



10 BIG GAMES REMEMBERED: 1999-2010
Jan. 1, 2006: Washington 31, Philadelphia 20, in Philadelphia. Needing a win to clinch a wild-card playoff spot, the Redskins trailed 20-17 in the final quarter. But an interception by linebacker Lemar Marshall gave the Redskins possession on the Eagles' 22, and running back Clinton Portis ran for a touchdown on the next play. Next, a sack by defensive end Phillip Daniels forced a fumble that Sean Taylor took 39 yards into the end zone. The win marked the Redskins' fifth straight victory after they were nearly out of the playoff race at 5-6.

But the Redskins collapsed in 2006, a 5-11 season that Gibbs called the most disappointing in his head coaching career. The defense finished 31st in the NFL in total yards allowed, and the front office made some of the most ill-fated personnel moves of the Snyder era. Receiver Brandon Lloyd, acquired in a trade for two midround picks, caught 23 passes and scored no touchdowns, and displayed an attitude problem. He had two receptions the next season and was cut. A bigger bust was Adam Archuleta, a free agent who signed for \$35 million over seven years, the most lucrative contract for a safety in NFL history. Beaten repeatedly on pass plays, Archuleta played only on special teams in the second half of the 2006 season and was released.

The Redskins made some nice midlevel free agency acquisitions in 2007, however, including middle linebacker London Fletcher, one of the NFL's top tacklers since the late 1990s. He would play a large part in what would be perhaps the most dramatic season in team history.

A D.C. SPORTS TRAGEDY

The Redskins started the 2007 season 5-3 season but lost three straight to the Eagles, Cowboys and Buccaneers. The day after the Bucs game, news surfaced that the Redskins' best overall player and one of the most feared hitters in the NFL, safety Sean Taylor, had been shot during a break-in at his home near Miami. He underwent seven hours of surgery but remained in critical condition. As he fought for his life, Redskins fans held candlelight vigils at Redskins Park and FedExField.

Taylor passed away the next day, marking the biggest D.C. sports tragedy since University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias died of cocaine intoxication in 1986 and the biggest Redskins tragedy since Vince Lombardi's death in 1970. The Redskins and their fans were devastated, and the team dedicated the season to Taylor. But a loss to Buffalo dropped the Redskins to 5-7.

(Above) Safety Sean Taylor (21) leaps for a touchdown to cap his 39-yard fumble return against the Philadelphia Eagles on Jan. 1, 2006. Taylor's touchdown put the game away for the 'Skins.

With their playoff hopes flickering, the Redskins looked down for the count when starting quarterback Jason Campbell suffered a serious leg injury just before halftime in week 13 against Chicago. His backup, 13th-year veteran Todd Collins, had not completed a pass since 2004. But Collins looked poised in a 24-16 Redskins victory, connecting on 15 of 20 passes for 224 yards and two touchdowns.

The Redskins, determined to win for Taylor, swept the Giants, Vikings and Cowboys to clinch a wild-card spot. Collins, the toast of D.C., was named NFC Offensive Player of the Month, posting a 64 percent completion rate, five touchdowns, no interceptions and a passer rating of 106.4. Moss and Portis made

big-time contributions down the stretch. For the season, Moss caught 61 passes for 808 yards and three touchdowns, Portis rushed for 1,262 yards, his fifth 1,000-yard campaign, and Cooley had a team-high 66 catches. The tackling machine, Fletcher, led the defense with 164 stops.

In the playoffs, Collins threw two late interceptions that were returned for touchdowns in a 35-14 loss in Seattle, ending a remarkable ride for a team that had faced incredible adversity. Players welcomed the opportunity to unwind mentally, and some looked for creative things to do.

"I'm going to hang with Fidel Castro and smoke

(Below) Linebacker Lemar Marshall crushes Tampa Bay running back Carnell "Cadillac" Williams during the first round of the playoffs.

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Jan. 7, 2006: Washington 17, Tampa Bay 10, in Tampa Bay. In the first round of the playoffs, the Redskins tallied 120 yards, the fewest ever by a winning playoff team. Mark Brunell passed for 41, and Clinton Portis rushed for 53. But Washington's defense came up big for the second straight week, holding the Bucs to 243 yards and forcing three turnovers. Linebacker LaVar Arrington's interception set up a touchdown, and safety Sean Taylor scored for the second straight game on a fumble return, this time for 51 yards. It was Joe Gibbs' lone playoff win in his second stint in D.C.



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Nov. 5, 2006: Washington 22, Dallas 19, in Washington. The improbable happened under a full moon at FedExField. With six seconds left and the score tied 19-19, the Cowboys' Mike Vanderjagt, one of the more accurate kickers in NFL history, tried a 35-yard field goal. But Redskin Troy Vincent blocked the kick, and ball hawk Sean Taylor picked it up and returned it 30 yards. Kicker Nick Novak, who had missed a 49-yard field goal with 35 seconds left, converted a 47-yarder for the winning points. Redskin Renaldo Wynn yelled, "You gotta believe! You gotta believe!"



some of the most powerful Cuban cigars you can ever find," Portis said.

"You might find me in Dubai in the next week or two," cornerback Shawn Springs said. "Then I'm going to ride to Zurich, then probably Italy somewhere. Might come back with a mountain man mustache."

THE STUNNING HIRING OF JIM ZORN

Gibbs added to the drama by unexpectedly resigning with one year left on his contract. The 67-year-old coach spoke about the NFL's demands and his desire to spend more time with his family in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area, home of his NASCAR team.

During his comeback, Gibbs had restored stability to a franchise that seemed rudderless beforehand. But his 31-36 record, including a 1-2 playoff mark, fell short of the lofty expectations that existed upon his return. His teams had also displayed some troubling trends. In 2007, for example, the Redskins blew five halftime and two double-digit leads. Ultraconservative play calling, bad clock management and other mental gaffes hurt chances for at least four wins.

Bobby Beathard, the Redskins' general manager during Gibbs' first eight seasons in Washington in the 1980s, said anyone who argues that the Hall of Fame coach tainted his legacy is wrong. "I think it might be a little bit more difficult to coach today with of all the new rules and everything," Beathard

(Above) Troy Vincent scrambles for the ball after blocking a fourth-quarter field-goal try during the Redskins' Nov. 5, 2006, game against the Cowboys.

said. "Being out for that long, it's tough to get back in and realize the game's a little different. Dan Snyder did the right thing. The fire's always going in Washington for the Redskins, but he probably stoked it more by bringing Joe back."

The apparent front-runner to replace Gibbs was Redskins defensive coordinator Gregg Williams, whose units had placed in the top 10 in three of the past four seasons. But Williams, a former Bills head coach, was not hired. Gibbs, who advised Snyder during the coaching search, suggested that there was a personality clash between Williams and Snyder.

In a monthlong search, Snyder and his top personnel executive, Cerrato, interviewed assistant coaches from other teams and ex-New York Giants head coach Jim Fassel. The process ended with the stunning hiring of Jim Zorn, who was never known as a serious NFL head coaching candidate. In fact, just two weeks earlier, Zorn had been named Redskins offensive coordinator, after seven seasons as Seattle's quarterbacks coach.

Zorn's ability to mold Seattle's Matt Hasselbeck into one of the NFL's top quarterbacks had intrigued Snyder and Cerrato. They were hoping for similar success with the inconsistent Campbell, whom the Redskins had drafted in 2005 after trading three picks, including a No. 1, to move up into the first round.



Kicker Nick Novak follows the progress of his 47-yard field goal as it sails through the uprights to beat the Cowboys.