

The Bengals strayed from the formula, and it paid off.

Cincinnati was supposed to be a team built around defense. Second-year quarterback Andy Dalton wasn't expected to have to carry the brunt of the load.

Things have changed.

The Bengals knew they would have to put up points in order to keep up with the Redskins and their high-scoring offense, led by rookie sensation Robert Griffin III, who had his team averaging 34 points a game.

Meanwhile, Cincinnati's defense had been in shambles, allowing an average of 38 points per game. On offense, Cincinnati put up only 13 points in their last road game and had yet to get superstar wide receiver A.J. Green sufficiently involved. That is why, in his team's 38-31 victory at Washington, coach Marvin Lewis decided to abandon a conservative approach on offense. And he did so in a hurry.

On their first play from scrimmage, the Bengals lined up in the Wildcat formation, with rookie wide receiver Mohamed Sanu standing in at quarterback while Dalton lined up at wide receiver. Sanu found wide receiver A.J. Green for a 73 yard touchdown that set the tone of the game.

Cincinnati raced to a 24-7 lead before RGIII made things interesting. Griffin (21/34, 221 yards, one touchdown passing, 85 yards, one touchdown rushing) kept drives alive with his legs as the Redskins scored 17 straight points.

But the young Bengals, unfazed, stayed their course, attacking Washington's secondary, as Dalton (19/27, 328 yards, three touchdowns, one interception passing) threw for two fourth quarter touchdowns, one a 59-yarder to nifty wideout Andrew Hawkins.

The early touchdown to Green got the second-year receiver going in a big way. In fact, he posted a career-high 183 yards receiving. Pro Bowl tight end Jermaine Gresham had his best game so far this season as well, totalling 64 yards and one touchdown receiving.

And while the defense still gave up plenty of points and nearly 400 yards of offense, they still made plays that changed the course of the game. After totalling only five sacks in their first two games, Cincinnati amassed six sacks, three by defensive end Michael Johnson.

Traditionally, a great defense will not allow that sort of offense, but if the Bengals can get big plays from their defense and production in the passing game, they might just have a recipe for success. After all, the 2011 New York Giants ranked 27th in total yards allowed, but third in sacks. Quarterback Eli Manning threw for almost 5,000 yards and won in the fourth quarter consistently. Their success carried over into the Super Bowl where New England quarterback Tom Brady was harassed by the Giants' front four and Manning continued to make plays.

Last year, Cincinnati struggled in the defense-oriented AFC North, losing all four games against Pittsburgh and Baltimore. The Ravens had the Bengals' number again in the season opener as Cincinnati played conservatively and ended up losing by 31 points. After failing at playing the kind of football practiced by their AFC North rivals, the Bengals may have found a new identity. And that might not be a bad thing at all.