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George Herbert Allen

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ALLEN, GEORGE HERBERT (b. 29 April 1918 in Detroit, Michigan; d. 31 December 1990 in Palos Verdes, California), professional football coach with a reputation for turning losing organizations into winners.

The only son of auto plant worker Earl and Loretta (Hannigan) Allen, George Allen was born in 1918 (although he often gave the year as 1922) in the Grosse Point Woods suburb of Detroit, and was raised along with his sister, Virginia, in the Saint Clair Shores district. After graduating from Lake Shore High School, where he had a perfect attendance record and lettered in basketball, football, and track, Allen attended Alma College and Marquette University as an officer trainee in the Navy's wartime V-12 program. He then served as athletic adjutant at the Farragut (Idaho) Navy base until his discharge in 1946, when he enrolled at the University of Michigan and received a B.S. (1947) and M.S. (1948) in Education. His thesis was "A Study of Outstanding Football Coaches' Attitudes and Practices in Scouting." As a graduate student at Michigan, Allen was an assistant to head football coach Fritz Crisler.

He began his head coaching career in 1948 at Morningside College (Sioux City, Iowa), and then spent 1951 to 1956 as head coach of Whittier College in California. While at Whittier, Allen spent much of his free time observing the Los Angeles Rams and their coach, Sid Gillman, who eventually hired him to be the Rams' offensive end coach in 1957, but he lost his position in a staff shakeup. After running a car wash in the San Fernando Valley for a year, George Halas,

owner/coach of the Chicago Bears, hired Allen as chief scout (1958) and then personnel director. In 1963, he became the Bears' defensive coach and helped guide them to the National Football League (NFL) championship, receiving the game ball from the players.

The first of many controversies involving George Allen revolved around his decision to accept the head coaching position from the Rams in 1966, while still under contract with the Bears. Halas filed a breach of contract suit, proved his point in court, and then released Allen from the contract. During his five years with the Rams, Allen gave the team its first winning season in eight years, won his division twice, and compiled the best record in the NFL during that period. A personality conflict with team owner Daniel Reeves led to Allen being fired the morning after Christmas, 1968. One week later, after pressure from players and fans, Reeves re-hired Allen, but eventually let the coach's contract expire after the 1970 season.

Allen's coaching philosophy involved heavy motivation and bringing in tested veteran players in exchange for future draft choices. When he was hired to be coach and general manager of the Washington Redskins in 1971, he adopted the motto, "The Future is Now," and immediately began to acquire (expensive) proven veterans, including many of his former Rams, guiding the Redskins into the playoffs for the first time since 1945. Although they were derided as the "Over-the-Hill Gang," Allen led the Redskins to the Super Bowl after the 1972

season. After the loss, he commented that, “Losing is like death.” His overall record as Redskins coach was 67-30-1, but 4-7 in the playoffs.

Allen married Henrietta “Etty” Lumbroso on 26 May 1951, and had three sons and one daughter; George, the oldest child, was elected Governor of Virginia in 1993. Believing strongly in physical conditioning, Allen jogged three miles a day, and was named Chairman of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness in 1981, serving in that capacity during the Reagan administration. He wrote or co-authored fourteen books on football and motivation. Allen founded the Red Cloud Athletic Federation for the purpose of providing athletic equipment for Sioux children, and was made an honorary Sioux chief for his longtime dedication to that cause.

Allen’s critics claimed that he had an “end justifies the means” philosophy, and, indeed, he was fined the (then) league maximum of \$5,000 in 1973 for trading away the same draft choices twice, which he attributed to an oversight. Described by some as eccentric, manipulative and “ruthlessly pragmatic,” Allen was a master motivator who instilled an “us versus them” mentality in his players. Fearing potential spies, Allen would have his team practice behind high chain-linked fences surrounded by tarpaulin. A fierce competitor, Allen believed in time management, insisting on a chauffeured limousine so he could work instead of drive, and usually subsisting on ice cream and milk (supplemented by vitamin tablets), so he did not have to waste time chewing. He once wrote, “every day you

waste is one you can never make up. Winners don't waste time, and that applies in every walk of life."

His free spending with the Redskins led team owner Edward Bennett Williams to remark, shortly after his arrival, "When Coach Allen came to Washington, we agreed he had an unlimited budget. He's already exceeded it." Although the Redskins made the playoffs five times in his seven years, the owner and the coach disagreed over the terms of a new contract, and Allen was fired. Hired in 1978 to again coach the Rams, Allen was quickly fired by owner Carroll Rosenbloom after losing the first two exhibition games.

Allen went on to work as a CBS Sports commentator, and briefly worked for the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League before coaching the Chicago Blitz (1983) and the Arizona Wranglers (1984) in the fledgling United States Football League. After retiring from coaching for five years and again working for CBS, Allen accepted the head coaching position at Long Beach State in December 1989. After an 0-3 start, Long Beach finished the season at 6-5, and Allen called it his "most gratifying year in coaching." He died of cardiac arrest in the kitchen of his home six weeks later at age 72, and was buried in Green Hills Cemetery in Palos Verdes. Although he never felt completely well after being doused with ice water after the school's season-ending victory, it did not contribute to his death, according to the pathologist who performed the autopsy.

Innovative and defense-oriented, George Allen was the first head coach to

employ a special teams assistant, and was one of the first to emphasize situation substitutions on defense. He was named NFL Coach of the Year four times, and never had a losing record in his 14 professional seasons, including the USFL. At the time of his death, his career NFL winning percentage (.705) was the third highest in history, and he was the winningest coach in team history for both the Rams and Redskins. Fourteen of his assistants went on to become NFL head coaches.

[Allen interspersed reminiscences of his career with advice on how to survive being unemployed in his book, *Merry Christmas – You’re Fired!* (1982), written with Charles Maher. An early biography of Allen is *The Future is Now: George Allen, Pro Football’s Most Controversial Coach*, by William Gildea and Kenneth Turan (1972), who were both sports reporters for the *Washington Post*. Another early source is “The Ice-Cream Man Cometh,” by John Underwood, *Sports Illustrated*, volume 35 (25 October 1971), pages 71-72, 74, 77. Allen was also profiled in *Current Biography Yearbook for 1975*; *Contemporary Authors*, volume 111 (1984); *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports: Football* (1987); and *Annual Obituary* for 1990.

Obituaries of Allen appeared on 1 January 1991 in the *Washington Post* (page A1) and the *New York Times* (page 30). Several informative articles (with many anecdotes) appeared in the *Washington Post* after his death, including “Allen: Motivator and Innovator,” by Leonard Shapiro (1 January 1991, pages C1

and C8); ““He Wasn’t Like Anyone You’d Ever Met in Your Life,”” by Richard Justice (2 January 1991, page F6); and ““When the Sun Comes Up, You’d Better Be Running,”” by Ken Denlinger (6 January 1991, page D12).]

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