

Washington Redskins

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2010 Washington Redskins: Re-Casting The Defensive Backs

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Greg Fiume/Getty Images

Barring a remarkable turnaround, the 2009 Washington Redskins season is basically over. In a continuing series of articles, I look towards 2010 when the team is expected to have a new head coach, potentially a new general manager and a whole host of new players.

This week, I evaluate the Redskins' defensive backs.

The defensive back corps of the Redskins has been one of the biggest groups of wasted talent in the NFL in 2009.

Consider that the team pays three corners north of five million a season to play man to man defense. These

three corners have superior skills in this department and were signed for the specific purpose of playing aggressive man coverage.

However, none of these three corners is allowed to play anywhere near the ball. In point of fact, they often play 15 or more yards off the line of scrimmage, so far back that a casual observer at home might think the Redskins are playing with only seven defenders. They appear to be instructed to stay behind their receivers at all costs, breaking on the ball only after it has been thrown.

Then consider that the Redskins have one of the most aggressive and athletic safeties in the NFL in LaRon Landry. Landry has great ball instincts and loves to hit, but doesn't have pure coverage skills.

However Landry has most often been used as a center fielder, a free safety quite often backed up 25 or more yards off the line of scrimmage. Landry, who lacks pure coverage skills, is counted on as the team's last line of defense, to read and react in time to save the team from any blown coverages and busted plays that allow receivers that far down the field.

Does any of this sound right to you?

If the Redskins are completely overhauling their coaching staff, the best thing they can do to maximize the talent of their defensive back corps is replace defensive coordinator Greg Blache. While Blache is an experienced football coach, his instincts and abilities run completely contrary to the personnel in his talented defense, no where else quite as glaring as in the defensive backs.

Cornerbacks Fred Smoot, Carlos Rogers and DeAngelo Hall are gamblers by nature; play them close to the line of scrimmage and keep them as close to the receivers as possible. They have the talent and athletic ability to stick to their coverages for four to five seconds, which is more than enough time for the Redskins pass rush to get to the quarterback and finish the job.

This creates game-changing plays like sacks, fumbles and interceptions; the type of plays the team has been lacking during its two seasons under Blache.

These corners will make mistakes, however, and that's where the free safety comes in. Blache has cast Landry in this role, due to Landry's pure athletic ability. However, Landry's instincts simply don't fit; often he's so anxious to make a hit he'll abandon his coverage and find himself lost in space.

Landry is much better suited as the strong safety; which for him would best be almost a hybrid linebacker/rover type, playing close to the line of scrimmage covering the flats and supporting in the run game.

Sadly, the player who best defined the role of free safety was the late great Sean Taylor. The idea him roaming around deep and Landry close to the line inspired fear in even the toughest receivers; yes, you may catch the ball, but you were going to pay.

The team hasn't found a replacement for Taylor yet. When they have allowed Landry closer to the ball, Washington has tried to jam Reed Doughty into this role. While Doughty is a talented defender, his skills are similar to those of Landry, giving the team two strong safeties and no free.

It's hard to say whose fault this is. Does Blache mistakenly tell the front office that Landry is his guy at the free safety, or does Vinny Cerrato jam Landry down the defense's throat?

No matter whose fault it is, Washington needs to address two things in the offseason: 1. Find someone who will call the defense the way it needs to be called, and 2. Find a true free safety who can compliment the rest of the group.



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