



Sports Television

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Butkus to coach football team, for real

Since TV sports can be so formulaic, any new idea should be greeted with tolerance. Especially when the idea has potential for unintentional comedy. Consider ESPN's *Bound for Glory*, a prime-time reality series this fall in which **Dick Butkus** will be installed as the coach of a real-life Pennsylvania high school football team.



Former Bears star Dick Butkus will coach a high school team on a reality show.

By Ted S. Warren, AP file

"It's an aspirational fantasy," says **R.J. Cutler**, one of the show's executive producers. "So in that sense, it's *Friday Night Lights*, *Rudy*, *Hoosiers*. But it's also a wish-fulfillment, Disney-type fantasy. We're putting these two *great* genres together."

More literally, the series will follow Butkus moving from Malibu, Calif., to lead the Spartans of Montour High School in McKees Rocks, a suburb of Pittsburgh. For participating, the school will get a new scoreboard, field maintenance gear and uniforms for players and cheerleaders. The cheerleaders also will get new coaching: Paula Abdul, once a Los Angeles Lakers cheerleader, is expected to drop by to help upgrade their skills.

Even for reality TV, it's startling that someone would be cast as an actual team coach. But Butkus, a Pro Football Hall of Famer who retired from the Chicago Bears in 1973, has an acting résumé that includes appearances on *Fantasy Island*, *McGyver*, *Matlock*, *Taxi* and *The Love Boat*.

Ben Silverman, another executive producer on the show, which begins shooting in early August, is concise on why Butkus was cast: "He's a *classy* brand and a *brilliant* coach."

Brilliant coach? Cutler, who says he's been working on this project for three years, notes Butkus coached in the old U.S. Football League. Adds Silverman: "We wanted to bring Butkus' Clint Eastwood-of-football values to this town. And didn't he also coach in the XFL?"

Butkus' coaching experience, however, doesn't appear in sports records. Butkus himself, noting his role as a basketball coach in the old teen TV show *Hang Time*, recently told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "I guess that's my only coaching experience. Maybe I'll have to draw off that. Of course, that was scripted." (Butkus sells himself short: He also played a coach, albeit in a cameo, in Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday*.)

Originally, Lou Cerro was hired to be Montour High's coach. Having coached for 22 years and won two Pennsylvania district titles in the last three years, Cerro was brought on in February to take over a team that won once last year. (That record suggests the title *Bound for Glory* could seem ironic after a few episodes. "Hopefully, it's like *The Bad News Bears* and they'll end up winning," says Silverman, who produced the NBC reality show *The Restaurant*. "But this isn't necessarily about the outcome of games.")

Now Cerro and his assistants ostensibly will coach under Butkus. "I was hired in February and all this started coming down in March," Cerro says. "At first I didn't know what to think. But after speaking to (Butkus) many times, we're on the same page. And that's good enough for me."

The "only pressure," Cerro says, "will be the pressure of the TV camera in your face every day, even when you eat." But Cutler, who produced *The War Room*, a documentary on the 1992 Clinton presidential campaign, says, "We won't go places where we aren't welcome. It's not as if the town will be the cast of *Big Brother*."

Montour was picked, Cutler says, partly from its "universal enthusiasm" after making the 15 finalist schools scouted for the show — "They threw a rally for us when we showed up."

Glory, which premieres Sept. 20, might turn out to be a preview on coming attractions. If its formula works, Cutler says, "We look forward to doing this year after year across the country."

No secrets:

NASCAR racing makes great TV partly because it's so accessible to viewers.

At the end of TNT's coverage of Sunday's Pennsylvania 500, viewers eavesdropped on radio audio as Rusty Wallace, in second, told Mark Martin, in third, they should "take it easy" because Kurt Busch seemed the certain winner. Martin replied he wouldn't "wreck" Wallace, "but I've got some *idiots* behind me."

Said TNT's **Benny Parsons**, "Sometimes these guys aren't politically correct."

On tap:

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., on site Saturday to watch the Tour de France, told the Associated Press that Lance Armstrong would be "awesome" and "a force" if he decides to go into politics. Armstrong, on CBS' Tour wrap-up show Sunday, said he's "a fighter and all politicians are fighters" and would "never say never." But, he added, politics is "not at the top of my list."

Big putt:

ABC's **Peter Alliss**, on Tom Watson's final putt Sunday to win the Senior British Open — "It's for all the gold in the world."