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Tight End Mike Ditka Bullied His Way To A Hall of Fame Career

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The play was vintage Mike Ditka: fierce, ruthless and determined.

With his Chicago Bears trailing the Pittsburgh Steelers 17-14 in the fourth quarter of a 1963 game, Ditka caught a pass in the flat.

The powerful tight end immediately shrugged off two defenders and charged downfield.

Iron Mike ground out chunks of yards while evading three more tacklers. A sixth opponent tried in vain.

When Ditka finally went down, he had completed a 63-yard catch and run that set up a field goal, evening the game at 17.

The late-season tie was critical for the Bears, who remained in the Western Division lead and went on to win the NFL championship.

Ditka's drive through football behemoths stemmed from a mindset that he formed as a child.

"It was in me as a kid that I've always wanted to be not necessarily the best, but I never wanted to quit at anything," Ditka, 74, told IBD. "I always wanted to prove I could do it, and it was just a thing I had. I didn't care what the challenge was, whether it was playing baseball or football or basketball. I played them all. I wasn't good, but I made myself pretty good at all of them because I worked at it. I had pride."

Ditka's Keys

- Considered by many to be one of the greatest tight ends in NFL history.
- Overcame: A size disadvantage that nearly led him to quit his high school team.
- Lesson: Give 100%.
- "You have something in you that says, 'Hey, what are you satisfied with being? Are you satisfied with being mediocre, run-of-the-mill, average? Then that's what you'll be. You'll get what you tolerate in life. If you tolerate mediocrity, then that's what you'll get. If you say I'm not going to tolerate anything but working as hard as I can and being as successful as I can, then you've got a good chance to get it.'"

Catch And Win

Ditka's perseverance led to a spectacular career in the National Football League. In 12 seasons, his first six with the Bears, two with the Philadelphia Eagles and four in Dallas — winning another NFL title with the 1971 Cowboys — he



caught 427 passes for 5,812 yards with 43 touchdowns, some of the best numbers for a tight end in pro history.

He was a four-time All-NFL player, appeared in five straight Pro Bowls and in 1988 became the first modern-era tight end inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

He also coached for 14 seasons in the NFL, leading the Bears to an 18-1 romp through the 1985 season that culminated in a 46-10 blowout of New England in the Super Bowl.

Ditka's work ethic was largely the product of growing up with a strict father who demanded that his children give their best. Mike realized there was no other way. His father, a steelworker of Ukrainian ancestry, didn't "spare the rod" if one failed to comply, as Ditka put it.

"You don't get anything for nothing," Ditka said. "You work for everything you get. That's what he did, that's what his father did, that's what this country was built on. So we were taught that from the beginning. It was important that we listened and that we paid attention and we did well in school. If we didn't, we got a whipping. It wasn't too complicated. It made us better, stronger, and gave us a better understanding of what was expected of us and what we had to do."



Born in

Ditka won it all as a player with the Bears in 1963 and Cowboys in 1971. AP View Enlarged Image

Ditka sat atop the NFL with his Chicago Bears in the January 1986 Super Bowl. AP View Enlarged Image

1939, Ditka grew up in the tough steel and mining town of Aliquippa, Pa. The steel industry was booming, but he refused to set his sights on becoming a miner or steelworker.

He saw how dirty and tired his father looked after work and told himself that he'd never set foot in Aliquippa's mill.

He instead aspired to get a college education and chose sports as his path to realizing his goal.

When not in class, Ditka immersed himself in football, baseball and basketball.

He spent long hours in the schoolyard trying to perfect his skills. He was so committed to athletics, he'd keep grinding while his fingers cracked open from playing basketball on a cold and wet court.

Ditka made his high school's junior varsity football team.

But he faced adversity. In practice, varsity players were administering a terrible pounding to the 130-pound Ditka.

Some teammates called him "chicken legs."

He considered quitting, telling his coach, Carl Aschman, that he doubted his ability to play.

Aschman encouraged Ditka to stick it out. The coach told him to bulk up by eating and exercising much more and drinking a lot of milk. Ditka took Aschman's advice.

Determined to compete at a high level, Ditka did what other players were doing to gain strength: pushups, pullups, situps and isometrics. He also ran cross-country.

The commitment paid off.

Ditka added more than 30 pounds of muscle to his frame and weighed 165 by his junior year.

Much more impactful on the field, he starred at linebacker and offensive end for a varsity team that won its league championship.

Armed For Action

He also excelled as a senior when he occasionally played fullback and added another element to his game: the stiff-arm.

Ditka calls Aschman one of the most influential people in his life.

"Sometimes, to succeed in life or to have success, you have to have good people in your life," Ditka said. "You have to have the right people in your life at the right time. I've been very fortunate. I've had a lot of the right people at the right time."

By the time Ditka finished high school, he was so highly touted that he received 60 football scholarship offers. He chose to be part of a big-time program at the University of Pittsburgh. But he quickly realized that he was less talented than some of his college teammates.

So he dedicated himself to outworking everyone else. He put in extra practice time and taught himself to do things that his teammates wouldn't — such as punting.

Result: In one season, he averaged 40 yards per punt.

Ditka, whose primary positions were receiver and linebacker at Pitt, evolved into one of the best players in the country. He was sixth in Heisman Trophy balloting in 1960 and the No. 1 player chosen in the 1961 NFL draft by the Bears.

The Bears positioned the 6-3, 230-pound Ditka at tight end. He was intense and motivated when preparing for his rookie season, but he knew it would be hard to become one of the NFL's best at that position based just on raw talent.

He figured he needed to upgrade his play and become more fundamentally sound. So he sought out veteran teammates.

Middle linebacker Bill George, one of the best in the game, showed him how to block and how to evade linebackers while running pass patterns. Harlon Hill, a wide receiver, taught him how to run pass patterns and get a step on defensive backs.

Sure Grabs

Ditka also worked with assistant coach Sid Luckman. The former Chicago superstar quarterback taught the rookie the best way to catch passes, saying that he should look at the numbers written on the ball as he snatched it out of the air.

Luckman required Ditka to call out the numbers as he made catches. The process improved the tight end's eye-hand coordination and concentration.

Meanwhile, Ditka ran route after route in practice for Bears starting quarterback Bill Wade.

Bears head coach George Halas positioned him in a three-point stance several yards down the line of scrimmage. Doing so gave Ditka the option of releasing inside or outside, and kept opponents uncertain about the direction he'd take.


He was now a bona fide receiving threat. With his acceleration and speed, Ditka often beat linebackers and safeties, and ended up open in the secondary.

Ditka was so dangerous that in 1961 he was named NFL Rookie of the Year after catching 56 passes for 1,076 yards and a career-high 12 touchdowns. His 19.2-yard average per catch was also the best of his career.

Hall of Famer Sam Huff, who as a linebacker with the New York Giants and Washington Redskins was one of Ditka's contemporaries, says that defenders beyond the line often double-teamed him because he was so tough to stop as he released off the line.

"He was a hell of a player," Huff said. "He was as fast as our linebackers. He basically could have played linebacker if he wanted to, and a lot of times he wanted to get on the defensive side of the ball. He was a really tough player. He came off the ball, and he punched on you. He hit you with his helmet. That's the kind of player he was."

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