 for 203 yards, threw touchdown passes of 35 and 50 yards and Dallas pulled out a 24-23 win. The Cowboys were still a longshot to make the playoffs, but it was apparent that the NFC East runner-up was going to be the wild-card, so neither Washington nor St. Louis were completely out of the woods.

Kilmer got the call for a tough Monday Night road trip at the Los Angeles Rams, a team on their way to the NFC West title. The Rams went ahead 10-0 in the first quarter, but Kilmer struck with three second quarter touchdown passes and a 23-17 win. The victory pushed the record to 9-4 and clinched at least a playoff spot. When St. Louis lost to lowly New Orleans—the second straight week the Cards lost to a bad team—it dropped them to 9-4 and the division race was still open.

Washington hosted lowly Chicago and with the defense picking off four passes from three different Bear quarterbacks, it was an easy 42-0 win. St. Louis beat the Giants and hung on to win the division. The Redskins would go on the road, back to Los Angeles for the playoffs.

Kilmer started and the 'Skins led 10-7 at half, but they weren't moving the ball, rushing for just 49 yards. Kilmer was erratic throwing the ball and when a pair of fumbles set up Ram field goals and put Washington down 13-10, you know where the coach was going—he was going to the old warrior one more time.

Jurgensen completed 6/12 passes for 78 yards, and had the Redskins moving toward a tying field goal late in the game. But he also threw three interceptions in the fourth quarter alone and one that ended up in the hands of Isiah Robertson was taken to the end zone. Los Angeles won 19-10.

It was a tough ending, the second straight year the Redskins were in the lead on the road in the second half of an NFC divisional playoff game and ended up losing. But there was also a little magic to the 1974 season. Sonny Jurgensen was never "The Man", but he got the call often enough and in his final season he helped push the Redskins into the playoffs one more time.

1975

The 1975 Washington Redskins were the odd team out in a tough three-team race in the NFC East at a time when only four teams per conference qualified for the postseason.

Washington was not loaded with talent, but they had proud veterans. On defense, that started with linebacker Chris Hanburger and strong safety Ken Houston, both All-Pros, and it included corners Pat Fischer and Mike Bass.

Offensively, it started with 36-year-old quarterback Billy Kilmer and included Pro Bowl receiver Charley Taylor. The offensive line didn't produce a Pro Bowler, but they blocked well enough to allow some dynamic youth, in the person of rookie running back Mike Thomas, to rush for over 900 yards in a schedule that was then only 14 games.

The offense came exploding out of the gate, dropping a combined 90 points in wins over bad teams in the New Orleans Saints and New York Giants, both at home. Taylor was getting help at wideout with 25-year-old Frank Grant, who had the first of what would be two productive seasons in the nation's capital.

A trip to Philadelphia for Week 3 in early October produced a costly 26-10 loss. The Redskins turned it over six times, and the fact it was a divisional game would haunt them later in December.

The St. Louis Cardinals had won the NFC East the prior year, while the Redskins had been the wild-card. The Cardinals came to old RFK Stadium for a Monday Night battle. The Cards were also 2-1, although their loss—an overtime defeat at the Dallas Cowboys, the third team in this NFC East dogfight, was considerably better than Washington's.

Washington led the Monday Night game 10-3 at the half and was completely shutting down St. Louis' talented running back, Terry Metcalf. But Metcalf did on special teams what he couldn't do out of the backfield, and returned the opening kick of the second half for a touchdown. The teams traded touchdowns after that, and it was 17-17 going into the fourth quarter.

The Redskins defense delivered, intercepting St. Louis' Jim Hart three times and getting five turnovers in all. Thomas rushed for 100 yards, including the tiebreaking touchdown and Washington won 27-17.

But the good times didn't last. The Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) were an up-and-coming team and on their way to a 10-4 season. They forced Kilmer into a 12-for-29 passing day and beat the 'Skins 13-10 in the Astrodome. Washington bounced back against a bad AFC team in the Cleveland Browns, recovering four fumbles in a 23-7 win.

The Dallas Cowboys were coming to town on November 2. The Cowboys had been the odd team out of the playoffs in '74 and were 5-1, leading the NFC East. After an early Redskin field goal, Dallas quarterback Roger Staubach threw for one touchdown and ran for another. Trailing 14-3, the game and season was starting to look bleak for Washington.

Kilmer responded by hitting Grant for a 46-yard touchdown pass and the lead was down to 17-10 by the half. Kilmer later connected with Charley Taylor to tie the game. The quarterback then appeared to make a fatal mistake, throwing a Pick-6 deep in his own end.

In spite of the Washington defense having taken over since the second-quarter Cowboy burst, the 'Skins trailed 24-17. But while Kilmer was often erratic, he was never without spunk. And he led a drive that was capped off with a seven-yard TD pass to tight end Jerry Smith with 1:52 left that tied the game.

Staubach gave Dallas a fair chance to win it, but a 38-yard-field goal was missed in the closing seconds. Then in overtime the Cowboys again reached midfield. Washington's two best defensive players came up with the play of the game.

Hanburger blitzed and as Staubach released, his arm was hit by the linebacker. The ball floated and Houston came up with it. He returned it back to midfield, and Staubach then was whistled for a 15-yard unsportsmanlike call. It took Washington ten plays to go the 36 yards, but Kilmer snuck it over from the one and the Redskins had a 30-24 win. The NFC East was a three-way tie at 5-2 halfway through the season.

Washington's road game with the New York Giants was a little lackluster and they needed a couple fourth quarter touchdowns to pull out a 21-13 win. It was the classic "sandwich" game, stuck in the midst of a tough stretch of games, so a win was a win. The next two games didn't turn out quite as well.

November 16 was the return visit to St. Louis, and circumstances forced the Redskins to rely on journeyman quarterback Randy Johnson. He played pretty well and threw for 252 yards, including a 36-yard touchdown pass to Taylor. It was the defense that failed the 'Skins on this day. Jim Otis ran for 109 yards for St. Louis, and Mel Gray got the same amount receiving. Hart led a fourth quarter drive to tie the game 17-17 and St. Louis won it in overtime.

The fate of overtime turned against Washington the following week at home against an Oakland Raider team that was a perennial playoff participant under John Madden. Raider running back Pete Banaszak ran for three early touchdowns and the Redskins trailed 20-9 at the half. Kilmer rallied the troops hitting Grant from 33 yards for one score and ultimately pulling even, 23-23.

But Kilmer was erratic—18-for-39-while counterpart Ken Stabler was efficient, at 20-for-32. Oakland won in overtime.

Now the season was on the line and the parade of tough games continued. The Minnesota Vikings were on their way to a league-best 12-2 record and quarterback Fran Tarkenton would win the MVP. The scrambling quarterback showed why. Even though Kilmer threw a pair of second-quarter touchdowns and the Redskins led 21-0, Tarkenton threw for 357 yards and eventually put his team ahead 30-24.

Once again, Kilmer, flaws and all, delivered a winning drive. He found Grant on a 15-yard touchdown pass and with their 31-30 win, the 'Skins were 7-4 and still alive.

The Atlanta Falcons were a bad team, but they nearly destroyed the Washington season. Kilmer had to reach deep, go 25/38 for 320 yards and outgun young Falcon quarterback Steve Bartkowski for a 30-27 win. The Cards beat the Cowboys head-to-head on the same day. It set up the Redskins' Week 13 trip to Dallas with both teams at 8-4.

The stakes were simple—the winner would wrap up a playoff berth. The loser, so long as St. Louis also won (they did), was out. It was a de facto playoff game. For Washington, this is where the loss to Philadelphia hurt double, as it put them behind Dallas in a tiebreaker if the head-to-head games were split.

Kilmer and Grant hooked up for an early touchdown pass and with a 10-0 lead, the outlook was promising for the Redskins. Staubach then hit Golden Richards on a 57-yard touchdown strike, and later ran for another touchdown.

The game was still a competitive 14-10 in the fourth quarter, but Washington couldn't run the ball, while Dallas would pile up over 200 yards on the ground. The dam broke in the final quarter. The Cowboys got a field goal, then got an insurance touchdown. Then they got an in-your-face touchdown when a Kilmer interception was returned for a score. The final was 31-10. The run of playoff berths under Allen was over.

Washington essentially mailed in their final game, an ugly 26-3 home loss to Philadelphia. St. Louis took the NFC East title, but lost the first playoff game to the Los Angeles Rams. Dallas took the wild-card route to the Super Bowl, the first time to do so, before losing to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Allen and the Redskins would both be back. For the present though, the immediate aftermath of 1975 was a bitter taste in the mouth.

1976

The 1976 Washington Redskins were a team of proud veterans struggling to hang on in a tough division at a time when playoff berths were at a premium. They made it to the postseason for the fifth time in six years thanks to a memorable stretch drive led by 37-year-old quarterback Billy Kilmer.

The Redskins won four of their first six games, but there were reasons to be concerned. The schedule was soft, with five of the games against teams that would be sub-.500 and another against the soon-to-be 7-7 Chicago Bears. What's more, the wins against the woeful New York Giants and Philadelphia Eagles were by the hair of the 'Skins teeth. At a time when parity in the NFL was nowhere close to what it is today, a team couldn't use the "just win and go home" mantra quite as easily as today.

Monday Night, October 25, saw a downpour hit Washington D.C. as the Cardinals came to town for a big game for an ABC audience. St. Louis was 5-1. Dallas had won the previous day to get to 6-1. If the 'Skins lost this game at home tonight, you might as well put another non-playoff year in the books.

Washington trailed 10-6 in the third quarter, but St. Louis was having a little trouble hanging on to the football—like eight lost fumbles worth of trouble. Plus two more interceptions. I'm going to take a cautious guess that the historical track record of teams that lose the turnover battle 10-3 is not very good.

The Redskins got the lead 13-10 on a touchdown run by Mike Thomas, on his way to an 1100-yard season and Pro Bowl trip. Then Eddie Brown electrified the crowd at old RFK Stadium with a 71-yard punt return for a touchdown that sealed a 20-10 win and kept the season alive.

Subsequent events made it look like Washington had only gotten a stay of execution rather than really saving their season. Kilmer had thrown for fewer than 100 yards in the St. Louis game. The weather might have provided a valid excuse in that game, but there was none when he turned in a similar clunker on November 14 against the Giants. The 'Skins lost 12-9, fell two games back in the playoff race with four to play and young Joe Theisman was starting to get snaps at quarterback.

November 21 was the chance to make a last stand. Washington traveled to St. Louis where the wind was blowing at 17 mph. Allen, notorious for relying on veterans, chose Kilmer to make the start. The game didn't begin well, with Jim Hart tossing a 48-yard touchdown pass to explosive running back Terry Metcalf, but the 'Skins fought back.

This was a team with a lot of proud veterans on defense—Linebacker Chris Hanburger and strong safety Ken Houston would make the Pro Bowl at ages 35 and 32 respectively. Pat Fischer, 36-years-old, was still fighting the good fight at corner. Diron Talbert was 32 and still anchoring a defensive tackle spot. Allen even brought in an old enemy—free safety Jake Scott had been Super Bowl MVP for the undefeated Miami Dolphins in 1972 when they beat the Redskins. 1976 saw Scott come over to the burgundy and gold. This defense wasn't going to go quietly into the good night.

The Over The Hill Gang kept St. Louis out of the end zone the rest of the game. Kilmer relied on his running game, with Thomas and 27-year-old John Riggins leading the way for an attack that piled up 247 yards. The Redskins won 16-10. They were still a game back of St. Louis and needed help with three weeks to go, but Washington still had life.

Kilmer still had life too. Washington took care of two easy games, but unlike the start of the year, they looked like a real playoff-caliber team. Kilmer threw six touchdown passes in the two games, the offense put 51 points on the board and when Dallas knocked off St. Louis, the Redskins got control of their playoff destiny when they entered the season finale at 9-4.

What the Cowboys giveth the Cowboys could taketh away though. Washington would have to win in Dallas in Week 14, and while their archrival had clinched the NFC East, the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs was still up for grabs.

Washington trailed 14-10, but with Kilmer providing some real air support for the offense, the runners eventually found room to move. Thomas would rush for 66 yards and catch seven passes. Riggins ran for 95 yards, and the ground game took it over down the stretch. The Redskins won 27-14 and had made the playoffs.

It was an unlikely run for Kilmer and a most deserving one for a quarterback that always had to fight for everything, first against franchise legend Sonny Jurgensen and then the up-and-coming Theisman. It all came to crashing an end six days later in Minnesota. The Vikings dominated the line of scrimmage on both sides, built a 35-6 lead and won 35-20. Kilmer threw for 298 yards, but just didn't have the help on this day.

What the wily veteran quarterback had done though, was author one last great memory in a fine career, as the improbable four-game win streak and playoff berth is an underappreciated moment in Washington Redskins history.

1977

The 1977 Washington Redskins finished fourth in the NFL in points allowed, in spite of having only one Pro Bowler—strong safety Ken Houston—on defense.

For all the defensive prowess, there were problems on the other side of the ball. Washington ranked 21st in points scored, and had a quarterback controversy behind wily veteran Billy Kilmer and up-and-comer Joe Theisman.

Kilmer was the starter when the season began and it didn't begin well in a visit to the Meadowlands to play the New York Giants. It took to the fourth quarter for the Redskins to get their first points of 1977, though a sudden flurry gave them a 17-10 lead before the ultimate lost on a late field goal.

Three straight wins followed, including victories over average teams in the Atlanta Falcons and St. Louis Cardinals, each of whom would finish 7-7, then a road shutout of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, an expansion team on their way to 0-14. Even here, the offensive problems showed—in an era where NFL expansion teams didn't get nearly the help they do today in stocking their rosters, the 'Skins mustered only ten points in a shutout win.

The Dallas Cowboys were always the enemy, especially in the era of Tom Landry and Roger Staubach and 1977 was perhaps the best team of this period in Cowboys' history. The Redskins went to Big D and were handled 34-16.

That loss could have been managed. What was inexcusable was a home defeat the following week to the Giants. New York finished just 5-9 and not until 1981 would they become competitive. Kilmer played an acceptable game—20/39 for 217 yards was tolerable in the era when defenses could get much more physical with receivers than is the case today. But there was no running game, the Redskins lost three fumbles and they lost the game 17-6.

With the team 3-3 and the season hanging in the balance, Allen gave Theisman a chance.

The young quarterback promptly hit Pro Bowl tight end Jean Fugett for two first-quarter touchdown passes in a 23-17 win over a Philadelphia Eagles team that was gaining steam under Dick Vermeil and would be in the playoffs one year later.

Theisman was back under center for a Monday Night trip to play the Baltimore Colts, en route to another division title in what was a successful era for the franchise an hour north of the Redskins. When you can't run the ball, it makes little difference who the center is, and the 'Skins couldn't that night losing 10-3.

Mark Moseley, one of the last straight-on placekickers to ever play in the NFL, saved the season a week later in Philadelphia, nailing a 54-yard field goal to get a 17-14 win. A Monday Night date with the Green Bay Packers finally saw a semblance of a running game—Mike Thomas ran for 81 yards—and the defense led the way to a 10-9 win.

Now it was Thanksgiving weekend and Dallas came to town, the Cowboys not having yet intruded on the Detroit Lions' tradition of hosting a game on Thursday and making it their own. Theisman played well—17/35 for 231 yards and outplayed Staubach. But the Redskins couldn't finish the deal and dropped a tough 14-7 decision.

With the season again in the balance—the Redskins would need to win their final three games and get help—Allen went back to his veteran. Kilmer would get the start. It was a fitting choice for a head coach who was so averse to youth that he consistently sought to trade his draft picks. Allen's defense was still keyed by vets like 33-year-old Diron Talbert at defensive end and 34-year-old Mike Curtis at linebacker.

The vets found a way to dig deep. They went to Buffalo and won 10-0. Then they went to St. Louis, where the Cardinals still had a longshot playoff chance and the defense intercepted St. Louis quarterback Jim Hart three times. Kilmer played mistake-free and the 'Skins won 26-20.

It was down to the final week of the regular season. Washington needed to beat the Los Angeles Rams—champions of the NFC West—to stay alive. And the Chicago Bears needed to lose.

Kilmer went 12/21 for 144 yards and the Redskins jumped out quickly 17-0, then held on for a 17-14 win. Meanwhile, the Bears were in danger. Their game had gone to overtime. There was just one problem—the opponent was the Giants. Since when had the Giants brought the 1977 Washington Redskins anything positive? It wouldn't be today. Chicago won 12-9 in overtime.

The two losses to a bad New York team, when just a split would have resulted in a playoff berth was a bitter ending. Allen ranks second to only Joe Gibbs on the list of Washington Redskins head coaches. Allen had a great run, and a nice season in 1977, but it ended a little too soon.