

## GLORY YEARS

### *The Joe Gibbs Era Of Redskins History: 1981-92*



The glory years of professional football in the nation's capital was the first term of Joe Gibbs, from 1981-92. Inheriting a team that had gone 6-10, Gibbs won the franchise's first Super Bowl title in just two years. Overall, the Redskins went to four Super Bowls and won three during Gibbs' run.

The great eras of most franchises are defined by a quarterback, but that's not the case with Gibbs. He won all three of his championships with a different quarterback. Joe Theismann in 1982, Doug Williams in 1987 and Mark Rypien in 1991. Gibbs even mixed in Jay Schroeder, who started for almost all of the '87 regular season.

How did Gibbs win without a clear-cut franchise quarterback? The answer was muscle up front. The Redskins drew their identity from a physical offensive line known as the The Hogs. The fan

base came to old RFK Stadium wearing hog snouts and The Hogs keyed a dominant running game.

So was there a single running back whose name defined the era? Again, the answer is no. John Riggins was the focal point of the early championship team, a bruising and colorful runner who delivered one of the most memorable runs in Super Bowl history.

But by the second championship run, George Rogers was the focal point. When he was shelved for the Super Bowl itself, an obscure player named Timmy Smith stepped up and made history. Earnest Byner and Ricky Ervins keyed the running game by the time Gibbs' third championship movement arrived.

There were certainly a lot of great players that came through Washington D.C. during this fabulous twelve-year stretch. Cornerback Darrell Green is in the Hall of Fame. So is Russ Grimm, the best member of the Hogs. His teammate, Joe Jacoby, deserves to be. Wide receiver Art Monk—quiet, consistent and the one player who links all three Super Bowl titles together is also in Canton.

But the biggest common thread is Joseph Jackson Gibbs, one of the greatest coaches in NFL history. All twelve seasons of this glory run have an article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. All twelve are pulled together and edited for this compilation.

## 1981

A new era of Washington Redskins history started in 1981, when they hired the offensive coordinator of the San Diego Chargers, Joe Gibbs, as their new head coach. Gibbs had overseen the most explosive attack in the NFL to put him on the map as head coach material. The 1981 Washington Redskins didn't have the most auspicious of beginnings—to put it mildly—but they eventually generated the momentum that started the most glorious era in franchise history.

Washington was a young team and started four rookies on offense. Two of them, Virgil Seay at wide receiver and right guard Melvin Jones, didn't have long runs in D.C. But two others, the left side of the offensive line, Joe Jacoby and Russ Grimm did. They, along with fellow offensive line rookie Mark May, would eventually form the “Hogs”, one of the great offensive fronts in NFL history.

Joe Washington was the most productive runner, going for 916 yards. Gibbs also got two accomplished veterans to come out of retirement. One of them, Terry Metcalf, didn't last past this season. The other one was John Riggins and this one worked out considerably better for the Redskins.

The quarterback was Joe Theismann, now 32-years old, and he threw for over 3,500 yards, albeit with a TD/INT ratio of 19/20. Art Monk, his 24-year-old wide receiver accumulated 894 yards through the air.

On the other side of the ball, there was a talented rookie defensive end in Dexter Manley. On balance though, this was not a team exploding with great talent—at least fully developed talent. Not a single Redskin starter made the Pro Bowl, and the only player on the team to do so was their great return specialist, Mike Nelms.

The season started with a home game against the archrival Dallas Cowboys, who were on their way to another vintage 12-4 season under head coach Tom Landry. After a scoreless first quarter, the Cowboys took over the line of scrimmage, winning the rushing battle 206-44. The Redskins committed six turnovers, four of them interceptions by Theismann. The game ended 26-10.

Three more losses to NFC East rivals followed. The Redskins were tied at home with the New York Giants, 7-7 in the fourth quarter, but one of their four turnovers was a fumble inside the 10-yard line that turned into an easy defensive touchdown. Washington lost 17-7. Theismann threw for 388 yards at the St .Louis Cardinals, but the 'Skins fell behind 40-17 and lost by ten points. They were competitive at Philadelphia for three quarters, trailing 14-13. But it all got away in the fourth quarter of a 36-13 loss.

Gibbs was still looking for his first win when the San Francisco 49ers came to town. The 49ers would win the Super Bowl this season and put Joe Montana and Bill Walsh on the map. But they weren't quite on the map by Week 5—the winless Redskins were still a two-point favorite. It was a big miscalculation by the oddsmakers.

Washington trailed 7-0 and was driving, when a fumble was returned 80 yards for a San Francisco touchdown and the rout was on. The score got to 30-3, before a couple meaningless Redskin touchdowns made the final look respectable at 30-17.

The new head coach and the fans were wondering if a win would ever come. Finally, on the road at a bad Chicago Bears team, it did. The 'Skins led 3-0 early in the game, when linebacker Neal Olkewicz returned an interception for a touchdown. It was one of four times the Redskins picked off Chicago quarterback Vince Evans. Riggins pounded out 126 yards, while Joe Washington had 88. The final was 24-7 and Gibbs was off the schneid.

Washington played well at Miami one week later, being tied 10-10 into the fourth quarter against a team that would win the AFC East. The Dolphins kicked a late field goal and won 13-10, but it seemed possible the 'Skins were getting on a roll. But one week later, playing an absolutely awful New England Patriots team at home, Washington trailed 15-7 in the second quarter. The home fans still hadn't seen a win yet, and it looked like this whole Gibbs thing was going to get flushed down the drain before it started.

Then Nelms turned the momentum. He returned a punt 75 yards for a touchdown, the Redskins got it rolling and escaped with a 24-22 win. It wasn't pretty, but at least it was a win. It obviously presumes a lot to think that had the Redskins not won this game, they wouldn't have eventually closed this season strong or gone on to their future glory under this coaching staff. It's fair to say

this though—in a town where media sharks swirl, it made everyone’s life a lot easier not to blow this game.

And then the winning really started. Theismann threw two long touchdown passes early in a home game against St. Louis, 38 yards to Monk and 51 to Seay. The quarterback finished the game 14/19 for 219 yards and led an easy 42-21 win.



A wild back-and-forth home game with the Detroit Lions followed. Joe Washington and Detroit counterpart Billy Sims each piled up big yardage on the ground. Seay and Lion receiver Freddie Scott had big days catching passes. But the Lions made mistakes—six turnovers—and it allowed the Redskins to get the final blow, a 44-yard field goal from Mark Moseley to win 33-31. Moseley came through again in New York against the Giants, tying the game 27-27 with a 49-yard field goal. Then he won it with a 48-yarder in overtime.

The ‘Skins were closing in on .500 at 5-6, but then tough road games against playoff-bound teams set them back. They were tied in Dallas 10-10 in the third quarter, but again got outmuscled by the Cowboys, giving up 258 rushing yards and losing 24-10. Washington gave up 188 more on the ground in Buffalo, losing four fumbles themselves, in a 21-14 defeat. The bright side was that these losses were clearly more competitive than what had happened early in the season.

Philadelphia, who had won the NFC title the year before and would make it back to the playoffs this year, came to old RFK Stadium. The Redskins trailed 13-9, but linebacker Monte Coleman intercepted Eagle quarterback Ron Jaworski, took it to the house and Washington won 15-13. Then they blasted a very bad team, the Baltimore Colts 38-14, as Theismann threw an early TD pass to Seay and went on to throw for 339 yards.

As improbable as it seemed, the Redskins were playing the final game of the 1981 season for the chance to get to .500. They were on the road at the Los Angeles Rams, who were also out of the mix, with a 6-9 record. The Redskins offensive line set the tone all day long. The team rushed for 241 yards, with Riggins, Joe Washington and even unknown Nick Giaquinto, getting in on what was a balanced attack. An easy 30-7 win capped Gibbs’ first year at 8-8

We all know how the Gibbs era turned out. Winning eight of the last eleven games in 1981 set the stage. They came a long way from an October afternoon in Chicago when everyone wondered if they would ever win a game.

## 1982

The NFL season of 1982 was overshadowed by labor difficulties and after two games, the season was temporarily shut down with a players’ strike. Play would not resume until November 21 with plans for a truncated nine-game schedule and divisional distinctions abandoned for

playoff purposes. Nothing—not the strike, not broken momentum, not anyone in the NFL could stop the 1982 Washington Redskins, as they won the franchise's first Super Bowl.

The Redskins had finished 1981 strong, winning eight of their last 11 after an 0-5 start. Gibbs was now in his second year and there was a lot of young talent to move forward with, particularly up front.

The offensive line that would become known as "The Hogs" was in its infancy. Joe Bostic, Grimm, Jacoby and May were all 24 or younger. The old man of the group was right tackle George Starke, at 34.

On the defensive side of the line of scrimmage, Manley recorded 6 1/2 sacks. Another up-and-coming talent, away from the trenches was rookie wide receiver Charlie Brown, who made the Pro Bowl.

Gibbs also had good veterans. Theismann had a Pro Bowl season at quarterback, throwing for over 2,000 yards in a nine-game schedule. Riggins keyed the running game. Dave Butz held the middle of the defensive front.

On balance though, the roster was not seen as loaded with talent. The only player to make the Pro Bowl besides Theismann and Brown was strong safety Tony Peters. Respect was hard to come by for the 'Skins .

Washington opened the season at Philadelphia. The Eagles were two years removed from reaching the Super Bowl and had gone to the playoffs in 1981. The 'Skins quickly fell behind 10-0 and trailed 27-14 going into the fourth quarter. Then Theismann hit Brown with a 78-yard touchdown pass and the magic of 1982 was underway.

It was a passing display on both sides. Theismann went 28/39 for 382 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. Philly's Ron Jaworski was 27/38 for 371 yards, two touchdowns and no picks. The two QBs that would each become ESPN commentators with a high regard for themselves staged a big-time duel.

Theismann won it with help from his great kicker, Mark Moseley, who booted a 48-yard field goal to tie the game 34-34 and then won it with a 26-yarder in overtime. The following week in Tampa, it was the running game that delivered. Riggins ran for 136 yards in a 21-13 win over the Buccaneers, who had made the playoffs in '81 and would do so again in 1982.

Then the strike hit. Play would not resume until November 21, and when it did, the playoff format was completely altered. Divisional distinctions were abolished. Teams would just play out the remainder of the schedules, seven more games, and then each conference would be seeded 1 thru 8, what remains the largest postseason bracket in NFL history.

Washington visited the mediocre New York Giants on their first game back and picked up where they left off. Theismann threw a 39-yard touchdown pass to Brown, the 'Skins opened up a 21-0 lead and ultimately won 27-17.

On November 28, the Sunday after Thanksgiving, it was time for the home opener at RFK Stadium. The Eagles were making the return visit and this time the pass defenses were ready and conditions were wet. Cornerback Jeris White intercepted two passes, and the team as a whole picked off Jaworski five times. Washington won it 13-9 and were rewarded by being on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with a "Hey, Look Who's 4-0" headline on the magazine article.

The tone of the headline showed how much the Redskins had to prove if they were going to get respect and the best way to do it was to beat the Dallas Cowboys, who came into RFK for a late Sunday afternoon national TV appearance. But Washington was unable to run the ball, Theismann threw three interceptions and they lost 24-10. It appeared there was still a gap between them and the league's elite.



But the team quickly got back on track and with a lot of help from Moseley, won their final four games. In a road game at the St. Louis Cardinals, the Redskins offense got inside the red zone four times, never found the end zone, but four Moseley field goals and great defense produced a 12-7 win.

The kicker came up even bigger the following week at home against the Giants. On a day when Theismann played poorly, with four interceptions, the defense kept the team in the game, trailing 14-9. Moseley drilled two fourth-quarter field goals, the last one a 42-yarder with nine seconds left to win 15-14.

In a decision that underscored Moseley's clutch performances, his record 21 consecutive field goals made and the strange nature of the 1982 NFL season, the kicker was voted the MVP award. Suffice it to say, no kicker since has been so honored.

Washington went to New Orleans for the season's penultimate game, tied with Dallas atop the conference standings, but losing the tiebreaker battle. Theismann threw a 57-yard touchdown pass to Brown to get the ball rolling against the Saints. It was part of a 14/23 for 264 yards performance for Theismann, and Brown caught three more passes, ultimately getting to 156 receiving yards.

The 27-10 win combined with more good news from Big D--the Cowboys had lost at home to the Eagles and the Redskins controlled their fate for the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs. They took care of business with an efficient 28-0 home win over St. Louis (who was a division rival prior to the realignment of 2002), scoring a touchdown in each quarter.

Postseason football was in D.C. for the first time since 1976. The Redskins opened up with the #8 seed Detroit Lions. White put the 'Skins on top early by intercepting an Eric Hipple pass and taking it 77 yards to the house.

It was a vivid example of the role defense would play for the Redskins in this postseason. While Theismann engineered an efficient passing game, and the receivers--starting with Brown and

Alvin Garrett--were being called "The Fun Bunch", for their choreographed end zone celebrations, and Riggins and the newly nicknamed Hogs were getting attention, the defense continually shut down top running backs and made big plays. The early interception was one of two White picks in this game, Lion running back Billy Sims was held to 19 yards and the final score was 31-7.

Minnesota was next up and the 'Skins offense struck quickly. A short TD pass from Theismann to tight end Don Warren along with a short run by Riggins made it 14-0. After the teams traded touchdowns in the second quarter, the scoring was done. Riggins rolled up 185 yards, while the Vikings had no ground game to speak of.

The Cowboys won two games on the other half of the bracket and came to RFK Stadium for the NFC Championship Game, hungry to show who was still the boss in this rivalry.

Dallas got an early field goal, but Theismann quickly countered with a touchdown pass to little Charlie Brown, Riggins plunged over from a yard out and it was 14-3 at half. Not only that, but Washington had knocked Dallas starting quarterback Danny White out of the game and the visitors would turn to Gary Hogeboom for a rally.

Hogeboom came closer than many might have thought. He threw two touchdown passes in the third quarter, but they were sandwiched around another scoring run by Riggins, so the 'Skins still led 21-17. A field goal stretched the lead to seven. Dallas got the ball back deep in its own territory in the fourth quarter with a chance to go the distance and tie it up.

Defensive end Dexter Manley and defensive tackle Daryl Grant bore down on Hogeboom, whose pass was tipped up in the air. It landed in the hands of Grant who took a few short steps to the end zone. His dramatic spike got the team another *Sports Illustrated* cover, this one saying "Wham! Bam! It's the Redskins!"

The game was all but over and it ended 31-17. Washington had their first trip to the Super Bowl since 1972 when they had the misfortune to run into the undefeated Miami Dolphins.

Ironically the Dolphins were waiting again this time, although they weren't quite as fearsome. The running game was suspect and David Woodley didn't scare anyone at quarterback. The Fish did play defense though and veteran coach Don Shula was still at the controls, as he'd been back in '72.

When Woodley threw an out pattern to Jimmy Cefalo who turned it into a 76-yard touchdown pass Miami had the early lead. After the teams swapped field goals and Theismann found another one of his diminutive wide receivers, Alvin Garrett for a tying touchdown, Miami's Fulton Walker returned a kickoff 98 yards for a touchdown.

If you're going to give up special teams touchdowns and let simple short passes turn into long scores and still win a football game, you better find ways to dominate everywhere else and that's what Washington did. The defense, having shut down Sims and Dallas' Tony Dorsett, was

overwhelming a mediocre Miami running game. Woodley would complete only four passes for the entire game.

In the meantime, Riggins and the Hogs were controlling the game up front. Miami still clung to a 17-13 lead early in the fourth quarter when the play for which this game is remembered finally swung the tide.

Washington faced 4<sup>th</sup>-and-1 on the Miami 43-yard line. Gibbs decided to go for it. Everyone knew the ball was going to Riggins. He powered off left tackle, aqua and orange jerseys hanging all over him. Riggins broke through the pile and pulled away, outrunning the rest of the Miami defense to the end zone.



With the 'Skins defense in lockdown mode a 20-17 lead seemed insurmountable, but when the Washington offense got the ball back, Theismann led them down the field and on third and goal hit Brown in the corner of the end zone for the score that sealed the deal. The 1982 Washington Redskins had given their crazed fan base its first Super Bowl title.

It was easy at the moment for outside observers to think the 1982 title run was a fluke, a byproduct of an entire season that was off-kilter. Gibbs and his team proved everyone wrong. It turned out, the winning was just getting started.

## 1983

The 1983 Washington Redskins were a defending Super Bowl champion that came into the season lacking in respect. The 'Skins didn't repeat as champions, but they produced an MVP, a high-powered offense, a ballhawking defense and NFC title and earned plenty of respect along the way.

Theismann had the best year of his career at age 34. The quarterback threw for over 3,700 yards and posted a 29/11 TD-INT ratio, excellent in that era. Theismann won the MVP award and had plenty of support on offense. Riggins, also 34-years-old, ran for over 1,300 yards. Jacoby and Grimm manned the left side of the line and joined Theismann and Riggins as 1st-team All-Pro.

Other Pro Bowlers included wide receiver Charlie Brown, a shifty little target that accumulated 1,225 yards, along with center Joe Bostic. With Gibbs orchestrating the attack, the Redskins averaged 34 ppg, the best in the NFL.

The defense wasn't as dominant, but they were still pretty good and the absolutely excelled at taking the ball away. Free safety Mark Murphy made the Pro Bowl with nine interceptions. The secondary also benefited from the addition of a rookie named Darrell Green, who would one day make the Hall of Fame.



Up front, the Redskins got a career year from 33-year-old defensive tackle Dave Butz, who recorded 11.5 sacks. With Butz coming up the middle, opposing offensive lines couldn't key on the edge, where Manley came for 11 more sacks.

The defense finished 11th in the NFL in points allowed, but more important, they set an NFL record with a stunning (+43) turnover margin.

When the season began the Redskins were still seen as mostly a fluke team that had come out of nowhere to win the Super Bowl in the strike-shortened year of 1982. They were actually a home underdog in the first game of the season, on Monday Night against the Dallas Cowboys.

Washington spent the first half looking ready to prove everyone wrong. They built a 23-3 lead and Theismann, who would throw for 325 yards, was rolling. Then it all came apart in the second half--the biggest flaw of the defense over the season would be giving up the deep ball, and they allowed two long touchdown passes from Cowboy quarterback Danny White. Dallas scored four successive touchdowns and won 31-30.

The highlight of the night from the Redskins' perspective was an electric moment when Green showcased his speed by coming from across the field to chase down Dallas' fast running back Tony Dorsett, a play that lives on in Redskins lore today. But Washington was still searching for respect.

Odds makers made the defending champs a pick'em in Week 2 at the Philadelphia Eagles, a team that had not made the playoffs the prior year and would finish 5-11. The game was tied 10-10 after three quarters before a 14-yard touchdown run by Riggins broke the tie. He finished with 100 yards, while the defense held Philly to 35 yards rushing. Washington won 23-13.

Another sluggish start against a bad team followed at home against Kansas City. The Redskins played poorly in the first half by repeated red zone stops kept the halftime score at 12-0. In the second half, Theismann got going and found his tight ends, Clint Didier and Don Warren, for touchdown passes and Washington pulled away 27-12.

The 'Skins played their best game of the season at Seattle, holding a good running back in Curt Warner to 34 yards rushing and Washington was in control throughout in a 27-17 win. The Seahawks would make the AFC Championship Game by season's end. The other future participant in the AFC title game was the Los Angeles Raiders, and the more heralded opponent was coming to D.C. on October 2.

An offensive shootout was on tap. Theismann threw for 417 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. He repeatedly connected with Brown, who caught 11 balls for 180 yards and with running back Joe Washington, who caught five passes for 99 yards.

One of the passes to the shifty Washington was a swing pass that went a long way. Its success would later come back to haunt the Redskins.

For today, all was good. While Raider quarterback Jim Plunkett threw four touchdowns, including a 99-yarder, the Redskins also got four interceptions and preserved a 37-35 win. They followed it up by going to a decent St. Louis Cardinals' team and winning 38-14 behind 115 yards from Riggins.

The Monday Night stage awaited again, this time at Lambeau Field. The Green Bay Packers had made the playoffs for the first time in a decade the prior year and were hungry to get back. They had a high-powered passing attack of their own and on this night, Theismann and counterpart Lynn Dickey put on an amazing display.



Theismann threw for 398 yards, spreading the ball among all his receivers. Dickey threw for 387. An early defensive touchdown scored by the Packers proved to be huge, and they eventually won the game 48-47 on a late 20-yard field goal.

The Redskins were 5-2, with both losses by one point. But from a standpoint of getting respect, they had come on their only forays to prime-time. What's more, Dallas was 7-0. But the 'Skins were about to really take off.

Even with Riggins missing the following week's home game with Detroit, the 'Skins got 147 rush yards from Joe

Washington, shut down the Lion running game and won 38-17. A Monday Night visit to San Diego--Gibbs' first return to the place he built his reputation as an offensive coordinator--produced a 27-24 win, as the Redskins picked off backup quarterback Ed Luther six times.

The defense kept making plays at home against the Cardinals, with Vernon Dean and Mel Kaufmann each scoring defensive touchdowns, the team forcing five turnovers and winning 45-7. The following week on the road against the New York Giants, the 'Skins held the Giants to 25 rush yards, led as much as 33-3 and won 33-17. Another blowout followed on November 20 at the Los Angeles Rams. This time it was interceptions--the 'Skins picked four, two of them by linebacker Rich Milot in a 42-20 win where the lead had been as high as 42-6.

Washington finally got a tougher game when Philadelphia came to RFK Stadium. Theismann and counterpart Ron Jaworski each played well, but Theismann had a running game--Riggins went for 99 yards and the Redskins escaped 28-24. They got back into blowout mode in a home game with the Atlanta Falcons, with defensive back Anthony Washington picking off two passes, the team getting four picks and rolling to a 37-7 lead. The defense gave up its usual garbage-time points and the final score was 37-21.

When December 11 rolled around, the Redskins were 12-2. The Cowboys had lost a couple games by now and the NFC East race was tied. Washington was going to Dallas for the regular season's penultimate game. The division title and the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs hung in the balance.

The Redskins and Cowboys traded momentum in the first half and Washington led 14-10. The big play came in the third quarter when Theismann threw a 43-yard touchdown pass to Monk. The avalanche started and Washington pulled away to a 31-10 win.

Butz got 2 1/2 sacks. Defensive back Greg Williams intercepted two passes. Theismann was both efficient and explosive, completing 11/17 passes and getting 203 yards out of them. And most of all, the running game dominated, with the 'Skins holding a 166-33 edge.

Washington still wasn't out of the woods. They would lose a tiebreaker, so they needed to win the next Saturday at home against the Giants. The Redskins looked like they were still in celebration mode for three quarters, trailing a three-win team 19-7. They finally got it together in the fourth quarter and took a 24-22 lead when Theismann threw a 7-yard touchdown pass to Didier. The final was 31-22. For the second straight year, the Washington Redskins were the NFC's top playoff seed.

They looked every bit the part on New Year's Day against the Rams, who had upset the Cowboys in the wild-card game. The Redskins had a 24-0 lead by the second quarter. Theismann hit Monk for a 40-yard touchdown pass. Washington scored on their first five possessions, and another Theismann to Monk scoring play made it 31-7.

Theismann finished 18/23 for 302 yards. Brown and Riggins had 100-yard days receiving and rushing respectively. And Green put the finishing touches on the 51-7 rout when he took an interception 72 yards to the house.

The San Francisco 49ers of Bill Walsh and Joe Montana were the last hurdle to returning to the Super Bowl. After a scoreless first quarter, Riggins ran for two touchdowns, part of a 123-yard performance. When Theismann connected with Brown for another touchdown and the Redskins took a 21-0 lead into the fourth quarter, it looked over.

Montana threw one touchdown pass, but Theismann led the Redskins back into field goal range, reaching the San Francisco 24. But Mark Moseley missed what would have been an insurance field goal. One play later, Montana threw a 76-yard touchdown pass and suddenly we had a game.

The 49ers got a third touchdown pass from Montana to tie it. The Redskins drove to the 49er 45-yard line. Theismann threw a pass to Monk that went over his head. A flag was thrown for interference. The 49ers went crazy, believing the ball to be uncatchable and they had a gripe. Another interference call, with the same dispute happened again during the drive, though not nearly as consequential. Moseley got another opportunity and he made it count, booting the field goal that sent the Redskins to the Super Bowl with a 24-21 win.

The controversy surrounding the end of the NFC Championship Game gave way to the anticipation of the Super Bowl with the Los Angeles Raiders. The Raiders were the clear best team in the AFC, just as the Redskins had been all year in the NFC. A reprise of their great early October meeting was anticipated.

What happened was a complete disaster for the Redskins. They allowed an early blocked punt and fell behind 7-0. They trailed 14-3 and had the ball deep in their own end in the closing moments of the first half.

The swing pass to Joe Washington, that had worked so well in October, now blew up in their face. Theismann didn't see Raider linebacker Jack Squirek who swiped the ball and walked the few yards into the end zone. The game ended 38-9.

The ugliness of the ending couldn't overshadow the majesty of the season though. The 1983 Washington Redskins were one of the most explosive offenses of all time. And in spite of their disastrous game in Tampa Bay to end the year, they were most certainly respected as a perennial contender by the time it was over.

## 1984

After winning the Super Bowl in 1982 and making it back in 1983, the 1984 Washington Redskins sputtered for a little more than half the season before finding their footing. They won another NFC East title in thrilling fashion, but a playoff loss marked a temporary step back from the NFL elite.

Washington's offense was no longer the best in the NFL, as it had been in '83, but they could still score. Theismann followed up his MVP campaign by throwing for nearly 3,400 yards and 24 touchdowns at age 35. Riggins, the same age, pounded out over 1,200 yards behind an offensive line that included Jacoby at left tackle and Grimm at left guard, both 1st-team All-Pros.

Monk set a single-season reception record with 106 catches (the fact Monk now ranks 41st on the list for catches in a single year tells you how much the game has changed). But depth at receiver was lost with injuries to Charlie Brown and Alvin Garrett. It was the key difference in the offense slipping from first to third in points scored.

Injuries were a factor on defense as well, with Mark Murphy missing much of the year. There was also a decline in production from Butz, off his best season in 1983. The only Pro Bowler on the defense was Green, while the Redskins also got good production from defensive ends Manley and Charles Mann, who combined for 20.5 sacks. The defense ranked 11th in the NFL in points allowed.

The gap that would open between Washington and the league's elite was laid bare in the first two weeks of the season. The Redskins played the Miami Dolphins and San Francisco 49ers, teams that would combine to go 29-3 and reach the Super Bowl. The Dolphins' Dan Marino came to RFK Stadium and threw for 311 yards and five touchdowns in beating the Redskins 35-17. The 49ers' Joe Montana threw for 381 yards, as the Redskins dropped a 37-31 Monday Night Game in San Francisco.

Washington was quickly in a must-win spot when the New York Giants came to town for Week 3. The secondary continued to show holes, allowing 347 passing yards to Phil Simms. But this

time they also made plays, intercepting three passes. Theismann threw for 331 yards of his own. The 'Skins held a 16-14 lead when corner Vernon Dean took an interception to the house. Safety Curtis Jordan then recovered a fumble and returned it for a score. Washington was off the schneid with a 30-14 win.

The running game churned at New England, with Riggins getting 140 yards, and the team winning the rush yardage battle 235-17 against a team that was just one year away from riding its own running attack to a Super Bowl. The 'Skins won 26-10.

They won in similar fashion against the shaky Philadelphia Eagles, outrushing Philly 232-76 for a 20-0 home win. Theismann and Monk hooked up for three touchdown passes in a 35-17 blowout at lowly Indianapolis. It set up a visit from Dallas.

A year earlier the Redskins and Cowboys had battled all year for both the NFC East and homefield advantage. Dallas was also slipping this year and the division would end up as a four-team race. In this late afternoon game from RFK Stadium, Washington kept rolling. Riggins piled up 165 yards, the rush defense stayed stout and the result was a 34-14 win.

Just when it seemed like the Redskins were back in Super Bowl form, a bad road swing within the division took place. They went to the St. Louis Cardinals and after leading 24-17 in the fourth quarter, gave up an 83-yard touchdown pass to Neil Lomax. Even after the Cardinals blew the extra point, the 'Skins allowed Lomax to drive for the winning field goal.

The following week in the Meadowlands, the improving Giants of Bill Parcells simply blasted the Redskins. Simms threw for 339 yards, the final score was 37-13 and with a 5-4 record, Washington was now in serious trouble.

Dallas and St. Louis were tied atop the NFC East at 6-3, with Washington and New York sitting on 5-4. The Redskins hosted a poor Atlanta Falcons team on Monday Night Football and got back on track. It was tied 14-14 in the third quarter, as the Falcons hung in the game behind the running of Gerald Riggs--who would eventually wind up in Washington later in his career. But Riggins got 100 yards, the defense recorded seven sacks and the 'Skins chiseled out a 27-14 win.

The Redskins blew out the lowly Detroit Lions 28-14, a game they led 28-0 after forcing five turnovers and only allowed some garbage time points. Washington needed to survive a November 18 trip to Philadelphia, turning it over six times and allowing a special teams touchdown. The defense bailed the team out and the Redskins won 16-10.

Theismann delivered at home against the two-win Buffalo Bills, throwing for 331 yards and completing 11 passes to Monk in an easy 41-14 win. Theismann kept it rolling against another league doormat in the Minnesota Vikings, going 19/24 for 223 yards, starting the scoring with a 68-yard strike to Calvin Muhammad and leading a 31-17 win--a game the 'Skins led 31-3.

Washington was now 9-5 and in a three-way tie atop the NFC East along with Dallas and New York, while St. Louis was still in pursuit at 8-6. The Redskins would visit Dallas and host St. Louis to end the season.

The Redskins-Cowboys game was in the late Sunday afternoon national TV window, and it started terribly for Washington. They surrendered three first half touchdown passes to Dallas quarterback Danny White and fell behind 21-6.

Green turned the tide in the second half when he picked off a White pass and took it 32 yards to the house, cutting the lead to 21-13. Theismann hit Muhammad on a 22-yard touchdown pass. Even though White threw another scoring pass, the Redskins finally took the lead midway through the fourth quarter on a 1-yard plunge from Riggins.

Riggins finished the day with 111 yards, Washington won the turnover battle four-zip and they got the victory, 30-28. On showdown day in the NFC East, the Cardinals beat the Giants and Washington was alone in first place at 10-5.

There was still no scenario in which the Redskins could lose to the Cardinals and still win the NFC East. Washington could still make the playoffs as a wild-card with a loss, though that was far from assured. The Redskins could range as high as the 2-seed that would be theirs with a win, to out of the playoffs entirely. For 'Skins fans, it was all too reminiscent of the 1979 finale in Dallas when the worst-case scenario materialized.

Theismann threw two early touchdown passes to Monk, although a missed extra point kept the score at 13-0. It didn't look like it would matter as Washington built up a 23-7 lead in the third quarter. The Theismann-to-Monk combination was clicking, as the quarterback threw for 298 yards and Monk caught 11 balls, breaking the single-season reception record in the process.

But something happened along the way to a day of celebration. St. Louis turned it around. Lomax threw for 468 yards on this day and he led the Cardinals all the way back to a 27-26 lead--with a missed extra point now looming as a season-wrecker.

Washington had a rally of their own though, with Theismann driving the team to the St. Louis 20-yard line and Mark Moseley hitting a 37-yard field goal with 1:42 left. Lomax still made the ending interesting. He got the Cards to the Washington 33, and kicker Neil O'Donoghue came out for a 50-yard attempt. It sailed wide and the Redskins were NFC East champs for the third year in a row.

The playoffs ended early. Even with homefield advantage, Washington did not play well against the improving Chicago Bears, who were emerging under Mike Ditka into the team that would win the Super Bowl in 1985. The 'Skins only mustered 93 rushing yards and they lost 23-19 in a game that didn't feel that close. It was a disappointing end, even if there was little chance that either team would beat the 49ers in the NFC Championship Game. It would be two years before the Redskins would start trending back upward again.

**1985**

The 1985 Washington Redskins were a "bridge" team in the Joe Gibbs era. After the success of 1982-84, with three straight NFC East titles, two NFC crowns and one Super Bowl trophy, the '85 Redskins missed the playoffs. But they finished the season strong and set the stage for a renewal that would soon result in another Super Bowl victory.

Joe Theismann was still at quarterback, but the 36-year-old was nearing the end of the line--an end that would arrive in hideous fashion later this year. Theismann struggled in the 11 games he did start, throwing 16 interceptions against just eight touchdown passes.

John Riggins was the same age and the big running back suffered the same decline and end of his career, albeit without the injury. Riggins struggled to a 677-yard season and George Rogers emerged as the primary running back.

The Pro Bowlers on offense were steady wide receiver Art Monk, who caught 91 passes for over 1,200 yards, along with the reliable left side of the offensive line, Joe Jacoby and Russ Grimm. The 'Skins also incorporated a feisty rookie receiver in Gary Clark into the mix. But in the end, none of it was enough to keep Washington's offense from dropping from being one of the league's best, to ranking just 20th in the NFL in points scored.

Defensively, Washington ranked 11th in the league in points allowed, just as they had each of the previous two years. There were good players, particularly future Hall of Fame corner Darrell Green, in just his third year, and defensive ends Charles Mann and Dexter Manley, who combined for 29 1/2 sacks. But there were no Pro Bowl seasons from anyone.

Washington opened the season on Monday Night in Dallas, and it quickly became clear that these weren't the same Redskins. Theismann threw five interceptions and the Cowboys coasted to a 44-14 win. The 'Skins bounced back with a 16-13 win over the Houston Oilers, but it was an unimpressive win over a bad team. On the positive side, Gibbs at least got the running game going, with Riggins and Rogers keying an attack that got 240 yards on the ground.

More problems went down at home against the Philadelphia Eagles. The 'Skins were two-touchdown favorites against a team that would finish the season 7-9. Washington lost 19-6, with Theismann struggling to 15/34 for 124 yards.

The start of the season hit rock bottom in Chicago, against the Super Bowl-bound Bears. The Redskins lost 45-10, and the game became infamous for Theismann being forced into punting duty and delivering a one-yard punt deep in his own end.

Struggling at 1-3, Washington had to return to Monday Night, as the St. Louis Cardinals came to town. In 1984, the Cardinals and Redskins had fought a thrilling battle for the NFC East crown on this field. This year's St. Louis team would finish 5-11 and they proved to be the antidote for the 'Skins. Riggins and Rogers each rolled for over 100 yards in a 27-10 rout. Riggins kept rolling at home against Detroit, for 114 yards in a 24-3 win.

Washington went to the Meadowlands to face the rising New York Giants. They had made the playoffs for the first time under Bill Parcells the previous year and were better in 1985. The

Redskins couldn't run and while Theismann threw for 272 yards, he also threw three interceptions in a 17-3 loss.

The next two weeks saw the 'Skins get over .500. They won a tough game against a Cleveland Browns team that was only .500, but was just starting the physical style of play under Marty Schottenheimer that would make them a serious contender the rest of the decade. Riggins ran for 112 yards and churned out a 14-7 win.

Riggins missed the following week at lowly Atlanta, troubled by the ailing back that would lead to his retirement at the end of the year, but Keith Griffin took his place and along with Rogers, the Redskins didn't miss a beat. They rolled up over 300 yards on the ground in a 44-10 blowout.

The Cowboys came to RFK Stadium for a late Sunday afternoon national TV game and Riggins was back in the lineup. But he, and everyone else, was shut down, while Theismann threw three interceptions. The 13-7 loss dropped the 'Skins to 5-5, two games back of the Cowboys and Giants. It made the coming Monday Night visit by Parcells, Lawrence Taylor and New York, all the more important.

It proved to be a great game and one that no one who saw it will ever forget. But the latter was for the wrong reasons. Theismann, after throwing an early touchdown pass to tight end Don Warren, dropped back to pass off a flea flicker early in the second quarter. No one was open and he was crushed by Taylor. He went down, and his leg snapped behind him in a terribly awkward manner. His season was over, as was his career and he received an ovation from both Redskins and Giants players as he was wheeled off in a stretcher.

The Redskins turned to untested Jay Schroeder, who had thrown eight passes in the season to date. Tonight he went 13/20 for 221 yards, including a big 14-yard TD pass to tight end Clint Didier that gave Washington a 23-21 lead in the fourth quarter. It stood up and they were still in contention, even as Theismann was on everyone's mind and heart.

A 30-23 win over the mediocre Pittsburgh Steelers, keyed by three interceptions from the defense followed, and Washington was now within a game of first place, as Dallas suffered their own humiliation at the hands of Chicago the same day.

On December 1, another big late Sunday afternoon national TV home game awaited with the San Francisco 49ers. Both teams were 7-5, and the loser would really be up against it in the push for the playoffs, at a time when only five teams per league qualified. The Redskins again laid an egg in a big spot. They allowed the opening kickoff to be returned for a touchdown, turned the ball over five times and lost 35-8.

Washington needed to win three in a row and hope for a break. And it almost worked out for them. Rogers rumbled for 150 yards at Philly and they rallied from 12-3 down with two second half touchdowns. Another rally came against the mediocre Cincinnati Bengals. Trailing 24-7, Schroeder repeatedly found Monk, who caught 13 passes for 206 yards and the Redskins won 27-24.



The Redskins were 9-6, as were the Giants and 49ers. Two of them would make the playoffs, and with the tiebreakers as they were, the 'Skins were the one standing without a chair. They needed to win at St. Louis and get one break.

On a Saturday doubleheader, the Giants won the early game and clinched their spot. The Redskins played the late game and Rogers took it over, racking up 206 yards on the ground and Washington won 27-16. Now they were in an odd spot--they needed to root for the Cowboys, who were in San Francisco.

Dallas had clinched the NFC East the prior week, and they led 16-10 at the half. But desperation mode kicked in for San Francisco and they dominated the second half, winning 31-16. The string of making the postseason under Joe Gibbs had ended in Washington.

It was the end of the era in a lot of ways, as Theismann and Riggins gave way to Schroeder and Rogers. And one year later, a new run would begin.

## 1986

The 1986 Washington Redskins were a team in transition and the transition was a resounding success--Washington returned to the postseason in 1986 and had success when they got there.

Schroeder threw for 4,100 yards and was a Pro Bowler. Rogers rushed for over 1,200 yards behind a line that included a Pro Bowl left side, with Jacoby and Grimm. Schroeder had two solid receivers in Gary Clark and Monk, both of whom went over 1,000 yards and were Pro Bowl-bound. The offense, after ranking just 20th in points scored in 1985, shot up to ninth in 1986.

Washington's defense was also ninth-best in the NFL. The D was keyed by pressure from the edge, with Manley and Mann collapsing pockets from both ends. Manley recorded 18.5 sacks and was 1st-team All-Pro, while Mann got to the quarterback ten times. And if an opposing QB wanted to get rid of the football quickly, there was a lockdown corner in the secondary to prevent that--Green had a Pro Bowl year of his own.



The Redskins opened the season at home against a bad Philadelphia Eagles team, but one that was still drawing great interest due to first-year head coach Buddy Ryan, the architect of the devastating Chicago Bears' defense that won the Super Bowl in 1985. Ryan would eventually win in Philadelphia, but not this year and not this day. Rogers keyed a ground game that piled up 159 yards and the Redskins blew open a close game to win 41-14.

A defensive battle followed against the Los Angeles Raiders, who had fallen into mediocrity since they beat up on the Redskins in the Super Bowl following the 1983 season. Washington's running game staggered,

but Schroeder was able to complete 12/19 for 203 yards and finally led a touchdown drive in the fourth quarter of a 10-6 win at home

Schroeder was erratic at San Diego, completing only 16/36, but he made his completions count. They went for 341 yards, almost exclusively to Monk and Clark and the Redskins turned a 21-3 second quarter deficit into a 30-28 win. The winning streak continued at home against Seattle, with Rogers running for 115 yards and the 'Skins getting a 19-14 win over a team that would win ten games.

The calendar flipped into October and Rogers kept rumbling, going for 110 yards in a 14-6 win down in New Orleans. Then the win streak came to a crashing halt in Dallas, not coincidentally because the rushing attack failed. The 'Skins generated just 71 yards on the ground and were blown out by the Cowboys 30-6.

Washington came home to host a bad St. Louis Cardinals team and led 28-7. But when Neil Lomax was quarterbacking the Cardinals, they always found a way to rally against the Redskins. The game got close. But the Redskins, as usual, managed to find a way to hold Lomax off at the end. They won 28-21 with Rogers enjoying another 100-plus yard game.

The stage was set for a Monday Night visit to the New York Giants, who were poised for a breakthrough year under head coach Bill Parcells. The same night was Game 7 of the World Series, also in New York, as the Mets would celebrate over the Red Sox. This was at a time when the seventh game of a World Series could still outdraw an NFL game, even a big one, so the Redskins-Giants was on the backburner.

But the game was a good one. It was tied 20-20 in the fourth quarter when New York finally got a touchdown run from Joe Morris to win it. The difference was that Washington was unable to run the football, getting only 32 yards, while the Giants piled up 202.

The Redskins had now lost two of three, and to the two teams they would fight with much of the year for the top of the NFC East. They needed a win and a decent Minnesota Vikings team was coming to RFK Stadium.

It proved to be a wild game. Schroeder threw for 378 yards, while Vikings' quarterback Tommy Kramer gunned for 490. Washington's running game made up the difference, but they still trailed 38-26 in the fourth quarter. Two straight touchdowns should have given the 'Skins the game, but they flubbed *both* extra points. And no, extra points were not necessarily more difficult in this era.

The extra point issue would bedevil the Redskins, as rookie kicker Max Zendejas missed five on the year. Fortunately, it didn't cost them in this game, as Washington pulled out a 44-38 overtime win.

A poor performance at lousy Green Bay followed, with the 'Skins getting just 87 rushing yards against a terrible team. Washington still survived 16-7. They won another survival game against the future NFC West champion San Francisco 49ers on Monday Night Football.

The Redskins shut down the San Francisco running game and Joe Montana was forced to throw 60 times. He got his yards, 441 of them, but Washington also intercepted three passes. The Redskins played much cleaner football, committing just three penalties while the 49ers were flagged 15 times. The combination of controlling the line of scrimmage and playing mistake-free produced a 14-6 victory.

Washington was riding high at 9-2, tied with New York for first place and Dallas chasing at 7-4. The Cowboys would come to RFK Stadium for a late Sunday afternoon national TV game that would shape what the Redskins were playing for down the stretch.

Gibbs' team sent a loud and clear message that they were more than just a borderline playoff team. The tone was set in the first quarter, as Rodgers ran 14 yards for one touchdown and Schroeder threw a 71-yard strike to tight end Clint Didier. Schroeder threw for 325 yards on the day and the points came like an avalanche. It was 34-0 by halftime and it ended 41-14. The Cowboys were finished, and the Redskins were in the discussion with the Giants and Bears for the best in the NFC.

The following week in St. Louis was a "sandwich game", stuck between the Cowboy and the impending visit from the Giants. Washington didn't play well, but the defensive line bailed them out, sacking Lomax five times, three of them by Manley. Zendejas hit a fourth-quarter field goal for a 20-17 win.

First place was on the line against the Giants, a game that stayed in the 1 PM ET TV window rather than being moved to late afternoon. It was a disaster for the Redskins. Schroeder threw six interceptions and Washington lost 24-14, a game not as close as the score makes it sound.

Being swept by the Giants meant that Washington had virtually no shot at the NFC East title the last two weeks of the season and they were still set up to host the wild-card game. They dropped a game at future AFC champion Denver, losing 31-30 because of a missed extra point.

Then the 'Skins fell behind 14-0 at Philly and turned the ball over four times before Schroeder rallied them to a 21-14 win that gave some momentum going into the playoffs. The more important note of the final week of the season was that Gibbs brought in a new kicker, Jess Atkinson for the playoffs.

Washington hosted the Los Angeles Rams, with a potent running attack of their own led by Eric Dickerson. The Redskins got off to a good start, recovering a Dickerson fumble, and getting inside the LA 10-yard line before settling for a field goal. Another drive ended with a touchdown when Schroeder found Kelvin Bryant, a running back who excelled in the passing game for a TD. The Rams had a drive of their own stopped when Dickerson lost his second fumble.

The Redskins defense kept getting the turnovers in the second quarter. Linebacker Monte Coleman forced a fumble, Washington drove to the 3-yard line and settled for another field goal. By the end of the third quarter, Atkinson booted another field goal for a 16-0 lead. The 'Skins inability to put the game away with touchdowns was frustrating, but at least they had a kicker who was putting points on the board.

Los Angeles threatened to get back into it, when a 65-yard run by Dickerson helped set up a touchdown. But before the age of the two-point conversion, the Rams had to settle for being within two scores at 16-7. Washington would drive for a fourth Atkinson field goal, Dickerson would lose another fumble past midfield and the Redskins would win 19-7. On the day, the Washington defense collected six turnovers.

The Redskins went to Chicago, to face a team that had knocked them out of the playoffs as an underdog in 1984. Washington was a decided (+7) underdog this time on what was then the artificial turf of Soldier Field.

Schroeder found Monk on a 28-yard touchdown pass for a 7-0 lead in the first quarter, but the Bears controlled the second quarter. Doug Flutie, playing in place of the injured Jim McMahon threw a 50-yard touchdown pass to Willie Gault and a Schroeder interception set up one of two Chicago field goals. Washington went to the locker room down 13-7.

The second half was all 'Skins, in one of the many impressive displays of the Gibbs era. Green intercepted Flutie, and Schroeder quickly hooked up with Monk, a 23-yard touchdown pass to give Washington the lead and they never looked back. A Bears' drive was halted by a Walter Payton fumble. Rogers ran for a touchdown and Atkinson kicked two field goals. The Redskins pulled away to a 27-13 win.

A return to the Super Bowl wasn't meant to be this year. The Giants were just too good. The Redskins returned to the Meadowlands for the NFC Championship Game, and in a game where the winds were blowing so hard that offenses could only move when it was at their back, it was no contest. New York won the toss, took the wind and got a 10-0 lead. Washington's offense couldn't do anything and the game ended 17-0.

The 1986 Washington Redskins were still arguably the second-best team in the NFL. New York blasted all comers on its way to a Super Bowl trophy. More important, the Redskins had put themselves back in the league's upper crust.

## 1987

The Redskins looked back on track for 1987, even as the entire NFL looked ready to go off the rails.

There were still problems to contend with. Center Jeff Bostic, a key part of the "Hogs" offensive line, only played five games. His injury required Grimm to move to center, which in turn had a ripple effect across the rest of the line. The only offensive player to make the Pro Bowl was Gary Clark. But even with all that, Washington finished fourth in the NFL in points scored.

Washington was also an elite team on defense, ranking sixth, and it started with great corners and great defensive ends. Mann and Manley combined for 18 sacks and Mann made the Pro Bowl. Green had a Pro Bowl year at corner. And for one year, the corner on the opposite side was even better. Barry Wilburn made 1st-team All-Pro.

The Redskins opened the season at home against the Philadelphia Eagles. Perhaps it was an omen that Schoreder injured his shoulder and Williams came on. He completed 17/27 passes for 272 yards, no interceptions and threw a big 39-yard touchdown pass to Art Monk that broke a 24-24 tie in the fourth quarter. Washington won 34-24. But a week later, Schroeder was still out and Williams was outplayed by Atlanta's Scott Campbell in a 21-20 road loss. And then the strike hit.

This players' strike wouldn't last nearly as long as the 1982 work stoppage, which wiped out seven games. And the owners were ready this time. After skipping Week 3, the league used replacement players for three weeks in October. Washington's replacements would have success and win three consecutive NFC East games, eventually becoming the inspiration for the movie *The Replacements*, with Gene Hackman and Keanu Reeves.

As much as the established players resented the replacements, the Redskins' season was given a big boost by the play of quarterback Ed Ruppert who threw for 334 yards in a win over the Cardinals. Or running back Lionel Vital who went over 100 yards in consecutive wins against the Giants and Cowboys, on the road no less. Wide receiver Anthony Allen had a 255-yard receiving game and defensive tackle Steve Martin had two sacks in leading a strong pass rush in Dallas.

The replacement players went 3-0 against what would have been a difficult portion of the schedule and put the regulars in a strong position when they returned.

It was a sloppy first game back against a subpar New York Jets team. Schroeder was healthy, but also erratic, completing just 15/38 passes and the 'Skins trailed 16-7 after three quarters. But Schroeder always could make big plays and those completions went for 275 yards. Eventually it was enough to pull out a 17-16 win.

Schroeder was sharper at the Buffalo Bills, throwing two touchdown passes to versatile running back Kelvin Bryant. Rogers led a running game that pounded Buffalo for 299 yards and the result was an easy 27-7 win. But Schroeder and the rest of the team regressed at Philadelphia--the quarterback attempted 46 passes and threw thirty incompletions. Each team turned the ball over four times and the Redskins coughed up a 21-0 lead, losing 31-27.

The corners put their talents on full display the following week at home against the Detroit Lions. Green picked off three passes, Wilburn added another and the 'Skins won 20-13. Williams was back in the lineup for the following Monday Night game at the Los Angeles Rams. He didn't play badly--24/46 for 308 yards with one interception was as good, if not better than what Schroeder had produced. But the 'Skins gave up a defensive touchdown, 138 yards rushing and lost 30-26. Gibbs would go back to Schroeder.

Washington was 7-3, and the coming three games against NFC East teams would swing their season. The stretch started badly, as they fell behind the Giants--the defending Super Bowl champs were having a rough go of it in 1987--trailing 19-3. Schroeder threw for 331 yards and three second-half touchdowns to overcome the lack of a running game and win 23-19.

The victory was the lynchpin the 'Skins needed to wrap up the division. Schroeder went to the St. Louis Cardinals (an NFC East team until 2002) and opened with an 84-yard touchdown pass to Clark and a big-play oriented 13/25 for 235 yard performance. Rogers pummeled the Cards on the ground with 133 yards in the 34-17 win. Schroeder delivered a similar performance at home against Dallas--13/26 for 250 yards, with most of it to Clark--in a 24-20 victory that all but put the NFC East to bed.

There were still problems though, even at 10-3. Schroeder's completion percentage would end the season at an erratic 48 percent and for all his big-play ability, he lacked consistency. Williams was the man who had the heart of the clubhouse and the players wanted him as the starter. Another erratic Schroeder performance in a 23-21 loss at Miami didn't solve that problem.

The defeat also dropped the Redskins to the #3 seed. Prior to 1990, all division winners were seeded into the second round so this wasn't as devastating as it would be today, but it did mean Washington would open the playoffs on the road.

The regular season finale in Minnesota was the last straw. The Redskins were tied 7-7 at half, but the only touchdown had been scored by the defense. Gibbs inserted Williams in the second half and the quarterback found speedy wideout Ricky Sanders on two long touchdown passes. Washington won in overtime, Williams finally had the job and the connection between him and Sanders on the deep ball would be heard from again.

Washington went into the playoffs with high hopes, even as the 3-seed. But the divisional playoff game in Chicago didn't start well, as Williams lost an early fumble, the 'Skins were stopped on a fourth down and Bears' quarterback Jim McMahon got his team out to a 14-0 lead. But Williams threw an 18-yard touchdown pass to tight end Clint Didier and it was tied up 14-14 at half.

Green made the play of the game in the third quarter, returning a punt for a touchdown and injuring a rib as he hurtled a defender. The Redskins hung on for a 21-17 win and already knew they had gotten a big break in the other NFC playoff game—wild-card Minnesota upset top-seeded San Francisco, meaning the Redskins were the improbable host of the NFC Championship Game (not until the 2006 Indianapolis Colts would a team seeded as low as 3<sup>rd</sup> host a championship game).

“Ugly” is the only word that describes the 1987 NFC Championship Game. Williams threw an early 42-yard touchdown pass, but went 9/26 on the day for 119 yards and the Redskins' lead was only 10-7 early in the fourth quarter. The defense delivered with two big goal-line stops. Minnesota had 1<sup>st</sup>-and-goal on the 3-yard line, but had to settle for a tying field goal.

Williams then connected with Clark on a 43-yard pass to get his team moving, and with Clark again on a seven-yard touchdown pass. Minnesota made one last drive, reached the 6-yard line and faced a 4<sup>th</sup>-and-4. Green made one more big play, breaking up a pass at the goal line and Williams was the first African-American quarterback going to the Super Bowl.

The media hype on this subject was intense and Williams handled it all with grace as he prepared to face the Broncos, led by John Elway. Denver struck first, as Elway threw a 56-yard touchdown pass and it was 10-0 at the end of the first quarter. Early in the second quarter, Williams hit Sanders on an 80-yard touchdown strike that cut the lead to 10-7. Then the avalanche began.



Before the second quarter was over, Williams would throw a touchdown pass to Clark, and another one to Sanders, this one from 50 yards. The Redskins scored 35 points, a record for one quarter. The game, after looking ready to get away from Washington early, ended up being all but over by halftime, when they led 35-10. Everyone just played out the string in the second half and it ended 42-10.

Williams set a record for passing yardage (340), running back Timmy Smith did so for rushing (204) and Sanders for receiving (193). Smith's record stands to this day. Williams was game MVP and his place in NFL lore was forever secured.

It was a crazy path that Doug Williams walked to history, but he and the 1987 Washington Redskins ended up with a championship.

## 1988

The 1988 Washington Redskins were the most disappointing team of the Joe Gibbs era. One year after winning their second Super Bowl, the Redskins fell to 7-9, the only losing season in Gibbs' first term as head coach.

Defense was the biggest reason for the failure, as Washington ranked just 26th in the NFL in points allowed. This was in spite of a big free agent investment in explosive outside linebacker Wilbur Marshall. But there was a significant decline from Manley. Tackle Dave Butz was an aging 38, and even the reliable Darrell Green didn't make the Pro Bowl. The only Redskin on defense that did have a Pro Bowl year was end Charles Mann, and even that came as his production slipped to just 5 1/2 sacks.

The running game, long the staple of success under Gibbs, lacked a big-time runner. Timmy Smith had been a Super Bowl hero, but he proved to be a one-game wonder. No one else emerged, in part because Grimm missed most of the year with injuries. The only Pro Bowler on offense was Mark May at the right guard spot.

Williams' year was up-and-down, with the quarterback position in flux between him and Mark Rypien. The decline in production was noticeable in the numbers of Monk and Gary Clark, who both ended up under 1,000 yards.

The season opened on Monday Night in the Meadowlands against the New York Giants, coming off a non-playoff year, but just two seasons removed from a Super Bowl title of their own. The Redskins quickly got on the board with two field goals and then Williams hit Sanders on a 29-yard touchdown pass. With a 13-0 lead, all looked well in the world of the defending champs.

Then New York tied the game up 13-13 and won it in the second half with touchdowns off a blocked punt and a fumble return. Washington lost 27-13. They barely survived a bad Pittsburgh Steelers team in Week 2, as Williams threw for 430 yards to overcome the lack of a running game. Rookie kicker Chip Lohmiller won it with a field goal at the gun, 30-29.

Smith delivered one of his few notable performances of the year the following week in a key home game against the Philadelphia Eagles. He ran for 107 yards, and along with Jamie Morris, helped put the 'Skins up 14-0 early and they held on 17-10. But just when you thought things were back on track, Washington lost at the mediocre Phoenix Cardinals, in their first year after moving from St. Louis. Rypien started and threw for over 300 yards, but the Redskins were outrushed 185-53 and lost 30-21.

The Giants made their return visit to RFK Stadium and the Redskins played poorly, falling behind 24-9 before Rypien found Sanders with a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns to close the gap to one point (there was no two-point conversion at this time). But it wasn't enough and a 24-23 loss dropped Washington under .500.

Rypien got churning the next two weeks as the Redskins scored 68 points combined in wins at lowly Dallas and at home against Phoenix. They also found a weapon in Bryant, who could both run and catch the ball. He became a prime threat, the deep passing game opened up and Washington coasted to a pair of easy wins.

The Redskins went to play Green Bay at old County Stadium in Milwaukee where the Packers used to play three home games a year. Green Bay was a bad team and Washington played down to their level. Only Bryant who ran for 140 yards and caught nine more passes saved them with a 20-17 win.

The 'Skins also got some help from their former kicker, Max Zendejas. The previous year, Zendejas missed five extra points in Washington, three of which had a major impact on games. This year he was in Green Bay and he shanked a short field goal at the end that would have tied it.

There was no denying the poor play though and it came home to roost at the playoff-bound Houston Oilers. Washington turned it over six times in a 41-17 Sunday Night loss.

Williams, now back in the lineup then led one of the season's high moments, a 27-24 win over a 10-win New Orleans Saints team. The game went back-and-forth and ten unanswered fourth quarter points preserved the win. Williams went 20/28 for 299 yards. But even this win came at a big price. Bryant was injured, and not only lost for the year, but his effective career was ended.



Bryant's short-lived career was, at the time, the biggest "what might have been" in the modern era of Washington Redskins history--until Robert Griffin III blew past him for the top spot.

The 1988 Redskins were still in contention at 6-4, but in an age when there were only five teams per conference in the playoffs, and the NFC was top-heavy, the 'Skins were hanging by a thread. The Chicago Bears, on their way to the top seed in the conference were coming to town. And the results were ugly. Rypien was back in the lineup and threw four interceptions. Williams came on in relief and threw one more. The running attack garnered only 28 yards in an ugly 34-14 loss.

Washington's last realistic stand had to come on Monday Night Football in San Francisco, where the 49ers were also struggling at 6-5. It was debatable if even one of these 1980s powers would make the playoffs and the loser was certainly going to be in serious trouble.

Williams got the start and didn't play badly, going 27/41 for 271 yards, three touchdowns and two interceptions. But there was again no running game. The special teams failed, giving up a 95-yard punt return for a touchdown. The result was a 37-21 loss. The 49ers used the win as a springboard and won the Super Bowl. The Redskins were realistically finished.

Any lingering hopes were ended with a 17-13 loss to the playoff-bound Cleveland Browns, as future Redskin back Earnest Byner beat them with a 29-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter. Washington was now 6-7 and they were playing for pride.

The following week in Philadelphia was the season's best moment. The Eagles were fighting the Giants for the NFC East title, a fight they would eventually win. But not because of what happened on December 4 at old Veterans Stadium.

Williams came on in relief of Rypien and went 20/32 for 206 yards. The 'Skins trailed 19-10 after three quarters, but rallied to win 20-19 on Lohmiller's 44-yard field goal on the final play. The normally stoic Gibbs leapt for joy on the sidelines, showing how badly this team needed a good win of any kind.

But it was the last happy moment of the season. The running game completely collapsed in an embarrassing 24-17 home loss to Dallas, a 3-13 team in Tom Landry's final season as head coach.

The Redskins played hard and played well in the finale at Cincinnati the following Saturday afternoon. They nearly denied the Bengals the top seed in the AFC, but a key fourth-down stop in the final quarter set the stage for an all-to-appropriate finish. Lohmiller missed a chip-shot field goal off the upright on the final play of regulation with the game tied 17-17. Cincinnati won in overtime.

Washington's hard year was over. But they wouldn't stay down forever.

**1989**

The 1989 Washington Redskins spent much of the season in the same doldrums that had caused them to post the first losing season of Gibbs' tenure the year before. A strong finish wasn't quite enough to make the playoffs, but it did serve as a launching point for a postseason return one year later.



Mark Rypien emerged as the regular starting quarterback and the strong-armed 27-year-old threw for over 3,700 yards as he made the Pro Bowl. His blind side was protected by an emerging young left tackle in Jim Lachey, a 1st-team All-Pro.

Established veterans populated the rest of the offense. The Hogs up front still had Russ Grimm, Jeff Bostic, Mark May and Joe Jacoby. The three wideouts, Art Monk, Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders were all 1,000-yard receivers.

The running game wasn't up to usual Redskin standards, but the combo of Earnest Byner and Gerald Riggs each had their moments through the 1989 NFL season. The offense as a whole ranked 5th in the NFL in points scored.

Defensively, the 'Skins were respectable, but not great, ranking 13th in the league. Charles Mann was a Pro Bowler at defensive end, with ten sacks and Dexter Manley got nine on the opposite flank. Future Hall of Famer Darrell Green was at corner and Wilbur Marshall led a pretty good linebacking corps.

Washington needed to be ready quickly, as they would host the New York Giants and Philadelphia Eagles to start the season. The Giants and Eagles had been the top two teams in the NFC East a year ago and beating them in front of the RFK Stadium crowd would send a clear message that the Redskins were back. What happened instead was absolute heartbreak in September.

The Redskins and Giants played a classic Monday Night Football game to start the year. Washington gave up a two long touchdown passes to Phil Simms and fell behind 14-0. But they were moving the football. Rypien threw for 349 yards, Riggs ran for 111 and when linebacker Monte Coleman picked off Simms in the fourth quarter and took it to the end zone, the Redskins had a 24-21 lead.

New York was able to get a game-tying field goal and on the final play, were lined up for a 52-yard try. Raul Allegre's kick went through. As a Redskins fan then in college, I still vividly remember being in my dorm room feeling nothing short of emotionally drained. I was also drenched with sweat from the constant movement and shouting I was doing in the September heat of southern Indiana.

The Washington-Philly game was an early afternoon kick that went to most of the country, and I was able to watch that one. Much to my emotional detriment. The game started off well for the 'Skins. Rypien hit Clark on an 80-yard touchdown strike and the early lead was 20-0. The Eagles gradually chipped their way back into the game and it was 30-28 in the fourth quarter.

Rypien connected with Monk on a 43-yard touchdown pass that appeared to ice the game. Even when Philadelphia pulled back to 37-35, the Redskins got deep into Eagle territory and were running out the clock. Then disaster struck.

Riggs had been brilliant all day long, rushing for 221 yards. He got the ball and ran into a pile. Suddenly an Eagle defender emerged with the football and almost went the distance. A quick touchdown won the game for the Birds, 42-37. Washington had played well enough to win each of their first two games, but all they had to show for it was an 0-2 record, both in the NFC East and both at home. The tiebreaker problem would bedevil them all the way to the finish.

A road divisional game awaited at lowly Dallas, struggling terribly in their first year under Jimmy Johnson's rebuilding program. The Washington defense picked off four passes in a 30-7 rout. A tougher game followed at a pretty good New Orleans Saints team, as the 'Skins could only get 92 yards on the ground. But the defense again forced four turnovers and a 16-14 win got them to .500.

Byner and Riggs combined to rush for 160 yards at home against the Phoenix Cardinals, then an NFC East opponent in the divisional alignment that existed prior to 2002. For the third straight game the defense produced four turnovers, with Green intercepting two passes. The 30-28 win had Washington back on track as they got set for another battle with the Giants.

It was a defensive brawl in an early kick at the Meadowlands. Rypien couldn't get the ball downfield, but he avoided mistakes, with a passing line of 19/30 for 205 yards and no interceptions. The 'Skins led 10-6 after three quarters, but Simms threw a pair of fourth quarter touchdown passes and the Redskins had another aggravating loss, 20-17, to the team that would ultimately win the NFC East.

Washington took out some frustration on a bad Tampa Bay Buccaneer team, holding the Bucs to one yard rushing and building a 29-7 lead before letting down in the fourth quarter and hanging on to a 32-28 win. They quickly gave that back with their worst performance of the year at the Los Angeles Raiders. Rypien threw three interceptions, including one returned for a score. The running game went for only 21 yards. The Raiders, a .500 team, led 37-10 in the third quarter before Washington got a couple garbage time touchdowns.

The record was 4-4 and the cameras of Sunday Night Football came to RFK for a game against the winless Cowboys. Washington needed to just get this win and then get ready to go to Philly for a big battle next week.

What followed was probably the most disastrous performance of the Gibbs Era. A Dallas running game led by Paul Palmer outrushed the proud Redskins 148-50. Doug Williams got the start at quarterback after Rypien's poor showing, and while Williams played adequately--28/52 for 296 yards and two interceptions--the offense couldn't find the end zone.

The 13-3 loss meant the team had now gone 11-15 since winning the Super Bowl following the 1987 season. That high point seemed decades away as the clock ticked down and the cameras

caught Gibbs looking forlornly out at the field, being comforted by defensive coordinator Richie Petitbone.

Just when the Redskins looked dead, they dug deep. The defense played a fantastic game at Philadelphia, forcing quarterback Randall Cunningham into a 17/39 for 177 yards performance. Williams was efficient, 14/21 for 161 yards and no mistakes. Washington ground out a 10-3 win.

The playoffs were still a longshot in a year when the NFC would end up stacked with seven teams on their way to 10-plus wins. They became a virtual impossibility when the Redskins lost 14-10 to the Denver Broncos on a windy Monday Night in RFK Stadium. Denver was on its way to the Super Bowl, but they were playing this game without John Elway. But the 'Skins, unable to run or throw downfield, couldn't capitalize.

Washington had to play for pride and hope they got some miraculous breaks. The latter didn't materialize, but there was plenty of the former and it started in a home game against the Chicago Bears, another traditional NFC power having a down year. Rypien opened up and threw for 401 yards and four touchdowns. The game was tied 14-14 at half, but a pair of scoring passes to Monk broke it open and the final was 38-14.

The Redskins went to the desert and beat up Phoenix 29-10, behind a rushing advantage of 135-29 and a 59-yard interception return by rookie corner A.J. Johnson that loosened up a 17-10 game. Washington rallied at home to beat the six-win San Diego Chargers, trailing 14-0 before Rypien hit Sanders on a 45-yard TD strike. Rypien covered for the lack of a running game with 302 yards passing and a 26-21 victory.

Another rally against a bad team followed, this one at the Atlanta Falcons. The deficit was 27-10 at half, before Rypien nailed a 60-yard touchdown pass to Monk. It was the first of three consecutive TD passes for Rypien and the Redskins won 31-30.

The events of that week's games officially eliminated Washington from the playoffs, but they were still playing for a 10-win season in Seattle on the season's last Saturday afternoon. A dominating performance sent the team into the offseason a good note. The rushing advantage was 137-25, the defense forced four turnovers and Rypien was a sharp 22/31 for 290 yards. The 29-0 shutout ended the year at 10-6.

## **1990**

Gibbs only missed the postseason in consecutive years one time in his storied coaching career, including his less successful second term from 2004-07. Those years were 1988 and 1989. The 1990 Washington Redskins got Gibbs and the franchise off the schneid, as they returned to the playoffs, won a game and set the stage for future greatness.

The Redskins dealt with injuries at the quarterback position. Rypien, after making the Pro Bowl the year before, missed six games. It didn't stop the offense from ranking fourth in the NFL in

points scored. Byner was a 1,000-yard rusher and Gary Clark cleared 1K in receiving yards, both making the Pro Bowl.

Washington's fabled "Hogs" on the offensive line underwent some transition that worked out well. Even though May and Jacoby were out, Raleigh McKenzie and Ed Simmons moved in. Meanwhile, Grimm, Bostic and Lachey were reliable holdovers, and Lachey made the Pro Bowl at left tackle.

Green was the key to the defense, the only Pro Bowler on the 13th-ranked unit in the league. The Redskin defense suffered from a down year by Mann. The defense had plenty of savvy though--free safety Todd Bowles and middle linebacker Greg Manusky had futures ahead of them as successful defensive coordinators when they were playing days were done.

In their pursuit of the playoffs, the 'Skins, along with every other team in the league would benefit from one significant change. The NFL expanded its postseason from 10 teams to 12, with one additional team per conference.

The season began at home with the Phoenix Cardinals, a welcome change from the Monday Night dates with the New York Giants that had begun each of the previous two years with losses. Rypien went 17/31 for 240 yards and threw three touchdowns to three different receivers in a 31-0 win.

Washington traveled to San Francisco to play the two-time defending Super Bowl champion 49ers. Rypien made some big plays, but was mostly erratic in a 17/37 for 241-yard performance. Meanwhile, Joe Montana carved up the Redskin defense for 390 yards and Washington was handled rather easily in a 26-13 game.

The 'Skins came back to win a pair of NFC East games, beating Dallas at home and Phoenix on the road on a Sunday night (the Cardinals were in the East prior to the realignment of 2002). The defense dominated the Cowboys, sacking Troy Aikman eight times. But the 19-15 win came at a price--it was when Rypien got hurt. Stan Humphries stepped in and led a 38-10 rout of Phoenix. Humphries hit Clark on a pair of 42-yard touchdown passes to turn the tide after Washington trailed 10-7 at the half.

Along with an extra team in the playoffs came another change that we take for granted today. The league instituted the bye week, and the Redskins took theirs the first week in October after the Sunday Night win in Phoenix. At 3-1, they were in position to contend in the NFC East and had two weeks to get ready for a home game with the New York Giants.

Bill Parcells brought the Giants in for a late Sunday afternoon national TV game. Washington led 3-0 after the first quarter, but then mistakes on both sides of the ball did them in. The secondary allowed an 80-yard touchdown pass by Phil Simms. Humphries threw three interceptions. In spite of outrushing the physical Giants 162-75, the Redskins dropped a tough 27-20 decision.

It was the first game of a five-week stretch when the 'Skins would play their four toughest NFC East games--the two with the Giants and two more with the Philadelphia Eagles. Reggie White and the Eagles came to RFK Stadium next. The Washington defense stepped up with five sacks of athletic quarterback Randall Cunningham and they won a grinding 13-7 decision.

The 'Skins had lost five straight games to Parcells and the Giants, and if they wanted to win the division, this one was necessary. But they didn't run the ball. They gave up a pair of second-quarter touchdown passes to Simms. Humphries threw three interceptions, the last a Pick-6 deep in his own end that was the final dagger in a 21-10 loss.

After the three physical games, and a visit to Philadelphia ahead, the Redskins played like a team that wasn't all there in Detroit. Humphries threw three more interceptions, and Gibbs pulled the trigger on a change early, going to third-stringer Jeff Rutledge.



Washington trailed 35-14 in the third quarter, but Rutledge had an amazing game, throwing the ball 42 times and completing 30 for 363 yards. The trio of receivers, Clark, Monk and Sanders combined for over 400 yards receiving, including from Humphries. Rutledge rallied the 'Skins into overtime where they won 41-38.

The Monday Night visit to Philly was a disaster. It didn't start out badly and was tied 7-7 at the half. But it became known as "The Body Bag" game. Rutledge was knocked out. Humphries was knocked out. All in all, nine Redskin players were knocked from the game. Running back Brian Mitchell finished the game at quarterback in a 28-14 loss.

Rypien returned just in time for a home game with the New Orleans Saints, who would make the playoffs, albeit at 8-8. Rypien showed no signs of rust--26/38 for 311 yards and four touchdown passes in a 31-17 win. But a Thanksgiving visit to Dallas went badly. The Cowboys were in their second year under Jimmy Johnson and started to mold into the team that would eventually win three Super Bowls. A rookie running back named Emmitt Smith ran for 132 yards and the 'Skins lost 27-17.

With a record of 6-5, Washington was in serious trouble of missing the playoffs and the schedule wasn't going to get a whole lot easier. December would open with a pair of home games with the Miami Dolphins and Chicago Bears, teams that would each make the playoffs with double-digit wins.

Gibbs always excelled at having his teams ready down the stretch and they came up big here. The running game crushed Miami, with Byner going for 157 yards and three touchdowns on 32 carries. Rypien repeatedly hooked up with Monk, who caught ten passes. The final was 42-20.

It was the defense that delivered against the Bears. They made key red zone stops in the first half, and even though the Redskins were being beaten, the only trailed 9-0. Rypien had a bad

day, throwing five interceptions, but he found Clark on a third quarter touchdown passes. Byner ran for 121 yards and the defense completely shut down Chicago in the second half. Washington rallied for a 10-9 win.

Just like that, the Redskins were in great shape to wrap up a playoff spot. All they needed to do was win in New England, the worst team in the NFL. On a Saturday afternoon, the 'Skins took care of business against an inept team. Linebacker Kurt Gouveia returned a fumble 39 yards for a score. A bad snap by the Patriots gave Washington a free two points on a safety. Rypien only needed to throw the ball 11 times, as Byner carried 39 times for 149 yards. The 25-10 win ended the playoff drought.

Washington was still in position to rise as high as the #4 seed (in the old three-divisional format, the top wild-card held the 4-spot) if they could win out. They played the Indianapolis Colts on a Saturday night. I was in attendance. A Redskins fan then in college, I took the helmet I used to wear trick-or-treating as a kid, jammed my head into it and went to the game with a few friends.

We sang "Hail To The Redskins" after every score amidst a stadium of fans that couldn't have cared less about the NFL until Peyton Manning came to town almost a decade later. But we were the ones who left the Hoosier Dome unhappy. Despite leading 28-21 late in the game, the 'Skins allowed Jeff George to lead a late drive to tie the game. Rypien then threw an awful interception in the flat that was easily returned for the touchdown that beat us.

Washington dropped to the 5-seed, and they were locked in there for the season finale at home with the Buffalo Bills. The Bills were going to make the Super Bowl and were resting quarterback Jim Kelly. The Redskins played starters and won 29-14 to cap a 10-6 season.

Now it was time for the playoffs and to return to the scene of the crime. Philadelphia was the 4-seed and the talk all week long was the Redskins going back to the old Vet after The Body Bag Game.

Washington played sloppy football early in the game. They allowed tight end Keith Jackson to get loose for an early 66-yard reception. But the defense recovered to hold the Eagles to a field goal. When the Redskins got the ball back, they fumbled. Again, the defense held the Eagles to a field goal. Rypien threw an interception. The defense forced a punt. Despite doing everything wrong, Washington only trailed 6-0.

The game then turned. Rypien threw a 16-yard touchdown pass to Monk. Washington drove inside the 5-yard line twice, although now it was their turn to settle and two field goals made the score 13-6. But the Redskin defense was locked in. They got to Cunningham five times, just as they had in the regular season game at RFK. Two sacks came from defensive tackle Tim Johnson. Despite only getting 93 yards rushing, the 'Skins won 20-6.

A return visit to San Francisco had the same result as the one in September. There was no running game, inconsistency from Rypien and brilliance from Montana. Washington lost 28-10.

Even with the playoff loss, the Redskins were trending back upward. And one year later they would trend completely off the charts.

## 1991

The Washington Redskins had gone to three Super Bowls in the 1980s and won two, but they only had one playoff victory over the last three years, and there were questions about whether quarterback Mark Rypien was the one who could lead them back. Over the long-term arc of his career, those questions proved fair enough, but in 1991, Rypien had a magical year and took his team along for the ride.

The 1991 Washington Redskins were also a complete team in all phases. The receivers were dynamic, with Clark, Sanders and Monk providing a balance of possession-types and deep threats. The “Hogs”, the famed offensive line, cleared the way for Byner to have a 1,000-yard season and his change-of-pace sidekick Ricky Ervins.

It added up to an offense that scored more points than anyone in the NFL. Rypien, Byner, Clark and right guard Mark Schlereth made the Pro Bowl. Lachey was 1st-team All-Pro.

Defensively, the ‘Skins ended up #2 in the league. Mann led the pass rush with 11.5 sacks, Wilbur Marshall was a playmaker at linebacker and Green provided lockdown coverage at corner. Mann and Green were both Pro Bowlers. On top of it, the special teams were one of the league’s best.

Under the coaching leadership of Gibbs, there was nothing the 1991 Washington Redskins didn’t do at an extremely high level.

Two prime-time games opened the season. Washington opened the season at home on Sunday night against the Detroit Lions. Byner led a balanced rushing attack that produced 191 yards. Rypien was 16/21 for 201 yards and three touchdowns. The defense held the Lions to 154 total yards and the Redskins won 45-0, putting on an absolute clinic.

A Monday Night visit to the Dallas Cowboys was a little tougher. This was the breakthrough year for Jimmy Johnson’s Cowboys, when they would make the playoffs for the first time. Washington took some early shots and trailed 21-10. But they got it together and the difference-maker proved to be kicker Chip Lohmiller. He hit field goals of 53, 52, 45 and 46 in a dazzling display. Every one of them was needed in a 33-31 win.

The Redskins hosted the Phoenix Cardinals and coasted to a 34-0 win as the defense held the Cardinals to 55 rush yards and intercepted three passes. Two of the picks came courtesy of Marshall who brought one of them back for a score.

Washington went on the road to play the Cincinnati Bengals. Though Cincy would finish the season 3-13, at the time they were still seen as the defending champions of the old AFC Central (including the Steelers, Browns and Houston Oilers). A punt return for a touchdown by Brian



Mitchell helped the 'Skins build a 27-10 lead. Then they blew the lead before short-yardage back Gerald Riggs scored the last of his three touchdowns in a 34-27 survival.

Another prime-time home game awaited, this time on Monday Night with the Philadelphia Eagles, who were missing starting quarterback Randall Cunningham. Washington held Philly to 89 total yards of offense and won 23-0. In two home games under the lights, the Redskin defense spun shutouts both times.

The defense continued to dominate at the Chicago Bears, who had an uncharacteristically poor year under Mike Ditka. Washington intercepted Jim Harbaugh three times and controlled the game in a 20-7 win.



A home game with the Cleveland Browns was a tougher test. Even though the Browns struggled this season, they still had a good quarterback in Bernie Kosar, and he moved the ball consistently. The Redskins only led 21-17 after three quarters, but their running game took over.

Washington ran for 208 yards as a team and Gibbs unveiled backup running back Ricky Ervins, shiftier than Byner and able to provide another weapon. Ervins gained 133 yards and the offense broke through late in a 42-17 win.

After a bye week it was time for a date with the defending Super Bowl champion New York Giants. The Redskins had lost six straight games to the Giants, each of them uniquely aggravating and down to the wire. Bill Parcells had retired and this New York team was not the same. But that didn't stop them from jumping out to a 13-0 halftime lead. It seemed like this was the same old Giant nightmare repeating itself.

Even though the running game only produced 95 yards, Rypien made enough plays to lead a rally. He found Clark on a short touchdown pass and then a 54-yarder. Washington won 17-13 in a Sunday Night game, and all of Redskins Nation could switch the channel over to Game 7 of the magnificent 1991 World Series with a victory under their belt.

The 'Skins hosted the Oilers next. Houston was coached by an old friend--Jack Pardee had led the Redskins from 1978-80, and the Oilers would win the AFC Central. Byner's running was the difference in an excellent game. He led an attack that produced 154 yards on the ground, while Houston quarterback Warren Moon threw for 250.

Still, it looked like Washington would lose when the Oilers lined up to try a 33-yard field goal with four seconds left in a 13-13 game. But the kick was missed and the Redskins won on Lohmiller field goal in overtime.

Having survived a scare, Rypien unleashed the next two games. He completed 16/31 passes for 442 yards and six touchdowns against the Atlanta Falcons--that's over 25 yards on every

completion, and Clark's four catches produced 203 yards. The defense forced six turnovers and the final score was 56-17.

A historical footnote to this game is that an unknown third-string quarterback named Brett Favre got in the game for some mop-up duty. He was 0-for-4, though given his later reputation, it's perhaps surprising he didn't contribute to the turnover count.

Rypien then went 21/28 for 325 yards with no interceptions in a 41-14 rout at Pittsburgh. Monk was the top target in this game and the future Hall of Fame receiver was on a good two-game run of his own. In the Falcon and Steeler games, Monk combined for 15 catches for 294 yards.

The record was 11-0. Rypien was throwing the deep ball with the ease and accuracy of someone playing catch in their backyard and the talk of an undefeated season was very much alive around the NFL.

Then Dallas came to town. Redskins' corner Martin Mayhew intercepted a Troy Aikman pass and returned it 31 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter and it looked like business as usual. Only it wasn't. The running game couldn't get started, with only 50 yards on the game. The Cowboys turned it around and won 24-21. Although even in losing, a different aspect of Washington's greatness came out.

This game was must-win for Dallas if they wanted to make the playoffs, and Johnson would later write that the Cowboys felt they had no choice but to unleash everything they had against the Redskins. From going for it on fourth down, to onside kicks at odd times, to constantly blitzing, Johnson threw the kitchen sink at the 'Skins.

The analogy the Dallas coach made in his book was that if you wanted to hit a gorilla you couldn't tap him, you had to hit him with everything you had. It might blow up on you, but it was the only chance of winning. That a fellow contender, one that would win 11 games and one more in the playoffs, would feel such extreme measures were required, speaks volumes about the excellence of the 1991 Washington Redskins.

Washington rolled to the end of the season, winning three more games that clinched the #1 seed in the NFC playoffs. They beat three successive non-playoff teams, the Los Angeles Rams, the Cardinals (who were in the NFC East prior to 2002) and were only tested at Phoenix, when they trailed 14-0 at the half. A takeover in the second half produced a 20-14 win. The 'Skins then lost a meaningless 24-22 game in Philadelphia to close the year.

The first playoff game was against the Falcons. In spite of the rout that had taken place in RFK Stadium on November 10, Atlanta was still gaining respect in the NFL. They had an electric corner in Deion Sanders making his first really big splash in the league. And speaking of splashes, a monsoon hit Washington and the sloppy field could serve to equalize a potential mismatch.

Redskins-Falcons was the 12:30 PM ET game on Saturday that got the divisional round started. With the bad weather, no one scored in the first quarter. Washington was able to get their

running game going, getting 162 yards on the ground for the game. They got a pair of rushing touchdowns in the second quarter, with Ervins maneuvering his way in from 17, and then Riggs crashing in from down close. The 'Skins led 14-7 at the half.

The defense was dominating. Atlanta would gain only 43 yards on the ground and most important, Washington was forcing turnovers. They intercepted Chris Miller four times, and strangely enough it was defensive tackle Fred Stokes getting two of the picks. Six turnovers in all came Washington's way and they pulled away to a 24-7 win.

The final home game of the year would be back against the team where it all began. Detroit, with its great running back Barry Sanders, had enjoyed a breakout year and been the second-best team in the NFC. The Lions had blown out the Cowboys in the second round of the playoffs to reach this game.

Washington came out fast in the NFC Championship Game, with Riggs finishing off a drive with a 2-yard touchdown run. Another drive down close stalled, but Lohmiller kicked a field goal. Riggs scored another TD, this one from three yards out, but the Lions were able to get a touchdown drive of their own and a field goal just before the half that kept the game at 17-10.



But the Redskin defense was in control of the great Lion running back Barry Sanders, who would gain only 44 yards. Rypien was playing flawless football and would go 12/17 for 228 yards and no interceptions.

After a Lohmiller field goal gave the Redskins breathing room, Rypien connected with Clark on a 45-yard touchdown pass that broke it open. Another touchdown pass to Monk followed. Green administered the coup de grace, with a 32-yard interception return that sealed the 41-10 win.

The best measurement of Washington's dominance of the NFC is this--they beat the conference's clear second-best team by a combined 85-10 in two games.

The Buffalo Bills dominated the AFC the same way Washington had owned the NFC, and the Redskins-Bills Super Bowl debate started fairly early in the season. Buffalo running back Thurman Thomas would win the MVP award. But the Bills, even in clinching the #1 playoff seed and then winning their two playoff games, had started to show some vulnerabilities. The 'Skins came into the Super Bowl as a solid seven-point favorite.

Washington looked ready to grab an early lead when Rypien appeared to finish an 89-yard touchdown drive with a third-down scoring pass to Monk. But instant replay showed Monk's foot out of bounds and the call was correctly overturned. The 'Skins flubbed the hold on the field goal and the first quarter went by without a score, and with Rypien and counterpart Jim Kelly each throwing an interception.

In the second quarter, the Redskins got settled in. Lohmiller hit a field goal and Rypien flipped a short touchdown pass to Byner. The defense was getting after Kelly and would end up with five sacks on the game, all from different players. Another short-yardage touchdown from Riggs put them in command, 17-0 at halftime.

The defense forced another turnover right out of halftime and the lead quickly grew to 24-0. Then Buffalo threatened to make it interesting--they scored on two successive drives to cut the lead to 24-10 and it was still in the third quarter.

It was time for Rypien to come through by throwing the ball downfield to Clark one more time. They two hooked up on a 30-yard touchdown pass that opened the game back up. Two more Lohmiller field goals followed. For the game, the 'Skins intercepted Kelly four times, two by free safety Brad Edwards. After the lead grew to 37-10, the Bills added a couple meaningless touchdowns and it ended a deceptively close 37-24.

It not only marked the third Super Bowl win for Washington head coach Joe Gibbs, but he'd now done it with three different quarterbacks, an unprecedented feat. Rypien was named Super Bowl MVP. He would never again have a season anything like this, but what a year this one was.

The 1991 Washington Redskins don't get the same historical love that other great champions—the 1984 San Francisco 49ers, the 1985 Chicago Bears and of course the undefeated 1972 Miami Dolphins do. While I understand that when it comes to the '72 Dolphins, the reality is that the '91 Redskins deserve to be in the discussion when it comes to the best Super Bowl team of all time.

Washington's legacy is hurt by the fact Rypien didn't have a great career and they lost two games. If you're asked to compare two teams, one of whom went 18-1 and was quarterbacked by Joe Montana (the 1984 49ers) and another that was 17-2 and quarterbacked by Rypien, you're going to have a natural human reaction to instinctively favor the former.

What has to be emphasized is that for one year Rypien was as good as any of the game's great quarterbacks. His career was nowhere in the ballpark, but his best year was as good, if not better than the best year of any quarterback in the league.

When it comes to the record, the last loss was meaningless, and the first one was against a talented and desperate team all but admitting that the only way to beat Washington was to throw the kitchen sink at them and hope it didn't blow up.

Finally, the completeness of the 1991 Washington Redskins team hurts them in historical discussion. Their defense was outstanding, but it's not remembered the way the 1985 Chicago Bears unit was. It was Washington's consistent three-phase excellence, including special teams, that made them stand out. It wins you a lot of football games, but doesn't add up to anything that stands out a quarter-century later.

This Redskins team was very much like their head coach—not flashy, not likely to stand out, but absolutely as good, if not better, than anyone who came before or after.

## 1992

The attempt at a sequel in 1992 didn't work out. The season was marred by problems from the moment training camp started. And even though the Redskins made the playoffs again, the end of the season was marred by the surprise departure of the cast's star member.

Rypien had enjoyed a great year in '91, and was looking to cash in. It led to a contract holdout that caused him to miss much of training camp. The same went for Lachey, and first-round draft choice Desmond Howard.

It's no surprise that when the Redskins opened the season on a Monday Night in Dallas, they looked unprepared. The Cowboys blocked a punt for a safety, returned another punt for a touchdown, had Rypien flustered most of the night and ran for 175 yards. It was the first clear sign that this year wasn't going to roll along as smoothly as the previous one had in Washington D.C.

Before the year was over, injuries would take a toll. Bostic only played four games. His injury required Raleigh McKenzie to move to center, and Jacoby to shift from tackle to guard.

The instability on the offensive front was a reason the Redskins slipped into the middle of the league in points scored, ranking 14th. There were no Pro Bowlers on offense. Even though Rypien threw for over 3,200 yards, his TD-INT ratio was 13/17. There were no 1,000-yard receivers and the dropoff in production for future Monk was most glaring. Byner rushed for 998 yards, but it wasn't enough to prevent the decline.

On defense, Washington got only eight games out of Green and Marshall was the only player to make the Pro Bowl. Marshall did have an excellent season, making 1st-team All-Pro and the defense overall still finished eighth in the NFL in points allowed.

After the debacle in Dallas, Washington would host the Atlanta Falcons and Detroit Lions, the two teams the Redskins had beaten in the NFC playoffs the prior year. The Falcons and Lions would fall off the cliff this season and Washington won both games.

They beat Atlanta 24-17 when Howard broke a 55-yard punt return for a touchdown. The running game was dominant, with Byner and Ervins combining for 162 yards and the 'Skins controlled the ball nearly forty minutes. The 13-10 win over Detroit was keyed by great rush defense on the great Barry Sanders, held to just 34 yards on 14 carries.

A bye week followed and it followed that perhaps the time off would give Washington the time they needed to really get everyone on the same page after the training camp instability. Instead, they dumped a game at the awful Phoenix Cardinals on their return and it fell on Rypien. With a 24-6 lead in the fourth quarter, the quarterback threw two Pick-6s to the same corner, Robert Massey. The game ended in a bad 27-24 loss.

The Denver Broncos reached the AFC Championship Game in 1991, but John Elway's team joined the list of those that would suffer a decline. They arrived in D.C. for a Monday Night game

and the Redskins played their best game of the young season. Marshall picked off Elway and took it 20 yards to the house. Rypien threw a 44-yard touchdown pass to Gary Clark and the game was a 34-3 rout.

It looked like the game would be a turning point. Washington won a tough 16-12 game over the playoff-bound Philadelphia Eagles at home. Rypien made big plays, going 14/24 and turning that into 240 yards passing. The defense sacked athletic Eagles QB Randall Cunningham five times. Another tough win against a future playoff team followed at Minnesota. The 'Skins didn't find the end zone, but Lohmiller bailed them out with five field goals--three from 45 yards or longer. Washington won 15-13.

With a three-game win streak and a 5-2 record, Washington was in the mix for the NFC East title along with Dallas and Philadelphia. A Sunday Night game against the New York Giants didn't seem to present much of a problem--the Giants had declined drastically since Bill Parcells retired following the 1990 season and they would finish 6-10.

But it was the Redskins who looked like the losing team in front of a prime-time audience and home crowd. After Brian Mitchell returned a punt 84 yards for a touchdown and a quick 7-0 lead, the 'Skins did nothing the rest of the night. They gave up 241 yards rushing and were beaten 24-7.

An uninspiring win at the horrible Seattle Seahawks at least put Washington back in the win column. It was a 16-3 game not put away until Rypien threw a touchdown pass to tight end Terry Orr in the fourth quarter.

Two more uninspired performances against playoff-bound teams, the Kansas City Chiefs and New Orleans Saints had predictable results--the Redskins dug themselves a 28-0 hole, as the secondary was carved up by KC quarterback Dave Krieg in a 35-16 loss. And Rypien was sacked four times on Monday Night in New Orleans, while the running game did nothing and Washington lost 20-3.

The record was 6-5, there was still time to recover and Gibbs always got his teams to play their best football down the stretch. Washington was able to take advantage of a visit by Phoenix. Free safety Brad Edwards picked off three passes, including one he took to the house to give Washington an early 14-3 lead. The final was 41-3. Another revenge win followed at the Giants. Byner ran for 100 yards and a pair of early touchdowns, while Rypien completed 15/18 for 216 yards and no mistakes in a 28-10 win.

It set the stage for the Cowboys to come to RFK Stadium. Dallas was in firm control of the NFC East and would ultimately win the first Super Bowl of the Jimmy Johnson era. The Redskins realistically needed either this game or the following week's game at Philadelphia to make the playoffs and neither would be easy.

Kickoff was late Sunday afternoon for the national TV audience. Washington looked outclassed much of the game. They only ran the ball for 68 yards. Rypien was 13/30 for 185 yards. But they somehow hung in and trailed only 17-10. Then the defense started getting the turnovers.

An interception in the end zone prevented the Cowboys from basically icing the game. Another turnover came and the Redskins would cut the lead to 17-13. Finally, safety Danny Copeland chased down a fumble by Dallas running back Emmitt Smith in the end zone for the winning touchdown. An improbable 20-17 win put Washington in good control of its playoff destiny.

The winner of the Redskins-Eagles game would lock up a postseason berth. Washington led this one 13-7, but was shut down in the second half of a 17-13 loss. The 'Skins still needed only to win a home game with the mediocre Los Angeles Raiders to qualify.

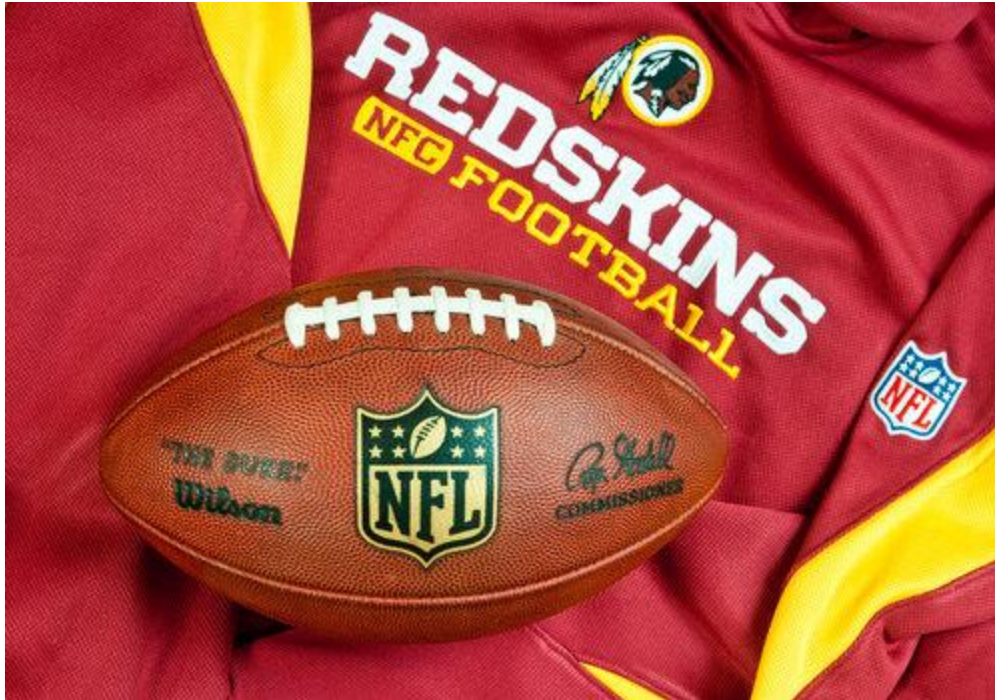
A frustrating season looked ready to have a miserable ending on late Saturday afternoon in RFK. There was no running game. Rypien was on and off throughout the day. The defense couldn't contain 37-year-old journeyman quarterback Vince Evans, who beat them 21-20 with a late touchdown pass. Washington had lost control of its fate. They needed to hope the Green Bay Packers lost in Minnesota the following day.

This Packer team was the first with Brett Favre at quarterback and had won six in a row to get in contention. But they weren't quite ready for the playoff stage, and lost decisively. It wasn't the most inspiring way to make the playoffs, but the 'Skins had backed in at 9-7. They had the Vikings to thank, and ironically, would begin the postseason at Minnesota.

What went down in the Metrodome was one of the great postseason performances of Gibbs' career, especially if you adjust for the fact that this wasn't a great team. Washington trailed early, 7-3, but then just took the game over and manhandled the Vikes in the trenches.

Byner and Mitchell each ran for second-quarter touchdowns. The Redskins outgained the Vikings 196-73. Mitchell, who had only 24 career rushes prior to this game, gained 109 yards. Washington controlled the clock for nearly 43 minutes of possession time.

"This is surgery without the anesthetic" is how ABC analyst Dan Dierdorf described what they were doing to the Vikings. Rypien tacked on a 24-yard touchdown pass to Clark and the 'Skins moved their postseason record to 16-4 under Gibbs with the 24-7 win.



The divisional round was in San Francisco. It was a sloppy game on a sloppy day. Each team turned it over four times and this time it was the 'Skins who were outrushed, 187-73. They hung in to the end, but Ricky Sanders dropped a key 3rd-and-17 pass from Rypien that would have been a first down, and the season ended with a 20-13 loss.

Whatever problems had taken place during the season were nothing to what awaited afterward. In a move completely taking the entire NFL world off guard, Gibbs announced his retirement. He would come back for a second term in 2004-07 and make the playoffs a couple more times. But the franchise has never been the same since. As of 2020, they're no longer even called the Redskins. The Gibbs' Glory Years of 1981-92 is officially in the books as the forever golden age of the Washington Redskins.