

# JOE GIBBS

By Don Smith

The Washington Redskins, whose National Football League history began in Boston in 1932, were among the league's most dominant teams in the 1930s and 1940s. But, with the exception of an NFC championship and a Super Bowl VII appearance against the Miami Dolphins in 1972, the team suffered through a championship drought of almost four decades.

When the Redskins posted a 6-10 record in 1980, the team's Chairman of the Board, Jack Kent Cooke, knew it was time for a drastic change.

The choice of Cooke and his general manager, Bobby Beathard, was 40-year-old Joe Gibbs, who had never been an NFL head coach but a man who had inspired accolades from almost every corner of the pro football world. He was hired to lead the Redskins on January 13, 1981.

As confident as Cooke and Beathard were over their choice of Gibbs, it is doubtful that they could have envisioned the sparkling record the new coach would achieve during his 12-year reign that ended with his retirement after the 1992 campaign.

Under Gibbs' leadership, the Redskins played in four Super Bowls and won three. They won four NFC titles and four NFC Eastern championships. They had only one losing season in 12 seasons and won 10 or more games eight times. With 16 victories in 21 games, Gibbs' post-season record is surpassed only by Vince Lombardi and Weeb Ewbank. His .683 career percentage for all games ranks behind only Lombardi (.740) and John Madden (.731) among coaches with 100 career victories.

One of the primary goals Cooke sought when he selected Gibbs to lead the Redskins was an exciting, attacking team. In his long career as an assistant coach for three universities and three NFL teams, Gibbs had developed a reputation for being a true student and teacher of the offensive game, a person who possessed superior motivational skills and an unique work ethic.

As the San Diego Chargers' offensive coordinator, he was recognized as the pilot of the "Air Coryell" attack which ransacked enemy defenses virtually every week.

Gibbs' first Washington team broke even at: 8-8, even though the 1981 Redskins set a team total offense record and came within five points of a new scoring record. With a team beset by numerous injuries, the Redskins lost their first five games before rebounding with eight wins in the last 11 games. "I began to think I would be the only coach who was fired before winning even one game," Gibbs joshed.

## Super Gibbs

One of the things most remembered about Gibbs was that he won three Super Bowls with three different quarterbacks -- Joe Theismann in Super Bowl XVII, Doug Williams in Super Bowl XXII and Mark Rypien in Super Bowl XXVI. Theismann's turn came in Gibbs' second season in 1982. With Theismann leading the way with 2,033 yards and 13 touchdowns passing, the Redskins won eight of nine games and defeated the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XVII. Theismann passed for two touchdowns but workhorse running back John Riggins won MVP honors with a 166-yard rushing performance culminated by a game-winning 43-yard TD run. Gibbs was the Associated Press choice as NFL Coach of the Year.

The 1983 Redskins used a balanced rushing and passing offense to win 14 of 16 games and advance to a second straight Super Bowl. Theismann passed for 3,714 yards but Riggins stole the show with his battering-ram runs that produced 1,374 yards and 24 touchdowns. Gibbs again was named NFL Coach of the Year. But the seemingly perfect season evaporated in Super Bowl XVIII when the Los Angeles Raiders stunned the Redskins, 38-9.

The Redskins did not return to championship status until the 1987 season, which was culminated with a 42-10 romp over the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XXII. Two unlikely heroes were Doug Williams at

quarterback and running back Tim Smith. Williams, substituting for Jay Schroeder, broke or tied four Super Bowl records and won MVP honors. Smith, who rushed for only 126 yards all year, ran for 204 yards and two touchdowns.

Gibbs' final Super Bowl triumph came in his 11th season in 1991, when he was named NFL Coach of the Year for the third time. The Redskins had a 14-2 record and overwhelmed Detroit 41-10. In the NFC championship game. The season ended with an easy 37-24 win over Buffalo in Super Bowl XXVI. Quarterback MVP Mark Rypien won MVP acclaim with a 292-yard performance.

The winning coach was lauded for the unprecedented achievement of winning three Super Bowls with three different quarterbacks. Typically, the soft-spoken Gibbs downplayed his own role and insisted that the Redskins won because Theismaun, Williams and Rypien were all excellent football players in their own right.

The Redskins struggled to a 9-7 record in 1992 but did win one playoff game over Minnesota before losing to San Francisco 20-13 in what would turn out to be Gibbs' final game as an NFL coach.

### Calling It Quits

There may have been several factors involved in Gibbs' surprising decision but a late-season health scare no doubt played a major role in his retirement. After being diagnosed with "migraine equivalence" -- a nervous condition that included everything but the headaches associated with migraines, Gibbs, then 52, began getting more rest as he continued to ponder his pro football future and to re-think his priorities.

Gibbs' 20-hour-day, work-around-the-clock routine and his sleeping three or four nights each week at his office was well known throughout the NFL. In the final weeks of the 1992 season, he found it more and more difficult to get the proper rest. After the season, he still felt physically drained and emotionally anxious. He underwent medical tests at the Mayo Clinic and elsewhere but the tests produced no evidence of a life-threatening disease.

At the same time, he realized that coaching was taking a toll on his family life, particularly his opportunity to be with his sons, J. D. and Coy. At that time, Coy was a linebacker at Stanford.

"I want to go and see Coy play. I want to sit in the stands and just be a dad," Gibbs said. "There's a window of opportunity with my family, my sons and my wife Pat. The last two years have been difficult for me. This is the toughest decision I have ever made in my life."

The news of Gibbs' retirement was stunning to most of the Redskins players. "In a game with a lot of liars and cheaters and crooks<sup>1</sup> he was different," defensive tackle Eric Williams said. "Joe was a shining star. He was honest. He was tough, but honest. He was brilliant at what he did. You couldn't ask for more of a coach or a human being."

One player who wasn't shocked, however<sup>1</sup> was Rypien, whose home Gibbs had visited a few days earlier.

"He was asking me about my family and he spent a lot of time talking to my little girls," Rypien remembered. "The conversation didn't revolve around football the way it usually did. Now that I think back on it, you had kind of an indicator there."

Since he was officially retired, Gibbs' nomination for Pro Football Hall of Fame membership could have come as early as 1994. But since many expected he would return to coaching, possibly with the new Carolina expansion team, the nomination was held up until 1996. In the meantime, Gibbs removed his name from consideration for the Carolina coaching position and later expressed no interest when it was rumored he might be hired by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Instead, he turned his interest to other pursuits. He did enjoy "the good life" with his family, as he said he would do. Gibbs also had been a long-time auto-racing enthusiast and, in 1991, he bought his first racing car. Today he and his sons work together in Charlotte, NC, overseeing their NASCAR race team. During football seasons, Gibbs is busy every week as a highly-regarded analyst on NBC's NFL Live pre-game show.

### **A Long Road**

Although he was born in Mocksville, NC, on November 25, 1940, Gibbs' roots are imbedded in California, where he moved as a child, and particularly in San Diego. A graduate of Santa Fe Springs high school, Gibbs attended Cerritos Junior College before enrolling at San Diego State, where he played guard, tight end and linebacker for the Aztecs and earned a physical education degree.

In his coaching career that began as a graduate assistant at San Diego State in 1964, Gibbs had the good fortune of working as an offensive assistant under some of the great names of the college coaching ranks -- Don Coryell at San Diego, Bill Peterson at Florida State, John McKay at Southern California and Frank Broyles at Arkansas.

Gibbs' college coaching career spanned nine seasons from 1964 to 1972 and his teams enjoyed unusual success. San Diego State was 27-4 in three seasons and both Florida State and USC were 15-4-1 during two-year stints by Gibbs. Arkansas was 14-8-1 in 1971 and 1972.

Two of his college coaches later called on Gibbs when they became head coaches in the NFL. Coryell actually hired Gibbs twice, the first time in 1973 as the offensive backfield coach of the St. Louis Cardinals and the second time in 1979 as the offensive coordinator of the San Diego Chargers. In between the two Coryell assignments, Gibbs served as the Tampa Bay Buccaneers offensive coordinator under McKay in 1978.

Two offensive players whom Gibbs coached in the NFL also were elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in the same year he was, a happy circumstance that Gibbs says made his election especially meaningful. Dan Dierdorf was an offensive right tackle for the St. Louis Cardinals and Charlie Joiner was one of the leading pass catchers in the Chargers' powerful offense during the Gibbs' years.

"Every year was a learning experience for me~" Gibbs said about his many stops as an assistant coach. "I certainly had a vast cross section. You watch those guys, you learn and you say that's what I want to be."

Gibbs learned intensity from Coryell, particularly in game preparations, during three tenures on his staffs. Gibbs picked up the hard work ethic from Peterson at Florida State. Peterson was tireless and he demanded his staff work by the same clock. McKay, clearly the authority figure at USC, gave Gibbs hands-on experience as a disciplinarian. At Arkansas under Broyles, Gibbs learned the power of positive thinking.

He also learned something about the running game from McKay, the architect at Tailback U., and about passing from Coryell, the author of a devastating passing offense that wreaked havoc in the pro ranks.

### **Planning to Win**

It was this unusual resume that Gibbs brought with him to Washington for his first head coaching job at any level of football. He knew exactly what he had to do. First, he assembled a quality staff of assistants. He turned the defense over to Richie Petitbon and took charge of the offense himself, but always made a point of listening to what his offensive assistants had to say. "He's not afraid to have strong-willed and independent thinkers around him," a Redskins official pointed out.

Perhaps most importantly, he adjusted his game plans within the framework of the talents of his personnel to create the best possible chance to become successful. His first change was the most dramatic. In San Diego, the Chargers excelled with Dan Fouts, one of the game's best pure passers. In Washington, Gibbs inherited Theismann, a classic scrambler.

In San Diego, the Chargers threw the ball on almost every down, partly because they didn't have a dominating running back. But in Washington, Gibbs found himself with a big offensive line and a big, hard-working ball-carrier in Riggins. In Theismann, he had a guy who could do things based on his tremendous athleticism. That combination brought Gibbs his first Super Bowl title in his second year in 1982.

Five years later when the Redskins won their second Super Bowl, Williams was their quarterback. He had a strong arm but little mobility and the Redskins didn't have a dominant running back like Riggins. Gibbs decided to capitalize on the arm of Williams and a handful of quality receivers and the Redskins won again.

In 1991, Rypien was a cross between Theismann and Williams. Rypien was mobile -- but not as mobile as Theismann -- and he had a big arm --but not like Williams. So Gibbs loaded up the attack with sprint-out and play-action passes to mesh with the running threat of Earnest Byner and Washington enjoyed a very successful year.

"It's amazing the things Joe comes up with," Redskins backup quarterback Jeff Rutledge said. "He puts things in, they always work. It seems like he's always calling plays at the right time. He's a genius when it comes to offense."

"Genius? Jack Kent Cooke said there are no geniuses in the game and I think he's right," Gibbs insisted. "This business is getting along with people, working with people. That doesn't fall under the category of guys being really bright or scholarly. You just need to be good with people."

Perhaps Broyles, Gibbs' coach at Arkansas, said it best: "Joe was one of the most complete coaches we ever had. He had toughness and compassion. He did it all from teaching to recruiting. He is so likeable, so pleasant. Joe not only was a brilliant coach, but an outstanding person.

So it was not unexpected when Joe Gibbs was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in the first year his name was on the ballot.