

Joe Gibbs Outworked Foes While Coaching Redskins To 3 NFL Titles



Joe Gibbs took over the Redskins in 1981 and had them on top the next season. (Fotosports International/Newscom)

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Reprints

When the NFL playoffs rolled around, Joe Gibbs made sure of one thing: He'd do everything possible to outwork his coaching rivals.

That meant elevating his game a few notches. He studied harder than ever, going deep into his playbook for anything that would outwit his opponents. He looked for any edge. He also made sure his Washington Redskin players understood what they needed to do and how to get it done, and he readied them so they wouldn't beat themselves through turnovers, penalties and other mental errors.

To him, it was all about preparation.

"One thing that always struck me is how aggressive Joe was in the playoffs with play calling and strategy," said former Redskins general manager Charley Casserly. "He didn't pull back in the playoffs; he went after it. It was clearly because of preparation.

He was great at preparing.

“He never played tense in the postseason. He went at it without a conservative game plan, whether it was by throwing the ball, formations, opening things up. He didn’t hold back. He never played not to lose.”

Gibbs’ patience and fearlessness paid off. He posted a 17-7 postseason mark in 16 NFL seasons for a winning percentage of .708. That and his regular-season mark of .621 (154-94) are among the best for coaches with at least 100 victories.

Two Tours In Washington

Gibbs coached the Redskins during two stretches. His era of fame was from 1981 to 1992, when the Redskins had three Super Bowl triumphs, five division titles and eight playoff appearances.

He was a first-ballot inductee into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1996.

He returned in 2004, coached the Redskins to the playoffs two more times and left after the 2007 season.

Gibbs won two of his Super Bowls during tumultuous NFL seasons.

During a player strike in 1982 that halted play for 57 days, he advised his players to stick together and not cross the picket line in bits and pieces. They respected his advice, lifting weights in unison and gathering for sandlot drills. Doing so gave them an edge on opposing teams, most of which scattered during the break.

When play resumed, the Redskins won 10 of their last 11 games, including a four-game playoff tournament that ended with a victory in the January 1983 Super Bowl.

The players again went on strike in 1987. This time, replacement players were used for games that counted in the standings.

Knowing for some time that the players would strike, Gibbs, general manager Bobby

Beathard and others on the staff did their homework. They gobbled up unsigned rookies and former National Football League rejects to field a replacement team that won all three of its games, one of only two squads to do so.

When the regulars returned, the Redskins held first place in their division and went on to capture the January 1988 Super Bowl.

In both of those instances, Gibbs knew that foresight was critical.

Out Ahead

“The whole time I was in the NFL, there was always something changing in the NFL, whether it was the strike years or free agency coming into play or the USFL (an upstart league),” Gibbs, 75, told IBD. “I always said that if you were the best at handling unusual situations, you’d get a big jump because chances are a lot of other people weren’t going to handle it very well.

“We kind of prided ourselves on keeping our heads on us at times and our eyes and ears open. That way, you come out a little better on that end of the deal.”

Gibbs is the only coach in NFL history to win three Super Bowls with three different quarterbacks: Joe Theismann, Doug Williams and Mark Rypien. With a firm grasp on their strengths and weaknesses, he devised game plans that suited them perfectly.

Case in point: Rypien had zero mobility, so Gibbs kept him in the pocket protected by the Redskins’ mammoth offensive line, the Hogs. With ample time to throw, Rypien responded with an All-Pro season in 1991, amassing 3,564 yards and 28 touchdown passes, with only 11 interceptions. He went on to thrash the Buffalo Bills 37-24 in the Super Bowl, gaining the game’s Most Valuable Player trophy.

That came after Theismann beat the Miami Dolphins 27-17, and Williams busted the Denver Broncos 42-10 in the previous Super Bowls.

Steve Sabol, the late president of NFL Films, put Gibbs in the stratosphere because of his Super Bowl/quarterback trifecta.

“He was definitely one of the three greatest coaches in NFL history, along with Vince Lombardi and Paul Brown,” Sabol said. “Joe Theismann, Doug Williams and Mark Rypien were all good players, but none of them were Hall of Famers. I don’t know if anybody will ever equal that record, taking three really different teams to the Super Bowl with three different quarterbacks.”

Off And Running

Shortly after becoming the Redskins coach in 1981 following 20 years as a college and pro assistant, Gibbs gained a reputation as an offensive mastermind. He implemented novel schemes such as the single-back, two-tight-end alignment, which let running back John Riggins rumble his way to a Hall of Fame career.

Gibbs also unveiled the bunch formation, which called for three receivers to run complicated patterns simultaneously. In one season, 1989, Redskins Art Monk, Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders used that formation to each gain more than 1,000 receiving yards.

But in the end, Gibbs’ emphasis on simple fundamentals lifted his teams to great heights, says former Bears coach Mike Ditka, one of Gibbs’ rivals in the 1980s.

“When you watched what Joe Gibbs did on offense, he gave you a lot of icing and glitter and glamour, but it was basic,” Ditka said. “When it was all added up, he was going to block and protect the quarterback. He also had a core of good players, basic players that he loved and trusted, and they trusted him.”

Indeed, Gibbs knew that player continuity was key to the Redskins remaining among the league’s elite. Many of the same players wore Redskin uniforms during his first coaching era.

Some of them — guard Russ Grimm, cornerback Darrell Green and receiver Art Monk — were future Hall of Famers. Most of the others were blue collar players who received little fanfare. Gibbs understood that he needed a complement of both to be successful. He also relied on interchangeable parts, using guard Raleigh McKenzie, for example, in four positions on the offensive line.

Plus, Gibbs surrounded himself with excellent assistant coaches, a few of whom went on to head coaching jobs. In fact, his assistant coaching staff saw little turnover during the Gibbs I period, another area of cohesiveness that was instrumental to the team's success. In his modest fashion, he freely accepted constructive feedback from his staff.

In Gear With Nascar

He's turned to the same philosophy of hiring and delegating authority to bright crew managers, drivers and others at Joe Gibbs Racing, which has won three Nascar championships since he launched it in 1991.

"If somebody said 'what's the greatest strength of Joe Gibbs?' it's that he surrounds himself with people that challenge him," said D.C. sportscaster George Michael, who died in 2009. "A lot of times people in business don't want people smarter than them working for them. That's job insecurity. Joe wants people who are great and who are going to push him."

In his public remarks, Gibbs never set the bar too high for himself and his team. When owner Jack Kent Cooke and many in the media were touting the Redskins as a Super Bowl-caliber squad before the 1991 season, the coach defused the expectations and focused on the present. He said his team had major problems following an overtime preseason loss.

Likewise, when Gibbs returned to coaching in 2004, the popular belief was that he'd take the Redskins to their first Super Bowl since the 1991 season. But Gibbs played down the hype. He said no net would protect him from failure and that the past didn't buy him championships.

"You don't want to have greater expectations than what you should have," he said. "It's a tough league, people can get hurt, and every year you've got to go out there and have things go your way to a certain degree. Everything can be in place, and it can be taken away in one quarter. So there are no guarantees."

Gibbs' Keys

Regarded by many as one of the greatest pro football coaches of all time.

Overcame: An 0-5 start in 1981, his first season as an NFL head coach.

Lesson: One often needs to experience adversity before realizing success.

“I’ve said this many times: I thought he was the best coach that I’ve ever coached against,” said fellow Hall of Fame pro football coach Bill Parcells. “We were very fierce rivals for many years, and I just have tremendous admiration and respect for what he did there and how he did it. He’s what you would call the most worthy of opponents.”