

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

www.suntimes.com

[Back to regular view](#)

<http://www.suntimes.com/output/mariotti/cst-spt-jay13.html>

[Print this page](#)

Sen. Ditka? Get your mouth shut!

July 13, 2004

BY [JAY MARIOTTI](#) SUN-TIMES COLUMNIST

Sorry, but the great state of Illinois cannot be represented in Washington by Sen. Limp Ditka. Who knew, when I coined that nickname last year for the beloved coach and erectile-challenged Levitra pitchman, that he would become the potential replacement for a political candidate ruined by a kinky sex-club scandal?

America is going to think we're real weird in the heartland, home of Midwestern values, if Not-So-Iron Mike emerges as the Republican U.S. Senate nominee on the November ballot. But Ditka could be moving in that direction anyway, disturbingly enough, declaring Monday that he is intrigued by recent support pushing him to replace Jack Ryan as the opponent for Democratic state Sen. Barack Obama.

"I'm getting excited about it," he told WGN-TV, choosing an interesting set of words. "I'm just thinking about it."

Let's hope the GOP crowd is smart enough to avoid this farce. Ditka on Capitol Hill would make Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger look like noble statesmen. As it is, I wonder about the decision-making abilities of a man who let William Perry run for a touchdown in Super Bowl XX instead of Walter Payton. But can you envision the stunts Da Coach would pull in Congress? Seriously, C-SPAN would have to concern itself with FCC violations and massive fines every time he appeared on camera.

Imagine this loose cannon staring down a rival in a hearing and shouting, "Get your mouth shut!" Or throwing a big wad of gum when he doesn't get his way. Or shooting the bird and grabbing his crotch, as he did in his final incarnation as a coach in New Orleans four years ago. Or flipping his wig when someone changed his course of action, as Jim Harbaugh did when he called the infamous audible in Minnesota. It seems improbable that Ditka, as a senator, would adopt the necessary air of political correctness after a lifetime of incidents, episodes, a well-known gambling fetish and general tough-guy crudeness. Remember the night he was banned from a casino for allegedly heaving a cigar at a craps-table attendant? That won't fly in public office.

Yet Da Coach, 65, doesn't think the political arena is such a crazy idea. "I'm not a genius. I'm pretty common sense. I'm just a guy," he said. "I don't see a whole lot of [common sense] prevailing in the Senate right now."

Of course, Ditka's possible candidacy is a byproduct of a city and state that can't cut the umbilical cord to the 1985 Bears, the most celebrated and entertaining of Chicago teams. Never mind that any baby born that year is about to become a sophomore in college. Ditka still sells.

He's a motivational speaker who commands up to \$50,000 a speech. His bar/restaurant on Chestnut Street continues to attract legions of scary 50-something Neanderthals who dye their hair blond, gorge on 20-ounce slabs of red meat and worship at the shrine of Da Coach. ESPN hired him as an NFL studio analyst. His sportswear collection, featuring pricey Polo shirts, will be introduced next month. Bill Rancic, Donald Trump's favorite apprentice, was helped along in the cigar business by Ditka. And he continues to thrive as a Levitra spokesman, though he was heard complaining recently that young folks know him only as that erectile dysfunction guy and not as the football legend and Hall of Famer.

Nothing is wrong with Ditka milking his celebrity for fortune. But people have to be insane to promote him as

senatorial material simply because he won a Super Bowl 18 1/2 years ago. He has no experience in politics, other than periodic appearances at Republican rallies. And when you think about it, how good of a football coach was he? The '85 team was a defensive juggernaut fueled by the passion of coordinator Buddy Ryan, Ditka's nemesis. The Bears should have won one or two more championships, but were sabotaged by numerous problems, including player egos running amok because Ditka was too busy making money off the field to control his team. And the New Orleans experience was an utter disaster, resulting in his dismissal. Basically, his icon status in Chicago has inherited a life of its own, even though none of the city's Ditkaphiles really can explain the continuing phenomenon if asked. It's ingrained in the local consciousness like every other cliché.

Habits die hard here, especially when the Bears have won only one playoff game since Ditka was dumped by Michael McCaskey after the 1992 season. Thus, politicians who don't know better are attempting to feed off an old romance, with one launching a *draftditka.com* Web site. "Mike Ditka would be a great candidate because he represents the average Illinoisan," said state Sen. Dave Syverson of Rockford. "He's just a decent, ordinary guy that worked hard and wasn't handed anything but made it successful."

No one is denying he's a decent, ordinary guy. But what qualifies him to serve the state as a powerful difference-maker? As the governor of Minnesota, Ventura was a high-profile buffoon who feuded with the media and didn't get much done. I suspect we'll say the same thing about Schwarzenegger when he's finished in California. It would behoove Ditka to kick back, analyze his football games for pay and enjoy the rest of his life. He doesn't need the hassles, nor do we need him creating any.

Unquestionably, he deserves honor as the first Bears coach to win a Super Bowl. But don't tell me Ditka, who grew up in western Pennsylvania, deserves to be on a significantly higher reverential plane around here than Mike Krzyzewski.

No Chicago native has achieved more in athletics over the last quarter-century than Coach K, who not only is the most accomplished college basketball coach of his time but continues to uphold ideals otherwise lost and corrupted in collegiate sports. Yet when he rejected the Los Angeles Lakers last week and chose to stay at Duke, the story barely created a ripple in his hometown. Yes, he hasn't lived here since the early 1970s. No, he didn't do his work for a Chicago-based team. That said, he should be regarded with great esteem. If any coach could be a senator, it's Krzyzewski. Or Marv Levy, another famous Chicagoan who went to four Super Bowls.

But the people love their Ditka. Not long ago, he defined the rage when discussing those old Superfans skits on the "Saturday Night Live" series. "They got pretty carried away with how good the Bears were that year," he said. "The people in Chicago really went off the deep end back then."

Times haven't changed.

Jay Mariotti hosts a sports talk show weekdays on WMVP-AM (1000) from 9-11 a.m. and appears on ESPN's "Around the Horn" at 4 p.m. Send e-mail to inbox@suntimes.com with name, hometown and daytime phone number (letters run Sunday).

Copyright © The Sun-Times Company

All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.