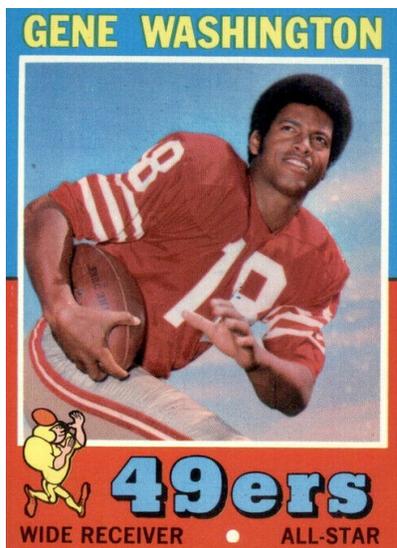


Gene Washington

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Gene Alden Washington (b. January 14, 1947) had a unique advantage over other receivers during his ten year NFL career: speed and versatility. Washington was a break away receiver, his speed provided a deep threat for the San Francisco passing attack.



He started immediately as a rookie, teaming with fellow receiver Dick Witcher. Witcher (6'3", 204 pounds) and Washington (6'2", 185 pounds) cast a formidable receiving tandem for quarterback John Brodie.¹ Many point to Washington as one of the key players that fueled the 49ers' turnaround from mediocrity into division champions. When he arrived in 1969, San Francisco had not posted better than a third place finish in nearly a decade (1960).² The team also had not won more than seven games in a season since 1957.³

A first round draft choice in the 1969 NFL draft, Washington led the team in receiving as a rookie, hauling in 51 passes for 711 yards.⁴ His performance netted him a spot on the

- 1 "1970 San Francisco 49ers Starters, Roster, & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/1970_roster.htm.
- 2 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.
- 3 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.
- 4 "1969 San Francisco 49ers Statistics & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/1969.htm>.



Pro Bowl team. He was also a first-team All-NFC choice by *The Sporting News*, and runner up in the Rookie of the Year voting.⁵ The 49ers went 4-8-2, but were on the rise to success.

Washington demonstrated an unparalleled skill, arising from his college years at Stanford. In his three seasons in Palo Alto, he spent time at receiver, quarterback, and halfback, immersing himself in the prowess of versatility.⁶ This proved to be an advantage as he distinctly recalled, “I played quarterback thru my junior year at Stanford, so when I made the switch from quarterback to receiver, I thought the way a quarterback thought.”⁷ Washington used this mindset to create instant chemistry with quarterback John Brodie. He had a way of signaling to John when he was open or was about to get open. Brodie replied, “He [Washington] knew my problem, and he knew how much time he had. He had a little clock in his head, and he took as much as he could, but he did not take any more. He knew if I was in trouble, he would be looking.”⁸

Such improvisation at times allowed Washington to utilize his fantastic ability to make remarkable grabs. On various occasions Brodie heaved up the ball in his general area, only for Washington to make an outstanding catch that involved him leaping high into the air. Washington recollected, “Quarterbacks, they rely on that. They can't wait to see you open and throw the ball. ... But a lot of receivers don't think about that. All they think about is just their little immediate area... there's a lot more to it than that.”⁹ Sometimes he would fight two, three or even more defenders to come down with the ball. As a result of his remarkable, highlight reel plays, Washington often earned praised from the game's greatest opponents.

Green Bay Packers safety Willie Wood recalled, “Gene was a great, great receiver. On his biggest strength I think was running with the ball once he'd catch it. He was almost like a running back in the open field. If the ball was anywhere near him, he was going to get it.”¹⁰ The legendary coach, George Allen, on Washington, “Washington was slippery. He was hard to jam, he was a fluid receiver. He'd be on you before you knew it.”¹¹

5 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.

6 “Gene Washington,” SportsReference.com, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/gene-washington-2.html>.

7 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.

8 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.

9 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.



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The 1970 season marked a turning point for both the 49ers and for Washington. Statistically, it was the greatest of his ten year career. He led the NFL with 1,100 receiving yards and was tops at 84.6 yards receiving per contest.¹² Washington also caught 53 passes (fourth in the league), 12 (ranked second) of which went for scores. He qualified for the Pro Bowl for the second straight year, was a first-team All-NFC choice, and named a consensus first-team all-pro by the major selectors – Associated Press, Pro Football Writers, *Newspaper Ent. Association*, and Pro Football Weekly.¹³

Meanwhile, the 49ers went 10-3-1, and won the NFC West for the first time in franchise history.¹⁴ After defeating the Minnesota Vikings on the road in the Divisional Round, San Francisco fell to the Dallas Cowboys at Kezar Stadium in the NFC Championship Game, 17-10.¹⁵ Despite the loss, Washington led all receivers with 88 yards on six catches.¹⁶ Quarterback John Brodie won the MVP award and the team sent five players to the Pro Bowl. It was the beginning of a successful run for the team, as they won the NFC West again in 1971 and 1972, for three straight division titles.¹⁷

The 1971 playoffs were a sing-song of 1970 with the 49ers falling again to the Cowboys in the NFC Championship Game. However, in the Divisional Round against the Washington Redskins, Gene caught one pass, a 78-yard score that tied the game at 10.¹⁸ The play swung the momentum in favor of San Francisco, propelling the 49ers to a comeback 24-20 victory.¹⁹

1 0 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.

1 1 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.

1 2 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.

1 3 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.

1 4 “1970 San Francisco 49ers Statistics & Players,” ProFootball Reference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/1970.htm>.

1 5 “1970 San Francisco 49ers Statistics & Players,” ProFootball Reference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/1970.htm>.

1 6 “Championship – Dallas Cowboys at San Francisco 49ers – January 3rd, 1971,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197101030sfo.htm>.

1 7 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.

1 8 “Divisional Round – Washington Redskins at San Francisco 49ers – December 26th, 1971,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197112260sfo.htm>.

1 9 “Divisional Round – Washington Redskins at San Francisco 49ers – December 26th, 1971,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/197112260sfo.htm>.



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Washington made the Pro Bowl in both seasons, and was a consensus All-NFC selection. He was named a second-team all-pro by the *Newspaper Ent Association* and Pro Football Writers. Washington returned to first-team all-pro status in 1972, voted by the Associated Press, Pro Football Writers, and *Pro Football Weekly*.²⁰ He continued to produce at a high level. He led the league with 12 receiving touchdowns in 1972 and a 21.1 yards per catch average in 1974.²¹ Unfortunately for San Francisco, the team regressed during the mid-70s, sliding to sub-.500 marks in 1973, 1974, and 1975. Inconsistency and personnel changes contributed to the slide, especially at the quarterback position.²² John Brodie struggled, seeing him split time with Steve Spurrier. 1974 saw the 49ers start four different quarterbacks during the season, en route to a 5-9 campaign.²³ Among the struggles, Washington stayed on his game, recalling, “I was on the top of my game when, the 49ers as a team, were at the worst. It was very disheartening.”²⁴ 1977 was the final season for Washington in the Bay Area. He was placed on waivers following the season. A year later the Detroit Lions claimed him because of his proven track record in San Francisco.²⁵

Washington finished his 49ers career as the franchise's all-time leading receiver in yards (6,664), receptions (371), and receiving touchdowns (59).²⁶ At the time, he ranked in the top 20 in all-time career receiving touchdowns, top 30 in yards, and top 40 in receptions.²⁷

Washington spent his final NFL season as a member of the Detroit Lions in 1979. He started in 13 of 16 games, mostly in a reserve role as the third or fourth receiver. Following the season, he announced his retirement.²⁸ Outside of football, Washington starred as an actor in a variety of films and television in the 1970s when he played for the

2 0 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.

2 1 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.

2 2 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/>.

2 3 “1974 San Francisco 49ers Statistics & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/1974.htm>.

2 4 NFL Films. “NFL Films: Gene Washington-San Francisco 49ers.” YouTube video, 4:27. August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x84KbKcsZA0>.

2 5 “Gene Washington (Alden),” ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=Gene+Washington&Team=Lions&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.

2 6 “San Francisco 49ers Career Receiving Leaders,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/sfo/career-receiving.htm>.

2 7 “NFL Career Receptions Leaders Through 1977,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2022, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/leaders/rec_career_1977.htm.



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49ers. After football, he did some work on NBC's coverage for NFL games in the 1980s and worked as a sports anchor for KABC-TV.²⁹ Perhaps Washington was most known for his tenure as the NFL director of football operations from 1994 to 2009.³⁰

Washington was born in Tuscaloosa, AL, but grew up in California, attending Long Beach Polytechnic High School. While at Stanford University, Washington was dubbed “the catalyst.”³¹

He was the number one recruit in southern California coming out of high school. At first, he only considered USC and UCLA, having nearly 50 scholarship offers. After consulting with a close family friend, Don Muchmore, Washington's desire to play quarterback drew him to Stanford.³²

In his three year NCAA career, he accounted for 2,254 yards from scrimmage and scored 14 touchdowns.³³ He was the first black quarterback in school history, and is credited with increasing the black enrollment at the university.

In 1968, after switching to receiver, he set the Pac-8 single-season record of 71 receptions (in a 10-game season), and earned first-team All-American honors.³⁴ Stanford posted a 6-3-1 record, that set the table for two Rose Bowl berths in 1970 and 1971. Stanford won both Rose Bowls, defeating Ohio State 27-17 and Michigan 13-12.

Upon looking back at his time in Palo Alto, “I have and always will be proud of Stanford... And proud of the way Stanford came through the 1960s, moving forward and going their own way.”³⁵ Washington's impact still can be heard somewhere between Palo Alto and Berkeley... “We love Washington! We love Washington!”³⁶

- 2 8 “Gene Washington,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/W/WashGe00.htm>.
- 2 9 “Gene Washington Will be Inducted into the John McLendon Minority Athletics Director's Hall of Fame,” Nacda.com, January 21, 2009, https://nacda.com/news/2009/1/21/gene_washington_will_be_inducted_into_the_john_mclendon_minority_athletics_directors_hall_of_fame.aspx.
- 3 0 “Gene Washington Will be Inducted into the John McLendon Minority Athletics Director's Hall of Fame,” Nacda.com, January 21, 2009, https://nacda.com/news/2009/1/21/gene_washington_will_be_inducted_into_the_john_mclendon_minority_athletics_directors_hall_of_fame.aspx.
- 3 1 Keifer, David. “The Catalyst: Gene Washington and the rise of Stanford football,” GoStanford.com, February 18, 2021, <https://gostanford.com/news/2021/2/18/football-the-catalyst.aspx>.
- 3 2 Keifer, David. “The Catalyst: Gene Washington and the rise of Stanford football,” GoStanford.com, February 18, 2021, <https://gostanford.com/news/2021/2/18/football-the-catalyst.aspx>.
- 3 3 “Gene Washington,” SportsReference.com, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/gene-washington-2.html>.
- 3 4 Keifer, David. “The Catalyst: Gene Washington and the rise of Stanford football,” GoStanford.com, February 18, 2021, <https://gostanford.com/news/2021/2/18/football-the-catalyst.aspx>.



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End Notes:

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- 3 5 Keifer, David. "The Catalyst: Gene Washington and the rise of Stanford football,"
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- 3 6 Keifer, David. "The Catalyst: Gene Washington and the rise of Stanford football,"
GoStanford.com, February 18, 2021, <https://gostanford.com/news/2021/2/18/football-the-catalyst.aspx>.