

WASHINGTON FOOTBALL TEAM

Season Recap



Washington's Top 5 moments from the 2020 season

By Zach Selby

The Washington Football Team's season is officially over, and there were plenty of moments that will stay with fans for years to come.

Between improbable comebacks, records being broken, playoff droughts ending and sensational plays from unlikely players, Washington found a way to endure an unprecedented season and start head coach Ron Rivera's regime on a positive note. Here are the team's top five moments from the season.

5. Ryan Kerrigan Breaks Official Sack Record

It was essentially a foregone conclusion that Ryan Kerrigan was going to surpass Dexter Manley as the franchise's all-time official sack leader. All he needed was 1.5 sacks to become Washington's most efficient pass-rusher. The only question that remained was how long

organization has been around for a really long time, seen a lot of really productive players come through. To be at the top of that list is pretty special for me."

Kerrigan's first sack came on the Eagles' second drive of the game; he rushed into the backfield untouched, which made quarterback Carson Wentz backpedal and turn to avoid the pressure. Wentz slipped out of a sack from Montez Sweat, but Kerrigan was there waiting to bring him down for a 10-yard loss.

Kerrigan's next sack -- the one that allowed him to surpass Manley -- came in the fourth quarter with the score tied at 17-17. This time, Kerrigan plowed through two Eagles players and grabbed Wentz's jersey to get the 92nd sack of his career.

Once the game had ended, Chase Young called Kerrigan "a dude," saying that his effort and ability to make plays made him special. Even though Kerrigan had fewer opportunities to impact the game this

4. Washington Upsets Undefeated Steelers

Washington was starting to find some momentum after grinding out a win over the Cincinnati Bengals and blowing out the Dallas Cowboys on Thanksgiving. It seemed like the young team was making progress, but it was about to face its toughest test yet against the undefeated Pittsburgh Steelers.

Washington was a six-point underdog heading into the Monday night game, and it looked like the Steelers were going to blow past that mark. Although there were some great moments -- like Young and the defense stopping Pittsburgh at the goal line in the second quarter -- Pittsburgh still held a 14-0 lead with just under four minutes left in the first half.

But just as it had done all season, Washington refused to give in. A 49-yard field goal from Dustin Hopkins made the score 14-3 at halftime, and then Washington went on a 14-play drive to cut Pittsburgh's lead to

learning how to play, with some veterans sprinkled in there at the right positions, and I think that we're growing and we're learning."

Things started to fall apart for Pittsburgh from there. Its following drive ended with a turnover on downs at Washington's 28-yard line, which allowed Smith and the offense to march down the field and take a lead with a 45-yard field goal. Then, after not forcing a sack all game, Washington's defensive line found a way to impact the game with a tipped pass from Sweat, which was then intercepted by Jon Bostic.

Washington added another field goal four plays later, to secure a 23-17 victory over the NFL's last undefeated team.

"I told them it was well earned," Rivera said. "We talked about the biggest thing, more so than anything else, is your reputation, your record. When you get on the field, those things don't matter. What matters is who plays the best and I thought our guys played pretty doggone good today."

3. Taylor Heinicke Erupts During Wild Card Weekend

No one knew what to expect out of backup Taylor Heinicke, who went from taking classes at Old Dominion to starting in a playoff game in about a month. It is safe to say that no one could have anticipated him to throw for 306 yards and put Washington in position to upset Tom Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

"I have nothing but respect for number four," Terry McLaurin said after the game. "The way he came in and handled his business on a moment's notice when we found out that Alex wasn't going to be able to go. He was just prepared for the moment. That's what this league is about, being prepared for your moment."

Heinicke brought new dimensions to Washington's offense -- among them deep vertical passes and elusive mobility -- and they flashed throughout the game. Fourteen of Heinicke's passes resulted in double-digit gains, and he led the team with six rushes for 46 yards. His biggest highlight came in the



Washington Football Team quarterback Taylor Heinicke (4) dives to score a touchdown against Tampa Bay Buccaneers inside linebackers Kevin Minter (51) and Lavonte David (54) during the second half of an NFL wild-card playoff football game, Saturday, Jan. 9, 2021, in Landover, Md. (AP Photo/Julio Cortez)

would it take.

The answer was one game. Kerrigan led Washington's eight-sack performance against the Philadelphia Eagles with two of his own, capping each play with his "HBK" celebration that fans have come to love.

"It meant a lot. It's pretty crazy," Kerrigan said after Washington's season-opening 27-17 win. "This

season, he made do with the snaps available to him, and he earned Rivera's respect for that.

"Coming off the bench and being fresh and getting two sacks," Rivera said, "and causing a couple of other plays out there to happen just speaks to who he is as a young man and what he means to our franchise going forward."

four points. The Steelers responded with a field goal, but Alex Smith hit Logan Thomas on a 15-yard touchdown to tie the score in the fourth quarter.

"We talked about fighting," Rivera said after the game. "There's no reason to stop playing. It doesn't matter what the score is. I just think that's who they are. These are a bunch of young guys that are

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Quarterback Alex Smith drops back to pass during the Washington Football Team's 20-14, NFC East-clinching win over the Philadelphia Eagles on Jan. 3, 2021. (Washington Football Team)

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third quarter when he miraculously avoided pressure and dove into the end zone for an eight-yard touchdown that made the score 18-16.

"He's a true pro," Morgan Moses said. "I can't tell you why he was on the street before we picked him up because obviously you see him out there playing today. He has every quality of a football player that you want. I'm just glad we got him."

Heinicke was forced to exit the game after injuring his shoulder, but he came back on the next drive to hit Steven Sims Jr. for an 11-yard touchdown with five minutes left to play.

Heinicke ultimately could not lead Washington to the game-tying score, but he fascinated fans with his sensational performance. Rivera said after the game that Heinicke had earned an opportunity, so it sounds like Washington has not seen the last of the 27-year-old signal-caller.

"I'm proud of myself and I'm happy that coaches believed in me and gave me the opportunity so... hopefully I can do it again next year," Heinicke said. "I want to be in the NFL. I want to keep playing ball. It's a dream of mine, and [I will] keep working towards it."

2. Alex Smith Completes His Comeback

There are some stories that go beyond what is shown on the field, and that is the case when it comes

to Smith making his return two years after his life-threatening leg injury.

Smith made tremendous progress in the months leading up to him coming in for an injured Kyle Allen against the Los Angeles Rams in Week 5. He was cleared for contact by team doctors and then showed he could handle a controlled pass rush in training camp. All that work came to a head when Smith jogged onto the field in the second quarter and finished the game.

"It was great to be out there," Smith told reporters. "The feeling, the range of emotions -- the good and the bad -- is why I fought so hard to come back. I think sometimes you can take it for granted, and certainly being away from it for a couple of years, I've missed it. So good to be back in it rolling, and like I said, we'll look at the film and get better and keep moving forward."

Nearly one month later, Smith replaced Allen again against the New York Giants and threw for 325 yards. This time, Smith was in the starting lineup for good, and after dropping a 30-27 loss to the Detroit Lions, he helped Washington win its next four games and finished the season 5-1 as the starter.

"Everything that I had seen in terms of the reports that I was getting from the doctors were positive that this is a guy who has a chance," Rivera said. "Given who he is and the way he came back, it doesn't surprise me to a degree that he's got an opportunity and he earned

an opportunity."

Smith could not play in three of Washington's final four games, as he was dealing with a calf injury, but the 36-year-old veteran had already proven he could defy the odds and help lead Washington to the playoffs. No matter what Smith does with his future, his accomplishment will go down as one of the greatest in sports history.

"I had so much fun this year, especially given all the COVID stuff," Smith said. "To be back in the locker room, to be with the guys, to be playing a game I love and to lose yourself in it, it's one of the greatest feelings in the world. You cannot duplicate it outside of here."

1. Washington Wins First NFC East Title Since 2015

Washington had been through a lot in the 2020 season between the COVID-19 protocols, Rivera battling cancer, injuries and quarterback changes, and yet it still had a chance to win the division for the first time since 2015. All it needed to do was beat the Philadelphia Eagles in Week 17.

It helped that Washington's offense was coming into the matchup at full strength with three of its biggest playmakers -- Smith, McLaurin and Antonio Gibson -- all suiting up together for the first time in weeks. Their presence paid off, as Washington scored on its opening drive for the first time all season. Then, after an interception by Kamren Curl set Washington up at the Eagles' 25-yard line, a 42-yard field goal led to a double-digit lead

in the first quarter.

The game was more of a grind from there. Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts scored back-to-back rushing touchdowns to take a 14-10 lead, but Smith and the offense responded seconds before halftime with a 15-yard touchdown to Thomas to make the score 17-14. The offense was only able to score three points for the rest of the game, but the defense forced two turnovers and a turnover on downs to maintain Washington's lead.

"I've got a lot of faith in what our defense is doing," Rivera said after the 20-14 win. "It's interesting because we've come out in the first half and our defense has really shut people down. That's one of the things we saw today. In that third quarter, they're pretty stifling."

Rivera's goal since Week 5 had been to win the division because he believed in his players. Despite a 1-5 record, they never stopped fighting and put their faith in Rivera when he asked them, "Why not us?" Over the course of a year, Rivera had turned Washington's potential into a playoff berth.

"This one is special just because of how hard it was and how tough everything has been on the guys and the organization," Rivera said. "It's a great group of young men in there, and we're trying to do things the right way. It's really a cool thing to come out and get the division."

The views and opinions expressed in this article do not reflect the opinion of the team.



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How Washington turned potential into a playoff berth



The Washington Football Team celebrates its NFC East-clinching win over the Philadelphia Eagles on Jan. 3, 2021. (Courtney Rivera/Washington Football Team)

By Kyle Stackpole and Zach Selby

From the moment Ron Rivera stepped up to the podium for the first time as the Washington Football Team's head coach more than a year ago, he spoke of a vision for where he wanted to take the franchise.

He explained how he wanted to return a team that finished the 2019 season with a 3-13 record to its days of being perennial playoff contenders. He wanted to help Washington reach the same tier as some of the modern powerhouse organizations like Kansas City, Seattle and Green Bay, and he wanted to do that by building on the potential of its young, talented roster.

Rivera would say there is still a long way to go before that vision is realized, but winning the NFC East in his first year is a good way

to start.

After starting the 2020 season 1-5, Washington claimed the division title for the first time since 2015 with a win over the Philadelphia Eagles in Week 17 and then nearly defeated the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the Wild Card round of the playoffs. The team had to endure double-digit losses, injuries at key positions, multiple quarterback changes and Rivera battling cancer during the season. And yet, Washington never believed the division crown was out of reach, and the players showed resilience throughout one wave of adversity after the other.

Rivera showed confidence in the players he had at his disposal, and that faith paid off. Take a look back at how the head coach turned potential into a playoff berth.

'Feeling It Out'

New head coaches are already at

a disadvantage in their first season. Add in a virtual offseason, modified training camp and no preseason games -- and on top of that a cancer diagnosis -- and the amount Rivera was supposed to overcome seemed, well, insurmountable.

In some ways, the regular season opener provided false hope. By erasing a 17-point deficit to defeat the Philadelphia Eagles, some thought that Rivera's first year in Washington would go smoother than expected.

Dwayne Haskins Jr. would continue to develop as the quarterback of the future -- with Terry McLaurin as his No. 1 option -- and the pass-rush, which racked up eight sacks, would wreak havoc on opposing quarterbacks. With a win over the defending NFC East champions, why couldn't Washington potentially contend for the division?

Quickly, reality set in. Giveaways and big plays doomed Washington

in its 30-15 loss in Arizona, while turnovers against the Cleveland Browns overshadowed an otherwise solid offensive performance and resulted in a 34-20 defeat. Defensively, Washington could not contain Cardinals' dual-threat quarterback Kyler Murray or the Browns' two-headed rushing attack of Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt.

Washington nearly matched the Baltimore Ravens in total yardage in Week 4, but that stat proved meaningless in a game the Ravens controlled from the onset. Quarterback Lamar Jackson did seemingly whatever he wanted against Jack Del Rio's defense, gliding for a 50-yard touchdown while throwing for two more. The result was a 31-17 loss, Washington's third straight by at least two touchdowns.

Despite Washington sitting at 1-3, with its win over the Eagles feeling

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like a distant memory, Rivera was oddly encouraged. He believed Washington had “some pretty good pieces in place” and thought marked improvement was imminent amid a struggling NFC East.

That’s the main reason he replaced Haskins with Kyle Allen a quarter of the way through the season. With someone who had been in offensive coordinator Scott Turner’s system -- the two worked together in Carolina the past two seasons -- Rivera believed Washington could pick up a few wins during the easier portion of their schedule.

“I just felt that with the pieces we had -- why not us?” Rivera said in December. “I looked at it and, to be honest with you, there were six games that I saw coming up. I just felt if we could win three of those six and then see what happens after that, we could be in a pretty good place. That’s why I did what I did. I just looked at it and felt it. I was drawing on my experience of having played and coached in this league for 30 years. I just felt there was an opportunity and I wanted to take it and see what happens.”

From an outside perspective, Riverboat Ron took a gamble. He

believed he could continue developing a young team while fighting for a historically bad division -- similar to what he did with the Carolina Panthers in 2014.

And while it took some time for that vision to come into focus, eventually everyone saw Washington’s potential through Rivera’s lens.

“I’ll be honest with you, that’s what the goal has been since about Week 5,” Rivera said about making the postseason. “The first four were about seeing what we were as a football team, kind of feeling it out. But then looking at it...Week 5 was really where I thought, ‘Hey, you know what, we have a shot for the playoffs because of the way the division is. Nobody has started out 3-1 or 4-0. I just thought, ‘Wow. There’s a chance.’”

Learning To Win

There was little time to celebrate Cam Sims’ biggest NFL moment against the New York Giants in Week 6. Sims’ 22-yard touchdown brought Washington within one in the final seconds, but Rivera wanted to leave MetLife Stadium with a win right then and there.

“The only way to learn to win is to play to win,” Rivera said after the failed two-point conversion in a 20-19 loss. “That’s what I want those guys to understand; that’s the

mentality.”

Many questioned the decision, especially because Washington’s offense just scored and its defense shut down the Giants for most of the second half. If it went to overtime, it could have avoided its second straight 1-5 start to the season. The players, though, stood behind their coach. They loved his attacking mindset and his belief in this inexperienced unit. Eventually, those plays would end up working in their favor.

“What he’s trying to do here, and I totally understand it and I love that he’s doing it, is we’re trying to create a winning mentality,” Allen said after the game.

Washington came out a week later and dominated the Dallas Cowboys. When its offense failed to convert a fourth down at the goal line, the defense immediately responded by recording a safety. Then the offense built on that momentum with a touchdown drive, giving Washington all the points it would need in a 25-3 rout.

“We’ve set the bar, we’ve set the standard,” McLaurin said. “We know what that looks like now. We know every week is not going to be perfect, but we have weeks like this against good football teams and it’s in your division. It gives you a lot of confidence as a football team, and

we just have to build on that going forward going into this bye week.”

Another disappointing loss to the Giants followed, but there were some encouraging signs, none bigger than the play of veteran quarterback Alex Smith. In just his second appearance since his grotesque injury, Smith nearly led a double-digit comeback in place of the injured Allen. His biggest mistakes were a pair of late interceptions, and those only occurred because Smith was trying to make a play, Rivera said.

With Allen out for the year with his own significant leg injury, Washington would be forced to turn to Smith, who looked like his former self despite the costly giveaways. And even at 2-7, Rivera felt confident with Smith under center. A proven winner and elite game manager, paired with a defense that was finally starting to gel, appeared to be just what Washington needed to climb back into the NFC East hunt.

Finding Their Identity

Washington faced a lukewarm, swirling wash of emotions at Ford Field after its game against the Detroit Lions.

For the first time in nearly two years to the day since his life-threatening injury, Smith was on

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the field as Washington's starting quarterback. Not only did he throw for 300-plus yards in back-to-back games for the first time in his career, but the offense also shattered its season-high production that had been set the week before with 464 yards. By tying the game, 27-27, with 16 seconds left in the fourth quarter, the team proved once again that it was making progress.

And yet, problems lingered; the offense took too much time to gain traction, while the defense continued to give up big plays, both of which contributed to a 17-3 halftime deficit. All the joy from Dustin Hopkins tying the game evaporated as Matt Prater nailed a game-winning 59-yard field goal. Rivera said the team played well enough to win, but it also left nine points on the field, and missed opportunities do not show up on the scoreboard.

"So, sometimes I tell the guys, 'You can't play against two teams on Sunday: them and us,'" Rivera said. "Sometimes we do ourselves in by some of the mistakes we make."

Still, Rivera always viewed his first season in Washington from a broader perspective, and the big

picture showed the team's record was close to being much better. Including the Lions game, Washington's last three losses came by a combined seven points. No other team was running away with the NFC East, either, and the next two games against the Cincinnati Bengals and Dallas Cowboys gave Washington the chance to double its win total and potentially take a lead in the struggling division.

On the surface, it looked as if the Bengals and Cowboys would be some of the easier games on the schedule. The Bengals had struggled almost as much as Washington in quarterback Joe Burrow's rookie season, while the Cowboys were a shell of themselves with Dak Prescott out for the year. However, the Bengals were two weeks removed from upsetting the Tennessee Titans, and the Cowboys had just won a battle against the Minnesota Vikings.

The reality was that Washington needed to take both opponents seriously, which is why having a player like Smith as the starting quarterback came in handy.

"You see those things that he does getting guys lined up or getting guys in the right position," Rivera said. "That's important, that really is. It helps these young

guys, especially these young guys, because now they're learning from a guy that's done it before."

The offense was not clicking as much as it was against the Lions, but it was still effective as it put up 325 yards and two touchdowns in a 20-9 win. The blowout came four days later on Thanksgiving when Washington turned a 17-13 lead into a 41-16 drubbing that briefly gave it first place in the division.

Although Smith threw for fewer yards in those two victories (315) than he did in either of Washington's previous losses, he was offering the stability Rivera wanted out of the 36-year-old veteran. But Washington's true growth came from the players who had tempted Rivera to become the team's head coach. That was apparent against the Cowboys; Antonio Gibson rushed for 115 yards and three touchdowns, while Montez Sweat sealed the game with an interception returned for a touchdown in the fourth quarter.

"I really think we're finding our identity and getting better as the weeks have gone on," Smith said. "Wins obviously only help to encourage that and fuel that. I think it's important to kind of keep that going week-to-week and keep developing as the weeks go on."

That talent, combined with a resiliency developed over the course of the season, ensured that Washington was going to be competitive, particularly in the second half of games. That was a sobering revelation to the then undefeated Pittsburgh Steelers, who had taken a 14-3 halftime lead. Washington marched 82 yards downfield on the opening drive of the third quarter and scored a one-yard touchdown to make the score 14-10. It went on to outscore the Steelers, 13-3, and essentially sealed the game with an interception by Jon Bostic.

The win accomplished two things: it allowed Washington to keep pace in the division, and it showed that after starting the year 2-7, the team could compete with anyone.

What's Important Over What's Interesting

There were plenty of interesting headlines surrounding Washington during the final stretch of the regular season.

It was interesting that the team followed up its victory over the undefeated Steelers with a win over the San Francisco 49ers -- last year's NFC representative in Super Bowl

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LIV, particularly since an injured Smith was replaced by Haskins and Washington's only touchdowns in the 23-15 game were scored by defensive rookies Chase Young and Kamren Curl.

It was interesting that Washington headed into its game against the Seattle Seahawks without its starting quarterback and Gibson, who had been nursing a toe injury since exiting the Steelers game in the first quarter. Its banged-up offense was still almost enough to knock off the Seahawks, but despite a valiant fourth-quarter comeback, Washington suffered its first loss in more than a month.

The defeat did not hurt Washington's playoff chances, though, and with the Giants and Eagles both losing their respective games, that created perhaps one of the most interesting twists of the season: if Washington beat the Carolina Panthers, Rivera's former team, and

the Giants lost again, Washington would win the NFC East for the first time since 2015.

However, Rivera has preached about focusing on what is important over what is interesting, and that included the potential for revenge over the franchise that relieved Rivera of his duties last season.

"This organization right now is more important than my personal situation," Rivera said. "I mean that because we have 53 guys downstairs and a group of coaches that we want to get into the playoffs. They want to get into the playoffs, and we want to do it for them and for us. We have to focus in on the game."

Washington found itself in another double-digit hole, and in many ways it was similar to what happened against the Seahawks. The defense made plays that kept the team in the game and the offense came alive in the fourth quarter with help from backup Taylor Heinicke, but a failed onside kick recovery spoiled a comeback attempt, resulting in a 20-13 defeat.

The loss, combined with the

Giants also losing to the Ravens, created a win-and-in scenario for Washington, and shortly after the Panthers game it was announced the regular season finale against the Eagles would be on NBC's Sunday Night Football with Smith, McLaurin and Gibson all returning to action. That created a massive spotlight on Washington, but since Rivera had seen his team perform on Thanksgiving and against the Steelers, he believed it would rise to the occasion.

"We're on the stage now. The one thing I will say, the first other two games we've been on the stage...our guys came out and played well and had fun. That's the biggest thing. We've got to get back to having a little bit of fun. The truth of the matter is we're playing with house money."

What was more important to take away from Washington's past four games was its fight. Its defense found a way to keep and maintain a lead when its offense was not as productive against the 49ers, while the unit kept the team in the game

against the Seahawks and Panthers. When it seemed like those games would get away from Washington, it clawed its way back with big plays on both sides of the ball.

And against the Eagles, it showed that it can put aside the glitz and attention that came with the national spotlight and defeat last year's division champs -- just as it did to start the year -- to show how far the franchise had come from holding a top 2 draft pick nine months ago.

What started as a rebuilding year yielded Washington's first postseason birth in five seasons, and despite falling short against the Buccaneers, there is a lot to look forward to.

"We've got some really special guys," Rivera said. "This group, I think if we can grow and learn together and add on a couple more pieces, I think we have a shot next year. It'll be fun to watch. I'm just glad that we were able to give the DMV something to cheer about. I promise you one thing, like I said, we'll show up and we'll play hard."





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The Washington Football Team defense celebrates after forcing a turnover against the Philadelphia Eagles on Jan. 3, 2021. (Washington Football Team)

5 things we learned about Washington during the 2020 season

By Zach Selby

The Washington Football Team's first season under head coach Ron Rivera was an eventful one, and he did not waste any time to establish how the team was going to be led during his tenure.

Free agents emerged as key contributors, the defense lived up to expectations and young players established themselves as key pieces to a future filled with optimism. Here are five things we learned about Washington during the 2020 season.

1. Washington's Free Agent Signings Paid Off

Rivera and Washington's strategy for free agency was to make smart, calculated additions and bring in players who would create competition and fit the system. Tight end Logan Thomas was viewed as having plenty of untapped potential; J.D. McKissic was seen as a multi-faceted addition to the running back position; and Wes Schweitzer was

brought in to compete for the open left guard position.

Other than signing cornerback Kendall Fuller, Washington did not make many flashy additions, and for the most part, they outproduced outside expectations.

The young team will be armed with another year's worth of experience, and with some other additions, next season could be even better.

Many of the team's free agents signed last March ended up changing their respective position groups on both sides of the ball. Thomas ended the season leading Washington with six receiving touchdowns and accounting for 670 yards.

McKissic, who offensive coordinator Scott Turner said could be an every-down back, had 954 total yards and was second among all running backs in receiving yards behind Alvin Kamara.

On defense, Ronald Darby played a full season for the first time in his career and led the team with 16 pass

deflections. Add that to Fuller's 11, and the duo combined for the most pass breakups of any cornerback combo in the NFL.

Even players who didn't receive many headlines were vital contributors. Schweitzer eventually emerged

trying to do. If you can keep those guys around for a period of time, now it takes the pressure off going into the draft."

2. Terry McLaurin Cemented Himself As A No. 1 Receiver

Terry McLaurin entered 2020 fresh off one of most successful rookie seasons for a receiver in franchise history. The next question was if he could handle the pressure of being the team's No. 1 wideout.

"You look at him last year, he is a young player," wide receivers coach Jim Hostler said during training camp. "Not a lot of people had expectations of what he was going to be. Teams that they played didn't know him or weren't really concerned about him. That is something to do with your early years. Once you have success in this league, it is about expectations, managing expectations."

The answer was an emphatic "yes." McLaurin finished his second season with 1,118 yards on 87

as the starting left guard and earned the best overall Pro Football Focus grade of his career, Cornelius Lucas only allowed two sacks, and line-backer Kevin Pierre-Louis recorded a career-high 56 tackles.

Eight of Washington's signees started at least two games, while McKissic, Lucas, Thomas and others had the best seasons of their careers.

"Those are the kinds of things that help you as you put your team together," Rivera said. "Now, those guys may not be your starters, but they may be top-flight backups that are just as valuable to what you're

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receptions and had 490 yards after the catch. Despite catching passes from four different starting quarterbacks this year, he recorded at least 70 yards in 12 games, including six catches for 75 yards against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the Wild Card round of the playoffs.

On top of that, McLaurin was unanimously voted as a captain by his teammates in the middle of the season.

“Terry was kind of a quiet guy, but he came in and worked. He showed work ethic,” quarterback Kyle Allen said after the announcement. “I said this to him early in the season, I said: ‘You’re a guy that can be great, but you can also be one of the best leaders on this team. You’ve got a lot more to say than you think you have.’”

McLaurin said he wanted to “walk the walk” of being a captain, and perhaps the best example of that came when he made the extra effort to play through a high ankle sprain against the Philadelphia Eagles in Week 17.

McLaurin did not care about catches and yards; he just wanted to be with his teammates. It further proved McLaurin is a cornerstone for the team both on and off the field.

“I started making turns and just looking my teammates in the face and knowing that this could be the end for us,” McLaurin said. “I couldn’t end the season not playing. I played through some pain but that’s part of it. I would do it twice over again.”

3. The Defense Lived Up To The Hype

There were many signs that pointed to Washington’s defense being much improved from the 2019 season. It was being led by Jack Del Rio, who has a history of turning defenses around quickly. The secondary was almost entirely revamped, and the team had just added Chase Young to an already potent pass rush.

By the time the season had ended, Washington had one of the most statistically dominating units in the league. The team finished second in passing yards allowed, 14th against the run, sixth in sacks and second overall. All four were improvements from 2019, when the team finished 18th in passing, 31st against the run, 10th in sacks and 27th overall, and it finished third



Washington Football Team running back Antonio Gibson (24) gestures with his hand as he gets past Dallas Cowboys safety Donovan Wilson (37) on his way to the end zone for a touchdown in the second half of an NFL football game in Arlington, Texas, Thursday, Nov. 26, 2020. (AP Photo/Roger Steinman)

in efficiency, according to Football Outsiders, behind the Buccaneers and New Orleans Saints.

“I have a lot of faith in what our defense has been doing,” Rivera said after Washington’s 20-14 win over the Eagles in Week 17. “It’s interesting because we’ve been coming out in the second half and our defense has really shut people down.”

There were still some growing pains throughout the season; after all, many of the players were young and learning a new system on top of having gone through a unique offseason. Giving up big plays was an issue early in the season, and the defense struggled with defending mobile quarterbacks like Russell Wilson, Lamar Jackson and Kyler Murray.

Still, most of the unit’s key pieces are returning next season, and safety Landon Collins and defensive tackle Matt Ioannidis will return from injuries that ended their

seasons prematurely. Many of the players expressed excitement for what the defense can be next year with Young saying, “We’re not letting our foot off the gas.”

“This is just the beginning with Coach Rivera and Coach Del Rio,” Young said. “I think it’s going to be scary for the years to come.”

4. Antonio Gibson Grew Into A Capable Running Back

There was no doubt that Antonio Gibson had a wealth of talent when the team drafted him in the third round of the 2020 NFL Draft. He even drew some comparisons to Christian McCaffrey from Rivera. But with Gibson spending most of his time at receiver while playing for Memphis, it seemed like it would take him some time to learn the position.

Gibson slowly improved each week, and eventually he started to show off his full rushing

capabilities. He rushed for 128 yards -- highlighted by a 40-yard run and a touchdown -- against the Dallas Cowboys in Week 7. That started a five-game streak of scoring at least one touchdown, which peaked on Thanksgiving with 115 yards and three touchdowns against the Cowboys.

“At first, he was a little bit all over the place and now...you start to see certain elements of his game coming into focus,” Rivera said. “The short runs where it’s pressing the hole a little bit longer and opening up and popping through where it never opens up and you gain three or four yards, but you’re getting what you can -- those are the things that you’re looking for. Or, he hits a hole or hits an area and then all of a sudden you realize he has to bounce it or cut it back. Those are things that he’s continuing to learn the feel for.”

What was more impressive was how effective Gibson was with the ball in his hands. He was the sixth-most efficient running back, according to Football Outsiders, and averaged 4.7 yards per carry. He finished the season with 795 rushing yards and 11 rushing touchdowns, the latter of which was only two away from tying the franchise record by a rookie.

Gibson missed two games while dealing with turf toe, but he still rushed for 136 yards in the final two games of the regular season. And with him starting in the final six games he played, he has solidified a future role in Washington’s backfield.

5. There Is A Lot Of Optimism For The Future

There were some outside of the organization who believed Washington was still a few years away from legitimately competing for the playoffs. Instead, the team more than doubled its win total from 2019 and put together a competitive postseason game against the Buccaneers.

Even after that, the team acknowledged there was still room for improvement. It lost five games by seven points or fewer, and if a couple of plays had different results, Washington could have secured its place in the playoffs -- and even improved its seeding -- before Week 17.

Rivera and his players admitted the season did not end how they wanted, but there was still plenty of optimism for next season. The young team will be armed with another year’s worth of experience, and with some other additions, next season could be even better.



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