MIKE DITKA

A PHILOSOPHY FOR SUCCESS

by Mitch Lebovic

Mike Ditka has spent 24 years in the National Football League as a player and a coach. During those years, he has been in the playoffs 14 times. He has been in five league championship games, and three times he has been a member of the NFL champions.

Ditka was all-NFL from 1961-64 and played in five straight Pro Bowls as a tight end for the Bears. He holds two Bear receiving records and is among the leaders in several other categories. His NFL single-season record of 75 catches for a tight end stood for 16 years before it was broken in 1980.

In 1984 Ditka guided the Bears to a first-place finish in the NFC's central division, their first title of any kind in 21 years.

A lot of people have said a lot of things about him. One thing is certain. Mike Ditka is a winner.

Ditka understands that being a winner on the playing field requires the same qualities as being successful in other areas of life. He thinks youth sports can be an ideal vehicle for teaching those qualities.

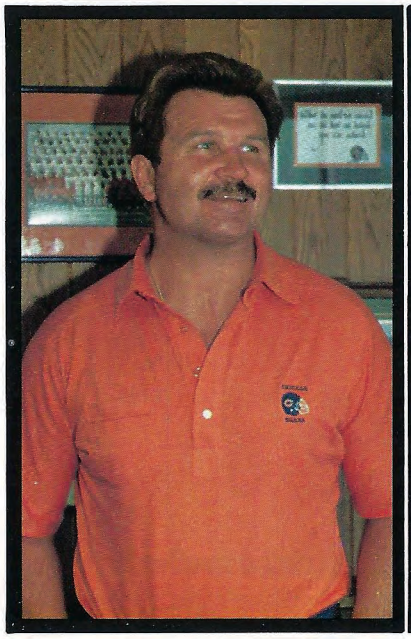
"That's what sports are all about—the lessons that you learn and how you apply them to life. You learn that competition in sports is the same as competition in life and business. You learn to compete equally and fairly within the rules of the game. You learn to persevere, to hang in there when things aren't going so well. These lessons apply in every walk of life."

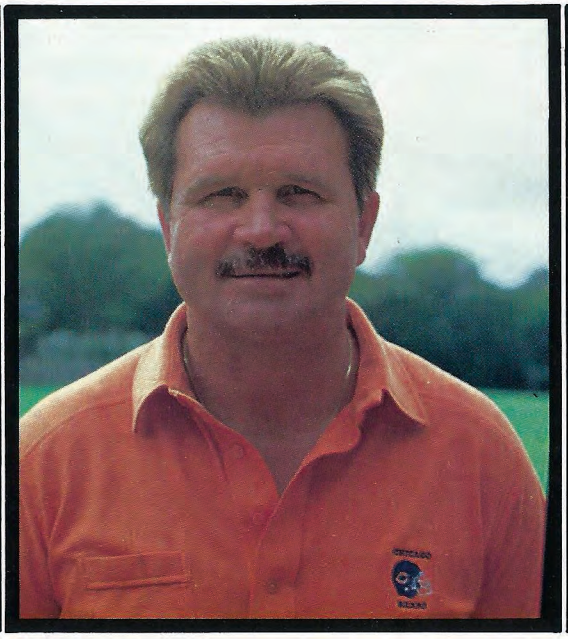
Ditka stresses these lessons as the most important things in youth sports. Becoming a winner involves learning, not necessarily winning all the time.

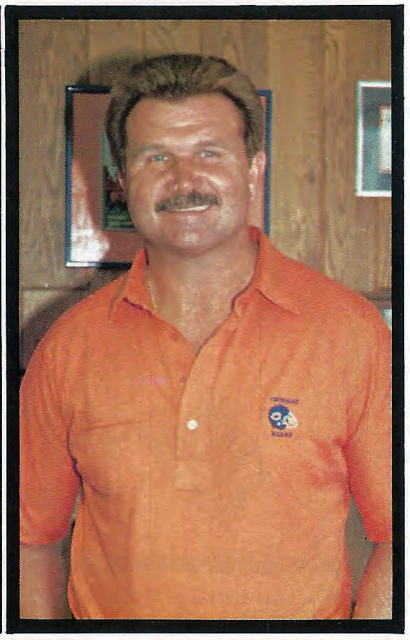
"Youth sports should be instructional. They should develop young people and their ideals. They should teach sportsmanship and competition. If youth sports become all winning and losing, they're no good. There are too many more important things to learn than who wins on the scoreboard."

The 46-year-old Ditka played baseball, football and basketball as a youngster. Describing the days of his youth, he recalls, "Sports from January to January, regardless of the weather." He grew up around the steel mills in Pennsylvania and is thankful for the opportunities sports provided him.

"If I didn't play sports I would have had a tremendous temptation to do other things that weren't right. The area I grew up in was tough and a lot







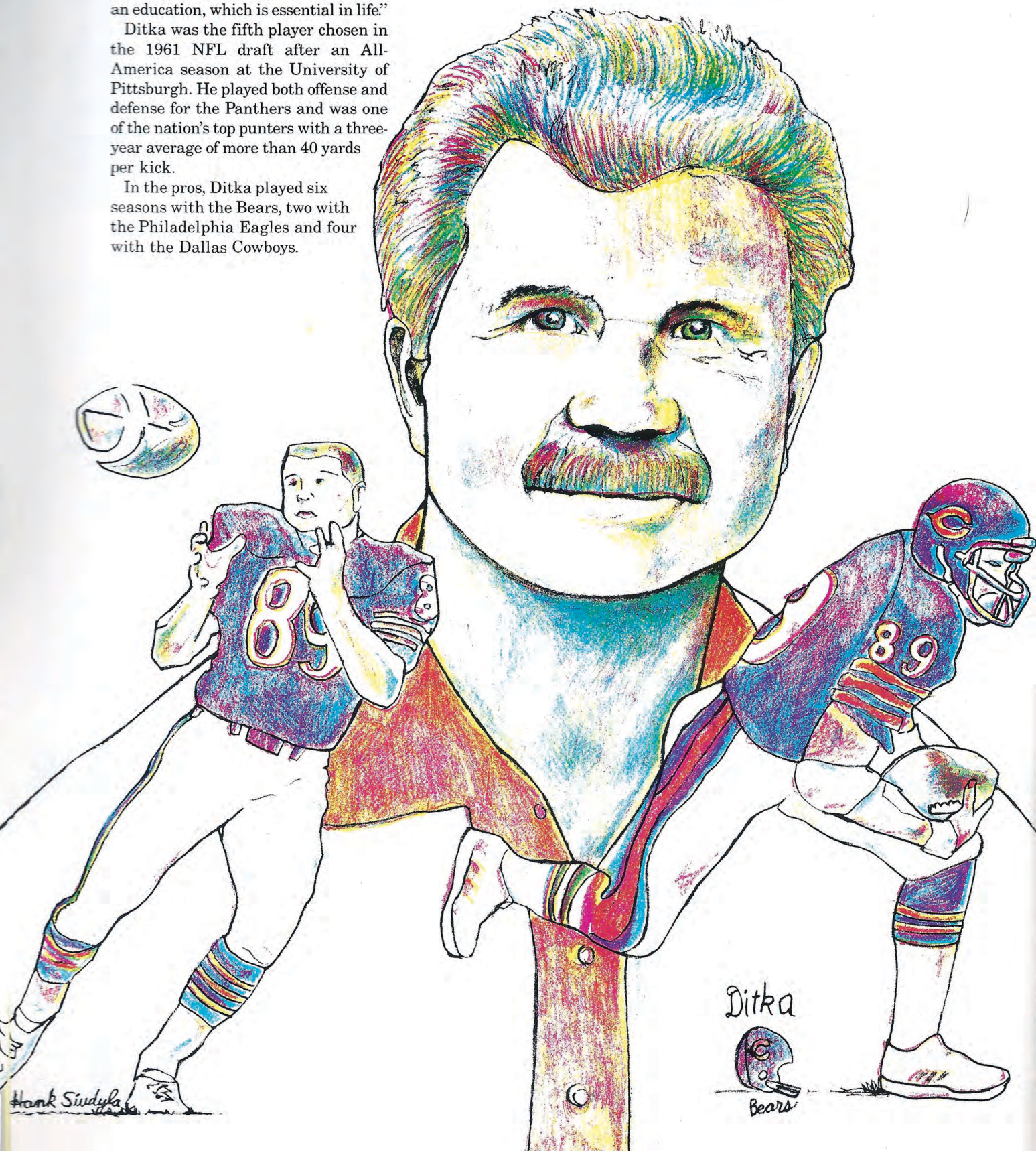
of the kids I grew up with didn't fare very well. None went to college. Some went to jail. A lot of them ended up working in the steel mill.

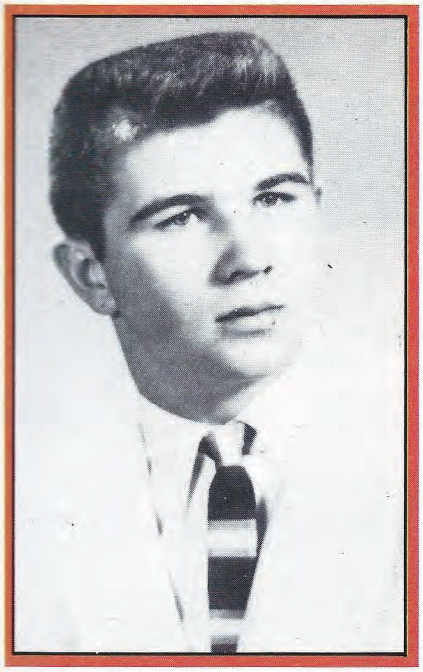
"I had two outs—either play sports, get a college education and go on to better myself, or go to work in the steel mill (which has since closed down). Sports provided me an opportunity for an education, which is essential in life."

Ditka was the fifth player chosen in the 1961 NFL draft after an All-America season at the University of Pittsburgh. He played both offense and defense for the Panthers and was one of the nation's top punters with a three-year average of more than 40 yards per kick.

In the pros, Ditka played six seasons with the Bears, two with the Philadelphia Eagles and four with the Dallas Cowboys.

"If I can teach my players a little about football and a lot about life, that's what is most important. In the long run you're looking for the same values."







In 1963 he helped the Bears to their last league championship. He also played in Super Bowls for the 1970 and 1971 Cowboys.

Success, however, was not handed to Ditka. He was not always able to run over linebackers or through defensive backs. There was even a time when he considered quitting football.

"My sophomore year in high school I got to go to camp. I was on the bottom of the totem pole, I wasn't very big and I didn't really know what I was doing. I remember after I would get knocked down the head coach would yell at the other coaches to get me off the field before I got killed.

"I wanted to quit but the coach came to me and said, 'Keep working and keep in shape. You'll grow and you'll play next year.' The following year I started on a state championship team. Without his encouragement, I would have quit."

After that camp Ditka's success in high school earned him a scholarship to college where he studied to be a dentist. He didn't decide to be a pro football player until his senior year at Pitt.

"I wasn't even sure then. But when you have an opportunity to play pro football you wonder if you're good enough to play with the guys you read about. Then, once you meet that challenge, you want to find out if you can be the best."

There is no doubt that Ditka was, indeed, the best tight end in football during his years with the Bears. He was a hero to many Bear fans and, in that sense, realized one of his childhood dreams.

"If you ask a kid now what he wants to be he might say a professional athlete because of the money to be made. That was not the case when I was growing up. We had ambitions of playing for Notre Dame, Pitt or Penn State. We had the idea of being a hero, not a professional."

Ditka's talents as a receiver, along with his knowledge of the game, earned him a coaching job with the Dallas Cowboys when his playing days were over. He served for nine years as an offensive coach under Tom Landry. He coached all-pros at three receiver positions.

"That's what sports are all about. You learn to compete equally and fairly within the rules of the game. . .to persevere, to hang in there when things aren't going so well."

In January of 1982 Ditka returned to Chicago as the tenth head coach of the Bears. His coaching philosophy is simple: HE DEMANDS HARD WORK AND TOTAL DEDICATION.

"People have to put the effort in for me. I don't take people who are lazy, people who don't appreciate the opportunities they have, or people who are not team players.

"I look for character in people. I look for intelligence. I look for a good work ethic. I like people who like what they're doing. If they don't I'd rather have them go somewhere else."

These are qualities Ditka feels can be developed and enhanced by youth sports. He credits his coaches with instilling those values in him.

"The vast majority of people who play sports as youngsters don't become professional athletes. So it's the lessons you learn from sports that are important."

"We had good coaching, people who weren't paid. They did it because they wanted to and because they cared. You're formulating a lot of a kid's life at that age—his opinions, what he believes, what he understands, what he thinks is right, what he knows he can and can't get away with.

"I think discipline has to be taught at that age also. If you want the good things that happen when you win, you have to pay the price. I remember coaches that made us work and made us appreciate what we had. We didn't have a whole lot, but we had an opportunity to play."

As a coach, Ditka feels he becomes a lot of things to his players. Primarily, he is a teacher. Even on the professional level he does not feel that football is always the most important thing he teaches.

"If I can teach my players a little about football and a lot about life, that's what is most important. In the long run you're looking for the same values."

The same rules apply to youth sports. Players and coaches on all levels would do well to heed Ditka's advice.

"The vast majority of people who play sports as youngsters don't become professional athletes. So it's the lessons you learn from sports that are important. You try to perfect them. You grow and develop as an athlete and hopefully as a person."

"If you're making the effort to be the best you can, and not cheating the job, then you're on the right track."■