

George Allen: Class of 2002

Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

GEORGE ALLEN

Col: Alma; Marquette; Michigan

B: 4/29/1922, Grosse Point Woods, MI

D: 12/31/1990, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

1966	LARm	8	6	0	.571	3	NFL-W	----
1967	LARm	11	1	2	.857	1	NFL-Coa	0-1
1968	LARm	10	3	1	.750	2	NFL-Coa	----
1969	LARm	11	3	0	.786	1	NFL-Coa	0-1
1970	LARm	9	4	1	.679	2	NFC-W	----
1971	Was	9	4	1	.679	2	NFC-E	0-1
1972	Was	# 11	3	0	.786	1	NFC-E	2-1
1973	Was	10	4	0	.714	2	NFC-E	0-1
1974	Was	10	4	0	.714	2	NFC-E	0-1
1975	Was	8	6	0	.571	3	NFC-E	----
1976	Was	10	4	0	.714	2	NFC-E	0-1
1977	Was	9	5	0	.643	2	NFC-E	----
		116	47	5	.705			2-7

NFC Champion

In a profession dominated by X-and-O-driven workaholics, George Allen was state of the art. During the season, he was so focused on football he might not have noticed World War III. Every moment was concentrated on the Game. A visit home was a rarity for him. Allen believed, "Every day you waste is one you can never make up." He defined leisure time as "that five or six hours when you sleep at night."

"Winning," he explained, "is the science of being totally prepared." He added, "There is no detail too small." His zealous attention to detail paid off in victories. In twelve years of NFL coaching, Allen never had a losing season. His overall mark was 118-54-5 – the tenth best record in NFL history at the time of his retirement. His teams made the playoffs seven times and only twice finished as low as third in their division. His reputation was not only as a winner but as a coach who could take a losing franchise and turn it around. "Every time you win, you're reborn," Allen said. "When you lose, you die a little."

Of course winning was important. But undoubtedly he would have followed the same grueling regimen had his teams played in some sort of Politically Correct League where no one ever lost.

But where other single-minded mentors burned out, Allen thrived. His fanatical devotion to duty wasn't something he did to achieve something else; it was the end itself. "He had to coach to live," according to John Schulian, who covered the Redskins for the Washington *Post* during Allen's time there. "It was that simple. That was his life. You weren't letting this guy breathe if you weren't letting him coach."

George Herbert Allen was born on April 22, 1922, in Detroit, MI, where his father worked in an auto plant. He showed his dedication early by compiling a perfect attendance record while lettering in football, basketball, and track at Lake Shore High School. Although he was named All-Conference in basketball and set a school record in the long jump, football was his preference.

At little Alma College and later at Marquette University, where he was sent as an officer trainee in the U.S. Navy's World War II V-12 program, Allen played end. His abilities were such that he decided coaching was his future. He finished the war as athletic adjutant at the Farragut Navy base, then entered the University of Michigan where he earned his M.S. in Physical Education in 1947. While at Lansing, he assisted Fritz Crisler, one of the most successful and respected football coaches of his time.

In 1948, Allen became coach at Morningside College in Iowa. Over three years, he compiled a 15-2-2 record. From 1951 through 1956, he coached Whittier College in California where he put together a 32-22-5 mark. All the time he had his eye on better things. He attended numerous coaching clinics both to learn and to meet the famous coaches conducting them. He always made certain they knew his name. Later, he reminded them by sending congratulatory telegrams whenever one achieved anything notable. Allen said, "Most men succeed because they are determined to."

He was named to Sid Gillman's staff with the Los Angeles Rams in 1957. Determination had led him to the NFL. But after one season, he was out. The Rams were in the middle of an ugly dispute among the owners, and the coaching staff suffered collateral damage. In what must have been the darkest moment of his life, Allen was reduced to running a car wash.

Fortunately, George Halas had an opening in 1958 and offered Allen a position on his Chicago Bears staff. His contributions increased in the next couple of years. Although he had no title, Allen had a large measure of influence on the Bears' draft and was responsible for drafting several players who later helped Chicago to a championship. Most ironic considering Allen's later use of the draft.

Allen took over the defense in 1962. Although the Bears put a mundane offense on the field, Allen installed a zone defense that took the team to the 1963 NFL championship. Doug Atkins, Stan Jones, and Bill George cemented their future enshrinement in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Other Bear defensive stars included linemen Ed O'Bradovich and Fred Williams, linebackers Joe Fortunato and Larry Morris, and defensive backs Richie Petitbon, Bennie McRae, Dave Whitsell, and Roosevelt Taylor. After Chicago's 14-10 title game victory over the New York Giants, the team voted Allen the game ball.

Allen was a hot head coach prospect in the NFL for several years. In 1966, the Los Angeles Rams, with owner Dan Reeves at last firmly in charge, offered Allen a contract and he accepted. George Halas exploded. After pointing out that Allen was still under contract to Chicago, Papa Bear sued and won. Then, having proved the sanctity of an NFL contract, Halas released Allen and let him join the Rams.

The Rams had struggled to a 4-10 mark in '65. Allen set about making changes that brought the team in at 8-6 in his first season.

The Allen way of doing things soon became evident. First off, he valued veterans over rookies. During the next few years, Allen showed he liked experience on the field even more than the ice-cream he was often photographed eating. He talked longtime Ram Jack Pardee out of retirement, brought in veterans Bill George, Maxie Baughan, Myron Pottios, Roger Brown, Rechie Petitbon, and Irv Cross, and meshed them with the Rams' Fearsome Foursome of Deacon Jones, Lamar Lundy, Merlin Olsen, and Rosey Grier. Meanwhile, draft choices were something to be traded for more veterans. A rookie who happened to make the team was looked on almost as a potential carrier of a contagious disease.

When he was criticized for mortgaging his team's future by not developing young players, Allen answered with the phrase most associated with him: "The future is now."

Allen's knack for the motivational phrase was legion. To an outsider, he might seem might seem the master of the sound-bite saw, but his players bought it – perhaps because they knew Allen himself believed what he said.

In his second season with the Rams, his team went 11-1-2, but they were no match for Lombardi's Packers in the conference playoff at Milwaukee, falling 28-7. Nevertheless, Allen was named NFL Coach of the Year by the Associated Press, United Press International, and *The Sporting News*.

Allen was also one of the first coaches to emphasize special teams. That was part of his extraordinary attention to detail. Sometimes he seemed to go to extremes. He once hired a left-footed punter for practices before a game with a team that employed a lefty kicker. On another occasion, he held a practice during the time when the sun was in the same position as it would be in an upcoming game. Allen believed such maniacal concentration on minutia might make the difference between winning and losing.

What was not to be found with an Allen-coached team was an exciting offense. His ball-control attack, led by quarterback Roman Gabriel, put a premium on avoiding mistakes. His offense usually scored enough to win, but it seldom got the fans up and cheering. It was Allen's unexciting offense as much as his trading away draft choices that caused owner Dan Reeves to shock everyone by firing him after the '68 season. The Rams had just completed a commendable 10-3-1 season while overcoming a crippling spate of injuries. Reeves explained that "winning with Allen wasn't fun."

The firing nearly precipitated a rebellion among the Rams players who, almost to a man, went to bat for their coach. Eventually, Reeves called a press conference to introduce the Rams new coach – George Allen.

The reprieve was temporary. Allen's team went 20-7-1 over the next two years and won another division title in '68, but a second-place finish in 1970 finished Allen. In five years, he'd made 51 trades, including most of the Rams early-round draft choices. Moreover, the payroll for his collection of graybeards was still climbing. And, the offense still made caffeine yawn.

The Washington Redskins, who'd enjoyed only four winning seasons since 1945, were more than willing to be bored by a few wins. They hired Allen as coach and general manager. He inherited a 6-8-0 team on its way down. In a dazzling series of trades, he brought in Billy Kilmer, Roy Jefferson, Boyd Dowler, Ron McDole, Clifton McNeil, Verlon Biggs, Diron Talbert, Jack Pardee, Myron Pottios, John Wilber, Richie Petitbon, and Speedy Duncan. The press tabbed them "The Over-the-Hill Gang" after a popular movie title, but the veterans made few mistakes. When the offense bogged down from injuries, the defense was able to keep the team winning. The 9-4-1 record represented Washington's most victories in 29 years. Despite his usual early exit from the playoffs, Allen was named either NFL or NFC Coach of the Year by all the selecting boards.

The next year was even better. The 'Skins edged Dallas for their first division title since World War II. Larry Brown led the NFC in rushing and Kilmer, though never stylish, was an effective passer. But, as usual with an Allen team, the defense filled with creaking veterans was the strength. Washington opened the playoffs with a victory – Allen's first in post-season – topping Green Bay 16-3. Then they defeated the Cowboys 26-3 for the NFC title. Next stop, Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and Super Bowl VII.

Unfortunately, the 'Skins ran straight into Fate or Kismet or maybe just plain Momentum. Their opponents, the Miami Dolphins were undefeated, untied, and unfazed by Super Bowl hoopla, having been there the year before. Allen's defense held the Dolphins to 14 points and even scored a touchdown on Mike Bass' 49-yard return of Garo Yepremian's fumble. Allen's offense contributed no points; Miami won 14-7.

From 1973 through 1977, his teams had winning records and made the playoffs three times, but some questioned the price. His veteran roster cost more than other teams, and he continued to be criticized for sacrificing the Redskins' future by trading away draft choices. In all his time in Washington, the 'Skins had one draft pick before the fifth round.

The Future-Is-Now Coach defended his strategy: "A gambler is a coach who uses a number one draft choice on an untested, inexperienced lineman or receiver from Illinois Normal. A conservative is a man who trades his number one choices for established veterans In my opinion, the odds are against gamblers, innovators and pace-setters in football. Call me a conservative."

Redskins president Edward Bennett Williams joked: "His father gave him a six-week-old puppy when he was four, and he traded it away for two 12-year-old cats."

But as more of Allen's precious veterans bowed to time and retired, others admitted that the slogans were losing their charm. One vet asked, "How many weeks in a row can you play the most important game of your life?"

After the '77 season, Allen left the Redskins. Carroll Rosenblum who had succeeded the late Dan Reeves as Rams president convinced Allen to come back to L.A. The widely anticipated return lasted through two pre-season games. Four players walked out in salary disputes and the team was in turmoil. Rosenblum fired Allen.

He stayed out of football for five years, a deed roughly similar to a tiger becoming a vegetarian. In 1983 he became head coach of the Chicago Blitz of the USFL and took them to a strong 12-6-0 record. The next year, the Blitz and Arizona franchises were exchanged. Allen's Arizona Wranglers went all the way to the league championship game before losing to the Philadelphia Stars. When he resigned, it seemed the final chapter in his coaching career.

Although he'd never quite won it all, he was always in the running. If he had no Super Bowl ring, only Vince Lombardi of the coaches in the Pro Football Hall of Fame had a higher career winning percentage. He'd given his sport enough inspirational phrases to batter through a whole season of lockerroom doors. But mostly, he'd convinced his players that they were better than they ever thought they'd be.

Deacon Jones said, "He was the greatest coach I ever played for. He believed in discipline and conditioning. Totally dedicated. He would work 24 hours a day at that film projector, and he would come up with something against anybody." But Jones credited Allen with more than that. He had been a Ram for six years when Allen arrived, and he was acutely aware of the racial strife of the 1960s. "I did not like white people," he says. "I was dealing with segregation and tokenism. Then I met Coach Allen. He brought about the only level-playing field I ever had and all the things I was really upset about in my life switched just like that."

Allen had said, "Each of us has been put on this earth with the ability to do something well. We cheat ourselves and the world if we don't use that ability as best we can." The man who needed to coach returned to the sideline in 1990 at Long Beach State.

Etty Allen, his wife, later said, "I realized when he went to Long Beach State that I finally understood him. The level of competition is not what matters; it's the competition itself."

It was his final season. Allen died on the last day of the year. Most football fans learned of his passing while watching New Year's Day Bowl Games. Somehow, that seemed fitting.